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### **Review / Reseña**

Jean Franco. *Cruel Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

### **Performing Modernity's Cruelty in Latin America**

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In a 1971 dialogue with the philosopher Fons Elders for Dutch TV on the eve of his famed debate with Chomsky—which has been recently rereleased—, Foucault hypothesizes about the relationship between Western civilization's knowledge and its claims to universality and tolerance. "The universality of our knowledge," he asserts, "has been acquired at the cost of exclusions, bans, denials, rejections, at the price of a sort of cruelty with regard to reality." *Cruel Modernity*, Jean Franco's latest addition to her extensive *oeuvre* on Latin American modern cultures and their fraught relationship with the imperial projects of the West, could be seen as a meticulously researched documentation of Foucault's claim about Western knowledge's systemic history of cruelty in Latin America.

Based in part on the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel's notion that the European conquest of the Americas inaugurated Western modernity and on her principled opposition both to those on the right and the left who view the acts of cruelty that have consistently driven (and riven) the course of Latin American history as an expression of a return to a repressed, atavistic, ostensibly pre-modern and pre-European past, Franco's latest book proposes to examine in a comprehensive way a period of modern Latin American history that, she claims, keeps haunting the region's present and impacting solutions for its future. Her account begins with the consolidation of the modern Dominican national state in a founding act of genocidal violence against Haitians along the Haitian-Dominican border in 1937, continues with the tortures and disappearances of the Pinochet regime in Chile and of Argentina's military junta's dictatorship during what is known as the "Dirty War," and the mass atrocities perpetrated by the state against indigenous populations in Guatemala, El Salvador and Peru during the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, and may be said to live on in contemporary times in the ruthlessly violent, apocalyptic world of drug trafficking across national borders that is fueled, as some have observed, by neoliberal consumption.

In this new book, Franco amasses a truly stunning archive of evidence about modernity's penchant for cruelty in Latin America—from literary texts to human rights commission and police reports, photographs and films, diaries and memoirs of both victims and torturers, and extensive historical, sociological, anthropological, and cultural and literary studies research—to reflect not only on the atrocities themselves committed by the modern Latin American states, revolutionary guerrillas, rebel and rogue groups on the right and the left, but also on the mechanisms, dynamics and logics that propel these acts of unimaginable and systematic cruelty. Yet what disturbs and intrigues Franco most in this book, which may be seen as the product of her lifetime of research on the uneven power dynamics that operate between Latin America and the West, indigenous populations and women and the modernizing state, is the increasing banalization and exercise of cruelty in the modern and contemporary culture of Latin America and the world—the way cruel acts of violence have become in

modern and postmodern times no longer instrumental or tactical, but goals in themselves to be exercised and expanded, performed and shared, even enjoyed.

With an analytical *sangfroid* and an ethical commitment to exposing the dynamics and logics of these heinous and increasingly common acts of cruelty from the perspective of the victims, by and large women, indigenous and black populations, that other critics would find hard to sustain, Franco details in this oftentimes disturbing book the ritualized, genocidal mass rape of indigenous women which frequently preceded the slaughter of entire villages, guided as they were by the notion that to defeat the “communist” revolutionary enemy the state militia had to not only kill them, “the fish,” but “to drain the sea” around them, but also exterminate the whole society which supposedly sustained them. She shows how the state counterinsurgency militias (as well as left-leaning revolutionary groups) regularly identified the indigenous with the barbaric practices that the Spanish attributed to them during the Conquest, such as cannibalism, which justified their repression, while perversely performing acts of cannibalism themselves on the “conquered” indigenous populations not only as a sign of victory over the barbarian other but also as a formalized part of their military training as effective counterinsurgency agents. She documents how corpses were systematically disrespected and desecrated, even raped after death. And over and over it is the excessive nature of these mass atrocities perpetrated against vulnerable populations, the way they exceed any purported or imaginable state or ideological tactical goal to become performances in themselves to be shared and enjoyed with other (often male) comrades that disturbs, haunts and intrigues Franco’s analysis of her massive corpus as a sign of a larger problem in contemporary culture, as a symptom perhaps of what Roberto Bolaño, the great Chilean exile writer whose uncompromisingly critical work she examines in her concluding chapter, “Apocalypse Now,” has called the “desert of boredom” that characterizes contemporary life, devoid, as he thinks it is, of utopias and regulated by capitalism’s savage consumption, and whose only apparent and perverse alternative seems to be these cruel “oases of horror.”

Based on her immense archive of cruel acts, Franco persistently inquires about the kind of performances these acts of atrocity are and the dynamics and logics that structure them, interpellating and binding subjects in new (mostly male) corporate identity formations in state militias, guerrilla and counterinsurgency groups, police forces, gangs, and drug cartels. What kinds of dynamics and logics drive subjects to engage in these cruel acts and to relish and delight in their excess with gusto, paranoia, anxiety, fear, and abandon? If performatives are, as linguists have proposed, utterances that do not so much make declarative statements about reality as bring into being that which they utter or signify, what kind of performances are extreme, cruel forms of violence? What do they bring into being? What do they disavow?

In her book, Franco does not offer a comprehensive theory of subject formation in these modern and contemporary extreme cruel acts. Instead, she offers brilliant specific analyses of myriad cases of modern genocidal cruelty from which hypotheses about subjectification in and through these acts however can be deduced. The complex dynamics of perverse identification or mimesis and disavowal, for instance, seems to structure the performance of cruelty in many of her most representative examples. As we have already indicated, counterinsurgency militias often performed as part of their genocidal acts the cannibalistic practices that they attributed to the barbaric indigenous. In one of Franco's most notable examples of perverse mimesis or identification, an indigenous woman who is gang raped to death by the Guatemalan military is first dressed as a soldier and then raped. If one considers that the state troops were often made up of indigenous or mestizo men who had to be trained to kill and to exorcise the savage 'other,' the indigenous difference, in themselves, one can infer then that many of these acts of ethnic cleansing or genocide were also symbolically a performative training. That training fostered the constitution or bringing into being among the perpetrating troops of an identity devoid of the feared stigma of ethnic difference, a ritualistic killing of the 'savage other' not only in others but also in themselves. Indeed, much of the training analyzed by Franco in her book, from that of revolutionary groups such as Peru's Shining Path to the Brazilian elite

urban squad fighting the drug war in Rio's *favelas* in Jose Padilha's film *Tropa de Elite*, center on exercises that foster the sacrifice or purging of the old, decadent, bourgeois or ethnic self in the name of an abstract image of a "new man" whose attainment always remains deferred and incomplete, and thus in need of constant surveillance and increasingly demanding acts of purging or sacrifice. As Patrick Dove comments in an essay quoted by Franco on the political practices of the Shining Path,

[t]he ground of militant reason is thanato-politics, a politics that goes in search of death. It is the sacrificing of existence to the transhistorical telos or cause of history. Sacrifice is something subjects do...and it is a preparatory step that clears the way for the true subject whose arrival would coincide with the elimination in ourselves and in others of everything that is [considered] false or improper.

Perhaps it is this constant, increasingly demanding, paranoid need to perform corporate identities by purging abjected, stigmatized otherness in others and ourselves that in part explains the "oases of horror" which present themselves, according to Bolaño, as the other side of the "desert of boredom" that is contemporary life.

Written with the clarity and scholarly assurance of someone who is in full command of her field of Latin American cultural studies and who has been enriched by years of direct participation in many of its central debates, Franco's latest book, *Cruel Modernity*, does not seek to propose alternative modes of subjectification to this appallingly haunting legacy of subject-constituting cruel practices initiated in the Americas by Western modernity. Even though one of her most moving chapters is an evocative portrayal of what she calls "the ghostly arts" that try to capture the trace of the absent or disappeared 'other' in Latin America's genocidal wars, Franco's emphasis in her new book is clearly on what she calls "the dark side"—that massive inter-American panorama of modernity's haunting legacy of subject-constituting cruel acts, which she lays bare and exposes with her immense knowledge, rigor and controlled passion in an almost encyclopedic or exhaustive way. In the end, what Franco's book seeks to offer is not solutions or statements that will definitively decide whether the legacy of such corporate subjectivities forged by cruelty will continue to expand in our contemporary world, as the writings of Bowden and Bolaño,

in her reading, seem to suggest. Instead, her objective in this book is more political—and yet also less programmatic or prescriptive. It simply seeks to redirect our gaze to the complex dynamics and logics of this dark side of modern cruelty's performances in the belief that political and ethical solutions to Latin America's contemporary social crises, which fail to address it, will remain ineffective and, in her words, merely in "the realm of the abstract."