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Márquez

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AMIDST WEED, DUST AND LEAD: A NARCOTOUR THROUGH SINALOA IN THE WORK OF LENIN MÁRQUEZ¹

Lenin's studio

When Lenin Márquez rolled out his canvases on the floor for me, my first reaction was to crouch down and touch the oil-painted dead bodies. Lenin interrupted the gesture to tell me that the local youth did the same thing. Indeed, he said, they touch the bodies repeatedly. They often pass by the studio to see what he is painting because they know he depicts scenes from their own lives: 'They take in the pictures silently, because the images are very close to their own experience.' Sometimes Lenin uses these same men as models for his paintings. Other works, as the expressions on the dead bodies make clear, are not simulations (see figures 1 & 2). His journalist friends give him photographs, or leave a message for him when a body appears so that he can go and see it. Thanks to these contacts, Lenin has recently had greater access to crime scenes.

A 38-year-old artist from Sinaloa, Lenin has been painting the region's dead for more than 10 years. During our conversation he tells me that his work tends to produce discomfort, that people think it is too *explicit*. Despite having gained some reputation at the national level and having had exhibitions in Mexico City and in the US, it has not proved easy for him to find a public. Perhaps, as I propose in this article, because his work explores death from phenomenological experience. The dead bodies Lenin paints are the product of a personal and collective experience that unfolds amidst the everyday landscapes and urban settings of Sinaloa.

If a preoccupation with the art and representation of violence is hardly a novelty either in the Mexican context or in the wider ambit of Latin America art, in this case, one must recognize, the violence has its own particularity: it flows from the traffic in illegal drugs. The questions raised in this paper concern the way in which this phenomenon has modified the concept of 'the local man' and have naturalized certain forms of violence that the drug trade brings with it. The violence associated with narcotraffic requires a blend of theoretical approaches from the social sciences and the humanities. A special analysis, however, is required for artistic productions that give an account of it, not from the point of view of conceptual knowledge, but from a wider register: that of perception.² In a society like that of Mexico, and particularly Sinaloa, in which corruption prevents institutional mechanisms from efficiently processing and remediating the violent deaths of many of its inhabitants, art (or certain artistic endeavours), by representing the murders, intervenes in reality to question it.



FIGURE 1 Serie "Aparecidos".

This cultural production concerned with the drug trade is of two kinds: that which either celebrates, legitimizes or makes invisible such violence, or that of artists like Lenin, which exposes and exhibits it.

The grotesque image of the dead bodies in Lenin's pictures has the necessary effect of not allowing their everyday presence to vanish. In his work, the dead bodies operate

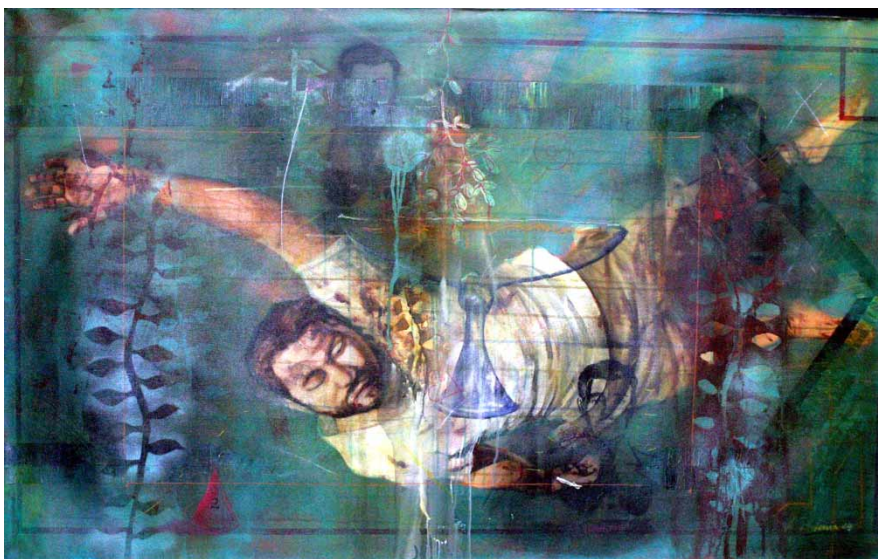


FIGURE 2 Oximorons.

in a different register, one that functions to challenge inertia, and a certain aesthetic of masculine daring. Below I wish to analyse Lenin's work within the cultural field that engenders it.

Culiacán: the cartography of the dead

I visited Culiacán in January 2007. I was led there by my reading of local authors and by my interest in finding out how, in particular instances of artistic production, certain phenomena linked to the violence stemming from the illegal drug trade were being conceived, expressed and represented. During my visit I talked to writers, cultural promoters, journalists, lawyers, academics and university students, publishers and artists. Our conversations revolved around the challenges of representation and aesthetic investigation when the central topic is violence: the commitments of resistance and the demands of art, the problems imposed by the work's consumption and a concern for aesthetic principles. And all of this within the context of the obvious difficulties of living in a city like Culiacán, considered one of the most violent cities in Mexico.

I made one of the most interesting drives of my stay with three advanced students of literature at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa. They seemed eager to tour Culiacán with me, an Ecuadorian woman interested in what was going on in their city, and as they settled on which places to visit I paid special attention to how they related to Culiacán's more notorious sites. A note of exultation or laughter accompanied their censure of the enormous houses of the *narcos* they pointed out, identifying the houses' owners by first and last name. And not because these students – two young men and a young woman – had ambitions to own one of the mansions or join the business. All *culichis*³ speak with a healthy dose of humour about the legendary *narcos*, their outlandish taste and their reputations. Humour is their way of weathering the reality these characters generate and the dark morality that protects them. Despite widespread and hegemonic condemnation of the illegal drug trade, it is impossible for Sinaloans to remain immune to the culture and media industries' glamorization of the activity. It is clearly this ambivalence, coupled with an ignorance of what actually happens in the narco business, that makes possible a mythic vision of the *narcos*.⁴

After the required tour of various mansions – houses with oversize balconies, Greek columns, bunker-like walls and veritable sanctuaries in the garages – we stopped at the black market, where dollars are on sale at reduced rates, visited the chapel of Jesús Malverde, and passed before some of the most famous local cantinas. The youth showed me a seedy bar where, they assured me, only the heavies go to fix deals with local hit men. 'Here, teacher,' one of the boys said, 'there are guaranteed to be shoot-outs in the early morning and when everyone's drunk, at least one person ends up dead'. They talked about the symbols and violence of the *narcos*, not as elements irrupting into a peaceful coexistence, but more as the very adversity that constitutes their everyday life. What we had just done, they said, is the 'narcotour'. Local folklore has it that cab drivers offer it to tourists for a fixed price. And all the neighbourhoods of the city have their own memories: their streets have been the scene of one or more murders, casualties of the shoot-outs between *narcos* and the police, or of settling of accounts between the former.⁵ These deaths, everybody knows, have their causes: they record a betrayal, a wrong move, a piece of bad luck, or are payback

for an unforgivable error. But they are murders for which society has no punishment. There is no legal penalty for these killings, nor, for the moment, is there any way of rectifying their causes. If it is true that the discourse of the law cannot explain the ethical significance of these killings, as Agamben might say, it must be recognized that the possibility of the exercise of the law would facilitate a collective mourning. The law creates the space for social reconstruction, or for the pursuit of such a reconstruction in the common imaginary. Finally, the law imposes order. The humour of the *culichis* is an attack on the failure of the law to act and a way of living with this disorder.

Throughout my various tours through the city, looking at streets full of cars and people walking on the pavements, the violence and murders remained abstract. In conversations with friends, the victims were absent. I found the counterpart to these stories without protagonists, stories where humour and myth were possible, in Lenin's studio. In his work the narcotour took on another dimension, with references closer to the senses. Against the glamorisation of the *capos*, or the ambivalence in the face of their exploits and manliness, Lenin's pictures show the corpses in the way the *culichis* perceive them. In the painter's work there is no search for transcendent meaning: on the contrary, stretched out in the streets of the city or in the dry rural landscape, the corpses are surrounded by objects that shelter their fame, presenting the senselessness that their deaths impose on the everyday landscape.

If the mythification of these characters requires a necessary separation from concrete spaces and their history (as Astorga suggests), Lenin paints the dead bodies in a concrete horizon. Mythical space is transformed in his work into a phenomenological space.⁶ His works represent a sensory experience of the dead bodies. In reproducing the phenomenological experience of the dead bodies on canvas, he alters the meaning of the crime scene and highlights how the corpses modify ordinary spaces and landscapes. So to say that Lenin's work is explicit is inadequate. The images do not speak for themselves. There is a shared knowledge about the cause of these murders and their discouraging persistence. There is no redemption for the dead in either the legal order or the divine. The canvases, then, have the effect of confronting the spectator with the uncomfortable but necessary task of processing these dead bodies. Lenin's work intervenes in an everyday reality as a call to mourn the dead who 'appear', modify and transform the landscape.⁷ It represents too a mourning for places that have ceased to be what they were. The transformation of the surroundings is notable in figure 3, in which the painter limns a new cartography of the city. Figure 4, on the other hand, records the modification of the romanticism of the rural landscape with the presence of bodies covered by blankets by the side of the road.⁸ In this painting, Lenin decides to preserve the frame from the original painting, underscoring how the dead body disturbs the idyllic nature of the landscape.

Painting among the dead

Lenin's studio is in a central part of the city: from the window you can see the Buelna market where young men and women hang around in groups of three or four in front of the exchange touts who are waiting for clients to buy dollars at much lower rates than the official market offers. Although raided from time to time by the police, this is the most peaceful of all the settings created by the complex mesh of transactions and



FIGURE 3 Croquis de la ciudad.

violent negotiations of the drug trade. The dollar merchants, mostly women, are also the least important pieces in the business because of the small amounts of money they move. From the terrace, I look out over a graceless city under a light rain and photograph the street sellers. Inside are the canvases Lenin has rolled out on the floor.



FIGURE 4 Paisaje.

His studio becomes a cemetery in which are laid out the bodies of the young dead men that I did not see in the streets. The pictures express and produce unease, but in order to make sense of them we have to understand the world outside, on the other side of the window.

When I got to Culiacán on 15 January, the media were announcing the arrival in Sinaloa of a major contingent of the army. It was part of a new policy by the recently elected president Felipe Calderón against the drug traffickers. In casual conversations, a number of *culichis* explained to me that there would be no attacks on the *capos*. They assured me that it would be a bit of theatre so that the new government would be on the right side of the neighbours to the north. The only people affected by the presence of the army in Sinaloa, they said, would be the peasants with smallholdings.⁹

What awakened my interest was not the correctness or veracity of these opinions but the ways in which the *culichis* interpreted this universe. The notorious scepticism and incredulity with which people gave an account of government actions revealed a dark side – a political apathy. My surprise was all the greater when on the night-time news bulletin a senior civil official appeared – behind him was an image of a group of soldiers raiding a house in a rural village – justifying the military action and asserting that the army had been acting firmly but respecting human rights. To see the civil authority appropriating the legitimacy of human rights claims to defend a military action seemed the most effective way to neutralize a social response.¹⁰

In the conversations I had with people during my stay I noticed that this mistrust of political power was voiced around a common idea. Nearly everybody agreed that the violence had to do with the idiosyncrasies of the people from the mountains, the *serranos* (the inhabitants of the Sierra Madre). The *serrano* was defined as happy, fond of fiestas and very macho.¹¹ Without wanting to, my interlocutors suggested that the culture of *narco* violence was inevitable given the nature of the men of the region. This idea extrapolated from the *doxa* (as Bourdieu would say) that necessarily reproduces a conception of violence as part of local nature – already a naturalized social construction – eliminates the possibility of understanding that violence as a product of historically established social tensions. In other words, it is a means, unconscious but effective, of internalizing and naturalizing violence. In this process the victims ascribe to themselves the responsibility for a sort of natural destiny. This is what Bourdieu has called symbolic violence (when the victim recognizes him/herself in the discourse that condemns him/her).¹²

Lenin's work is quite other to this conception. His pictures change the register in which the dead bodies 'appear' and, thus, the bodies go through a process of resignification. To do so, it is necessary to have some idea of the conceptions and myths around the *serrano*, to explore their origin in the local imaginary and determine their transformations with and through the growth of the drug trade.

The myth among the living

Sinaloa was traditionally a poor state, and the principal resource at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was mining. The mines were located in the mountains of the Sierra Madre.¹³ Although some mines remained operative into the following decades, the boom came to a halt with the Revolution of 1910 and the collapse of tariffs. In the 1950s, however, with mining having mostly

vanished and with the construction of dams in the region, agriculture became the main source of work. Both the mines and the land were in the hands of a small number of families and the rural population were for the most part a source of cheap labour for both industries. The *campesinos* from the mountains were never integrated into modern Mexico and the conception of rural life continued to be fed by the mythology of dispossessed figures whose values of authenticity, wisdom and manliness led them to confrontations with the law in the name of just causes. The first such figure was Heraclio Bernal, a young man who had joined up with the Juárez forces at the end of the nineteenth century to fight against the supporters of Porfirio Díaz. The image of Bernal is reinscribed as the bearer of the most exalted values of manliness and courage, making possible Sinaloa's integration into the project of the modern Mexican nation. Bernal becomes a sort of necessary seed of – an early local contribution to – the revolutionary struggle of 1910.¹⁴ What distinguishes Bernal from the run-of-the-mill revolutionary, however, is that, as well as being courageous and willing to die for his ideals, Bernal becomes the good bandit who robs the powerful in order to share their wealth among the poor (much as Hobsbawm describes the phenomenon in his well-known book on banditry). The incorporation of the Sinaloan man into the imaginary of the nation is achieved through the value granted to disobeying the law, and it is this that truly consecrates him as a hero. The paradox is that that the heroism that legitimizes Bernal as a part of modern Mexico comes from his capacity to challenge the most important of state institutions: the law.¹⁵ In other words, Bernal's manliness and heroism (his identity) are what distance him from the function of the state.

The much written about Heraclio Bernal was succeeded by Jesús Juárez, known as Jesús Malverde.¹⁶ He was the good bandit to whom the people of Sinaloa render homage in a chapel constructed for him. His death, as José Manuel Valenzuela recalls, inspired sympathy and indignation among the people because of the brutal way his body was exhibited (2002: 150). The authorities hanged Malverde from a tree, as was common during the period. What was singular about his death, however, was that the authorities refused to allow his body to be taken down. Valenzuela suggests that this decomposing body is the fundamental element of the mythology that surrounds Malverde, granting him his status as martyr, and hence the grandeur attributed to him (p. 150). We need to go back to this powerful image from local iconography in order to understand the bodies that Lenin paints. But for now what matters is that Malverde is not a character from books: he is considered a saint, a martyr who performs miracles, whose followers offer tribute to him. His chapel and the pomp-filled musical celebrations with which in previous decades the 'crowning' of shipments was celebrated have transformed him into a picturesque figure.¹⁷ His increasingly pronounced resemblance to the Sinaloan heart-throb of Mexican golden-age cinema, Pedro Infante, is not coincidental. Malverde's face adorns key-rings, shirts, belts and hangs from the gold chains that can sell for upwards of 10 thousand dollars in Los Angeles.¹⁸ Malverde is not only a saint, but the icon of a whole new culture surrounding the illegal drugs trade.

Malverde's fame grows with the trade. Drugs have a long history in Sinaloa. Marihuana and poppies have been cultivated in the region since the end of the nineteenth century. Their presence in the region leaves deeper traces with the criminalisation of every activity related to their cultivation, processing and transport across the border. The consolidation of a narco culture is relatively recent. Many important developments of the drug trade happened in the early part of the last

century, and Astorga has discussed these at length in his books.¹⁹ For most of their existence, activities related to planting and cultivation of poppies and marihuana were not seen as criminal, but rather as alternative means of subsistence in the countryside. As local cultural entrepreneurs told me: 'My family comes from the country, my grandfather used to grow weed and smoke it in the house. I don't smoke so as to protect my children. The connotation it has now is different than when I was a kid.' The changes in anti-drug policies, moreover, have turned Mexico from a site of production to one of consumption, and this, of course, has changed local attitudes towards cultivation. But above all, the drug trade has submerged the people of Sinaloa in a world of extreme violence.

There is also a different conception of smuggling now. The boy who was driving the night we toured the city told the following story. His uncle had smuggled a shipment through once to keep the family sporting goods shop afloat during a crisis, but was not involved in the trade in any sustained way. It would be difficult to have such a sporadic involvement nowadays, as the business has become increasingly criminalized and professionalized.

The violence connected to the illegal drugs trade in Sinaloa also has its own genealogy. In the 1970s the so-called Operation Condor was implemented: its object was to destroy the guerrilla bases in the region, to break up the groups of traffickers and destroy their crop.²⁰ This may well have been a severe blow for the gangs involved in the cultivation and traffic of marihuana and heroin, but according to local historians and scholars its most important legacy was the abuse of human rights, the devastation of entire villages and the wave of violence which ensued, even if the people, especially those in rural areas, assimilated it with a certain naturalness (Córdova, 2006; González, 2007).²¹

The drug trade made a more energetic appearance in the following decade. The need for stronger security forces led those in the business to arm themselves with more sophisticated weapons. Gangs became more professional in order to protect themselves from competition and the army, a direct result of the 'War on Drugs' that Reagan declared in 1986. The activity became a state crime, and therefore justified the involvement of the army in combating it. The greater criminalization of the illegal drugs trade led the business itself involving greater violence. This was accompanied in the 1980s by the Colombians establishing alliances with local gangs to ship cocaine across the border, since Miami had ceased to be a port of entry.²²

This is the context in which the image of the primitive rebel symbolised by Heraclio Bernal and Jesús Malverde is recycled. They are two protean figures in which the good bandit and the gang leader coexist, as this *corrido* suggests: 'I am the boss of bosses, señores/They respect me at all levels/And my name and photograph/You'll never see in the papers'.²³ This is one of the many *corridos* that synthesize the transformation of the image of the Sinaloan man, his ubiquity proof that the heir of the bountiful bandits is also suggestive of another reality.

The masculine aesthetic

The figure of Malverde is hybrid, not because of its criminal/religious aspect,²⁴ but rather because it has been turned into a myth marketed by an industry that understands how to profit from the promotion of consumable objects and practices proper to *narco*

culture. Malverde is repeatedly celebrated in the *narcocorridos*. These are narratives where one can truly see a transformation in the conception of the courageous *serrano* from one who defies the law as a good bandit with good intentions to the criminal for whom honour and business are the determining features of life or, better, death. Various works explore the origins, development and intentions of the *narcocorrido*.²⁵ Helena Simonett's (2004) signals something quite pertinent here. Studying the local music of *banda* and *tambora* from a historical perspective, Simonett, an ethnomusicologist, argues that the analysis of *narcocorridos* requires 'a redefinition of the genre. Contemporary *corridos* not only produce a commercial mystification of the drug trafficker, but also succumb to the hegemonic power of the culture industry' (2004: 240).²⁶

What Simonett says about *narcocorridos* also applies to the masculine figure that is celebrated and exaggerated in them. A masculine aesthetic, so predominant in the objects of popular culture associated with the drug trade, alters the meaning of what is virile – virtuous – exacerbating insinuations of violence. Sinaloans' identification with the mythical figure of Heraclio Bernal is perhaps best expressed in the following quotation taken from the book *Ensayo de una provocación*, whose author was awarded the prize for best Essay in Historical, Social and Cultural Research, 2006. 'Perhaps all of us Sinaloans have a cynical and mocking bandit inside us, a man who is ready to die with pistols in his belt – or these days with 0.9 mm or a 45. And if Borges says "at some moment . . . one man is every man," in Sinaloa we are all Heraclio Bernal.'²⁷ The peculiarity of the *serrano*, a fighter, a lover of fiestas and a brave man whose emblematic origin lies in Heraclio Bernal, is the frozen image to which all my interlocutors attribute the origin and destiny of the region. However, values are ascribed to Heraclio Bernal which are not the only ones that exist there. The good bandit whose attachment is to justice and the dispossessed lives alongside and competes in the collective imaginary with the image of the successful and violent *narcotraficante* who is afraid of no one and possesses unlimited acquisitive power. *Narcocorridos* are a source of a constant updating and 'recycling' of mythical values. Hence many of my interlocutors criticize them, despite the fact that they dance to them, celebrate them and know them by heart.

The sleeves of the disks illustrated in figure 5 are the two extremes of a nuanced and contradictory phenomenon, but they serve to illustrate the confluence of two images of the rural Sinaloan man. On the disk by *Los Tigres del Norte* featuring *corridos* like 'Contrabando y Traición' and 'La Banda del Carro Rojo' (Contraband and Betrayal; The Red Car Gang) (considered by many to be the first of the genre) the men are pictured in a typical rural setting, whilst in the compilation of 'The 30 Banned *Corridos*', put out by the same label nearly 20 years later, the similar setting has clearly become one of sophisticated violence. These images do not contradict each other but instead show how two aesthetics of masculinity converge in the local imaginary. What the culture industry has done is *modify* the form of appreciation of that traditional masculine value and refitted it with a figure whose bravery merits unquestionable social ascent.²⁸

In the majority of recent *narcocorridos* there is no longer a celebration of the heroic deeds of the smuggler whose amorous betrayal ends in his death, as in 'Contrabando y traición' or 'La banda del carro rojo'. The songs celebrate another type of violence and homage is paid to brave men who take risks, who demonstrate

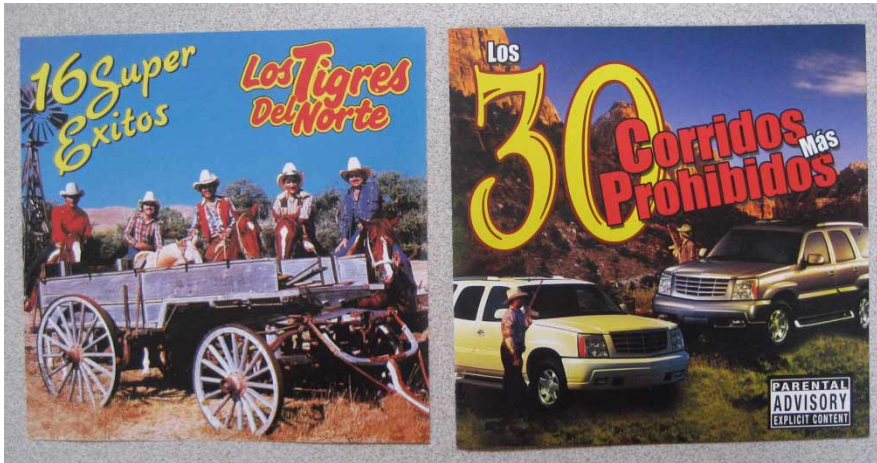


FIGURE 5 Picture G. P.

their manliness because they defy death, rather than fear it. ‘People’, Lenin complains, ‘put on these songs as background music while talking with their friends and that is how media culture gets us used to these histories’. Lenin was not alone in commenting on his discomfort with the abundance of *narcocorridos* and their success. Many people I met criticized songs that glamorise violence for giving a mistaken impression of Sinaloans to the rest of Mexico and to the outside world. The real concern centres on the message of glorification of the *narco* business the songs transmit to young boys, especially the poorest who wish to emulate the stories that are told in them.²⁹ They also want to possess everything they currently do not, ignoring the risks involved and how briefly their wealth will probably last. There is a desire to prove their masculinity in this social climb, however ephemeral it might be. This is what Carlos Monsiváis calls the Faustian pact, ‘the most serious episode in neo-liberal criminality’ (2004, p.).

But the desire for short-term riches cannot explain the phenomenon. All of these elements delineate a quest for recognition beyond that achieved through wealth. The particular quality of local masculinity mentioned by my interlocutors when discussing the ills of their region appears dressed up in (an)other meaning(s). The manly courage exaggerated in the *narcocorridos* implies an ethic that goes beyond honour and appeals to an aesthetic of excess in which the real risks of the business vanish. These values go back to the imaginary of the original myth of the Sinaloan male – represented by Heraclio Bernal and the martyr Jesús Malverde – figures that remain lodged in the minds of Sinaloans, but invested with other values.

The end of the narcotour

Beyond the theoretical disputes about *narcocorridos*, their controversial messages and irrefutable quality of rendering the *narco* world, beyond the truths they promote, the inventions they disseminate and the ways in which the *culichis* talk about them, Lenin’s aesthetic project contrasts with the abstract image of Sinaloan male courage sung about

in the *corridos*. His work is a response to local particularity represented in the protean image of the good bandit/saint and the drug trafficker, to whom the origin of the violence is attributed. Lenin leaves no space for the idealization of these mythical figures. He works with what the *serranos* are or, better, are ceasing to be.

Let us look at figure 1, which shows the figure of a strong man, whose arm, leaning on the floor, reveals a sturdy musculature which resists his final fall. It gives the impression that the arm is holding the body back. From the expression on the face, the body would seem to be recently dead, and it seems as if the dead man were posing for the painter, the robust figure of his still young body unable to compensate for his death.

Figure 1 contrasts with the crudeness of figure 2. The dead body in its decomposition revives the imagery surrounding Malverde the martyr. The saint, far from church religiosity, and with a mystical appeal based on a corpse which extols what is irredeemable in death: the decomposition of the body. What is grotesque about Malverde, let us recall, is not his death but the exhibiting of his decaying corpse. This is why his body generated pity, and above all indignation. Figure 2 is the closest to this local iconography of a saint's death. In this image too, the decomposed body inspires indignation.

But the painter's gaze does not linger on the murdered body: this work also includes a series of objects found at the crime scene. The paraphernalia glorified in media culture and turned into valuable merchandise take on another meaning when surrounding the dead man. If we pay attention to the details around figure 2: the CD of some *narcocorrido*, the favourite song or even perhaps the CD with the recording of the entrusted song; the image of the saint with the same inexpressive face that appears on the medallions and belts of the victims; the weapons that at some point served in self-defence or murder appear like toys; even the patterns of the costly silk shirts adorn the outside of the bodies. The objects of violence appear as elements of a naïve painting. The resignification of the objects is part of the resignification of the bodies themselves.

The phenomenological experience of the dead bodies is crystallized in the traces of wild grass around the corpse (see figures 6 & 7). This ephemeral presence of nature suggests a less solitary death and evokes empathy from the world in the moment of extinction. In all the paintings, nature is an integral part of the experience of death, of the victims and the witnesses. In his capacity to recover nature's testimony before the murders, Lenin shows compassion.³⁰

Baroque violence

Two months after my trip to Sinaloa, *Riodoce*, the local weekly, announced the discovery of a marihuana plantation of 200 hectares in the municipal district of Elota. The headline read, 'Elota, the silence of complicity', and reported the army's actions in its relentless mission to destroy the fields, and the heretofore suspicious ignorance of the local authorities about its existence. This type of news story fills the local papers. What is singular about this one, however, is the declaration by one of the officials of the local Irrigation Board: 'We saw that they were planting marihuana, we saw it grow, we saw them harvest it but we also knew that those very same furrows could be our graves.' In this long process described so succinctly by the local official is condensed a whole universe of violence in which he imagines himself as a potential corpse. The land, the furrows, planting and death: the official can even see himself buried in a muddy



FIGURE 6 Serie "Aparecidos".

furrow, and his words express something similar to what I see in Lenin's work. Both share a similar elaboration of an eschatological perception of nature. The sensibility of the painter who, even as he depicts the horror of death, perceives the wild grass that surrounds the victim shares with the irrigation inspector's description a rootedness in a non-mythical place. The countryside is the common setting of life and death.

Among the photographs that I took that rainy evening at Lenin's studio there was one which well illustrates my argument: that place shared between a dead body and the person looking at it. The painter faces the painting, which shows a child before the spectacle of a dead body in the street. The background to the child is very similar to that behind some of Lenin's dead bodies (see especially figure 8). The colours are the same, as are the races of wild grass. The child's expression is almost one of insolence: no fear is registered in his look, or in the expression on his face. One could rather say that the attitude of his body is one of challenge, with his arms crossed showing some impatience. In the photograph it is not the dead body in front of the child but the painter.



FIGURE 7 "Testigo organico" from the Series "Aparecidos".



FIGURE 8 Painter facing his mode. Picture G. P.

The painter in turn crouches down in front of the canvas, as he would in front of the bodies that he paints. The scene in the photograph reproduces the effect of Velázquez's work in which the painter portrayed himself inside the picture that he is painting. Let us recall Foucault's reflections in the first chapter of *The order of things* where he analyses *Las Meninas*: he describes the complete spiral of baroque representation contained in the divine order. Of course, in Velázquez's painting the exchange of gazes between the painter and his models coincides in time. In this photograph, the look of the child contemplating the dead body does not coincide with the time in which Lenin sees the child as part of his work. However, for us, the intersection of looks has the same effect: Lenin shows the child looking at a dead body and before this gaze the painter becomes the dead man. We spectators can ask ourselves on what side is death, or the dead body, and to our gaze, it is on both. The game of correspondences, similitudes and analogies that composed the baroque world here no longer obeys a divine order, but the profane order of violence. Both the violence that the government 'legitimately' exercises, and that which the *narcos* illegitimately exercise, because we do not know to whom to attribute responsibility for these deaths.

Lenin's work does not claim to re-establish order, nor does it. Nor does it punish those who might be guilty. But it does remind us that something remains unfinished about these deaths: the juridical and moral impossibility of processing them. Lenin's art is perhaps one of the few spaces that permit the processing of such ravages, and becomes a work of mourning for so many deaths.

Translated by Philip Derbyshire

Notes

- 1 My work in Sinaloa was made possible thanks to a research grant from the Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences initiative (FAHSS) at Stony Brook.
- 2 The distinction between conceptual knowledge and that of perception is described by Levinas in his essay on art (2006).
- 3 Inhabitant of Culiacán.
- 4 Luis Astorga's work *Mitología del narcotraficante en México* (2004) explores the construction of the myth and asserts that this is the fruit of an ignorance of the real historical tensions and contradictions from the origin of the illegal drug trade in the area.
- 5 Perhaps the oldest and most famous have been put together by Elmer Mendoza his book *Cada respiro que tomas* (Difocur, 1991).
- 6 Here I follow the ideas of David Abram who asserts that every phenomenological experience occurs on the basis of the experience of nature. This is very clear in Lenin's work in which the dead bodies are part of the rural and urban landscape. Levinas has reflected a great deal on phenomenology and the plastic arts: see Note 2.
- 7 In the title to the series 'Aparecidos' we can see that the violence that prevailed in Latin America in previous decades and that 'disappeared' its victims has changed. Violence now saturates the landscape with dead bodies. The generation of the 'disappeared' has been replaced by that of the 'appeared'.
- 8 The explanation of the use of blankets to cover dead bodies is offered by Lilian Paola Ovalle in a work that analyses the significance of the forms of death in the drugs trade (2006).

- 9 It should be explained that since January 2007 there has been an intensification of violence and a number of big shots have been taken out. According to the figures of CENAPI, from January to December 2007, some 271 police officers were killed; 945 deaths connected to the drugs trade have been acknowledged nationwide. In August alone, there were 306 deaths (10 every day), 56% of these taking place in Sinaloa, Michoacán, Guerrero and Mexico City. (<http://www.eluniversal.commx/nacion/15881.html>) These figures, published in *El Universal*, seem small by comparison with those reported by the Sinaloa weekly *Riodoce* in the three months of the army's incursion into the state, when it was asserted that there had already been more than 600 killings. The periodicals agree on is that nobody can be sure whether the killings are due to the army or to *narco* paramilitaries. What is clear is that this escalation in violence has not solved the question of drug trafficking. Astorga (2007) gives an analysis of how the military response which has grown in strength under recent presidents has failed to deliver viable solutions to the problems of the illegal drugs trade. By the side of these figures, it should be stressed that during my stay in Sinaloa I did not set out to report the reality of the events. The object of my visit was to get a better understanding of the ways in which local people interpreted that reality and represented it.
- 10 This event is a good example through which to understand Badiou's criticism of ethics. See especially, *Ethics: An essay on the understanding of evil* (2001).
- 11 It is crucial to make a distinction between the scientific discourses and even those fictional discourses from which the idiosyncrasies of the local inhabitants are explored. Social science discourse and literature have described the modifications of the values of certain practices and traditions. The value some of the contemporary literature from Sinaloa is to be found in this exploration. The works of Inés Arredondo, the books of A. Nacaveva, and the novels of César López Cuadras and Élmer Mendoza are important in this regard. On the other hand, in the social sciences there are the works of Luis Astorga, Nery Córdova, Rolando González and Elena Simonett, who, albeit from different perspectives and using different methodologies, present thorough descriptions of the local inhabitants, society culture and history. The following pages are indebted to the works of these researchers. There are also the works of local authors (like Héctor R. Olea, 1988) from the municipality of Badiraguato – the birthplace of various *capos* in the drug trade – who in their desire to redeem their region of a bad reputation describe local people as essentially courageous; their works have served, paradoxically, to strengthen the mythology surrounding the *narco*.
- 12 See especially *Masculine domination*.
- 13 *Cástulo Bojórquez* (César López Cuadras) is a story that explores the primitive features of the mining boom and the life of the people of the mountains.
- 14 In the book *La rebelión de la Sierra: Vida de Heraclio Bernal*, there are a number of moments in which the author makes this type of allusion: 'In order to fulfil his destiny, Heraclio Bernal came on stage when the backdrop of the drama of the Intervention had already come down, and a long time before the rehearsal for the 1910 Revolution' (Marín Tamayo, 1950: 97).
- 15 There are various references to Bernal in many current studies on the culture of Sinaloa, as well as reflections on the value of disobeying the law in the local culture. It is interesting to contrast this image of the northern man and the reflections of Samuel Ramos in *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* and those of Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, indispensable works for an understanding of the importance of masculinity in the construction of the modern Mexican national imaginary. For

- contemporary versions of Bernal, see Astorga (2004), Córdova (2006) and Simonett (2004).
- 16 People gave him the name Malverde, because 'he came out of the green and vanished into the green' (Crónicas: n/p).
 - 17 Malverde's chapel is one of the places where the 'narcotour' begins. Pérez Reverte's novel *The queen of the south* uses it in an important way. The Spanish writer turns the *culichi* world into a characteristic setting for the drugs trade in Mexico.
 - 18 Figures from Simonett's 2004 book.
 - 19 See especially 1994, 2003, 2004. For discussions of violence in the state of Sinaloa, see González (2007); Córdova (2006), amongst others.
 - 20 Operation Condor began in Mexico in November 1975, although it was only implemented in Sinaloa in 1977. According to Astorga, this was the biggest anti-drugs campaign ever carried out in the region. The person in charge of carrying it out in Sinaloa was Jesús Hernández Toledo, who had been responsible for the student massacre in Tlatelolco years before. I have found no precise references (names, documents) to suggest that Operation Condor in Mexico was the same as that in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia) although there is a similarity in the rhetoric of the need to destroy 'guerrilla bases' located in the Sierra Madre. The coincidence of name and politics does not appear to be a matter of chance.
 - 21 González (2006) is interesting in this sense: the book maintains that Sinaloa is a state in which civilization is an unfinished process. González analyses the worker, peasant, agricultural and student movements in the 1950s, '60s and '70s and focuses on the profound sense of frustration of all these organizations at seeing their political struggles defeated by central government repression in the 1970s. It is this frustration, the author maintains, and not the barbarity attributed to the culture of the local inhabitants that makes Sinaloa into a state where the illegal trade might take root. In *El amante de Janis Joplin*, Mendoza explores this period of local history with great brilliance.
 - 22 For a review of the participation of different countries in the illegal drugs trade before and during the Cold War years, as well as the rhetoric around the drugs trade, see Gootenberg (2007).
 - 23 This is one of the first *narcocorridos* popularised by *Los Tigres del Norte*.
 - 24 The hybridizing of the religious and the criminal so common in certain criminal cultures is exacerbated, as the title suggest, in Vallejo's novel *La virgen de los sicarios* (see Polit Dueñas, 2006).
 - 25 Studies on *narcocorridos* have proliferated in recent years. Among the first were those by Maria Herrera Sobek (1990) and Luis Astorga (1985). More recently there are works by Elijah Wald (2002), Sam Quiñónez (2001) and José Manuel Valenzuela (2002). The state prohibition on the playing of *narcocorridos* on local radio has been analysed in the works of Klaus Wellinga (2002) and Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta (2004). *Narcocorridos* cannot be seen as an homogenous group of songs, but in all of them masculinity is extolled as a moral value connected to honour and, of course, challenging death is a sign of manliness. The polemic around *narcocorridos* also involves their performers. *Los Tigres del Norte* the Sinaloan group with the biggest audience on both sides of the border, is also an object of analysis in some of the works mentioned. An alternative approach to *narcocorridos* from the inside is given by James Nicolopoulos, in his two CDs put out by Arboolie Productions. Nicolopoulos's work demonstrates that the songs about drugs and cross-border shipments are very old and that contemporary discussions have to recognize that the 'boom' in *narcocorridos* owes

- much to a cultural industry that promotes them as something new. This is the framework of the violence generated by the illegal drugs traffic: *narcocorridos* become more controversial and better selling at the same time. Listen to especially 'the Roots of the Narcocorrido' (2004) and 'Columpio del diablo' (2000).
- 26 Although it is perhaps Valenzuela who most dissents from Simonett, since he states that '[The] *corrido* is inscribed in a syncretic process where together with other forms of popular music that have deep roots, like *cumbia* or *tambora* music, it expands its field of reception through processes that cannot be reduced to the "manipulative capacities of the media", but to its levels of appropriation by wider popular sectors' (2002: 93). He also makes a distinction between the popular *corrido* and the *popularesque* version, the latter being more commercial.
- 27 Its author Adrián López was 26 when he won the prize. The book is a rather ambitious approach to local history and to the extent of *narco* culture. (Thanks to Juan Esmerio Navarro for sharing his manuscript with me prior to its publication.)
- 28 *Los Tigres del Norte* have a more ambiguous posture in the face of criticism of *narcocorridos*. They defend their songs because, in the end, they say, they reflect local reality (Ramírez-Pimineta, 2004). *16 Super Éxitos* (Univisión, 1989), *Los 30 Corridos más prohibidos*, various authors, Univisión, 2003. The resent assassination of several performers of *narcocorridos* has been the object of much speculation. The analysis of these events exceeds the objective of this article but it is worth mentioning that these deaths are elements that contribute to the myth surrounding the drugs trade.
- 29 Again, this is not to endorse or disqualify the conceptions of *narcocorridos* but to attest to the complex perceptions that the people of Sinaloa have of them.
- 30 The word compassion (pity) suggests the presence of a Superior being as mediator between the self and the other, whom I do not know but see as victim. Pity in this sense evokes charity. Here I do not use the word pity in his mystical/religious meaning. I understand pity as a positive feeling in the context of a superior reality which is political life, life in society. Pity, in this context, would be the search for justice. Faced with collective disenchantment with the executive organizations of justice, Lenin's work is a legitimate space of condemnation, but above all it is the creation of a mourning that produces discomfort but finds no political resolution.

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