

RETHORICS OF CRIME IN ARGENTINIAN *NEOPOLICIAL* NOVELS. STYLIZATION AND PARODY OF CRIME FICTION

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ABSTRACT. The present work aims at providing an overview of the main contributions to the contemporary crime fiction in Argentina. We are talking about the so-called *neopolicial* writings that have revitalized the detective fiction genre from a thematic and formal perspective that is closer to our continent worldview. For that purpose, we will first put forward a reflection on one of the pioneers in the field of the *neopolicial* story, Osvaldo Soriano, and his novel *Triste, solitario y final*. Secondly, we will refer to a newly emerging space for detective story writing, one that follows the footprints marked by the above mentioned author and shows novel expository characteristics, not only in the reallocation of roles and places for the key pieces of the genre as are detective, police, investigation, the agent or agents of crime, crime and truth, but also in the understanding of the contemporary societal map and its growing complexity.

KEY WORDS: literature, neopolicial, parody, stylization, crime

La buena novela negra es, al mismo tiempo,
el espejo de parte de la sociedad actual.
Entraña por tanto, un elemento de testimonio e incluso de
psicología humana extraordinariamente poderoso.
Pero entonces la evasión desaparece y el lector vuelve a encontrarse
en el corazón de algunos de los problemas contemporáneos.¹
Fereydoun Hoveyda, *Historia de la novela policial*.

Crime fiction, of which models and authors came from the Anglo-Saxon literary world, arrived in Latin America in the last quarter of the nineteenth

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1 Suggested translation: "The good hard boiled fiction is, at the same time, the mirror of part of today's society. Therefore, it entails an element of testimony and even of human psychology that is extraordinarily powerful. But then, evasion vanishes and the reader finds himself again at the heart of some of the contemporary problems."

century, through the diffusion in Argentina of detective stories by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and police serials by authors such as Emile Gaboriau (1832-1873), Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) and Gaston Leroux (1868-1927). Even when readers enthusiastically welcomed these first texts that reproduced a world and some crime logics from countries very different from ours, it was clearly perceived that it was an imported genre, presenting stories which ran in the dark streets of cold and smoky metropolises, led by stoic detectives; that is, far from the reality of Latin American countries.

Thus, the publication dates of the first translations of Anglo-Saxon and French detective fiction done in Latin America (according to Bajarlía, 1964; Yates, 1964, 1972); Fevre, 1974; Lafforgue and Rivera, 1977, 1981), would have occurred, approximately, in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. In the preface to *Cuentos Policiales Argentinos* (1997), Lafforgue refers to Poe's inaugural translations made by Argentine Carlos Olivera in 1880, which included the three foundational stories of the classic genre: *Los crímenes de la calle Morgue* (1841), *El misterio de Marie Roget* (1842) and *La carta robada* (1844). In *Asesinos de papel* (1977), Lafforgue and Rivera, mention the arrival of Poe's stories in the country towards the end of the nineteenth century, along with those of Gaboriau, Conan Doyle and Leroux, in various "youth magazines such as Nick Carter, Tit-Bits, and Buffalo Bill Magazine" (Lafforgue and Rivera, 1977: 18), while they point out the year 1915 as the date of the publication of massive Argentinian collections and sold at kiosks as *La Novela Semanal*, *El cuento ilustrado* or *La novela Universitaria*.

Anyway, this early reception does not mean that the local authors had adopted the genre immediately. As it is stated in the book *Estudio preliminar a Cuentos policiales argentinos* (1974) by the critic Fermín Fevre, the detective fiction genre spread to Latin American countries but had no direct impact on literary practices. In a certain way, in our cultural context the narrative structure presupposed by the first crime fiction novels, both in the enigma classical series and in the hard-boiled fiction, that of the criminal's punishment followed by the restoration of the social order in the end, seemed to be somewhat incongruous with the logic of our society which is rather traversed by corruption and collusion between the police, politics and justice.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the number of detective fiction readers, especially in Argentina, was always significant, together with all those who enthusiastically followed the new science fiction and the "heart" magazine-type editions (melodramatic stories into chapters); for vernacular writers of crime fiction genre this literary format never stopped being sensed as an "imported product" and somehow, as it was presented, it seemed to be ideologically incompatible with Latin American realities. That is why our writers soon had to find new ways to create detective stories truer to our Hispanic culture.

In the introduction to *El cuento policial latinoamericano* (1964), Donald A. Yates refers to it by saying “while detective fiction, as a type of ‘escape literature’ may have a peculiar charm to the Hispanic audience, everyday reality, that of a society in which the authority of the police and the power of justice are not as admired as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, tended to discourage native writers” (Yates, 1964: 5-6). In this sense and from a critical point of view that is closer to our socio-cultural area, other authors, such as Monsivais (1973), Taibo II (1987), Feinmann (1991-1996) or Padura (2001) would ratify those statements expressed by Yates. Far from the remedial figures of social order, embodied by private detectives or policemen in the North American and European series, in the context of Latin American societies “there is (absolutely) no confidence in justice” (Carlos Monsivais, 1973: 11), so those investigators, where they exist, often stir fear or rejection.

The search for vernacular models of detective fiction, more plausible in the complex reality of our culture, led many Latin American writers to develop pieces of writing which were better suited to our particular way of understanding crime, of seeking truth and of *suturing*, somehow, the social gap created by crime. This is the case of Zelaschi Perez (1960), a true precursor, when he said that “the Latin American public rejects any idealization precisely because it has an intimate familiarity with our police (...) The widespread contempt for the law makes it virtually impossible for us to create a pure detective story [...] We are forced to take alternative paths” (Zelaschi, 1960, in Simpson, 1990: 22). Our country has exceptional examples of writers who have respected, in their own way, the basic conventions of enigma writing (Borges, Castellini, the first Walsh), however, the manner in which Poe, A. C. Doyle or Chesterton structured their narrative was “artificial for us” (Simpson, 1990: 22), so the writers of the Latin American detective novel needed to readapt the genre to our own ways of telling stories about crime.

In this regard, we must go back to Carlos Monsivais, the writer who best theorizes on these necessary readjustments of the genre in our region. For the Mexican writer and journalist, there are two key aspects that define our new narrative:

1. The first has to do with the transformation of the detective fiction traditional reader, from one who is just looking for a good plot or, in its absence, for some punches and escapes for entertainment, into a critical reader in our society, history and culture. The reader of the detective fiction genre in Latin America tends to demystify the traditional formulations of the Anglophone and European series, and he even “ignores a detective process that, rejected for being unreliable, is no longer a mystery revealed but becomes a denunciation” (Monsivais, 1973: 2).

2. The second aspect relates to the position of the victim/victimizer participants. The new Latin American detective writings work on an essential presupposition, that is, “there is no confidence in Justice (...) (and) crime (...) does not have a seizable connotation: the exceptional, the unusual, is not that a Latin American person turns out to be a victim, but rather that he/she may stop being one (Monsiváis, 1973: 3).

Our *neopolicial* story writings clearly have more affinity with the hard or hard-boiled series (Chandler, Chase) than with the narrative logic of the pure enigma (Poe, Holmes). Ricardo Piglia, in the introduction to his anthology to *Cuentos de la serie negra* (1979), states that the detective in the series “does not hesitate to be ruthless and brutal, but his moral code is invariable in just one aspect: no one will corrupt him.” The thriller meets its utopia when the virtues of the individual, who is fighting alone and for money against evil, are mentioned (Link, 1992: 57). The *hard-boiled* fiction detective is immersed in the logic of capitalism: punishment of the criminal and money; re-establishment of the social fabric and payment for rendered services; and he plays and judges the world from there.

However, Monsiváis, still thinking about the series affinities, goes on to say that these two particular aspects of hard-boiled novels would be, at least partially, scarcely credible for the Latin American context, where “a police force judged unanimously as corrupt is not susceptible to any credit: if this literature aimed for realism, the accused character would almost never be the real criminal and unless he was poor, he would never be punished” (Monsiváis, 1973: 3).

The Argentine writer Juan Pablo Feinmann, states the same in his classic articles *Estado policial y novela negra argentina* (1991) and later on in *Narrativa policial y realidad política* (1996):

There are no detectives in our crime fiction stories. There are no policemen because a good cop is—in narrative terms here in Argentina—impossible to be found. The police are strongly attached to the idea of repression, and for now, and as long as crimes such as the murder of Cabezas continue further, they are not going to be redeemed from that dark and violent position. In the book *Triste, solitario y final* by Osvaldo Soriano, the detective is Philip Marlowe, assisted by Soriano himself (...). In *Manual de perdedores* by Juan Sasturain the detectives are the veteran Etchenaik and the Galician Tony Garcia (...). In short, there are no detectives... (and for the explanation) we have to turn... to the social reality (Feinmann, 1996: 2).

But perhaps it is the Cuban narrator Leonardo Padura (2001) who refers with greater precision to the existence of some “founding fathers” of what would later be called the Latin American *neopolicial*, when he says that in fact only some Anglophone authors had a prominent presence in the 70’s,

and who are still regularly being read, such as Chester Himes (1909-1984) or Donald Westlake (1933)² who concoct a detective story in which “the existence of an enigma or not can be finally forgotten and, only then, a final awareness is reached, an awareness of the fact that the essential element which has truly categorized and continues to categorize this narrative model is not the presence of an enigma but the existence of a crime that [...] does not have to be mysterious to achieve the ultimate purpose of this genre: the feeling of uncertainty, the evidence that we live in an increasingly violent world, the conviction that justice is a moral and legal concept that is not always present in real life” (Padura, 2001, in Trelles).

This proposal for a new crime fiction aesthetics, which re-signifies the figure of the “private and official detective— in favor of a predominance of marginal voices, attitudes and thoughts generated and grouped by a chaos that dominates everything, or almost everything” (Padura, 2001: 10), is perhaps the defining point for a novel that is different from the traditional writings—enigma or simply hard-boiled fiction—in Spanish-speaking countries such as Chile, Argentina, Spain and Mexico, and it means the definitive emergence of the Ibero-American or Latin American *neopolicial*—if we include other languages like Portuguese for Brazil.

The *neopolicial* seeks ways to reformulate and even subvert essential aspects that define the crime genre, such as: detective, police, criminal, crime, enigma and truth- with the purpose of readapting it to the plausible version proposed by Latin American countries contexts. In certain cases the *neopoli-*

2 Chester Himes (1909-1984) was a black writer who almost always reflected in his novels the problems of his race and of New York Harlem. His characters were either black cops or Harlem criminals, and if some of them were hard the others were not far behind. His literary style was an almost impossible mixture of wild humor, absurd violence and social criticism. Sarcasm presided over many of his intrigues or anecdotes of the story, but sometimes an unexpected bitter romanticism was offered amid the violence and dehumanization of his characters. *Un ciego con una pistola* or *Por el amor de Imabelle* are two examples of this combination of styles in his work. His work was really hard; he described the world as he saw it, without simulations or intentions to shock. His hardness and his straightforward language, in principle, might suggest the existence of possible successors, but no one like him has been so near to the description of a particular human territory and of a seemingly unsolvable problem. Donald Westlake (born in 1933) His incorporation to the tradition, but also to the renewal of hard-boiled fiction, is due to his inclusion of humor in the genre. Both in his novels with thief Dortmund as the main character, like *Un diamante al rojo vivo* or *¿Por qué yo?*, as well as in others without a fixed protagonist, as *Ayúdame, estoy prisionero!*, and *El muerto sin descanso*, Westlake offers very funny, sometimes almost irreverent stories in which he combines hard-boiled fiction together with the most joyful and happy humor, an apparently impossible combination which he creates in the most inimitable manner. In his stories, a cynical but also a loving look towards a usually violent genre is revealed, and at the same time, towards our own reality. Source. Blog Letras en negro 2009, www.letrasennegro.wordpress.com/2009/02/26/los-seis-imprescindibles/.

cial becomes an anti-genre³ in the sense defined by Oscar Steimberg (1993), because it may incorporate humor, grotesque rhetorics, intimate declarative points of view, and topics that are unimportant or that do not belong to the protocols of the gender themes—like that crime which happened in *Traslasierras*, Cordoba, in the midst of a Holy Week procession, portrayed in the novel by Lucio Yudicello *Judas no siempre se ahorca* (2010).

A differential aspect of these new writings, as I have quoted above (Mon-sivais), has to do with the absence or the displacement of the leading role of the detective actor. In fact, sometimes the detective actor simply does not exist, or he/she is just a character who is barely configured, with little impact on the overall plot development. This is the case of our emblematic novel, the initiator of the *neopolicial* fiction in Argentina, *Triste, Solitario y Final* (1973) by Osvaldo Soriano, in which the investigation vicissitudes are in charge of a journalist—auto-fiction by the same author—a character who is little talented for doing these works and a detective—Marlowe—who has become the ghost of that one created by R. Chandler. This innovative and creative sense of Soriano’s work had already been noticed by Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge B. Rivera (1982) when they commented, in relation to *Narrativa policial en la Argentina*, that “in 1973, the year of the publication of *The Buenos Aires Affair*, a ‘detective story’ by Manuel Puig (...), some equally significant titles for both the history of the genre as for the general chronology of the Argentine narrative were published. Among others, we refer to *Triste, Solitario y Final* by Osvaldo Soriano, an ingenious tribute to *hard-boiled* fiction and to the detective Philip Marlowe, a reflection of the great ‘discredited’ heroes who were referents for a whole generation of readers” (Lafforgue and Rivera, 1982: 358).

Thus, in his famous novel, Soriano rehearses some writings that will prelude the *neopolicial* dominant scene by proposing the adventures of an Argentine writer as a character in a detective novel. As Diaz Eterovic (2004), one of the most widely read Chilean writers today, states, “the *neopolicial* story is consistent with the emergence of such discursive format in the context of Hispanic American literature, from Osvaldo Soriano’s novels onwards, because Soriano (...) imprinted the detective novel written in this

3 “Anti-genre must be understood as the piece of writing that generates disruptions on the three levels (rhetorical, declarative and thematic) while maintaining the usual genre indicators. In narrative films, for example the westerns, the indicators remain stable... But, based on these similarities, the anti-genre work disrupts the predictability in the three orders; in the case of westerns, spaghetti westerns generated this disruption in their earlier days, not only in the subject order [a non-strict hero], but also in the declarative order [the abandonment of the narrative, and the inclusion of humorous complicity and of rhetorical ‘winks’ [due to changes in the narrative pace]]” (Steinberg, 1993: 81-82).

continent with the Latin American stamp; in other words, the *neopolicial* fiction has served to reveal the reality of our countries where—Diaz Eterovic says—“crime and politics have been a tragically perfect equation” (Eterovic, Diaz, 2004).

In this way, *Triste, solitario y final* takes up the hard-boiled fiction structure to rewrite it in a parodic way and to establish some discursive operations that will be fruitful during the following decades and that are summarized as follows:

- First, the parody of the crime genre takes place when a journalist detective is introduced without the traits that characterize the investigative role in traditional series, such as: bearing arms, self-defense skills, forensic expertise, and knowledge of crime codes. In this sense the auto-fictional character -Soriano finds himself almost by chance in the middle of an action that exceeds his abilities.
- Secondly, it refers to the symbolic death operation of the emblem-figure, the detective in the *hard-boiled* series, through the gloomy image of Philip Marlowe; a sad, solitary character who is portrayed by the presenter in a poetic key passage of the novel: “Soriano entered the room and saw that his mate was sitting with his face in his hands. The candle was on the floor, as if someone had abandoned it. The Argentine man raised his light and felt that the silence of his friend was a heavy burden for that dark house, that tragedy had finally and forever embraced him from that small, soft, now rigid body that the detective had dropped on his legs. The cat’s head was hanging out of Marlowe’s knees and its eyes were open, though devoid of color. The tail was like the counterweight of an abandoned kite. Soriano looked at his mate for a long while and noticed that he faded into the gloom. He was very still. Nothing moved in that place. At last, the Argentine man approached and touched the animal with his fingertips. Then he pressed one of Marlowe’s shoulders and left the bedroom. There was still an icy feeling in his fingers” (Soriano, O. 1973: 73). Many semes associated with death are mentioned, although Marlowe is just asleep. In our view, this *figurativization* of decay will work as a background for future ‘demystifying’ strategies of detective idols that will appear in the *neopoliciales* series, especially after the 90s’.

Shortly after *Triste, Solitario y Final* (1973), Soriano writes two novels almost simultaneously. They are *No habrá más pena ni olvido* (1978) and *Cuarteles de invierno* (1980). As Eterovic (2000) also states, these novels will deepen the features of crime fictions, by completing that which was built out of parody, with the insertion of politics, corruption and the development of an ideological device in which the State plays an active part in criminal and persecutory acts, among others. Somehow, with these two novels, Soriano completes the matrix of the next detective story genre in Latin America, in which the combination of power, corruption and crime will be the essential condiment of future literary practices.

With these novels Osvaldo Soriano, whether conscious or not of founding a new space in the narrative and detective fiction literary domain, particularly in Argentina, laid the groundwork so that writers of the following generations had a key frame of reference. Thus, since the early years of the 90s' in our country, a growth process of the crime genre has started and it has not yet stopped, rather it has intensified. Particularly in Argentina and after the institutional and economic crisis of the year 2001, there has been a real 'big bang' of written works related to crime, with interchanges between the political and police powers within the framework of new crime forms. In one way or another, most of them lean on those writings by Osvaldo Soriano and his thematic, rhetorical and declarative findings (Steinberg, 1993).

The parodical rewriting model with exchanges between the mass culture and the detective fiction writings is highly valued by the *neopolicial* writers. This is evident by the inclusion of certain resources, topics, and narration perspectives in their texts that move them away from both the enigma classical series (in Poe's style) and the resources found in the traditional hard-boiled series (in Chandler's way). Thus, detective fiction plots that resort to forms taken from action films are produced, like *Santería* (2008) by Leonardo Oyola, set in Villa Puerto Apache by Costanera Sur and featuring La Víbora Blanca, almost a horror film character; or like the referrals to anticipatory science fiction by the esoteric triptych, Muishkin, Abelev and Maglier, in *El síndrome de Rasputín* (2008) and *Los bailarines del fin del mundo* (Romero, 2009), novels in which the extremes of representations are being played with. This is carried out by creating the image of three persons who must not only deal with the case they have been appointed—that of a young woman lost in the circuits of prostitution, nocturnality and body experiences— but also carry out the investigation they have been assigned while they are immersed in their own fantasies, obsessions and disturbances caused by the Tourette Syndrome.

Novels in another writing sub-field also stand out because they modify some aspect of the detective fiction matrix without using strong intertextual references with mass culture discourses, but they do accomplish operations that remind us of the journalist in *Triste, solitario y final* by combining the presence of an amateur detective and of certain processes that give visibility to criminal issues which are just emerging on mass media's agenda. This is the case of the creative novel by Federico Levín Ceviche (2009), in which the investigation plot leans on the *Sapo*. A true gastronomic detective. An actor who follows extended itineraries around bars and canteens, while eating Peruvian *ceviche* in the Abasto neighborhood. He is a detective who gains experience as such as he walks through the crime scene. The death of *El Rey*, a legendary musician of the Peruvian community, takes him along

the intricate neighborhood mazes: “Hector Vizcarra is called El Sapo and he moves inside a two-room apartment (...) El Sapo rests from an impossible tiredness: doubt” (Levin, 2009: 11). Thanks to the character of El Sapo, the reader is introduced to the Peruvian community in the *porteña* metropolis, to their rituals, their meals, their ways of exorcising death, their new ‘businesses’ (especially drugs) in order to show a whole world, the Peruvian one, within a larger one, that of the city of Buenos Aires.

In *El doble Berni* (Gandolfo and Sosa, 2008), space is invigorated by the movements. In this work the setting alternates between the city of Rosario and of Buenos Aires. Juan Lucantis, thin and colorless character investigates the death of the enigmatic painter Robert Taborda, his friend. He is not a professional detective, or anything like that. With his friend, he shares the common image of failure: “The first thing that surprised him was to recognize that the decision that pushed him to the final break with his own wife depended on having become aware, indisputably (...), of Taborda’s own failure” (Gandolfo and Sosa, 2008: 42). This murder leads his friend—Lucasti—and the reader himself, through the labyrinths of the art business, the exhibition galleries and the counterfeiting of original works of art. Berni is the one that is forged, and becomes the starting point for several deaths.

Finally, Ruth Epelbaum, the detective in *Sangre Kosher* (Krimmer, 2010), is only a low profile archivist who is overnight immersed in a dense story which involves the trafficking mafia within the framework of the old tales of the Jewish community in Buenos Aires. Ruth moves through the city in search of a girl who has disappeared. At that point of the story, one of the strongest and most recurrent hypothesis of our current police agenda is updated: the victim has been ‘taken’, ‘sucked’ by a human trafficking network with sexual objectives. However, and this is what proves to be original, the current history is linked, from the very first lines, with another hypothesis: the organization that has kidnapped Deborah, the girl, is connected with the Zwi Migdal, ancient Jewish association with prostitution.

Conclusions

As we have shown with some examples of recently published *neopoliciales* almost all of them belonging to the *Negro Absoluto* collection, which is directed by Juan Sasturain, Soriano’s work, and in particular his first and inaugural parodic-detective novel, has been continued by some authors. The result is a shift from the detective classic images, such as those of Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Father Brown, Hercule Poirot, or the legendary Marlowe, toward characters who circumstantially have had to take on the investigative role. Thus, in recent decades in Argentina, crime fiction has innovated its writing forms. While it has been tainted by the signs of national reality, many of the stories and their subsequent adaptations to the televi-

sion and cinema format were inspired by the complex reality of Latin American cities.

The North American Hard Boiled series has been the most widely accepted for these writing exercises and as Elvio Gandolfo (2007) says, in Argentina “writers have copied or tended to reproduce a very small part (...) With some exaggeration it might be said that they have not chosen a movement, an author or a work, but a character: Philip Marlowe. One of the initiators was the one who better tackled the problem. Osvaldo Soriano embedded Marlowe, using the very name and surname, into *Triste, solitario y final* and cleverly inserted him in a very swift comic-ethical film of the silent era, portraying him fat and panting” (Gandolfo, 2007: 160).

Soriano precludes and outlines the contours of things to come in crime fiction; a space of literary practices, as we intend to describe, dominated by *parody, power, State corruption and the absence of savior heroes*, and where that functionality which every good detective story must have is updated; as Henning Mankell says, to help “to see what is happening in society” (La Nación, 2007).

Literary theory and criticism are readapting their criteria, methods and concepts to the challenges proposed by the new aesthetic objects in this emerging literary field. The *neopolicia* is one of those writing practices in which the search for expressive forms is linked with the need to tell about the complex world of crime in the XXI century. It is up to us, scholars, to be flexible and creative so that we can continue to think about literature, that dynamic object in constant reinvention.

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