

IRONY, HUMOUR AND CYNICISM IN RELATION TO MEMORY: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN THE ARGENTINIAN AND THE MEXICAN LITERARY FIELD

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Making fun of traumatic experiences is a delicate issue. However, Freud has worked on the cathartic function of the joke (1905), and Andréa Lauterwein, in her edited volume Rire, Mémoire, Shoah (2009) insisted on the presence and relevance of laughter in the memory of the Shoah. In the context of Latin American literature, the presence of laughter and irony is still less prominent than in the context of the Holocaust, both in the cultural field and in the academic context. A logical reason is that the experiences of violence in the subcontinent are recent or even ongoing. In this paper I focus on the way in which irony, humour and cynicism manifest themselves in two different cases: the Argentinean memory of the last dictatorship (1976-1983) and the Mexican war on drugs as it was declared by Felipe Calderón (2006-2012).

In Latin America, the impact of violence in the second half of the 20th century was so high that in the 1980s a specific discipline, called the “violentología,” was created. Despite the fact that it was originally founded in Colombia, when president Barco created the famous “Commission of Studies on Violence” in 1987 during his campaign against the narcos, the field broadened its scope and began to focus on violence in other parts of the continent as well. Its aim was to study violence from different perspectives, which explains the interdisciplinary collaboration of historians, anthropologists, political and social scientists.¹

Nowadays, the “violentología,” overwhelmed by the growing popularity of memory studies, has been relegated to the background. Mainly in postdictatorial societies –in the Southern Cone, but also in Central America– the memory paradigm has become a dominant conceptual frame.² The call for papers launched by the present monographic issue is

representative in the sense that memory is proposed as the umbrella concept that might unify the different experiences of violence and trauma on the continent:

According to this, we invite to reflect on the axes of memory that crisscross Latin America from different and unequal historical experiences, focusing on the dissimilar locations and multiple actors which dispute and interfere both with the globalization of memories and the critical boundaries set by the Southern Cone experience, whose importance acquires new meanings vis-à-vis other Latin American experiences. Would it be possible to re-connect Latin America –as Ángel Rama and Antonio Candido proposed to do– this time under the aegis of memory? (Basile and Trigo 2013; <http://alternativas.osu.edu/en/issues/autumn-2013/call-for-papers/memoria.html>)

Firstly, this call for papers states that the memory paradigm underwent a kind of transculturation in the Southern Cone. Indeed, the conceptual framework developed in the context of Holocaust Studies has not been merely exported to Latin America, but has been critically reconsidered. Beatriz Sarlo's famous revision of Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" in *Tiempo pasado* (2005), for example, has provoked many discussions on the usefulness and necessary adaptations of the terms related with Memory Studies when they are applied to the memory of the postdictatorships in Latin America.³

Secondly, the authors of this call ask whether the memory paradigm, as it found its way into Southern Cone studies –which is often considered the "centre" of Latin American critical theory– proves useful as a global framework for Latin America, thus extending its scope from postdictatorial societies towards those societies in which violence is not primarily connected to dictatorship. For example, they ask themselves whether memory might be a useful concept for the violent situation in Mexico:

We call to make a collective reflection that allows us to chart a historical and continental map of the struggles for memory, from the politics and policies of memory deployed under dictatorships in the Southern Cone countries to the history of genocide and ethnocide perpetrated by the Guatemalan State against the Maya peoples; the no man's land of memory of manufacturing enclaves,

maquiladoras and narco-borders, to the banished memories of transnational migrants and displaced peoples. (Basile and Trigo 2013; <http://alternativas.osu.edu/en/issues/autumn-2013/call-for-papers/memoria.html>)

In the Mexican case, the answer has to be nuanced. On the one hand, it is important to stress that until now the memory paradigm has not been predominant in the Mexican context of the war on drugs. Although there exist various social movements, like Javier Sicilia's "Movimiento por la Paz",⁴ which use memory to fight against impunity and oblivion, the main discourse in relation to the war on drugs is still that of violence. The stress both in social and academic discourse is not that much on the fate of the victims (which amount to more than 80,000 since Calderón's coming into power), but rather on the perpetrators' excessive use of violence and expressive crime. On the other hand, the memory paradigm has proven very productive in relation to the remembrance of the PRI's "dictablanda" and the violent repression of the student revolts in 1968. In this context, it should be emphasized that the practice of disappearing continues to be an acute problem in the present, which generally doesn't receive that much attention. Actually, the estimated number of "desaparecidos" in Mexico is no less than 25,000 persons, and as it became clear recently (September 2014) with the kidnapping and murdering of 43 students of the Rural School in Iguala, the war on drugs and the politically disappeared cannot always be neatly dissociated.⁵ However, in academic studies on the actual drug war, "violence" seems to be the key concept, while memory's conceptual presence is still incipient.⁶

How could we explain this divergence between Mexico and the *Cono Sur*? One obvious reason is that the dictatorships in the Southern Cone ended in the 1980s, while the war on drugs in Mexico is still ongoing. How can we speak about memory if things have not come to an end, and we find ourselves still submerged in them? But not only did the war on drugs not come to an end, there is another major difference between both situations, which is related to the context. The dictatorships in the Southern Cone were intrinsically linked to the cold war, and this provoked an extreme ideological polarization. This resulted in a simple scenario: the good, the bad and the ugly became clearly defined.⁷ In Mexico, however, the situation is entirely different. The Mexican conflict is marked by a context of late capitalism in which it is

considerably more difficult to identify victims and perpetrators. The state, drug lords, drug proletarians, multinationals, and bank holdings are all suspicious of complicity. A third difference pertains to the scope of these conflicts: while the Argentinian or Chilean state terrorisms were seen as a national issue, the war in Mexico was initially represented as a northern problem. For a long time, many inhabitants of central Mexico considered this war as a regional conflict.⁸ However, it is evident that the cartels are no longer confined to the Northern regions; they are obviously operating in the whole territory of the Mexican state and it would be naïve to relegate the problem to the North, even if this ostrich-like strategy has persisted for a long time, as stated by Heriberto Yépez in his book *Tijuanológicas*. The recent tragedy in Iguala (state of Guerrero, in the center of Mexico), again made this very clear and sparked solidarity actions on a national scale. At the same time, the war on drugs clearly transcends national boundaries and is a textbook example of “the transnational”.

Another interesting difference between the situation in the Southern Cone and Mexico is that few written testimonies have been left by the victims of drug violence. Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza proposed to create “testimony workshops,” so victims could tell about their experiences with violence, and deal with their trauma (see the interview “Los invisibles,” transmitted on TV Mexico in 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmv_EgAjj-Y&feature=youtu.be). This would allow them to counter the official discourse according to which the only victims of the war on drugs are those directly involved in it.⁹ Certainly, a growing presence of testimonies would facilitate the creation of a sense of community amongst victims, which at present seems to be rather scarce.

In short, violentología seems to be the predominant paradigm in relation to the war on drugs in Mexico, even though memory is becoming an important and useful category.

Humour in relation to violence and memory

We have just remarked on the discrepancy between the situation in the Southern Cone on the one hand, heavily embedded in a postdictatorial context, in which the positions of the victims and perpetrators have been clearly defined by official discourse, especially since the Kirchners came into power, and on the other hand, the preponderance of the concept of

violence in the Mexican context, where it seems to be impossible to draw a clear actantial scheme of the actors involved in the war. What are the consequences of this divergence for analyzing the presence of humour in relation to these different contexts? Are humour (or irony) and the memory paradigm in the Southern Cone compatible? And what about recent violence in Mexico? How do irony and humour manifest themselves in relation to narcoculture?

Before exploring these questions, I propose to take a brief look at the place irony and humour occupy in trauma and memory studies related to the Holocaust. It is curious to observe that theoreticians from the paradigm of Memory Studies (Caruth, Felman) have not paid much attention to humour, and even less to irony, so Lauterwein's volume *Rire, mémoire, Shoah* (2009) can be considered a first attempt to explore the field. She insists on the presence and relevance of laughter in the memory of the Shoah and states in her "warning":

Avertissement: [...] Quelles que soient son origine et sa vocation, le rire, même traversé par la catastrophe, risque d'éluder l'indignation profonde. Nous sommes conscientes de ce risque. L'étude du mode comique face à la Shoah touche aux limites des convenances d'une mémoire soucieuse de fonder des valeurs sur la base de la connaissance d'une négativité absolue. [...] L'ambivalence intrinsèque du rire contribue-t-elle à soutenir une culture du dissensus, salutaire pour la perpétuation de la mémoire? Comment faire face à l'indifférence des générations futures sans pour autant les entraîner dans une névrose de culpabilité? [...] Le rire peut-il libérer certains affects bloqués, pour engager à un travail de mémoire? [...] A l'intérieur de ce champ, par quelles techniques du rire les oeuvres artistiques interrogent-elles les convenances mémorielles? Peuvent-elles, au-delà de leur évidente fonction cathartique pour l'auteur, opérer comme un mode de transmission efficace de la mémoire? (6)

Lauterwein highlights the therapeutic potential of laughter as well as its social and controversial effect. In that sense, Freud's theory (1905) on the cathartic effects of jokes, as elaborated in *Der Witz* (1905), is expanded to incorporate laughter. Through these rhetorical questions, Lauterwein suggests that laughter allows the consolidation of discursive communities, and the release of accumulated tensions and emotions. Moreover, she states

that laughter could contribute to the questioning of established versions of History, and also to place more emphasis on taboo items. In that sense, laughter creates the dissension that is necessary to perpetuate memory.

However, not all critics agree on the positive, therapeutic, or social function of humour. According to Theodor Adorno, for example, laughter is a sign of barbarism, a lack of civilization; it is “the sign of force, of the breaking out of blind and obdurate nature” (*Dialectics* 77).¹⁰ And somewhat later he states:

There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at. Laughter, whether conciliatory or terrible, always occurs when some fear passes. [...] Conciliatory laughter is heard as the echo of an escape from power. [...] It is the echo of power as something inescapable. Fun is a medicinal bath. The pleasure industry never fails to prescribe it. It makes laughter the instrument of the fraud practised on happiness. Moments of happiness are without laughter; only operettas and films portray sex to the accompaniment of resounding laughter. [...] In the false society laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its worthless totality. (140)

In relation to fascism, however, Adorno’s attitude is somehow ambiguous, since here he suggests a critical potential of laughter. On the one hand, he argues that a sense of humour would have been healthy in Germany, and possibly would even have avoided Hitler’s domination: “Even merely without the German seriousness, [...] Hitler could not have flourished. In the Western countries, where the rules of society are more deeply ingrained in the masses, he would have been laughed at” (*Critical Models* 208-09). Elsewhere, he states that the representation of fascism is completely incompatible with laughter:

Several years ago there was a debate about whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an outrage against its victims. The silly, farcical, second-rate quality is unmistakable, the kinship between Hitler and his followers on the one hand and the gutter press and stool pigeons on the other. One cannot laugh at it. (*Notes to Literature* 251-52)

So it seems that resistance against the nazi regime was not possible through laughter, or at least through some sense of laughter which is only too close to “Spitzeltum,” as the original says, or “the silly, farcical.” According to Adorno, only in very specific circumstances is laughter allowed and able to subvert violence. It might be interesting to consider what Adorno would have thought of those recent artworks on the Holocaust that integrate humor and playfulness, like the film *La vita è bella* by Roberto Benigni (1997), the *Lego Concentration Camp Set* by the Polish artist Libera (1996), and the film *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) by Quentin Tarantino. These are three very diverse examples in which humour, laughter, and irony have been used to represent the Holocaust. All of them have received harsh criticism and have opened up an intense ethical debate on the conditions under which we can approach such a traumatic event as the Holocaust in a playful way. In this context, it is interesting to see that Adorno’s arguments are still very much alive amongst critics. For example, Adorno stated that “[i]n the cultural industry, jovial denial”—we could add “humour”—“takes the place of the pain found in ecstasy and in asceticism” (141), and both *La vita è bella* and *Inglorious Bastards* have been criticised on these grounds.¹¹ Libera’s installations, on the other hand, were not exactly considered as a denial, but as a playful –though painful and uncomfortable, even unethical– confrontation of the sharp division between victims and perpetrators.¹²

Humour and irony in the Latin American context¹³

In Latin American literature, the presence of laughter and irony is still less prominent than in the context of the Holocaust, both in the cultural and the academic field. A logical reason would be that the experiences of violence in the subcontinent are recent, or even ongoing. In the following, I will focus on two very different cases: the Argentinian memory of the last dictatorship (1976-1983), and the incipient presence of memory in relation to the Mexican war on drugs, which was dramatically declared by Felipe Calderón in 2006, but which had already been dormant in Mexico since the mid-80s, when the Mexican drug cartels took over the distribution of cocaine in the U.S.¹⁴

1. *The Argentinian Case*

I will first concentrate on the way in which humour and irony are related to the memory paradigm, which is firmly established in the Argentinian cultural and academic context. The following issues will be addressed: Why does irony seem to be a preferred figure of speech? How does irony question existing discourses on memory in the high-brow postdictatorial novel? And what role do generational shifts play in the use of irony?

It is well known that the memory paradigm has had a strong presence in Argentina after the end of the military regime in 1983. In those years, the postdictatorial experience was systematically connected with the experience of the Shoah, a connection which has not always been evaluated very positively. In her essay *Tiempo pasado*, Beatriz Sarlo states, for example, that “el Holocausto se ofrece como modelo de otros crímenes y eso es aceptado por quienes están más preocupados por denunciar la enormidad del terrorismo de estado que por definir sus rasgos nacionales específicos” (61). The huge amount of testimonies published in the 1980s contributed to the creation and consolidation of social and communitarian bonds which had been lost in exile or destroyed by the violence of the dictatorship (Sarlo 59). Without questioning the undeniable value of testimony in the judicial and moral sphere, Sarlo sharply questions what she calls the “fetichización de la verdad testimonial” (63), and the unquestionable status of the testimonial subject. In testimony, “las narraciones en primera persona se mueven por el impulso de cerrar los sentidos que se escapan; no sólo se articulan contra el olvido, también luchan por un significado que unifique la interpretación” (67). In the first decades after the dictatorship, we could say that testimonies were considered a “sanación de identidades en peligro” (68), in which an intense trauma is expressed, and where there is no room for irony or humour.

According to Elsa Drucaroff in *Los prisioneros de la torre. Política, relatos y jóvenes en la postdictadura*, a substantial shift took place within the next generation. In the 1990s there was more distance, and debates on the “Truth” of testimony were no longer out of question:

La narrativa anterior [de los 70 y 80] entona grito, acusación, proclama, denuncia, reflexión, explicación sesuda; si bromea es con un fin serio: criticar y denunciar; si juega [...] es para hacer preguntas filosóficas que no son juego. [...] La nueva se

toma menos en serio. Predomina la socarronería, una semisonrisa que puede llegar a carcajada o apenas sobrevolar, pero señala siempre una distancia que no se desea recorrer: la que llevaría a tomarse demasiado en serio. (21-2)

However, who are these new writers, and what is this new literature? Does the generational shift of the so called “NNA” (Drucaroff, *Nueva Narrativa Argentina* 20) imply an unheard-of predilection for sarcasm, or humour, as other critics have also stated (Sosa, Blechmar)? In my view, it would be important to stress the continuity in the use of irony over different generations, to which the critical dimension is an essential ingredient.

Indeed, as Philippe Hamon stated, one of the main characteristics of irony is to utter an evaluation, a critical revision of given truths and norms through its indirect, oblique discourse (1996). It is precisely the existence of a very strong narrative with clearly defined positions in the Argentinian memory discourse, which invites irony to manifest itself as a counterdiscourse, as a means to question established and unquestionable truths.¹⁵ By this, I don’t suggest irony is essentially subversive: as Linda Hutcheon (1994) clearly demonstrated, irony is a transideological discursive strategy, that can have a variety of ideological implications. Irony, because of its axiological dimension, questions monolithic statements, without necessarily proposing an alternative discourse that aspires to be true.

A fruitful way to demonstrate the varied functions of irony during the last decades of postdictatorial literature is to start from Carlos Gamerro’s scheme of four different stages of postdictatorial literature, in which the generational criterium is combined with the position of enunciation of the author/narrator. Gamerro first singles out the literature produced during the dictatorship: the most well known example is, without doubt, *Respiración artificial*, a novel by Ricardo Piglia (born 1941) published in 1980, in which the disappeared are not mentioned literally, but alluded to allegorically through the disappearance of a character in the novel. It is generally agreed that the early postdictatorial production is highly allegorical because of the dangers implied in the explicit mentioning of the regime’s cruel practices. The disappearance of a character is a good example of irony, as it corresponds to the classical rhetorical definition of irony as a “discours épideictique complexe” (Hamon 30). It criticizes the regime’s practices through obliquity, or in Gamerro’s words, “the novel was so cryptic and intelligent that the

military were guaranteed not to understand it” (112). This means that novels like *Respiración artificial* already made a first attempt to restore communitarian and social bonds, a function which, according to Sarlo, was primarily associated with testimonies. In that sense, irony –the implicit reference to disappeared persons through narrative strategies like the disappearance of a character– is in this case essentially a serious and critical mode of discourse which reinforces community, since irony’s success as a communicational strategy relies heavily on existing discursive communities (Hutcheon 19). To my mind, this community-bonding function of irony is even more reinforced in the other three stages of the postdictatorial novel.

The second stage distinguished by Gamarro was initiated by the return to democracy, and is characterized by works produced by people directly involved in the conflict. In this period, testimony predominated, and “imagination was unnecessary, almost irrelevant” (112). However, in the later novels of this stage, some texts started giving voice to the perpetrators, and adopting their point of view, like *Villa* (1995) by Luis Gusmán (born 1944) and *El fin de la historia* (1996) by Liliana Heker (1943). Just like Piglia’s novel, these stories do not make us laugh at all, but they use dramatic or situational irony to show how people are enrolled in the regime’s sinister terror machine. Heker’s novel is particularly interesting: it is the story of a woman who is first arrested and tortured for being a militant of the “Montoneros,” only to fall in love with her torturer and to become part of the regime’s repressive state apparatus. Significantly, the narrator, Diana Glass, is not the militant woman who becomes a torturer, but her friend, who never got actively involved in politics, and narrates the story of her militant friend from an uncomfortably innocent present. While Diana Glass is generally interpreted as an alter ego of Heker herself, the character of the militant is inspired by the story of Inés Carazo, who actually was an acquaintance of Heker and a prisoner at the ESMA during the dictatorship who fell in love with a marine. If Hugo Vezzetti states that “[la memoria] tiende a ver los acontecimientos desde una perspectiva única, rechaza la ambigüedad y hasta reduce los acontecimientos a arquetipos fijados” (192), it is clear that this novel uses irony as a way to subvert the fixed actantial scheme and existing archetypes, which is a delicate issue. The question that is raised here is the right to speak: who can use irony in relation to the atrocities of dictatorship? The polemic that was generated after the publication of this novel, was

intrinsically related to this question. Actually, some critics defended an ethical stance which implied that the use of irony should be restricted to the victims: why should Heker, who was never imprisoned herself, represent through situational irony and melodrama the difficulties in which prisoners might have found themselves during dictatorship?¹⁶ In this way, *El fin de la historia* shows to what extent irony is a “transideological discursive strategy”: “irony can and does function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests” (Hutcheon 10).

The third stage distinguished by Gamarro is that of the literature produced by those who were not so much witnesses as bystanders, i.e. witness-observers rather than witness-participants. It concerns a series of writers who were too young in 1976 to be activists, but who, as teenagers, were not insensible to the circumstances either. Amongst these novels we may consider, for example, *Dos veces junio* (2001) by Martín Kohan (born 1967), a novel about a young army recruit who collaborates with a doctor in the detention centres, and clearly decides to close his eyes to what is happening around him. The whole novel is built on the highly ironical contrast between the succession of chapters, which alternate between describing the FIFA World Cup of 1978, and the torture sessions. Indeed, the detention center was very close to the stadium, and afterwards victims of the regime’s terror declared they could hear the screams of delight of supporters celebrating each goal, while, at the same time, they were being tortured. Irony, in this case, is used to underscore the coexistence of violence and play, and the way in which the dictatorship unashamedly used the World Cup to polish up its image, while continuing its cruel practices right next door. Moreover, irony also relativizes the innocent position of the recruit: he seems to be only an observer, but, when a prisoner gives him the phone number of her lawyer, his lack of action is a way of being guilty. The irony in this novel reflects on the banality of evil and questions the innocence of the recruit. The ironical structure of the novel underlines the impossibility to make a clear distinction between the observer and the perpetrator. Again, this asks for a more complex actantial scheme of the dirty war.¹⁷

The last category distinguished by Gamarro, similar to Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, refers to literature written by those who had no direct memory of the atrocities

because they were too young. In this category he places, for example, *Los topos* (2008) by Félix Bruzzone (born 1976), whose parents disappeared during the dirty war. Bruzzone's novel proposes an ironic and critical view of HIJOS, a strong association organised by the children of the disappeared from the 1990s and onwards. The efforts by both the "Abuelas" and the "Hijos" to make human rights a central issue in Argentinian politics, led president Kirchner to sanction the "national trauma" in 2003, when he stated that "[w]e are the sons and daughters of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo" (Sosa 76). Interestingly, in her article on *Los topos*, Cecilia Sosa underlines the presence of a kind of extremely dark humour amongst these youngsters: "'Because we suffered, we are entitled to laugh' was the unspoken code that circulated within the group. In some oblique way, humour confirmed the 'privilege' of the victims; it delineated a peculiar form of community elitism among the descendants" (78). For example, it was common practice to organize Mother's days or Father's days next to the Río de la Plata, where most of the disappeared had been thrown in to drown (85, note 9). In his novel, Bruzzone teases precisely this elitist way of kinship with the victims, and proposes the creation of "SOBRINOS" and "NUERAS" of the victims (21). Implicitly, this is a defense to expand memory to what Hirsch called "affiliative postmemory," in the sense that transmission of trauma is not to be confined to the direct descendents of state terrorism and exceeds bloodline ties. In the second part of the novel, the irony is even more acerbic when it targets the officialization of the national trauma of dictatorship. The protagonist meets the transvestite Maira with whom he falls in love, and who, like in a Bollywood movie, turns out to be his lost twin brother, born while his mother was imprisoned, and given away to the regime's acolytes during the dictatorship. The marginal status of the protagonist, who ends up as a transsexual, is contrasted by the centrality of the victims in the national trauma, organised and subsidised by the government in place. In that sense, and as Cecilia Sosa earlier suggested (83), *Los topos* becomes a humorous –I would rather say, ironical- reflexion on identity politics, in which the comfortable position of "national victims" is questioned in relation to other "victims", like transsexuals and homosexuals.¹⁸

2. *The Mexican Case*

The Argentinian officialization of national trauma was certainly preceded by many years of activism by civil associations whose demands for memory constituted a battle against oblivion. In Mexico, the situation is different. Even if the war on drugs has been existant since Nixon's initiation of "Operation Intercept" at the end of the 1960s, it had not been enforced with military troupes until the presidency of Felipe Calderón in 2006. In the six years of his government, there have been 60,000 victims. Peña Nieto's policy did not bring any relief either: during his first year in power, almost 20,000 Mexicans have died.¹⁹ As we have said before, the actuality of the war on drugs might explain the relative absence of the word "memory" in critical and academic studies.

However, while in Argentina testimonies proliferated as early as the 1970s, their exiguous presence²⁰ in Mexico is striking, and one of the consequences is the lack of solid communitarian and social bonds. Compared to the highly polarized, but at the same time very active and strong discursive communities in Argentina, in Mexico the victims seem to be far more isolated. One reason might be that in the case of Argentina, the militants were part of a highbrow intellectual community, while the conflict in Mexico does not have such a strong an intellectual connotation and is mainly concerned with economic power. If the Argentinian dirty war was clearly embedded in the polarizations of the cold war, the Mexican drug war is a product of late capitalism, in which the victims are far less organized since they are not connected by any ideological background.²¹

In short, memory as a concept is not predominant in the current Mexican debate.²² While irony was a perfect tool to question and subvert the fixed positions related to the different actors in postdictatorial Argentina, cynicism seems rather akin to the late capitalist frame of the war on drugs in Mexico. If we remember Georg Simmel's works on the philosophy of money, it is interesting to see how he related the emergence of capitalism in modern times, i.e. the introduction of exchange value, with the generalization of cynicism. According to his reasoning, cynicism accepts the interchangeability of values, just like capitalism does: "The concept of a market price for values which, according to their nature, reject any evaluation except in terms of their own categories and ideals is the perfect objectification of what cynicism

presents in the form of a subjective reflex” (257). In that sense, the Mexican conflict, which is intrinsically embedded in a context of late capitalism, and in which positions and values seem fully exchangeable, is a perfect breeding ground for cynicism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the drug novel has a specific affinity with the crime novel or the “roman noir,” traditionally considered a genre that grew in popularity in the aftermath of the crisis in 1929, and in which the cynical perspective on capitalism as a means of structural violence became predominant.

If we go back to Gamberro’s subdivision of postdictatorial literature, the first observation that comes to mind is that the drug novel has not yet given way to a categorization of different stages. The phase of testimonial narrative, predominant in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s, and characterized in Drucaroff’s view by crying, accusations, and denunciations, seems to be less present in Mexico. On the contrary, the drug novel is often considered as a commercial brand exploited cheerfully by the “norteños,” the writers of the north. At least, that was the accusation formulated almost ten years ago by Rafael Lemus in his much commented essay “Balas de salva,” published in *Letras libres* in 2005:

¿Cómo narrar el narcotráfico? Otra pregunta sin respuesta. [...]. La abulia teórica es apenas comparable al entusiasmo narrativo. Se escribe, se hacen novelas, se es del norte. Tanto entusiasmo es norteño y, con más precisión, fronterizo. Desde allá se escribe una literatura que alude irreparablemente al narco. Es imposible huir: el narcotráfico lo avasalla todo y toda escritura sobre el norte es sobre el narcotráfico. [...] Toda mesa de novedades está sitiada por el narco, algún día será tomada por su literatura.

(<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/balas-de-salva>)

Perhaps to compensate the near absence of testimonial voices, the narrative on the drug war has been characterised by realist aesthetics, or, as Lemus stated, by a “costumbrismo [...] elemental” (ibid.). According to Lemus, writers like Élmer Mendoza make an effort to reproduce the idiolect of the gangs, and offer a picturesque portrait, or a “postcard,” of Northern Mexico. However, it is striking that autobiography, or autofiction, seems to be lacking in these narratives, contrary to what happens in Argentina’s postdictatorial fiction.

Another striking difference is that, while corpses, the haunting specter of the disappeared, are rare in Argentinian postdictatorial narrative, the Mexican drug novel gives prominence to the spectacular and ubiquitous display of the abject corpse. This corpse –and violence in general– is often represented in a playful way, which might be explained by the huge influence of the Tarantino aesthetics in contemporary Mexican literature. Marco Kunz already insisted on the grotesque representation of violence, and I would add, especially of the abject corpse:

Como el asesinato es una realidad cotidiana y se da por sentado que, en la gran mayoría de los casos, se relaciona con las actividades delictivas del crimen organizado, entre las que el narcotráfico y el pollerismo ocupan el lugar más importante, la muerte violenta pierde su excepcionalidad y es a menudo objeto de un tratamiento literario irrespetuoso, frívolo, burlón, relativizador y/o grotescamente hiperbólico. La capitulación de la sociedad ante el crimen omnipresente repercute en una profanación de la muerte en la literatura, una indiferencia moral y emocional ante las brutalidades narradas. (139)

In that sense, the traumatic impact of the drug war seems to be present in a mediated way; this mediation could not only be explained by the absence of witness participants in the literary field, but also by the geographical distance, as for many Mexicans, the war on drugs rages on without impacting their daily lives, except for the images of violence in the mass media. In consequence, television plays a leading role in many of these novels, as the main vehicle through which violence –and especially spectacular violence, i.e. mutilated and abject corpses– is transmitted. In opposition to the Argentinian narrative, where the absence of corpses of the disappeared is haunting, the drug novel reflects the sensational display of violence, like those corpses hanging from a bridge in the center of Cancún, sometimes accompanied by sardonically humorous messages from the criminals themselves.²³ It is this grotesque, abject form of the corpse, and its omnipresence in Mexican media,²⁴ as well as the spectacle this violence implies, which is often treated with humour or irony.²⁵

A first example is taken from *Perra brava* (2010) by Orfa Alarcón (born 1979). This novel, exceptional because both its author and first person narrator are women (although no

autobiographical nor autofictional link is suggested), is about Fernanda Salas, who recalls her love affair with Julio Cortés, the leader of a group of hitmen. It is the story about the excitement, the fascination, and even the addiction Fernanda feels when she is treated in a violent, derogatory way by Julio, and of how she in turn becomes an extremely violent person herself. We find several episodes in which dismembered bodies are represented, but the mutilated head of a policeman is described in a particularly superficial, even comical way: “Fue reconocido por la dentadura: el comandante Ramiro Silva se había vuelto famoso de la noche a la mañana. Amanecía y la ciudad desayunaba teniendo enfrente huevos estrellados, salsa catsup y unas cavidades vacías de ojos mirándola fijamente” (87). The complete lack of transition in this paragraph between the mutilated corpse and daily breakfast, and the comparison between the fried eggs and the eye sockets is striking. For a moment, it feels like watching a scene from Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

In *Fiesta en la madriguera* (2010), by Juan Pablo Villalobos (born 1973), the spectacle of violence is observed through the perspective of the child narrator, who lives with his father, an important drug lord, in a kind of fortified palace. He is not supposed to see any violence – women are continuously cleaning, weapons are hidden behind closed doors, the lions make sure no body parts are left over– but as a real detective he discovers details that are indicative of the violence of his environment. However, his most flagrant encounter with violence occurs through television, when he sees a dismembered head, probably the result of his father’s deeds, which leaves him curiously insensible:

Hoy hubo un cadáver enigmático en la tele: le cortaron la cabeza y ni siquiera se trataba de un rey. Tampoco parece que fuera obra de los franceses, que gustan tanto de cortar las cabezas. Los franceses ponen las cabezas en una cesta después de cortarlas. Lo miré en una película. En la guillotina colocan una cesta justo debajo de la cabeza del rey. Luego los franceses dejan caer la navaja y la cabeza cortada del rey cae en la cesta. Por eso me caen bien los franceses, que son tan delicados. [...] Los mexicanos no usamos cestas para las cabezas cortadas. Nosotros entregamos las cabezas cortadas en una caja de brandy añejo. [...] En la

tele pasaron una foto de la cabeza y la verdad es que tenía un peinado muy feo. Llevaba el pelo largo y unas mechadas pintadas de güero, patético. (42-43)

The use of the distant perspective of the boy is striking, and ironically underscores the insensibility which is produced through these images. But are these corpses and their representation in fiction merely a contribution to the daily spectacle of violence in Mexico, or could we consider them as ironic reflections on the spectacle of violence in which we, as readers, also participate with delight? And what about the more global frame in which this violence “made in Mexico” is situated? Indeed, the novel alludes frequently to the violence of colonialism and modernity: as the narrator observes several times, the French cut off as many heads as the Mexicans, they only did it with more sophistication and left them in a basket instead of in a box of brandy. Irony, in this novel, is used precisely to criticize the exotic spectacle of violence as it is present both in Mexican and international media, as a stereotype of Mexican culture dating back to the Aztecs.²⁶

This complex relation between supposedly “endogamic violence” and the violence produced both by colonialism and modernity, is the topic of a last novel I would like to briefly comment on: *Arrecife* (2012) by Juan Villoro (born 1956). This novel considers tourism as the latest manifestation of imperialism, and tells the story of a number of Western tourists who go to a resort in Mexico in order to experience real fear and anxiety. They are welcomed in a touristic resort by a team of more than twenty actors adequately representing drug violence, kidnapping the hosts, treating them violently, scaring them with various actions that recall the actual drug war:

En todos los periódicos del mundo hay malas noticias sobre México: cuerpos mutilados, rostros rociados de ácido, cabezas sueltas, una mujer desnuda colgada de un poste, pilas de cadáveres. Eso provoca pánico. Lo raro es que en lugares tranquilos hay gente que quiere sentir eso. Están cansados de una vida sin sorpresas. Si tú quieres, son unos perversos de mierda o son los mismos animales de siempre. Lo importante es que necesitan la excitación de la cacería, ser perseguidos. Si sienten miedo eso significa que están vivos: quieren *descansar sintiendo miedo*. Lo que para nosotros es horrible para ellos es un lujo.

El tercer mundo existe para salvar del aburrimiento a los europeos. Aquí me tienes, dedicado a la paranoia recreativa. (63)

Amazingly, this kind of resort really exists: the Eco Alberto resort in the state of Hidalgo, for example, welcomes tourists who want to experience the near-death experience and fear of migrants attempting to pass the border, which is extremely unsafe due to the growing influence of the drug cartels (“Atracciones”).²⁷ The portrayal of dark tourism in this novel suggests that violence could be more than the subject of first hand testimony, of subjective trauma, it could also be an object of consumption and enjoyment through the commodification of its spectacular dimension. Simultaneously, this ironic portrait of the tourist as a consumer of fear, as well as the conception of tourism as a sort of new imperialism in which the affects of the third world are “consumed” in order to be “contained” by the first world, imply a cynical reflection on the fact that literally everything can be sold and is exchangeable in late capitalism, as long as you are willing to pay for it.

Conclusions

In summary, it is striking how in both Argentina and Mexico, irony and humour are increasingly introduced in literature on violence. However, in these two countries their function is very different. In Argentina we see a predominance of irony, which operates as a way of criticizing the coherent narrative on dictatorship produced primarily by testimonies. In Mexico the memory discourse is only incipient; instead we observe that in this case violence is the key concept, a violence with a notoriously spectacular dimension. In Mexican narrative, we seem to find a predominance of cynicism, insisting on the interchangeability of positions in the war on drugs, and the absence of a fixed narrative scheme. Moreover, irony and black humour question violence’s grotesque representation in the media, and its surrealist aspects, since major drug lords can escape prison in a laundry basket,²⁸ while some are murdered, only to resurrect a few years later, and possibly murdered again.²⁹

Many Mexicans consider the war as a big and of course extremely painful joke in which nothing is what it seems to be, where any narrative is exchangeable and cynicism rules supreme, to the point that violence, like drugs, can be sold and consumed by tourists who enjoy its exotic

and spectacular experience. The voices of the witnesses, still important players in the Argentinian memory discourse seem to be –until now– nearly absent in the Mexican literary scene. The film *Rambo V* announces itself as the final chapter of the Stallone saga, with John Rambo crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and rescuing a girl kidnapped by the drug cartels in Ciudad Juárez. This goes on to prove once more that Mexican memory is still not owned by the victims themselves.

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Notas

¹ For an excellent overview of the “violentología” and its interdisciplinarity, see Rueda 2008. It is symptomatic that Rueda’s article uses the word “memory” only once (and then only in a quote).

² In *Accounting for Violence. Marketing Memory in Latin America*, Ksenija Bilbija and Leigh A. Payne collect various contributions on the predominance of the memory paradigm in Latin America (with no articles on the recent violence in Mexico), and open the discussion on the risks of promoting collective memory in such a way as to create a “memory market”.

³ Sarlo’s essay is based on the concept as exposed by Hirsch in *Family Frames* (1997). Later on, Hirsch developed this concept in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012). A fruitful discussion on this topic can be found in the introduction by Jordana Blechmar and Natalia Fortuny to their monographic issue *Revisiting postmemory: The intergenerational transmission of trauma in post-dictatorship Latin American culture of the Journal of Romance Studies* (2013).

⁴ The Movimiento por la Paz, con Justicia y Dignidad (www.movimientoporlapaz.mx) is an organisation which was created in April 2011 by the Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, whose son Juan Francisco Sicilia was murdered shortly before. This association, also denominated as the “Mexican Indignados Movement”, has brought together many victims of the war on drugs, and has organised numerous protest marches and conferences. Speaking from the point of view of the victims, el Movimiento por la Paz vehemently

condemns the situation of impunity which predominates in Mexican society, demands the recuperation and identification of the “desaparecidos”, the persecution of the criminals, the demilitarization of the conflict and the legalization of drugs. However, this civil association remains a marginal player in the conflict, and the efforts made by the government to end with impunity are still disappointing.

⁵ Although the judicial process is still ongoing and more than 80 persons have been arrested in this case, it is clear that both drug cartels (“Guerreros Unidos”), local authorities (the mayor of Iguala and his wife) and police officers are involved. The demonstrations all over the country in support of the students’ families contribute to the creation of a collective memory related to drug and state violence. These protests also show how the representation of the Mexican war on drugs affects the entire Mexican population, and how the authorities’ complicity is once and again profound. The case of Iguala is especially interesting since it shows to what an extent state criminality and drug violence are interconnected.

⁶ Cf. the very recent volume *México post 68*, edited by Mónica Szurmuk and Maricruz Castro Ricalde, in which a connection is made between the post 68-memory discourse and contemporary violence in Mexico.

⁷ Sarlo also insists on the strong ideological background of the revolutionaries: “Las ideas eran defendidas como núcleo constitutivo de la identidad política, sobre todo en las fracciones marxistas del movimiento radicalizado” (88).

⁸ In his book *Tijuanologías*, Heriberto Yépez insists on this projection of Mexico’s problem on the northern region: “La frontera es la paradójica oportunidad para que nuestros males nacionales (la pobreza, la migración, el crimen) le ocurran a otros; es el set donde México se hace un país extranjero para los propios mexicanos” (84).

⁹ At least, that is what president Calderón famously declared, causing major indignation amongst the Mexican population, when thirteen youngsters were murdered in their house in Juárez in 2010 by hitmen of one of the cartels. See Yuri Herrera’s article “Subjetividades criminales: discurso gubernamental, periodístico y literario en el México contemporáneo” (130-3).

¹⁰ This analysis of Adorno’s position towards writings on laughter is based on Diane Cohen (2009) and Sea Coulson (2007).

¹¹ On *La vita è bella*, Lauterwein states that “Benigni présente tantôt *La vie est belle* comme une “love story” (suppl. DVD), avec un message d’amour et d’humanité qui secondarise la Shoah, tantôt il revendique la finalité mémorielle du film. On ne peut donc se départir du soupçon que Benigni humorise

les cauchemars de l’histoire par amour du paradoxe plutôt que par engagement pour leur mémoire” (364). On *Inglourious Basterds*, Jean Franco remarks: “Consider a film like Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*, in which extreme cruelty is played for laughs as Jewish commandos in Nazi Germany rival the SS in horrendous acts and scalp their prisoners. Tarantino boasted that “taboos are meant to be broken,” but when the taboo against harming another is broken, there can be no limits, no social pact” (1).

¹² See Ernst Van Alphen 2002.

¹³ I am very grateful to Pilar Calveiro for her helpful remarks on this paragraph.

¹⁴ Generally, this is referred to as “el trato con los colombianos,” which took place around 1985.

¹⁵ In *Política y/o violencia*, Pilar Calveiro analyses the origins of this binary narrative in the discourse of the guerrilla movements, especially in the case of the *Montoneros* (cf. “Una lógica cerrada”, 111-136).

¹⁶ Cf. Héctor Schmucler’s review, in which he stated famously: “¿Qué extraña traición se teje entre el autor y su palabra cuando la tragedia -no es otro el tono que merece la agonía de las personas reales que padecieron el destino de Leonora- se resuelve en divertimento literario? Saturado por su propia biografía, Liliana Heker hace de *El fin del la historia* un espejo multiplicado en el que la novelista de ficción Diana Glass, busca descubrir su íntimo rostro en la imagen de su amiga montonera, pero sólo encuentra ecos de sucesivas traiciones” (web).

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the functions of irony in Kohan’s novel, see Adriaensen 2009.

¹⁸ It is noteworthy, however, that Sosa places the whole discussion in the context of humour, rather than irony: “I contend that humour has not only provided a creative means of political empowerment for those who have been persistently constructed into victimizing narratives. Rather, it has become the surface and medium of an experience of iteration, displacement and contagion across expanded audiences” (75). In her conclusion, she states that “[f]or the new generation, then, this form of humour does not work as a form of light entertainment. Rather, it becomes a strategy and even a platform of resistance, refusal and creation. Dark humour sticks. [...] Thus, it emerges as a form of *doing*, a form of connection, submission and getting undone by grief. Far from leaving the past behind, dark humour works as a form of recovery and even of conversion” (84). Although I do agree on the fact that the examples extracted from daily life are particularly illustrative of a tendency to black humour, the narrative strategies used by Bruzonne are, from my perspective, more akin to irony: not only the parody of the discourse of the HIJOS movement is based on irony, but the multiple conversions of the character Maira, and the absurd twists of plot can also be interpreted as examples of situational irony.

¹⁹ These data were published by several media, but it is the weekly newspaper *Zeta* from Tijuana in particular, that has accused the PRI-government of silencing the numerous deaths caused since Peña Nieto's presidency (see <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=358840>).

²⁰ Some noteworthy and early exceptions are Angelo Nacaveca's *Diario de un narcotraficante* (1967) and *El tráfico de la marihuana* (1987). However, in his article "Vuelta al narco en ochenta ficciones", Marco Kunz expresses his doubts about the reliability of this author ("¿es puro invento o confesión fidedigna, reportaje o novela de testimonio? ") and observes the recent popularity of the so called "docuficción autobiográfica", including both chronicles by journalists that interviewed some capos and testimonies by hitmen or *sicarios*. Two other volumes with testimonies were edited by Javier Valdez Cárdenas: *Los morros del narco. Historias reales de niños y jóvenes en el narcotráfico mexicano* (2011) collects testimonies by children involved in the war on drugs, and the second one, *Levantones. Historias reales de desaparecidos y víctimas del narco* (2012) is a compilation of stories by the victims of express kidnapping. However, Marco Kunz is utterly suspicious about the veracity and reliability of all these recent, "testimonios de incierta veracidad de narcos, policías, políticos, víctimas, etc." (article in press).

²¹ It should be noted that the position of the drug gangs and cartels in this context is cause of controversy: are they examples of extremely well organized multinationals, or are they tribal organizations in which the local is more important than the global exchange of goods and money? In *Amexica*, Ed Vulliamy explains how the cartels developed from monopoly capitalism (with a vertical, hierarchical structure) towards a globalized system of free market economy (with a more democratic structure): nowadays, the cartels use "the same concession or franchising system as any other corporation marketing any product or service in the globalized economy" (128). They became "outsourced, meritocratic and opportunistic" (129). Again, the disappearance of the students in Iguala shows to what extent the "a-political" dimension of the war on drugs should be nuanced, since drug cartels were possibly involved in the kidnapping and murdering. However, it stays true that the cartels themselves usually do not prioritize their political views. On the other hand, the tragedy in Iguala impeded collective memory.

²² In Mexico, however, we might say there is an alternative to the testimony: the narcocorrido. Accused by some of converting violence, death and machismo into a marketable commodity (Simonett), others consider the narcocorridos as the chronicles of our time, where the perspective of the "people" on the war on drugs is given voice (Cabañas).

²³ As Ed Vulliamy reminds us, the cartel “La Línea” took to publishing “the names of police officers it was about to execute on public narcomantas. A list of twenty-six officers was posted at a dog-racing track just before Christmas 2008, above the bodies of four [executed] civilians, one of them wearing a Santa Claus hat” (125).

²⁴ There is an interesting contrast between the exposure of bodies produced by the drug gangs, and the invisibility of the corpses of the 25.000 disappeared in Mexico, victims both of state violence and the drug cartels who ultimately prefer to dissolve the corpses of their victims.

²⁵ Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2666* is a different case. Even though the abject corpse is also extremely present in this novel, it is not exposed in the same spectacular or humorous way (which does not mean that irony would be absent from *2666*). *2666* is exceptional too by the fact that it has been considered as the most monumental and most succesful example of a novel in which violence in Mexico is related not only with drug trafficking, but placed in a broader context of structural violence related to the permanent state of exception installed by the neoliberal system (Farred). Not only could the endless description of corpses in the fourth part be considered as a way of introducing these murders into collective memory, the “genealogy of evil” (Galdo) that is designed in *2666* might also contribute to insert the Juárez murders in a memory paradigm, of which the Shoah described in the fifth part is obviously an essential part. However, it is interesting that in the literary criticism on *2666* the key concepts in analysis still seem to be “violence,” “evil,” and “cruelty,” rather than memory itself.

²⁶ For a more detailed analysis, see Adriaensen 2012.

²⁷ For more information on the Eco Alberto resort see <http://ecoalberto.com.mx/atracciones.php/>

²⁸ On January 19, 2001, el Chapo Guzmán, one of the most wanted drug lords of Mexico, succeeded in escaping from a high-security prison in Mexico by hiding in a laundry basket. This hilarious fact contributed to the profound cynicism of Mexican citizens towards the credibility of the authorities, and the judicial system.

²⁹ In March 2014, Nazario Moreno, “El Chayo,” was murdered by Mexican authorities. El Chayo supposedly had already died in 2010, but continued to appear sporadically in public. The article published in *El País* in March 11, 2014 was titled “Muere el capo mexicano que resucitó y lo hicieron santo.” <http://www.elpais.com.uy/vida-actual/muere-capo-mexicano-que-resucito.html>