



Dark Humor and the Horror of Postmodernity

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“What should not be made about Ciudad Juárez? A musical. It sounds like dark humor, like a bad joke. I asked myself what should not be made about Ciudad Juárez, and I said, ‘That’s what I’m going to do.’” The documentary *Bola negra: Ciudad Juárez, the Musical* (2012) is the product of writer Mario Bellatin and composer Marcela Rodríguez. “Neither of us is a filmmaker,” explained Bellatin and Rodríguez when I first met them at the Hay Festival in Xalapa, Mexico on October 4, 2012, where they premiered their documentary. The following conversation is based on interviews with Bellatin and Rodríguez in Xalapa and with Bellatin at his Mexico City home on October 25, 2012.

My interest in *Bola negra* developed from a long-term research project on femicide in Ciudad Juárez, and, I have to admit, I could not imagine what a musical documentary about the city would look like. The Ciudad Juárez represented in the news, in newspapers like *PM*, certainly left no room

for a narrative outside of extreme violence. I wanted to understand what Ciudad Juárez Bellatin had discovered during his time living there, working with the youth in his choir, and trying to dig beneath the superficial descriptions of universal violence. Bellatin explained that

it is and is not Ciudad Juárez. The title, which mentions the musical, is *Bola Negra: Ciudad Juárez, the Musical* and it’s the title of the movie precisely because it contradicts what you’d imagine making a documentary in Ciudad Juárez would be like. If we read the text and see what’s going on, we’re always trying to keep our distance from the immediate reality. We have a huge, terrible amount of material that we didn’t want to work with precisely because we wanted this film to be a symbol of something much greater than Ciudad Juárez. I believed in something more than the daily horror, the violence, how a society could be organized in this way, despite what I had been told. In spite of what we have seen in some images, there is an order to everything, an organization —everything is planned. Someone always benefits from the situation, except for the victims,

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to whom this film is dedicated. They are the youth; they are the generation that is obviously not taken into account; and they're from the weakest segments of society and are its main victims. For us, part of the magic, the miracle, was seeing how, despite these conditions, young people could organize. They did form the choir, and the people singing in it are from that world. It breaks a bit with the idea that it is Ciudad Juárez. I believe there are images that, for me in particular, take me to other parts of the world. I think of Palestine. I feel that this is the horror of postmodernity. I don't know what to call it. I don't want to give it a name, but it's a very particular kind of horror. It's a horror that repeats itself in many parts of the world.¹

What is lost in the horror of postmodernity, the stories that don't make it into the mainstream news, are precisely those that remind us of the humanity of a place and of its victims and perpetrators, which, as Bellatin pointed out, are one and the same. The perpetrators of crimes are often members of the poorest fringes of society, people who are responsible for the physical action of the crimes, but who are not the ones who plan them. According to Bellatin, the planners "are never caught." What is the role of a writer, an artist, or a composer in taking on complicated social issues like those seen in Ciudad Juárez? Bellatin discussed how:

When the documentary shows the faces of missing girls, the experience is representative of being in Ciudad Juárez, of seeing the faces of those disappeared taped to telephone poles and of feeling haunted by their presence.

For both Marcela and me, it was important to explore another area because, as we know, she's a composer, and we're not filmmakers. We both have constant questions about the social role that we should play, especially when dealing with a society that's being destroyed, one that can't seem to find any viable way out. We found isolated marches and protests, but there was no path for artists, for creators. We didn't want to fall into thinking about what our social attitude should be when dealing with a particular reality. Mainly, the forms have been worn down, and, to get right to the essence, to go into depth about the violence, the blood, the testimony, would be to repeat them. That artistic form is already worn out. What we began to discover is that, yes, we can speak for the voice of a whole society, mainly for the youth shown in the film.²

The images of the youth in the documentary work against a whole genre of film and literature about Ciudad Juárez that capitalizes on the violence, that represents porno-misery, and sensationalizes violence to play to our basest desires as consumers. In 2009, I read an introduction to a photography exhibition written by Ciudad Juárez photographer Julián Cardona, and I have carried his words with me, a constant chant running through my mind. He wrote, "Juárez blows like cold wind through the windows of our souls and demands our attention. We embrace its images as if they could fill our own empty spaces, but we cannot hold on."³ For me, this quote captures an essential paradox of human nature: our hunger for voyeuristic graphic imagery accompanied by the knowledge that such images will never be able to satisfy us. We demand images as proof of violence, but, at the same time, those images play a role in society and influence how we judge innocence and guilt and how we perceive bodies.

Bellatin wanted to highlight a different narrative, one that included the victims of violence. The children in the choir in





the documentary sing lines from Bellatin's short story *Bola negra* about a Japanese entomologist, a story that apparently has no connection to Ciudad Juárez. Bellatin described how:

In my case, as a writer, I also flatly refuse to write a script about people who cut off heads. We are already saturated with that subgenre created in the literature of the North, in the literature of violence. In my conversations with Marcela, we began to see how, by applying a text that apparently had nothing in common in terms of logic, we could allude in a much more meaningful way, in a much more reflexive way than the superficial—which can become a repetition from a certain point of view—to the specific problem. The only time you see Ciudad Juárez is when the posters appear, the notices about the disappeared girls, about the famous “dead women of Juárez,” who are also part of the choir. What I mean is that, if you've seen the posters of missing girls, they share the exact same characteristics as the girls singing in the documentary. We had doubts about whether to include the posters or not. There is another element that we wanted to maintain in the documentary, because we lived in Ciudad Juárez and spent several weeks there, and we had other information (aside from what was presented in the media). When we were editing the film we decided to be distant, to always be inside a car, and to never let the camera get close. The camera always maintains a distance, a distance we need in reality to be able to appreciate and see that one can confront this particular situation.⁴

Watching the documentary made me think of Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel *2666* (2004) about Ciudad Juárez. Bolaño describes a missing woman in Ciudad Juárez as “more or less dead.” What does it mean to be more or less dead? It made me think of ghosts and haunting and the documentary, because *Bola negra* is about a city populated by ghosts.

I also thought the film showed influences of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955). I didn't know if Bellatin and Rodríguez wanted to guide viewers through a city of ghosts, a place where you see posters displaying the faces of missing girls. However, when the documentary shows the faces of missing girls, the experience is representative of being in Ciudad Juárez, of seeing the faces of those disappeared girls taped to telephone poles all over the city and of feeling haunted by their presence. I asked Bellatin about the influences of *2666* and *Pedro Páramo*, and he replied,

Your mention of Roberto Bolaño is interesting because I think it's the only tribute the victims have received, the dead women of Juárez, most of all in the part of *2666* where he gives bodies and names to those anonymous dead women. Anonymity is terrifying; it's something that goes beyond death. They [the dead women] are always statistics or numbers. In recent years, the government has tried to criminalize all the victims, to say that aside from being killed, they were delinquents. This is their ultimate strategy, as if to say, it's good that they died because they were involved in some type of illicit activity. Hence the outcry of many mothers to try to defend the lives of their lost children, as we see in that scene that to me is key, of the Felipe Calderón administration. A mother rebukes him, calls him a “murderer,” and says that he is not welcome and that her children were not criminals, but that he incriminated them. I think

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that was the turning point that unmasked the government. This war is a fictional war. This war is hiding a series of business transactions, because when you're in Ciudad Juárez and you see any one thing that seems out of order—it is not out of order—it is part of an order that we don't have a clue about. Everything is business, and the victims are the weakest populations, like the boys who sing in the film. To me, Roberto Bolaño's novel is very important because he takes 800 victims, and he writes an epitaph for each one. As a writer, I know that's almost impossible to do. What Roberto Bolaño achieves is a feat, because apparently every victim is the same, the same girl between 14 and 21, with long hair, dressed in jeans, from the lower class, a worker.⁵

What Bellatin and Rodríguez achieve is also impressive because they manage to meld two seemingly disparate tales, that of Ciudad Juárez and that of Bellatin's text *Bola negra* (about a character who eats himself alive). The metaphor of a city that is consuming itself is clear when the child choir sings the line "they gorged themselves" over and over in the documentary ("*Comían hasta hartarse. Comían hasta hartarse.*").

We didn't regret the choice [to use the text from "*Bola negra*"] because we said, "If I'd written a story about Juárez, the impact wouldn't have been as big." We used this story because it had nothing to do with the reality of Juárez. We managed to get the youth of Juárez, who are victims and to whom the film is dedicated—a whole generation of youth that's been destroyed, whose future was stolen—to participate in the choir. In the end, the victims and the perpetrators are one and the same. There's

a part in the film where we show child assassins in prison, and then we show young girls singing, and those young girls are their potential victims. There's also a part where we show the faces of missing girls and women, and you realize that they could be the same girls who are singing. We chose to work with the weakest members of society, a population that supposedly, whether they live or die, as the president of Mexico has said "are collateral damage." We arrived in Ciudad Juárez, and we realized something fundamental, something that you know because you've been there: it's a lie that the city is out of control, that the violence has exacerbated. No, it's a business. Everything is organized. Everything is perfect. It's the perfect society. Nothing is out of control. The way everything functions in the middle of such horror is possible because many people are making money.⁶

Having this discussion with Bellatin made me think of a conversation in which a colleague asked "Why isn't anybody making the connection between economics and the violence in Juárez?" What Bellatin and Rodríguez manage to do in their musical documentary is remind us of a whole generation of children raised amidst such violence, a generation that goes about daily life in a city that both is and is not what it seems. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Author's interview, October 4, 2012. [All notes are Editor's Note.]

² Author's interview, October 25, 2012.

³ Julián Cardona, *World Class City* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Canony-mous Press, 2006), s/p.

⁴ Author's interview, October 4, 2012.

⁵ Author's interview, October 25, 2012.

⁶ *Ibid.*