

Morality in the Aesthetics of Violence: Political Denunciation in *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (1994, 2000) by Fernando Vallejo

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One of the first novels to initiate the genre of Colombian Sicaresca, *La Virgen de los Sicarios* by Fernando Vallejo (1942–), did not gain widespread popularity until the film adaptation was released six years later (Buschmann 138). This phenomenon is of course common, as movies generally reach a wider audience than novels and then spur an interest in the original work on which the film was based. It is widely agreed upon by critics that the film adaptation was much more digestible than the novel, as the controversies regarding representations of violence were greatly diminished on the big screen (Martí, Osorio “From Novel to Film”). With Fernando Vallejo working closely with the director, Barbert Schroeder, as the screenwriter of the movie, this article questions the aesthetic shift between the novel and the movie in their depictions of violence in Medellín. Highlighting that both artforms were created with the goal of denouncing violence in the Colombian socio-political context (“La desazón suprema” 22:30–22:55), this article seeks to reveal which art form was more effective in creating the shift in consciousness that Fernando Vallejo had ultimately hoped for within the Colombian public.

The most detailed analysis of the aesthetics of violence employed in the novel comes from Pablo Restrepo-Gautier in “Lo sublime y el caos urbano: Visiones apocalípticas de Medellín en *La Virgen de los Sicarios* de Fernando Vallejo.” He bases himself in the theory of the sublime, which British gothic authors of the 18th and 19th century implemented to terrify readers with grotesque, violent, and disturbing experiences. (Deibler) Edmund Burke, the 18th century British/Irish philosopher and writer that formed this theory of the sublime,

highlights the following in his book, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757):

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible . . . is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. . . . When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and [yet] with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.

According to Burke, patrons of the arts can enjoy pain, danger, and terror if they are experienced at a distance. Restrepo-Gautier paraphrases the other “modifications” that can facilitate delight amidst the experience of terror:

La estética del terror parte de la idea de que lo terrible mezclado con la belleza es sublime porque sorprende y asombra a la mente con elementos ilegibles que escapan a la razón... lo sublime consiste en una experiencia en la cual el estado cognitivo y emocional normal de la mente es violado por una experiencia abrumadora o traumática que produce un momento de suspensión de las facultades. (97)

In his analysis, Restrepo-Gautier questions if the terror experienced in the novel through the violent depiction of Medellín occurs with sufficient amounts of beauty or distance to create a ‘suspensión de facultades’ according to the Burkean sublime, and a subsequent transcendence in the reader according to the Kantian sublime (Kant 17). He emphasizes the fact that “la urbe industrial, grotesca y bestial, con asombrosos edificios, calles congestionadas, y potentes máquinas, es lo suficiente maravillosa y asombrosa para permitir que el sujeto vislumbre la transcendencia” (Restrepo-Gautier 98) and concludes that, instead of combining the characteristics of the city that are “maravillosa y asombrosa” to conform with the sublime, Fernando Vallejo “construye una imagen de Medellín que exagera sus defectos y elimina sus virtudes produciendo una caricatura grotesca que representa la desintegración de la modernidad” (Restrepo-Gautier

97). In the novel, Medellín's defects are exaggerated to a point of hellishness; the narrator witnesses a murder every time he steps into the city streets, causing him to declare that Medellín is "un infierno: el infierno" (56) and that it is the "capital del odio, corazón de los vastos reinos de Satán" (82). Because this Dantean representation of the Medellín of the novel does not conform to the definition of the Burkean or Kantian sublime, neither an effective "suspensión de facultades" nor a subsequent transcendence can ensue. Also, there is not enough distance between the hellishness and the reader since the novel is written in first person and is addressed to the reader in the form of *usted*. Because the aesthetics of the sublime are absent in the novel according to Restrepo-Gautier, he proposes that the novel is ineffective in its sociopolitical denunciation since it "crea un ambiente de terror que, al contrario de la tradición de lo sublime, niega la transcendencia y desemboca en el nihilismo" (Restrepo-Gautier 97).

Colombian critic Oscar Osorio also criticizes the aesthetics of violence in the novel. He finds the saturation of violence as unacceptable, and the exaggerated diatribes of the narrator as immoral (Osorio, "From Novel to Film" 135). He focuses particularly on the narrator's following harangue, when Fernando proposes genocide as a solution to the city's violence: "Mi fórmula para acabar con ella [la pobreza] no es hacerles caso a los que la padecen y se empeñan en no ser ricos: es cianurarles de una vez por todas el agua y listo" (Vallejo 68). For Osorio, the scandalous statements of the narrator depreciate the literary value of the novel (Osorio, "El amor" 135). It seems that Vallejo's possible use of irony either evades Osorio or simply does not compensate for the impact of his incendiary language. Osorio does, however, exalt the film's adaptation of the book, claiming that it "obedece a la necesidad perfectamente realizada de contar una historia: una bella historia de amor, con el trasfondo de la frenética Medellín de la muerte" (Osorio, "El Amor" 135). Although Osorio does not indulge specifically in the theory of the sublime, it seems that, to him, beauty and terror in the film are sufficiently combined to cause a delightful confusion in the viewers, with a "suspensión de facultades," and a transcendence following suit.

As Restrepo-Gautier claimed, the Dantean representation of Medellín in the novel does not conform with the sublime due to the absence of the city's virtues and the emotional proximity with which the reader experiences its terror due to the first-person narrative.

However, one could argue that the sublime is present in the idealized memories that Fernando has of his childhood that contrast with the exaggerated horror of the present reality. He opens the novel describing the balloons he chased as a child and remembers the neighborhoods and cafes of his childhood fondly. Fernando effectively voids his memories of any defects regarding the beloved Medellín of his youth. Yet since Fernando's idealized memories comprise only a few pages within the 160-page text, the amount of terror in the Medellín of 1994 clearly outweighs the beauty of his remembered childhood. Therefore, according to many critics, Vallejo's novel is too saturated with horror to effectively assimilate the message of denunciation (Osorio, "El amor" 131). Although it could create "una suspensión de facultades" due to the "experiencia abrumadora o traumática" of violence, there is not enough beauty or distance for readers to transcend the sociopolitical context, which was likely the exact goal of Vallejo.¹ The exaggerated, Dantean, and grotesque portrayal of Colombia is effective in emulating the sociopolitical terror plaguing Medellín the aftermath of Pablo Escobar. In wounding his readers with an overwhelming amount of violence in this hellish city, it could be argued that Vallejo instead adheres to the aesthetics of rupture, which restages trauma in order to synthesize sociopolitical pain and prevent it from repeating in the future (Labanyi 108).

The Medellín of the movie is shown in a more sublime light, with dynamic shots revealing mountainous landscapes, stormy skies, leafy *plazas*, and modern skyscrapers along with congested streets, sprawling ghettos, bothersome noise, and frequent gunfire. The audience is able to synthesize the violence due to the beauty that buffers the terror, and therefore can transcend the pain with significant moments of pleasure and delight. It is necessary to analyze the main character, Fernando, of both the novel and the movie because his representation is much more relatable in the latter. Fernando of the novel is bitter, cynical, and immoral. He delights in the violence incurred by his amantes-sicarios, compares God to Satan, and insults women, children, and poor people. The defects of his personality could potentially be offset by virtuous characteristics, such as his wealth and level of education. However, Osorio's assertion that "[e]l Fernando de la novela es pensado y construido en función de producir escándalo" (Osorio, "El amor" 135) seems to ring truest. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of provocation, scandal, and shock should not be undermined

in Fernando's character, although they veer from traditional representations of horror and violence as defined by the sublime. Because this is a work of autofiction, many critics struggle to discern between Vallejo as an author and Fernando as the main character, harshly judging Vallejo's moral character in purporting that he wrote in this controversial manner to gain public notoriety (Santamaría). Yet the confusion created by the blending of the author and the violent diatribes of the narrator/main character facilitates "una suspensión de facultades," once again traumatizing the reader through the aesthetics of rupture. Critic Albrecht Buschmann confirms the value of a novel that is written both about violence and through violence in the narrative technique employed by Fernando in the novel, as it "confronta al lector con las fricciones de sus códigos morales y culturales" (Buschmann 142). Like Medellín in the film adaptation, Fernando of the movie is also much more digestible, as the horror of his comments are offset by his frequent smile, emotional vulnerability, and genuine affection towards his amantes-sicarios.² The movie loyally conforms with the aesthetics of the sublime in its portrayal of Fernando, which is potentially the reason why the film was initially more popular than the novel; viewers could delight in both the horror and beauty of Fernando's personality.

The representation of the amantes-sicarios also greatly varies between the novel and the film adaptation. According to Buschmann, Fernando's amantes-sicarios appear in the novel "ante el narrador como un ser de belleza irreal y angelical, en cierto modo sobrehumana" (Buschmann 139). They are called "Ángeles Exterminadores" and are presented for their beauty and danger in the same sentence: "Aquí te regalo esta belleza que ya lleva como diez muertos" (Vallejo 12). Their representation as demonic angels with beautiful and terrifying characteristics could conform with the theory of the sublime. However, like the terror in the representations of Medellín and Fernando, the amantes-sicarios' defects outweigh their virtues: the 35 murders that Alexis commits along with the 5 of Wilmar causes a saturation of violence that leaves the reader exhausted, not delighted. Yet elevating these amantes-sicarios to an almost supernatural status conforms with Jo Labanyi's theory that cultural production using monsters, science fiction, and fantasy are "more successful in dealing with a traumatic past than those films, novels, and testimonies that adopt a realist or documentary mode, precisely because they

acknowledge the horror—that is, the ‘unspeakable’” (Labanyi 107). Representing the amantes-sicarios as supernaturally dangerous and beautiful, in addition to homosexual, impoverished, and youthful, displays the dysfunctional reality of Colombian youth to a level of terror that is ‘unspeakable’. Therefore, the amantes-sicarios of the novel conform more loyally with Labanyi’s theory and veer from Burke’s sublime. On the other hand, the aesthetics of the sublime are once again successfully adhered to in the film. Although the violence they perpetuate is terrible, the amantes-sicarios are young and beautiful, they commit fewer murders (Alexis with 8 and Wilmar with 1), and the distance with which we can experience them as an audience facilitates the conditions of the sublime. Also, the love stories infuse tenderness into the violent context, allowing the audience to experience delight within the state of terror. However, Fernando’s heartbreak regarding the deaths of his two amantes-sicarios and his implied suicide in the closing scene reopen the wounds of the traumatic socio-political context, adhering to the aesthetics of rupture and preventing a spiritual transcendence.

Although the sublime is utilized sparingly throughout the novel and regularly within the film, Vallejo does not allow his readers or audience the luxury of transcending the sociopolitical violence of Colombia. Therefore, Vallejo often conforms with Burke’s definition of the sublime and veers from Kant’s regarding transcendence. It is through the aesthetics of violence, rupture, and the Burkean sublime that he creates a “suspensión de facultades” in his readers and audience, forcing the Colombian public to question the ubiquitous violence plaguing the country in the 1990s and early 2000s. Whether Vallejo’s techniques in criticizing and depicting violence are moral or immoral is irrelevant. He is not memorializing victims, nor is he inundating us with violent images derived from real life for personal gain as Susan Sontag condemns in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).³ He is confronting the Colombian public with the harsh reality that anyone can be affected by Colombia’s violence, even an educated and wealthy man like the main character, Fernando, in addition to the readers and audience enveloped in the first-person narrative and the documentary-style filming of the movie.

Even though the weight of violence is diminished in the movie, Barbert Schroeder emphasized the following: “I wanted the viewers to feel, like the characters, a kind of progressive anesthesia towards

violence, like anyone who wants to continue living in Medellín” (Kantaris). The saturation of violence in both works creates the desired “*experiencia abrumadora o traumática*” regarding the numbing normalization of violence within Colombian society. It seems that the movie garnered the initial audience for Vallejo’s message due to its subtle uses of the sublime, in addition to its focus on a love story, to portray the violence. Yet the novel’s confrontational narrative style and Vallejo’s controversial personality are what ultimately maintained public interest in his sociopolitical commentary. Twenty-six years after the release of the novel, Vallejo still had one of the largest turnouts of all authors at the recent *Feria del Libro de Bogotá* in 2019 (Gomez). Vallejo often channels the violent narrative techniques of the novel’s Fernando; he consistently shocks the public with comments about statutory rape, religion, and reproduction in interviews and speeches (“*La desazón suprema*” 24:00-24:06, 15:30-15:40, 01:30-02:15). Yet, like Fernando in the movie, his controversial statements are often accompanied by a smile, a warm voice, and a certain tenderness. Vallejo himself often employs the techniques of the sublime in his public life, in addition to the aesthetics of rupture as his incessant cynicism reopens the wounds of hopelessness regarding cyclical Colombian violence.

Notes

1. This deduction is based on the frustrated reaction of Vallejo in an interview with Germán Santamaría, who called for the prohibition of the movie version of *La Virgen de los Sicarios* in Colombia. Reacting to Santamaría’s claim that Vallejo’s production was offensive, Vallejo passionately responds that Colombia is the most violent country in the world, and that Colombians shouldn’t hide that truth (“*La desazón suprema*” 22:30-22:55). Therefore, a spiritual transcendence through ignorance, complacency, or beauty was not the motive of Vallejo’s disturbing productions. Instead, he utilized irony, scandal, and controversy to wake up the Colombian public to the political and societal atrocities plaguing the country.

2. This aesthetic shift towards more palatable cinematographic productions than the literary works on which they were based seems to be a general strategy for many screenwriters and directors. The reasons for this shift vary according to studies on the film adaptations of Tennessee Williams’ plays, who was also the screenwriter for many of his film adaptations (Rohrhofer). Like Vallejo, Williams was a catalyst in this aesthetic

shift – changing the movies’ endings and diminishing the abrasiveness of the characters, events, and settings. Censorship by Hollywood was a main motive for the changes in tone between Williams’ plays and film adaptations (Mason). Another reason for this aesthetic shift may be the desire to reach a larger, more mainstream audience that may not tolerate violence, controversy, or uncanniness as well as the scarce literary public.

3. Sontag questions the moral responsibility of those who create and consume violent images and footage regarding domestic terrorism and war abroad. She criticizes artists and journalists who exploit the pain of others to gain fame, as well as the consumers who feel morally improved after “sharing” suffering with victims. She highlights the potential for creators and consumers of violent media to facilitate social change when a deliberate space is created to reflect upon the pain of others.

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