

Violence and the humanities

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To speak of violence from the perspective of the humanities is to confront something of a paradox. On the one hand, the humanities, as the supposed repository of ethical, moral and humanitarian thinking, would seem to be the appropriate intellectual space from which to address the violence and injustice which are endemic to so many parts of the world. After all, those who are called upon to defend the place of the humanities within universities regularly invoke higher principles of human interaction, such as tolerance and justice, of which, it is claimed, the humanities alone are qualified to speak. It is in the humanities, its defenders argue, that prejudice, incomprehension and other alleged sources of violent behaviour may most effectively be countered. Critical thinking and philosophical reflection, the encounter with fictional characters different from ourselves – these are among the experiences which, those in the humanities claim, can temper the human capacity for violence.

At the same time however, and for a century at least, the humanities have ceded to the social sciences much of the task of reflecting seriously upon the social causes of violence. The issue of violence in entertainment media, which humanities scholars address through an interest in the forms and themes of media content, is regularly displaced in the public mind by the social scientific question of whether the media have a direct effect on social behaviour. In this displacement, the public role of humanities media scholars has often seemed diminished. Those of us who study media from humanities perspectives are familiar with the exasperated impatience of journalists who, seeking from us a confirmation of the negative effects of violent media content, show little interest in our claims that these relationships are always more complicated than is thought. The humanist’s typical insistence that no direct effects of media violence can be demonstrated – that these are always mediated by the forces of genre, tradition, style and audience predisposition – will inevitably seem impotent (or needlessly convoluted) beside the social scientist’s demonstration of effects which, however mechanical, offer the image of a world in which media messages have consequences. The tragedy of the humanities media scholar, then, is this: convinced more than anyone else of the importance of cultural expression within society, we are the least willing to claim that such expression has any direct and measurable effects. We

find ourselves condemned to endlessly repeat, in the face of the social scientists' claims of media effects, that things are more complicated.

The humanities scholar's caution, nevertheless, remains absolutely necessary. Without it, the temptation to read cultural texts (popular or elite) as transparent documents of social realities will prevail. For example, an observer from another planet, surveying the corpus of highly popular television series of the last decade, might well conclude that the most violence force in Western Europe and Anglo North America at present is the male serial killer of women, the staple central figure of dozens of television series, from Denmark, Norway, Great Britain, France and the United States. In the face of this success, social science finds itself disarmed. No statistical rise in incidences of serial killing can explain the popularity of the televisual genre. Nor can this popularity explain the most common or socially resonant forms of violence which have marked these societies over the last decade, from school-shootings to the police killings of minority men or the single acts of misogynistic violence carried out by men against women of their acquaintance.

The humanist scholar of fictional media forms, on the other hand, is ready with a range of explanatory arguments for the success of the serial killer narrative: that it focuses on white, middle-class protagonists similar in demographic status to the typical viewers for these programs; that its emphasis on forensic police work reinforces a sense of law enforcement as scientific and value-free; that its authorization of bravura acting and charismatic performances lets these programs recycle already established performers or give new boosts to others (Michael C. Hall in *Dexter*, Mads Mikkelsen in *Hannibal*, Jamie Dornan in *The Fall*); and that it is appropriate to a televisual industry now organized around series of limited duration which are neither those of the self-contained episode nor of the endlessly renewable series (as in the past of mainstream networks and their conventional television "seasons").

To these explanations of a formal or institutional character, the humanist scholar may add a moral judgement which is not dependent upon the demonstration of direct causal relationships between media content and social behaviour. Debates over the misogyny of serial killer narratives, for example, have little to do with the directly causal relationships of such narratives to real-life violence, but involve judgements of the ways in which we take pleasure from media texts and the political stakes in constructing our pleasures in such a fashionⁱ.

In Mexico

The risk of the humanities response to media violence, of course, is that the analysis it offers may appear trivial, as if genre conventions or the constraints of particular formats were all that was needed to explain (and justify) certain kinds of media content. Nowhere, perhaps, does this risk weigh more heavily than in Mexico, where the violent character of media content very often seems overwhelming. What can be said of the fact that, in Mexico City, on every day of the week, at least two daily newspapers (*El Grafico* and *La Prensa*) feature on their front covers the image of a dead body lying on a street, the victim of violent murder? The first response might be to note that this sort of imagery was once more pervasive, internationally, than is now the case. From the 1930s through the 1950s, the corpse on the street was a staple of tabloid crime news photography in the United States, but it had disappeared almost entirely by the 1960s. In Mexico, in contrast, the absolute consistency of such images on the front pages of certain newspapers is such that they have assumed the status of a trademark. Day after day, with only slight variations of angle, distance and detail, these images occupy the centre of these newspapers' front pages.

In contrast, the frequency of images of dead bodies in print journalism in the United States, Canada and Western Europe is probably at its lowest level in a half-century or more. Just as violent imagery has increased in fictional programming on television or in films, it has virtually disappeared from newspapers and from all but the most sensational of local television news programs. We may trace this decline to several changes in the economics and organization of news gathering in these regions of the world. One is the decline of the full-time police reporter and the increased reliance of newspapers, in order to cut costs, on freelancers and independent producers of non-timely content. Another is the changing status of the tabloid newspaper, of the sort which regularly presented violent imagery in the middle of the 20th century. By 1960, weekly tabloid publications which once sought violent imagery of urban crime to adorn their covers now turned increasingly to coverage of celebrity scandals or non-criminal forms of abnormality (such as claims of encounters with flying saucers.) This change came when tabloid newspapers began selling most of their copies in supermarkets, and could not fill their covers with images likely to offend young children or their parents. Daily newspapers, no longer able to survive by occupying market niches and selling copies on newsstands, found themselves seeking out broad, family-oriented readerships in order to attract advertisers.

The image of the murdered body of the street, once a cliché of Western photojournalism, is now found almost exclusively in Mexico and some of the countries of South America. In the case of Mexico, the immediate temptation is to link the prevalence of the corpse photograph to the broader conditions

of violence which have marked Mexican society since 2007. In that year, as Sergio González Rodríguez has noted, the national homicide rate in Mexico reached its lowest level since 1940ⁱⁱ, then began to climb again amidst the spread of violence tied to the so-called narco wars. Faced with the stark irrefutability of this context, the humanities media scholar would seem to have little choice but to leave any explanation of this violent front-page newspaper imagery to the social scientist, for whom it would be the obvious effect of a heightened social climate of violence.

It remains the case, nonetheless, that the relentless regularity of the front-page corpse photograph, which appears every day without exception, cannot be explain solely in terms of an equally relentless procession of murderous events. In ways which invite further analysis, the corpse photograph is embedded in the conventions by which a tabloid newspaper marks its visual presence in public space and attracts the eye of those who pass by. This imagery is more likely to survive in cultures where newspapers are sold from street kiosks or by itinerant vendors. The photograph of the dead body has become one of the recurrent features through which each newspaper establishes its identity in a competitive market, and responds to the need to maintain a constant level of sensational intensity from day to day. Finally, the image of a body on the street is a highly economical and photogenic condensation of a broader climate of violence whose larger complexity does not lend itself easily to photographic representation. Little is conveyed, in the front page photographs of *El Grafico* or *La Prensa*, of the systematicity of everyday violence, of the complicities and corruptions which make it possible, or of the consistency with which that violence is exercised towards certain groups rather than others.

The task of the humanities media scholar is to understand such images in terms of traditions and conventions, using tools which do not seem overly formalistic and trivializing. The challenge of humanities research is to acknowledge the role of aesthetic features in rendering images meaningful without reducing such images to the status of purely aesthetic objects. One strand of writing on Mexican crime photography has elevated certain examples of photojournalism in order to celebrate the individual artistic signatures of those photographers, like Nacho Lopez or Enrique Metinides, whose work is seen to transcend the exigencies of a simple professionalism. The humanism ascribed to the work of Lopez, or the hyper-realism of Metinides' scenes of technological carnage (airplane crashes and car wrecks) are seen to endow the work of both photographers with an artistry that is in excess of their journalistic purpose. Can one use these aesthetic categories, however, when dealing with photographs of violence whose authors are unknown or whose ambitions seem much less grandiose? Set against the

humanistic nobility or aesthetic individuality of these men's work, the photographs which adorn the front pages of *La Prensa* or *El Grafico* may simply seem like debased symptoms of a world in which the artfulness of tabloid photography is no longer imaginable, or in which an aesthetic discourse about crime photography could only seem irresponsible. And yet, of course, the nameless, innumerable photographers who work, in the present moment, to produce the image of a dead body every day of the week are cultural producers of a sort, working within forms and conventions and worthy of being studied for this. To provide an account of these forms and conventions is not to produce an alibi for the sensationalism and apparent irresponsibility of which these photographers may be accused. It is, however, to begin to understand the ways in which media violence is a historical phenomenon, produced in the interplay of professional routines, sedimented conventions and ideological preconceptions.

Faced with the dead bodies on the front pages of *La Prensa* or *El Grafico* (or of a sporting newspaper like *Pasala*, which will set corpses amidst its cover images of half-naked women and football stars), the humanities scholar may express the moral judgement which the humanities have long claimed as one of their duties. More usefully, though, the humanities media scholar may wonder about the 50-year shift whereby dead bodies, which once were photographed and shown in neighbourhood settings, surrounded by crowds of local residents, now appear cropped or set against deliberately blurred backgrounds. The reduction of these dead bodies to bits of flesh covered in blood denies the viewer any sense of social context or of the human individuality of the victim. In this decades-long shift, the brute singularity of the *fait divers*, of the isolated and therefore meaningless murder, has replaced the representation of rich social tableaux in which one could imagine the urban crowd as a social actor and the urban environment as an ecology of violence and class identity. This transition happened slowly, but not invisibly, and one may trace its unfolding across a broad corpus of magazines, from the social realism of crime photography in 1950s periodicals like *Prensa Roja* and *Magazine de Policia* through the emergence of a more restricted view of death in magazines of the 1960s and 1970s, like *Alarma!* and *Alerta*, from which any sense of social background was slowly disappearing. In the 2010's, even the vestiges of a human face in its final moments of agony are usually invisible, covered over with blood or strewn debris.

Censorship (official or self-imposed) may act upon the editors of *La Prensa* or *El Grafico* to evacuate, from their front-page imagery of death, any connection to larger conditions or contexts, but so, too, may the pressures which constrain the work of the photojournalist, who is now required to

capture the singular image on a daily basis and deliver it rapidly in the absence of any supplementary reporting. The humanities scholar may uncover these factors, then show their role in shaping a routinized display of death which, hanging from newspaper kiosks, forms part of the visual landscape of Mexico City and other cities in Mexico. In their horror, and in the contingencies which preside over their creation, these photographs form part of a history of visual forms. To set them within that history is not to trivialize them or disconnect them from the horrific conditions of which they are a part. It is, however, to see media forms within the complexes of images and words to which they belong. Within such complexes, the horror of contemporary social violence is distributed. It is set in proximity to other phenomena (like sex and sports) and joined to the rhythms of particular media and their appearance.

Mexican studies of the violent image

As I have argued elsewhere, Mexican scholarship on the media representation of violence is perhaps the most developed in the worldⁱⁱⁱ. This is particularly the case for the examination of crime-oriented photojournalism in Mexico, which has largely been studied within the humanities, in such disciplines as Art History. Elsewhere in the world, the study of journalistic crime imagery has seen few developments, outside the attention paid to canonical photographers like Weegee or the collections of judicial photographic archives assembled by historians in recent years^{iv}. Most strikingly, the study of crime photography has largely been absent from English-language media studies, which, largely as a result of its social scientific roots, has lacked a vocabulary with which to speak of images. As noted, Mexican scholarship has focused on canonical photojournalists “raised” above others, such as Enrique Metinides and Nacho Lopez, but it has also focused on the anonymous traditions of judicial photography and on the uncredited images which have appeared in such periodicals as *Alarma!*^v The importance given by historians to traditions of social realism within Mexican photography, and the strong links between such realism and the documentation of crime, have ensured that crime-oriented photojournalism retains a prominent place within broader histories of Mexican visual culture. This has meant that crime imagery in Mexico is studied, most of the time, from humanities perspectives, rather than simply and unproblematically used as evidence in social scientific studies of crime itself.

Alongside this scholarship on photography, it is important to acknowledge recent national and international recognition of the rich tradition of the Mexican crime-oriented *cine negro* (or “film noir”) of the 1940s and 1950s. Those who work to insert Mexican cinema within broader histories of Mexican visuality have tended to focus on the open-air work of cinematographers like Gabriel Figueroa, which was marked by a particular rendering of rural landscapes and horizons seen to express an essential

national character. Films of the *cine-negro*, typically shot in studios but employing real urban streets as locations, were long dismissed as having little status whatsoever as social documents. More and more, now, they are studied alongside newspaper photography of the mid-20th century as media which registered the modernization of Mexico City and other municipalities. The recent surge of interest in Mexican urban thrillers, which were the focus of a comprehensive retrospective at the Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia, and then again, in 2015, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York^{vi}, points to the reclaiming of the Mexican crime film as a key ingredient in a national visual culture.

The longstanding humanities scholarship on Mexican crime photography and recent interest in the *cine-negro* serves to counter two prejudices which one encounters in Anglophone humanities scholarship. The first is that Mexican crime photography was just a regional variant of a tradition more fully visible in the tabloid culture of the United States (and represented by the well-known New York photographer Weegee). Both Enrique Metinides and Nacho Lopez were the object of gallery exhibitions and book-length catalogues at roughly the same time that the American photographer Weegee received similar tributes, and Metinides has often been called, quite condescendingly, the “Mexican Weegee”^{vii}. The relative simultaneity of the rediscovery of Weegee in the United States and art-world acceptance of photographers Enrique Metinides and Nacho Lopez in Mexico suggests that all these developments were part of a global awakening of interest in photojournalists who operated initially outside the context of art worlds. This simultaneity should not obscure the much longer recognition of Lopez and Metinides within histories of Mexican visual culture, and the more richly delineated context in which both have been set.

Likewise, the characterization of Mexican *cine negro* as merely a peripheral manifestation of the phenomenon now known as “global noir” – a phenomenon produced in the expansion of *film noir* outside of its “natural” place of birth in the United States – has given way to a deeper interest in reconstructing the relations between screen-writers, cinematographers, directors and actors which made the Mexican *cine negro* distinctive. The deep roots of these forms within Mexican popular culture – social documentation in the case of Mexican crime photography, the tradition of violent urban melodrama in the case of the Mexican *cine-negro*, for example – are more and more acknowledged by humanities scholars writing within and outside Mexico.

The other prejudice restricting recognition of the specificity of Mexican crime-oriented media is that which tends to over-socialize it, to see all such media as responses to a generalized climate of social violence. Humanities scholarship at its best will elaborate the complex articulations between cultural

forms and social realities, and do so in ways which acknowledge the rich national traditions of the former without overlooking the powerful force of the latter. In times of exceptional violence, of course, it is easy to succumb to the notion that the humanities have become a luxury no one can afford. It is easy, as well, to believe that questions of form and aesthetic choice must give way to the blanket condemnation of all media representations of violence on the grounds that they contribute to an atmosphere of generalized insecurity from which certain social forces profit.

Were the concerns of the humanities simply a luxury, however, we would not have the rich legacy of artistic interventions by which activists have responded to such events as the murder of 43 students in Ayotzinapa in 2014. The “frenzy of art-making”^{viii} which followed the revelation of these murders has involved profound and sustained reflection on the appropriate cultural forms by which a response to these crimes might be expressed. In particular, artistic works responding to the events of Ayotzinapa have reworked traditions of portraiture from within and without Mexico, repurposed traditional forms of drawing to offer narrative accounts of the events which challenge official versions, and devised fanciful means (such as kites) of circulating the names and faces of the missing within public spaces^{ix}. Each of these interventions involved the subversion of forms and aesthetic styles. All of them drew, in varying degrees of explicitness, on the sorts of knowledge which the humanities are able to impart.

The traps and promises of humanist analysis

Faced with violence, those who study media in the humanities weave their way between two traps which are each, in their own way, dissatisfactory. One is to make of humanist analysis the site of a moral judgement which will often seem ineffectual or elitist in the face of the undeniable popular appeal of violent content in entertainment forms. The other is the tendency of humanist research to treat violent media content in the cold, detached terms of form and style, which risks seeming irresponsible. If the twin traps of moralism and formalism each threaten a useful role for the humanities in the treatment of violence, it is important to pay attention to those works which avoid both. Sergio González Rodríguez’s astonishing book *El hombre sin cabeza* (2000) is, in my view, one such work. It is both a chronicle of horror (of the rise of beheadings amidst the violence of the last twenty years in Mexico) and, at the same time, a reflection on the image of the headless victim across two centuries. *El hombre sin cabeza* situates this image within a long history of iconography which stretches back to the French revolution and through the subsequent history of the guillotine. (The book was written before the recent string of beheadings in the Middle East.) The purpose of this historical

genealogy is not to drain recent examples of their exceptional horror, but, rather, to capture the ways in which images of decapitation have functioned within different regimes of power. Beheading by guillotine was introduced, during the French Revolution, as a democratic, hygienic and compassionate alternative to such forms of execution as hanging and the tearing apart of the human body limb from limb. If its meaning has shifted, such that it now stands as one of the most horrific forms of execution, this is partly because the act of beheading has come to be detached from the rational exercise of state power, and made to stand as a symptom of lawlessness.

Humanities scholars might wish to undertake a similar genealogy of the image of the corpse on the city street, the most common present-day manifestation of violence in Mexican media. Fifty years ago, such images, with their wider vistas and groups of onlookers, conveyed a sense of neighbourhood solidarity or urban indifference. The corpse, stretched horizontally, lay in contrast to the upright forms of assembled crowds or surrounding buildings, and these images captured both the fleeting character of individual lives and the durability of the worlds in which such lives unfolded. Today's death photos, with their isolated images of wrecked bodies in unidentifiable spaces, communicate little more than a brief and meaningless sense of horror. The differences between these images are those of style and convention, but they crystallize significant shifts in the social meaning of violence. It is the role of the humanities to study such shifts and interpret their significance.

References

ⁱ See, for example, Richard Tithecott. *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. An interesting moment in the debate over the misogyny of the serial killer narrative may be found in Taryn Hillin, "How a crime drama about a misogynistic serial killer became the most feminist show on TV," *Fusion* on-line, April 3, 2015 <http://fusion.net/story/114107/the-fall-allan-cubitt-interview-feminist-misogynistic-serial-killer/> accessed October 15, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Sergio Gonzalez Roriguez, *Los 43 de Iguala*, Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2015, p. 58.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wil Straw, "Pulling back from apocalypse." *Scapegoat*, no. 6, "Mexico City DF/NAFTA," 2014, pp. 17-28; http://www.scapegoatjournal.org/docs/06/Scapegoat_06_Straw_Pulling%20Back%20From%20Apocalypse.pdf accessed October 20, 2015.

^{iv} See, for example, Alain Bergala, Eileen Handy and Miles Barth, *Weegee's World*, Bullfinch Press, 1997; Peter Doyle, *City of Shadows, Sydney Police Photographs, 1912-1948*, Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2007.

^v See, for example, Jesse Lerner, *El impacto de la modernidad: Fotografía criminalística en la ciudad de México*, Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Turner de Mexico, 2007; and Susana Vargas Cervantes, *Mujercitos*, Mexico City, Editorial RM, 2015.

^{vi} See, for coverage of this retrospective, <http://moreliafilmfest.com/programa-de-cine-negro-mexicano-en-el-12o-ficm/> accessed October 1, 2015; and Aaron Cutler, "Human Weakness and *Ciné Negro* at MoMA's Mexican Noir Series," *Brooklyn Magazine*, July 22, 2015, <http://www.bkmag.com/2015/07/22/human-weakness-and-cine-negro-at-momas-mexican-noir-series/> accessed October 2, 2015.

^{vii} See, among many other uses of this label, "GRISLY IMAGES FROM LEGENDARY PHOTOGRAPHER ENRIQUE METINIDES A.K.A. "MEXICAN WEEGEE", *Juxtapoz*, April 15, 2014 <http://www.juxtapoz.com/photography/grisly-images-from-legendary-photographer-enrique-metinides-a-k-a-mexican-weegee> accessed September 28, 2015.

^{viii} The phrase was used by Los Angeles Times reporter Caroline A. Miranda in her article "Art in honor of the missing 43: the powerful symbols of the Ayotzinapa protests in Mexico," *LA Times*, October 10, 2015 <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-missing-43-art-of-the-ayotzinapa-protests-in-mexico-20151010-column.html> Accessed October 12, 2015.

^{ix} See, for accounts of artistic responses to the Ayotzinapa massacre, Renee Lewis, "Mexico artist's exhibition is vivid protest for missing students," *Aljazeera America*, February 1, 2015 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/2/1/mexico-art-ayotzinapa.html>, accessed April 15, 2015; Lorena Marrón and Juliana Jiménez Jaramillo, "In Memoriam: After the disappearance of the Mexican students, only art could give voice to a nation in mourning," *Slate*, September, 2015 http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/photography/2015/09/disappearance_of_43_mexican_students_from_ayotzinapa_in_2014_transformed.html, Accessed October 24, 2015; and David Sim, "Illustrators with Ayotzinapa: Artists' Moving Portraits of Mexico's 43 Missing Students," *International Business Times*, November 6, 2014 <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/illustrators-ayotzinapa-artists-moving-portraits-mexicos-43-missing-students-1473520> accessed August 15, 2015.