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Literature of Evil: Can words deal with, to borrow from Conrad, "the horror of it all"?

1. Four Colombian scenes

A far right-paramilitary command arrives at a small town with the approval of the military forces in the zone. They carry machetes, power saws and fire to massacre a group of isolated, helpless peasants. Among the peasants are women, children and old men (July 1997).

A left-wing guerrilla command throws butane gas bombs into a chapel, in which forty families have taken shelter after five days under attack. Those who survive the explosions are later killed with machine guns (November 2002).

A commercial flight explodes in the air. The attack has been ordered by the leader of a drug cartel as a strategy to put pressure on the government, so it will stop its policy of extradition to the U.S. (October 1989).

A kidnapping band has been forced out of action. The group used to sell its victims to the highest bidder. The leader of the band was an official in the military forces. He used to mutilate the victims in order to get the ransom more quickly. In addition, he systematically killed other officials who eventually could report him (March 1999).

2. Yes, literature can deal with horror

All the above are true scenes taken from the news in my country. Horror in Colombia—a kind of horror capable of imprisoning, mutilating or killing human beings—is exercised on a daily basis by individuals who justify themselves through their own passions and their own right to revenge, or by groups that argue economic, social and political reasons. Every year more than 15,000 people are killed,¹ there are more than 1,600 kidnappings and hundreds of thousands of people are displaced by force.

The question that opens this talk is therefore among us answered affirmatively. Yes, literature in Colombia can deal with evil, with the "horror of it all," and it is not its own decision: literature in Colombia deals with evil because it can't help it. The omnipresent horror makes all of us deal with it through commission or omission. All writers born and raised in Colombia, also those who don't live in the country or those whose literature pretends to avoid it, have inevitably to face horror in their writing.

The question in our case is slightly different.

In which forms can literature fight against horror?

¹ Only 7 % of those deaths were caused by political violence, according to the numbers of the NGO's in the region.

3. The contemporaries

For more than a century, Colombians have been killing each other with singular energy and creativity. During that time our literature has been dealing with horror, but for the purposes of this paper I am going to focus only on contemporary Colombian literature. Trying not to exceed the time assigned for my presentation, I am going to talk exclusively about living writers. And trying to be even more precise—an action that you may consider violent—I will separate the writers into “thematic herds,” making it clear from the beginning that some writers moo simultaneously in more than one herd.

I will call the first thematic herd “The herd of those who use violence.” This herd literally uses the press as its main source. Two groups form it: those who write “genre literature” and those who write “literary stories” set against real violent events.

The first group uses the parameters of noir literature, thrillers and historical fiction to create plots, to depict heroes and villains, to describe shootings and explosions (and, in most cases, to make tons of money). Drug dealers, members of the military, thieves and killers, those are their characters, and the streets and mountains of Colombia their settings.² (This group also includes some American bestsellers: the only virtue about Colombia’s horror is its abundance, enough to be shared.)

The second group of this herd is composed of those who write “literary stories” using national violence or those who use that violence as scenery. Those writers take their characters to the midst of the war scene, determine their routes and destinies through writing. There are several other writers who transform violence into a pasteurized, decaf product, a theatrical set for cardboard-made characters.³

The second thematic herd, “the domestic violence herd,” is constituted by those who talk about an intimate violence that is also very Colombian, although it’s never in the headlines. It is the violence of interpersonal relationships, of family, of gender, of everyday actions, the violence of language and symbols. Those writers tell personal stories, stories about a horror that is usually made flesh in characters who live in big cities and speak in the first person about their lives.⁴

The third herd, “the fantastic-violence herd” is constituted by those who make metaphors of horror, who transform it into stories that border reality and fantasy, or totally fantastic stories. This herd moos in a special way and contradicts the paradigms of the bigger herds: violence in their stories neither comes from the headlines nor is it an intimate violence. Horror is psychological or abstract, transformed into unreal images that come out of reality, distort it or complement it.⁵ (Do not confuse this herd with that of magical realism, a herd of old cows who lost their course and don’t fit in this analysis.)

² In the first group there are writers such as Jorge Franco, Sergio Álvarez, Nahum Montt, Sergio Gamboa.

³ In the second group there are writers such as Fernando Vallejo, Héctor Abad, Santiago Gamboa, Sergio Álvarez, Laura Restrepo (I will not say which design their characters in cardboard and which don’t).

⁴ In the second heard there are writers such as Fernando Vallejo, Efraim Medina, Alonso Sánchez Baute, Antonio Ungar, Margarita Posada, Laura Restrepo, RH Moreno Durán, Antonio García.

⁵ In the third heard there are writers such as Luis Noriega, Antonio Ungar and Carolina Sanín.

There is also a fourth herd: "the herd of those who pretend to avoid horror." Here one can find all kinds of moos: novels about bucolic scenes from North Europe in the nineteenth century, cerebral historic novels about Persian or Moroccan culture, neurotic novels about the problems of French teenagers. The members of this herd believe they are free of Colombian horror. But you can also see horror here. In their language, in their characters, even in the complicated pirouettes they do in order to avoid horror.⁶

4. Literature and reality

A few weeks ago a panel was held in this room. Participants were asked to describe what it meant to write in their specific countries. European writers used their time to talk about *publishing* or about *getting reviews* or about *cashing in* in their countries.

That day I played the role of the madman in the audience. Interested in knowing more about the relation between those writers and their countries, I got up and interrogated a Belgian writer, trying to get her away from those non-literary subjects, to make her talk about "writing in Belgium." I failed. The closest answer I got was her confession about her habit of writing in a white notebook using a yellow pen.

Now I think that I was wrong in asking such questions, not that she was wrong in not answering them. In the "First World," full of comfort and order, a world standardized by the multinationals' brand names and by the Internet, by exact artificial environments and controlled temperature, a writer's nationality and the place where he writes are not important issues. It's not significant whether you are from Belgium, Germany or Sweden. It's practically the same to produce your work from LA, London or Rotterdam.

Writing in the "Third World" means confronting conflicts that deal with essential human needs, pure passions and life-or-death problems. Human needs, as well as passions and vital problems, are not the same in Afghanistan, Kenya or Colombia. That is the reason why the question "What does it mean to write in our countries?" is so meaningful for Third World writers like us and that's also why the answers are multiple.

I make this reflection, which is not apparently related to the topic we are discussing this afternoon, because I believe that what we have defined as "horror" during this panel, blind and brutal violence, breeds in the "Third World" from these human needs, passions and crucial conflicts. That's why in our countries literature must assume a position, any position, facing that intense, always-in-motion, full-of-life and full-of-death reality.

In fact, the omnipresence and fury of violence have forced our literature to trace a line and create a territory of its own, to choose and prepare its own weapons. And force it also to be flexible, to be in a state of permanent assessment of its own values, so that it can move at the same pace as the horror monsters. That is the double challenge for our texts: they must be capable of preserving the autonomy of their "own reality" and at the same time they must be capable of confronting in diverse ways the constant siege of violence.

⁶ Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Carolina Sanín, Pablo Montoya, Ricardo Silva, Enrique Serrano, Fernando Charry, Arturo Robledo.

Only through the defense of a "literary" perspective of the world (that overwhelming and complex world where we live), only through finding new forms in which to present that perspective will our narrative be able to find its own territory and face the horror of violence. That's its only chance to survive and, in addition, influence reality in the only way literature has ever done: changing the eyes of those who watch.