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Confronting Conspiracies in Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's Late Carvalho Novels

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Abstract This essay examines the conspiratorial worldviews of three of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's novels on detective Pepe Carvalho. It claims that Vázquez Montalbán's conspiracy narratives, due to their preoccupation with the (in)adequacy of names and actions within a conspiratorial totality, complicate both their own gesture of social criticism and the possibilities of rebellion by literary characters. Moreover, the article shows that conspiracies are located at the upper-end of the social spectrum in these novels. Unlike other contemporary writers of detective fiction in Spanish, then, Vázquez Montalbán stops short of imagining society as a productive battlefield between opposing complots.

Keywords Manuel Vázquez Montalbán · Conspiracy theory · Detective fiction · Irony · Satire · Criticism

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's fictional and non-fiction writings are full of references to secret societies, complots and conspiracies in different phases of recent history. The writer's most famous literary character, detective Pepe Carvalho, made his first appearance as a conspirator against John F. Kennedy in the novel *Yo maté a Kennedy* (1972). Another Carvalho story, entitled "Federico III de Castilla-León" and included in *Historias de política ficción* (1987), comically restages the failed coup d'état in Spain by coronel Antonio Tejero in 1981, commonly known as 23-F. Later detective novels by Vázquez Montalbán, such as *Sabotaje olímpico* (1993), *Roldán, ni vivo ni muerto* (1994) and *El hombre de mi vida* (2000) do not

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locate small complots within a larger system, but rather interpret the entire world as an artificial creation by conspiratorial alliances between state powers, enterprises and media agglomerates. In these works, conspirators and secret societies embody some of the broader processes Vázquez Montalbán has insistently criticized during his entire career, such as the theatricalization of politics during the Spanish transition and the vanishing of historical consciousness in a society reigned by simulacra and media spectacles (Afinoguénova 2007; Balibrea 1999; Colmeiro 1996: 166–182; Colmeiro 2007).¹

While Vázquez Montalbán's poignant criticism of Spanish society has received much attention by critics, this essay sets out to lay bare the specific dynamics and characteristics of the conspiratorial worldview that informs many of his texts. My analysis will focus on operations of naming and acting, two parameters of the conspiracy story that share a confrontational character, as they both seek to forge a position from where conspiracies may be brought into vision and opposed. However, this search for autonomy and stability tends to become a key problematic in conspiracy stories. Therefore, the first part of the article will investigate how Vázquez Montalbán maps Spanish society during the 1990s within a conspiratorial framework that is informed by a self-reflexive critical attitude. The second part of the essay will discuss how the novels under scrutiny critically engage with the inability of their main characters to forge a well-defined position *vis-à-vis* a conspiratorial totality.

The meanings of the term “conspiracy” have fluctuated over time. Horacio González, in his etymological discussion of the term, observes that it may point toward a mode of “breathing together”, a commonality of spirit and intention shared by those who participate in a common mission or organization. Likewise, it may also be an indication of “lo que trabaja en las sombras contra nosotros y contra nuestro lenguaje público” (2004: 10). In this second sense, a conspiracy has an oppositional character, pointing towards those who move in the shadows and whose interests are directed against the public sphere. Accordingly, conspiracy theories attempt to identify the operations of unknown groups that might be affecting reality as it is known to us. Therefore, conspiracy theories reflect a wider preoccupation with the origins of meanings, conveying the suspicion that perhaps “todo obedece a una causa que puede estar oculta” (Piglia 1991: 5; Boltanski 2012: 7).

There is a growing body of theoretical work that seeks to divest conspiracy theories from their status as oversimplified accounts of reality (Boltanski 2012: 286–287).² For certain critics, conspiracies may work as a specific narrative device,

¹ In this sense, Vázquez Montalbán aligns himself with other critics of the Spanish transition to democracy who, following the philosophies of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, have emphasized the omnipresence of simulacra and spectacles in this period. See among others the studies of Medina Domínguez (2001), Moreiras Menor (2002) and Subirats (2002).

² Fredric Jameson has famously defined a conspiracy theory as a degraded form of what he calls “cognitive mapping”, an aesthetic process aimed at offering an outline of a broader social or economic framework; for instance, the role of an individual in a broader structure of class relations (1988: 353). A conspiracy theory would constitute a simplified schematization of an abstract totality, since it empowers a limited group of persons with the ability to affect this totality as a whole, creating a problematic “closure-effect” within the latter (Jameson 1992: 31). For an interesting discussion of Jameson's argument, see Toscano and Kinkle (2015: 1–27 and 69–77).

a “poetics” or an “aesthetic construct” (Bey, date unknown), that helps to disclose abstract processes affecting society. Conspiracy narratives are not necessarily pertinent because they might be true (Ngai 2005: 398n3), but rather since they may be strikingly similar to other narratives that do not explicitly refer to any hidden plot or secret society. For David Kelman, conspiracy stories are related to catachresis, a rhetorical trope that refers to an operation of improper naming (2012: 62–67). For Kelman, this lack of adequacy in nomenclature is not limited to conspiracy theory: he sees it as a structural characteristic that determines both conspiracy stories and other narratives that seek to name and disclose complex events. Conspiracy stories, however, would bring their catachrestic dimension to the fore with utmost clarity, thereby making a move beyond other narrative modes that may be equally dependent on notions of causality, coincidence or responsibility for their understanding of the connectedness of events: “[c]onspiracy theories ‘introduce’ this imaginative leap (or catachresis) in order to bear witness to a gap that can never be fully covered over” (66). Taking cues from Kelman’s argument, this essay will investigate how Vázquez Montalbán’s conspiracy stories grapple with their own catachrestic dimension, especially regarding their extreme dependence on topographical distinctions between surfaces and depths and on anthropomorphic images of power.

Naming Conspiracies in the Post-Olympic Carvalho Novels

Many of the novels that are part of Vázquez Montalbán’s well-known Carvalho series may be read as caricatural sketches of the conducts of significant actors in Spanish society and politics. The writer deploys a conspiratorial framework for these novels in order to pinpoint those who may be held responsible for crucial developments in Spanish society during the first decades after the Franco dictatorship. An eminent example in this regard is *Sabotaje olímpico* (1993), a novel with a multilayered plot that revolves around an event that has been at the heart of the Carvalho series since the late 1980s: the Olympic Games celebrated in Barcelona in 1992. In the novel, detective Pepe Carvalho is hired by the International Olympic Committee to verify their suspicion that the Olympics are being sabotaged. This concern is based a report of an intelligence service related to NASA. The document reports, among other conspiracy theories, that a secret nationalist society named *España, una y grande* has planned to block the Games due to its alleged connections with Catalan separatism (62–63), and that a terrorist group might be seeking to sabotage the Games in order to draw attention to the contradictions of capitalism (63).

By constructing a complex investigation around these suspicions, the novel satirizes those Spanish politicians who are desperate about their country’s march to modernity, fearing that this development might be delayed, or worse even, that it remains without completion. Minister of Interior José Luis Corcuera is a foremost representative of this sentiment in the novel. He continuously appears in order to apply the security measures that were created during his term of office, thereby attempting to protect the Games from any disturbances. Some of his fellow

politicians, on their turn, engage in a comical conversation on the work of the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, whose writing, they suspect, condenses certain indications that might help explaining the emergence of an anti-Olympic complot in the Balkan countries. Ironically, Corcuera, while not partaking in these rather absurd theories, seems to be equally preoccupied with Spain's status as a modern country when he replies: "De esta manera, con tanto circunloquio, nunca entraremos en la modernidad" (58).³

Initially, it appears that the suspicions of Corcuera's colleagues are not entirely unfounded. In the course of the novel, Carvalho meets a Serbian athlete who claims to be at the head of a clandestine movement seeking to trigger a military interference by the United States during the Olympics. The key objective of this operation would be to distract the international community from the anti-capitalist revolution the Serbian group is simultaneously initiating in the Balkan region (77). In the final part of the novel, however, this Serbian complot is revealed to be part of a broader conspiracy existing in Spanish society. Xavier Rupert Dos Ventos, the official ideologue of the Games named after the Catalan philosopher Xavier Rubert de Ventós, explains to Carvalho that the authorities decided to carry out the event in a virtual, mediatized version after considering the risks of sabotage. The revolutionary threats from Serbia were merely part of a harmless spectacle, created for the occasion by Walt Disney and by Mariscal (142), a design bureau that assisted the local city council in creating a cosmopolitan imaginary of Barcelona (Balibrea 2001: 204).

The ultimate conspiracy in *Sabotaje olímpico*, then, is not the one headed by the Serbian athlete, but rather an alliance between politicians, designers and entrepreneurs—appropriately referenced by Donald McNeill as the "designer socialists of *posmodernidad*" (1999: 43). These operated in order to secretly defend "el penúltimo intento de este milenio de desestabilizar lo poco, lo muy poco que hay estabilizado" (Montalbán 2002: 141), illustrating the symbolic value of the Games as a signal of stability. Carvalho poignantly addresses the falseness of this creation in a later comment on the sharp contrast between the illustrious image of the city that proliferated before and during the Olympics, and the more arduous economic reality that presented itself immediately thereafter: "Biscuter, hasta octubre de 1992 esto era Manhattan... mejor dicho, una mezcla de Manhattan y Hollywood. Y de pronto fueron retirados los decorados y nos dijeron: Os habéis equivocado, estáis en Somalia" (166).

The plotline of *Sabotaje* directs towards this final moment of deception, where the world turns out to have been a phantasmagoric spectacle all the time (Resina 1997: 290). The presence of this problematic within the novel is more insistent, however. It also becomes manifest in earlier reflections on the question of nomenclature. Finding adequate names both for themselves and for their objects of investigation is a conundrum that poses itself to several characters. Thus, when trying to name the responsible persons for besieging the Games, Carvalho recalls

³ This criticism regarding Spain's modernization reverberates throughout Vázquez Montalbán's entire work. See, for instance, the ironic use of the expression "Centinela de la Modernidad" in his article collection *Felípicas* (Balibrea 1999: 118–120) or the final part of the novel *Roldán, ni vivo ni muerto* (1994) which will be analyzed at a later stage of this article.

the malign Fu Manchú, a character from series of novels by Sax Rohmer that strives to take over the world, and Spectra, an evil secret society from the James Bond series. Carvalho is clearly aware that such comparisons with other literary creations are reductive of the complexity of contemporary society: he concludes that such figures merely represent “prehistoria argumental” in a fragmented post-Cold War world (Montalbán 2002: 100). Likewise, the secretary of the ONU claims in a conversation with Carvalho that he is a “mera visualización del supuesto Orden Internacional” (115); an “inútil redundancia” that, like the ONU itself, merely represents a “simulacro” of an international order that as such remains ungraspable (119). These comments convey a melancholy critique of the novel's contemporary geopolitical situation, where abstract international orders, with names written in capitals, seem to have substituted all graspable political entities. This point is illustrated in the final pages of the novel, where Carvalho receives an invitation from José Luis Corcuera to participate in the reconstruction of an “Intelectual Orgánico Colectivo” (170). As ironically indicated by the capitals, this Leftist alliance holds high similarity to the “Orden Internacional” to which it is supposed to offer a critical alternative.⁴ Unsurprisingly, Corcuera's call for action remains unattended by Carvalho. Instead, the novel ends with a conversation by the detective and his assistant Biscuter on an old transistor radio that was sent to them by Charo, Carvalho's ex-girlfriend who now lives in Andorra. This primitive radio is a material object that seems to have become definitively obsolete in post-Olympic Barcelona.

Sabotaje olímpico acknowledges the obsolescence of existing narratives in which the world is imagined as being subject to bold, malign, omnipotent characters. It is nonetheless significant that references to Fu Manchú and other uncanny figures continue to appear in Vázquez Montalbán's later prose. Besides Fu Manchú, Vázquez Montalbán has frequently referred to the omniscient leader of the dystopian world described in George Orwell's 1984—*Big Brother* or *Gran Hermano*—as a model for vigilant, panoptic power structures. In *Sabotaje*, for example, the narrator references an entity called “el Gran Hermano democrático y benefactor” (19), in reference to the local politicians that ballyhooed an Olympic spirit of brotherhood and cooperation in the years prior to the Games (Balibrea 2001: 198). This analogy suggests that values traditionally attached to the Games, such as cooperation and equality, are merely elements of a script.

Big Brother also plays a crucial role in the next novel in the Carvalho series, *Roldán, ni vivo ni muerto*, which was originally published in episodes in *El País* in 1994. The work hones in on the disappearance of Luis Roldán, a politician of the PSOE and ex-director of the Spanish Civil Guard who fled from Spain due to his involvement in several corruption scandals (Millás 2013). Vázquez Montalbán started writing his fictionalized account of Roldán's situation when the latter's location abroad was still unknown. Significantly, this narrative takes place in a series of labyrinthine and subterranean constructions, such as the hidden offices and

⁴ The organic intellectual is a concept from Antonio Gramsci, figuring an intellectual whose position is intimately related with political struggles. Vázquez Montalbán has criticized the idyllic connotations of this concept (Espada 1997; Vázquez Montalbán 2011).

secret hallways of Televisión Española (54) or the sewer system of Damascus (129) (Vázquez Montalbán 2005). The omnipresence of hidden spaces in the course of the work metaphorically indicates that Roldán's behavior is not necessarily aberrant if compared to the actions of the government as a whole. The latter, like Roldán himself, seems to be highly familiar with clandestine operations. At one point, it is even suggested that Roldán is merely a scapegoat of a "conjura" (54) that would have expelled the Aragonese politician from its ranks in order to keep itself intact.

In the course of the novel, Carvalho and his assistant Biscuter meet different persons who all claim Roldán's identity. Rather than having disappeared, Roldán seems to have multiplied himself into different copies that exist dispersedly in cities around the globe, such as Barcelona, Zaragoza, Beirut, and Istanbul. As we learn in the final part of the novel, these multiplications were created by Pablo Nidal Fernández, alias El Gran Hermano, who currently works for an entity called the Empresa (166). Being situated within Spain's sewer system where it controls compromising intelligence on secret plots that are interfering in the real world situated above, this enterprise is an evident inversion of Plato's cave allegory. Moreover, it reads as an application of conspiracy theory alongside Baudrillard's logic of simulacra, suggesting that the disappearance of a tangible reality is the result of active manipulations by a secret society.⁵ Since Luis Roldán had accumulated too much compromising information on the activities of the Empresa, the latter reacts to this potential threat by recruiting numerous doubles in order to damage the original Roldán's testimonial authority.

Thus far we have seen that the conspiracies in *Sabotaje* and *Roldán* are responsible for the creation of unilateral illusions suffered by others. Significantly, Vázquez Montalbán's later work *El hombre de mi vida* constitutes a more fragmentary conspiracy narrative, staging a battle between a number of opposing secret groups rather than focusing on one generalized conspiracy that influences reality. Being situated in the months prior to the general elections in Catalonia in 2000, the novel narrates the murder of Alexandre Mata i Delapeu, a member of a cult group called Luzbel who is also the son of an important Catalan politician. Luzbel is a forum for homoerotic rituals that, according to its founder Albert Pérez i Ruidoms, pretends to cast an anarchistic, subversive shadow on the everyday world as known to all (74–75). Pérez i Ruidoms considers darkness to be a necessary complement to light, that is, to the socioeconomic order that is epitomized by his father. While initially he was confident that his father would not infiltrate the dark world represented by Luzbel, it finally becomes apparent that the father ordered the murder of Alexandre Mata i Delapeu so as to destabilize Luzbel's activities (198). In this sense, *El hombre de mi vida* restages a topic that was also central to Vázquez Montalbán's short story collection *Historias de padres e hijos* (1987): a generational conflict between fathers and sons that entails different concepts of masculinity and political worldviews. Following this scheme, *El hombre* represents the defeat of anarchic-revolutionary struggles within a patriarchic world where businessmen and

⁵ For Baudrillard, a simulacrum is a self-sufficient sign that lacks any dialectical relation with reality (1981: 16).

politicians are aggressively struggling for the possession of larger networks of power.

However, the work does not maintain this bias and renders a vision of society that is considerably more multilayered. In it, every person is part of different struggles and frameworks that are interconnected in complex ways. The head of the Pérez i Ruidoms clan, for instance, is also involved in an elite association called Monte Peregrino⁶ and in *Región Plus*, a “conspiración economista” (153) composed by Spanish nationalist politicians and international representatives of the financial world that wants to destabilize the Catalan struggle for independence (242). Carvalho remarks that Pérez i Ruidoms bears a striking resemblance to the malign Fu Manchú (243), highlighting once more the body of comic books and adventure stories to which Vázquez Montalbán's prose is tributary. An additional sign indicating that conspiracies have become a common business in the novel is a building called *Enigma S.A.* where a number of secret societies are based (72–74). Referencing the common Spanish abbreviation for public companies—*Sociedad Anónima*—this title operates as an ironic marker of a generalized culture of opacity and anonymity.

Thus, the novel delves into a complex network of conspiracies in order to denounce the cynical implication of a number of Catalan politicians in dubious political and economic negotiations that are supposedly carried out in order to protect Catalan freedom and autonomy (Lagarde 2008). Cynicism, in Peter Sloterdijk's terms, represents a scission of consciousness that enables one to act in modes contrary to one's opinions or moral standards (1983: 225). In Vázquez Montalbán's novel, this attitude is among others represented by Jordi Anfrúns, a sociologist who simultaneously works for a number of secret societies that are ideologically opposed; and by Manelic, the leader of a grassroots independence movement that seeks to counter *Región Plus*.⁷ During a conversation in Carvalho's car, Manelic mystifies Catalonia as a territory with a natural inclination to secrecy and occultism (Montalbán 2001: 252). But after having expressed this opinion, Manelic asks the detective to drop him off at a hotel so that he will not have to miss a soccer match by F.C. Barcelona. Ironically, Manelic himself declares that this football association has lost any of the symbolism that it previously possessed as an icon of the Catalan struggle for independence, due to the current influence of a Dutch trainer and the high visibility of foreign players in the team (253). The fact that Manelic supports Barcelona in spite of this recent development, suggests that he is not entirely free from confusing his supposedly genuine predisposition for independence struggles with other political and economic interests.

The novel also denounces Pérez i Ruidoms and other members of the political and economic elite who have been able to establish themselves in the decades following the Franco-dictatorship. These actors are currently coopting for new networks of power beyond the sphere of the nation-state, thereby representing the

⁶ This name is a pun on the Mont Pèlerin Society, a closed association founded by the economist Friedrich Hayek in 1947 as an early forum for neoliberal thought.

⁷ This movement is related to CIEMEN, an organization founded by the religious leader and activist Aureli Argemí in Catalonia in the 1970s. CIEMEN aspired at solidarity with other European independence movements (Lagarde 2008: par. 20–21).

advent of an order that Vázquez Montalbán has called “capitalismo salvaje” on numerous occasions (Nichols 2007: 185). This order makes itself palpable in society through developments such as the fragmentation of power structures and the generalization of a culture of paranoia. In this vein, a taxi driver expresses to Carvalho that “el espía posmoderno al servicio de nuevos centros de poder fragmentarios ha de espiarlo todo” (Montalbán 2001: 16). In a context of “capitalismo salvaje”, he continues, no clear line can be drawn between the good and the bad so that every action becomes potentially threatening. The driver himself can testify to the radical increase of espionage practices in the contemporary world, since people often hire him to spy on employees arriving late at work so that these can be fired without further administrative complexities (66). On one level, then, the novel engenders a multiplication of conspiracies in order to mimic the hegemonic presence of cynicism in Catalan society. On a second level, however, this fragmentation also illustrates that recent sociopolitical developments cannot be led back to one responsible group of actors, as did happen in *Sabotaje* and *Roldán*.

Acting: Moving or Being Moved

Acting tends to become a problem in conspiracy narratives. Usually, these stories empower a malign ‘other’, while at once divesting ‘us’ of any productive capacity for agency and action (Melley 2008). In Vázquez Montalbán’s work, the actions of several characters do not take place against a conspiratorial order, but rather within it and, more importantly, without being able to change it. Failure, then, is a dominant sentiment in these novels. It becomes manifest through reflections on the inauthenticity of operations of both naming and acting.

Sabotaje olímpico, for instance, commences with an act of rebellion by Carvalho but immediately thereafter destroys its impact. At the beginning of the novel, situated in the economic crisis of 1993, Carvalho recollects that when the tournament started a year earlier he confined himself to his apartment where he solitarily dedicated himself to some of his well-known pastimes: the consumption of large amounts of gourmet food and the ritual incinerations of the books of his personal library. The specific meaning of these rituals, in view of the Olympic Games taking place in other parts of the city, is explained as follows by the detective:

Sus dos vicios principales, cocinar y quemar libros, le proporcionarían contacto con la materialidad, le ayudarían a transformar el mundo y en diecisiete días de encierro podía permitirse el placer de quemar libros sustanciales; para empezar el volumen de *Que sais-je?* sobre el olimpismo (16).

These material pleasures are accompanied by a third source of indulgence: narcissism. Carvalho delights in the fact that, except for a limited number of “familia y allegados”, no one in Barcelona participates in his act of resistance: “¿Qué mayor placer que ser el único gozador de su negación de los Juegos Olímpicos de Barcelona?” (16). However, while Carvalho’s narcissism pretends to

be an alternative to the generalized exhibitionism that he observes in his environment (17), there are several signs of irony pointing towards the problematic character of this attitude. For instance, the detective imagines the surprise effects his absence will probably engender amongst some of the spectators of the inaugural ceremony of the Games, such as King Juan Carlos and president George Bush. This illustrates that Carvalho is not entirely disinterested in the development of the spectacle or in the opinions of its participants. An additional sign of irony resides in the fact that, during his period of voluntary reclusion, Carvalho dedicates himself to a series of pastimes that were already publicly consecrated in earlier novels. Therefore, these rituals seem to have little effect as strategies to avoid exposure in the public domain. Thirdly, Carvalho's act definitively collapses when it turns out that he had been observed from the outset by the authorities. While inside his residence, Carvalho is suddenly detained by an exorbitant team of soldiers, policemen, firefighters, boy scouts and other numerous "cuerpos subversivos" operating under the auspices of the Corcuera Law (21–22), a security measure also known as the "Ley de la patada en la puerta" that permitted disciplinary forces to enter into the domicile of persons that were suspected of threatening national security. In retrospect then, Carvalho's detention demonstrates that his reclusion never was a secret. This early collapse of the private and public spheres foreshadows the broader conclusion on the ubiquity of media spectacles to which *Sabotaje olímpico* ultimately directs. What is more, it draws immediate attention to the limits of any attempt at resisting this wider development.

By pointing to the ultimate limitations of Carvalho's actions, the novel recalls a condition for which Vázquez Montalbán had dubbed the term *subnormalidad* in the 1970s. As José Colmeiro indicates, in Vázquez Montalbán's writing the adjective *subnormal* conveys the marginal condition of individuals within a "normalidad impuesta" (1996: 59). Normality, according to Vázquez Montalbán, cannot be an innocent *status quo*, for it would always be the result of an amalgam of norms that are imposed on society (Nichols 2007: 189). *Subnormales* then are those unable to erect an autonomous critical position towards the rule of power.⁸

There exists an important connection between this earlier concept of *subnormalidad* and the spatial oppositions between characters operating from above and beneath that continuously appear in the Carvalho novels. In his *Manifiesto subnormal* (1970) Vázquez Montalbán opposes the *subnormal* status to a "Supersistema", a word that alludes to the intelligence and counterintelligence apparatuses that operated on a global scale during the heydays of the Cold War to exert "sometimiento ideológico, vigilancia y control" on all citizens (Colmeiro 1996: 170–171; Montalbán 2003b: 31). Also significant is Vázquez Montalbán's *La palabra libre en la ciudad libre* (1979), an essay on information networks and communication theory that he wrote progressively during the 1970s. Here, the writer theorizes that the dominant group responsible for publishing and divulging information in society is a "conjura" or "conspiración" (Vázquez Montalbán

⁸ In *Crónica sentimental de España* (1971), a collection of chronicles published in the cultural magazine *Triunfo* during 1969, the writer addresses the *subnormal* status of Spanish citizens during the first decades of the Franco dictatorship, reading this condition as a consequence of censorship and the state-controlled diffusion of popular culture (Vázquez Montalbán 2003a: 10, 182–183).

2003c: 15, 25, 71, 86) that transmits its messages to a “receptor pasivo y desarmado” (Vázquez Montalbán 2003c: 14).⁹ *Sabotaje olímpico* may be read as a continuation of these earlier writings, in the sense that it also advances a concept of individual actions as being manipulated by preexisting cultural codes that were forged in a different, invisible stratum of the world.

Roldán, ni vivo ni muerto continues with this tendency by implicating Carvalho and Biscuter in a process of epistemic discovery that was masterminded by a representative of the conspiracy. El Gran Hermano stages a philosophical gift for Carvalho and Biscuter, inviting them to go and meet “[e]l Roldán verdadero. Ni vivo ni muerto” (170). When the investigator and his assistant succeed in locating Luis Roldán in a shabby canteen, the latter initially remains silent when they ask him about his identity. Then, when Biscuter asks him what time it is, Roldán exclaims with agitation: “Enfadado, Roldán le enseñó un reloj que no llevaba y gritó, iracundo: –¡Está usted retrasando la cadena de producción de mierda! ¡A este paso nunca vamos a llegar a la modernidad!” (172). As we have seen, Roldán’s preoccupation with the arrival of modernity was already expressed by José Luis Corcuera in *Sabotaje olímpico*. In this sense, Corcuera and Roldán voice a sentiment of distress that was common among socialist politicians during these years. As such, it offers little proof regarding their individual identities, suggesting that Carvalho’s search for the real Roldán is doomed to fail.

The title and postdata of the novel further illustrate this conclusion, suggesting that it has become impossible for the authentic Roldán to reappear: “En un momento determinado puede aparecer, vivo o muerto, un Roldán que será considerado oficialmente el verdadero. No será cierto. *Roldán permanece para siempre, ni vivo ni muerto*” (173; original emphasis).¹⁰ Roldán’s permanence within the public domain has become independent from the common parameters of life and death. In this way, the novel illustrates the functioning of a new logic that is concordant with Eduardo Subirats’s specific definition of the simulacrum: it universalizes an alienation between reality and its representation, while at the same destroying the conditions that would make the experience of such an alienation possible (1988: 103–105). In other words, this alienation can only be experienced if one still conceives the possibility that reality may be thought in opposition to its representation. The existence of such dialectic does not yet become a problem in *Sabotaje olímpico*, where Carvalho draws attention toward the radical difference between the Olympic representations of Barcelona and the harsh reality hidden

⁹ With information actively produced by a selected few and passively received by powerless consumers, *La palabra* refers to certain scenes in world history in which the masses, “los no naturalmente implicados en la conjura” (71), could take possession of the communication chain and erect autonomous positions that suspend the common structures of domination. Among other examples, Vázquez Montalbán cites the French leftist newspaper *Libération*, which sought to inspire a more active role of its public in the transmission of journalistic information from the 1970s onwards (69–70); and the critical writings of posters known as *dazibao*, which have been an important unofficial medium in public spaces in China (70–71).

¹⁰ This expression is based on a phrase that Vázquez Montalbán frequently used in his literary and journalistic work and that was coined by Miguel Mihura and Antonio Lara in their theater piece “Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario”. In France, the comedian Michel Colucci, better known as Coluche, popularized an equivalent expression: *je ne suis pour, ni contre, bien au contraire*.

behind the decor pieces. In *Roldán*, however, Carvalho and Biscuter are invited to definitively leave behind their beliefs in authentic versions of reality.

Crucially, this invitation is offered by El Gran Hermano, who as a conspirator already seems to know what the result of Carvalho's and Biscuter's philosophical voyage will inevitably be. Carvalho and Biscuter cannot but receive the "regalo" given to them and thereby confirm a transformation in society that has already been fulfilled. In that sense, their meeting with Roldán is an inauthentic moment of discovery, as it does not contribute any innovative critical awareness regarding the worldview that El Gran Hermano already possessed and actively helped to materialize.

Finally, in *El hombre de mi vida* it becomes evident from the outset that Carvalho's steps through Barcelona are not necessarily an active contribution to the disentanglement of multiple secret societies and their role in larger economic and political struggles. Carvalho repeatedly acknowledges that he is being moved instead of being able to determine his own steps.¹¹ This problematic first comes to the fore when the members of the Monte Peregrino society turn out to be actors of a Cuban theater group. Due to this discovery, Carvalho starts suspecting that all his interlocutors are participants in a masquerade (98–99).

The limitedness of Carvalho's actions may also be inferred from a different plotline in *El hombre de mi vida*. Besides staging a complex network of secret societies, other parts of the novel focus on Carvalho's romance with Jessica Stuart-Pedrell, a woman whom he had already met decades earlier in *Los mares del Sur* (1979) during his investigation of the murder of Jessica's father.¹² Carvalho's love for Jessica seems rather exceptional, considering his declaredly aseptic pose towards personal affectivity in earlier novels. It could be argued that his involvement in a personal relationship with Jessica indirectly points towards his affinity with the values represented by Jessica's father, a Catalan businessman who bared sympathies for revolutionary struggles while also being involved in urban speculation during the Franco dictatorship. If Carlos Stuart-Pedrell's economic practices were an important object of critique in *Los mares del Sur*, Carvalho now rehabilitates his persona when remembering that Stuart-Pedrell was part of the last generation of Catalan businessmen with a guilt complex over their Francoist heritage (145). Carvalho notes that in the present, and contrarily to 1978, the heirs of the Franco-regime are in complete possession of society without feeling scrupulous about their pasts (145). As stated before, a figure who epitomizes the cynicism of this new sociopolitical order is Jordi Anfrúns who, after spying on Carvalho and Jessica, becomes implicated in the murder of the latter. Carvalho proposes to assassinate Anfrúns in the concluding pages of *El hombre de mi vida*, an action that may be read as a moral retribution not only for the death of his lover, but also for the fact that Anfrúns lacked the self-critical attitude that Jessica's father still possessed.

¹¹ The expression "mover o ser movido" that appears throughout the novel is taken from Samuel Beckett's poem "Whoroscope", a fragment of which also appears as an epigraph to Vázquez Montalbán's essay *La penetración americana en España* (1974).

¹² For more detailed readings of *Los mares del Sur* see Martín-Cabrera (2011: 87–115) and Santana (2000).

In his analysis of *El hombre de mi vida*, William Nichols dedicates attention to Carvalho's act of vengeance in relation to the broader difficulty that poses itself to the detective to "encontrar y establecer una posición estable desde la que ofrecer resistencia" (2007: 192). Nichols emphasizes that Anfrún's assassination occurs at the foot of the Torre Mapfre—an emblematic construction situated in the old quarter of Poblenou, where Carvalho spent his childhood and which reminds him of a "pasado proletario y radical" (196). According to Nichols, this topographical clue demonstrates that Anfrún's has now become a victim of his own implication in speculations with real estate. The assassination, moreover, would be a gesture suggesting that symbolic rebellion is still possible (196). If earlier I have also proposed a productive reading of Carvalho's act of resistance in relation to the moral legacy of Jessica's father, it remains problematic that this act of rebellion occurs through murder; that is, by means of a highly codified "logic of war" in which "the loner" is endowed with the capacity to take up arms against "the system" (Bosteels 2012: 271–272). Like other genre codes, this act of masculine heroism is usually approached with ironic distance in the Carvalho novels (Cate-Arries 1988). Nichols recognizes this at a different point of his study when he writes that "[e]l detective contempla la construcción de su propia conciencia, muchas veces con ironía metaficcional, dentro de las imágenes comodificadas, el lenguaje cooptado y los manipulados medios de comunicación dentro del paisaje postmoderno del capitalismo y el consumismo" (2007: 189). I would propose to extend this reading towards the closure of *El hombre de mi vida*, identifying the final scene as imbued with ironic reflexivity regarding the reach of Carvalho's act of rebellion.

To further support this claim, it is important to remember an earlier comment by Carvalho on the tragic sentimentalism of Alexandre Mata i Delapeu's mother, who desires a neat-cut answer to the question of who is responsible for the murder of her son:

Ya es cosa sabida que el asesinato del joven Mata i Delapeu se debe a una conjura entre grupos de presión, pero la madre de la víctima me pide que descubra quién mató a su hijo, quiere verle la cara para preguntarle ¿por qué mataste a mi hijo? La mujer participa del sentimiento trágico de la vida, una tendencia española que yo creía superada, sobre todo en Cataluña. Según parece el asesino ha sido un sicario, pero yo no puedo volver ante mi cliente y decirle: Señora, a su hijo le mató un profesional. (Montalbán 2001: 66).

Carvalho summarizes the maternal perspective in a burlesque tone. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel a similar type of sentimentalism and personal affection towards the victim of a murder—Jessica Stuart-Pedrell—helps forging a moment of closure. By extension, it should be remembered that the "omnipoderoso" (199) Pérez i Ruidoms is not punished for his deeds while Anfrún's—identified as a mere "títore" of the former (198)—does become a victim. Murder, when carried out by the detective, tends to be a moral retribution for a crime previously committed by a perpetrator who therefore needs to be exorcised from society so that a certain order can be reestablished (Resina 2010). In this case, however, it seems unconvincing that Carvalho murders a person who occupies a lower position on the ladder of the patriarchic system headed by Pérez i Ruidoms.

To conclude, a crucial element in the novel's final scene, which remains unattended in Nichols's reading, is the fact that Carvalho's confrontation with Anfrúns takes place under the eyes of a spy dressed as a jogger. Carvalho knows the spy to be working for Pérez i Ruidoms, and before proceeding to kill Anfrúns, he reflects on the extent to which the presence of this silent observer will affect the meaning of his deed: "Por un momento Carvalho detuvo su intención de cumplir consigo mismo, pero a medida que la carrera del hombre del chandal se alejaba, se reafirmaba en la idea de que la suerte estaba echada, se moviera o le movieran" (296). After the killing, the extradiegetic narrator dedicates the last lines of the novel not to Carvalho, but to the spy, who approaches Anfrúns's corpse and then continues walking "sin perder el ritmo" (296). This subtle reference to rhythm is highly significant, suggesting that Anfrúns's death will not fundamentally affect the continuation of the order represented by Pérez i Ruidoms and the spy working for him. *El hombre de mi vida*, then, leaves us with an unsettling view on Carvalho's ability to oppose those who dominate contemporary society.

In this essay, I have analyzed three novels in which conspiracies are exclusively situated at the upper end of the social spectrum. As we have seen, actions from beneath are represented as coopted by other narratives, not as alternative alliances endowed with the capacity to counter the sweeping powers of *capitalismo salvaje*. If Luzbel, the cult group from *El hombre de mi vida*, makes an attempt at resisting a patriarchal social order by aiming to introduce subversive values into it, this struggle is finally neutralized by the same complot that it initially wanted to resist. Vázquez Montalbán's Carvalho novels are therefore fundamentally different with respect to the works of other writers of detective fiction, such as the Asturian-Mexican author Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia, who have explored the potentials of conspiracies to become, in Piglia's terms, "nuevas formas de sociabilidad" (2002: 8).¹³ Vázquez Montalbán's detective novels, by contemplating actions from a large ironic distance, also convert them into ultimately untenable.

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¹³ Piglia frequently deploys the term "ficción paranoica" throughout his novels and essays; this is in reference to a kind of literary fiction that revolves around suspicion and secrecy and that gives expression to the "delirio interpretativo" that such atmosphere engenders for those who try to understand it (1991: 5). Examples of this literary mode are Macedonio Fernández, Roberto Arlt, William Burroughs, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Piglia's own work. Piglia's essay "Teoría del complot" theorizes a relation between conspiracies and artistic vanguardism. Furthermore, Glen Close has explored the presence of a conspiratorial worldview in the detective fiction of Paco Ignacio Taibo II (2008: 41–44), while Janet Pérez (2007) and Guillermina De Ferrari (2014: 27–34; 41–50) highlight the presence of clandestine brotherhoods in the detective novels of Cuban writer Leonardo Padura.

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