



Vol. 9, No. 1, Fall 2011, 429-436
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review / Reseña

Sánchez, Fernando Fabio. *Artful Assassins: Murder as Art in Modern Mexico*. Trans. Stephen J. Clark. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010.

The Meanings of Murder in Postrevolutionary Mexico

Amy Robinson

Bowling Green State University

Artful Assassins is an ambitious work that promises to invigorate ongoing discussions about the meanings of violence and death in Mexican culture, the role of the detective genre within literary studies, the ability of literature and film to wage a critique of the elite, and the relationship between modernity and the idea of Mexican national identity in the twentieth century. Fernando Fabio Sánchez focuses on the representation of murder to argue that the murderers in each work under analysis “seek to destroy both the system that makes them violent, as well as the neurotic father figure, a metaphor for the state” (7). This reflects his argument that the authors of these works, characterized as “critics of the official historical

narrative” (14), depict murder with the objective of “reimagining the foundation of modern Mexico through literary and cinematic lenses” (14). Sánchez has carefully selected as his main objects of study five novels and three films with several key common denominators: they can (mostly) be classified within the crime genre; they narrate a murderer whose violent actions are (almost always) intentionally related to the failures of the Mexican Revolution; and they combine what Sánchez refers to as “low” and “high” cultural forms to create a key critical vantage point. He divides the works into three general historical periods: the 1940s and 1950s are characterized by “the emergence of assaults on postrevolutionary nationalism,” the 1960s and 1970s are characterized by “latent national crisis,” and the 1980s to 2000 are characterized as the “age of national disintegration” (5). Sánchez argues that the representations of murder falling in each period respond to changing attitudes about modernity, identity, and the state in postrevolutionary Mexico.

The first chapter lays out the rationale for organizing the works into these historical periods, for focusing on the detective genre as a reflection on modernity, and for finding critical utility in these works’ use of the murder trope. His theoretical foundations about national identity are explicitly and repeatedly grounded in Benedict Anderson’s theories of the *imagined community*. This may turn off those who would like to know where the author stands regarding the polemic surrounding Anderson’s theory, perhaps especially regarding those critiques made by Claudio Lomnitz’s in *Deep Mexico/Silent Mexico* (2001) given Sanchez’s pointed references to Lomnitz’s *The Idea of Death in Mexico* (2005). In his theoretical reflections on the murder trope Sánchez notably looks to art as a reference, with many included works to illustrate his point that death and the Revolution have been imagined as a foundational act in Mexican history and identity. Oddly, however, none of the works of art that he discusses here depict the act of murder itself, which leaves his main topic still unaddressed. What is it about representing the violent act of murder (as opposed to a corpse or a group of soldiers) that sheds light on a national sense of identity in postrevolutionary Mexico? The following three chapters attempt to more explicitly answer that question.

Chapter Two focuses on Rodolfo Usigli's *Ensayo de un crimen* (1944) and Juan Bustillo Oro's *El hombre sin rostro* (1950) and argues that the crime genre blurred the boundary between the postrevolutionary state and the act of murder, thereby critiquing how elites controlled the postrevolutionary narrative in this historical period's rocky transition to modernity. Usigli's novelized murderer, Roberto de la Cruz, is determined to commit a series of motiveless murders. Sánchez argues that this absurd goal "mimics the actions of the state and the elitist intellectual as they attempt to build the nation through violence and works of art, respectively" (46). Murder thus functions as a parody of state-sponsored violence wielded under the guise of nation building and patriotism while simultaneously critiquing the postrevolutionary artists for their attempts to homogenize and sanitize the revolutionary narrative. This particular murderer's psyche was formed by the revolutionary era (as a child he witnessed a motiveless murder committed by a revolutionary soldier), but his similarly murderous acts are not legitimized by their postrevolutionary context. This signals a crisis in the elite constructions of Mexican identity and, as Sánchez argues, the novel thus "becomes a critique of the symbolic validity of the two leading postrevolutionary institutions: the governing regime...and the state-sponsored intelligentsia" (48).

Sánchez follows his analysis of Usigli's novel with a brief section about Luis Buñuel's 1955 "free adaptation" (78) of *Ensayo de un crimen*. Sánchez argues that Buñuel's film represents a "(mis)reading" (81) of Usigli's novel in that its protagonist harbors a nostalgic view of the past and a more complicit view of the modern state. Sánchez attributes this difference between the two works to the fact that Usigli's novel was published at a time when the transition to modernity was still in a state of tension, whereas Buñuel's film was released at time when "Mexico had already undergone this transformation; Mexico's modernity was now taken for granted" (81). Given at the centrality of the many intricate discussions of modernity to the overarching argument in *Artful Assassins*, this reference to Mexican modernity as something fully attained might come off as oversimplified. Sánchez himself later stages a provocative debate between those who would focus on the economic and political stability of

mid-century Mexico and those who would expose that “social peace” as “a myth” when taking into consideration the continued use of state violence, dramatic social inequalities, and the fact that the majority of the population was still rural and impoverished (85-87). In brief, the concept of modernity is muddy, and this may complicate Sánchez’s attempts to draw conclusions by referring to solid connections between a particular stage of modernity and the works under analysis.

Switching to the last work in this chapter, Sánchez argues that Bustillo Oro’s on-screen murderer in *El hombre sin rostro*, functions as a critique of the postrevolutionary state’s murderous nature as well as its deceptive control over the national narrative. The murderer, Juan Carlos Lozana, is also the detective assigned to lead the investigation into his own crimes. While the film offers a psychiatric explanation for this duality, in that Lozana suffers from schizophrenia, Sánchez argues that this murderer-detective allegorizes the Mexican nation suffering its own mental crisis as a result of being trapped between two stages of economic development. In both Usigli and Bustillo Oro’s works, the victims symbolize that which the postrevolutionary state desires to eliminate from the national script. Sánchez’s analysis of these violent eliminatory gestures draws a bold parallel between representation of murderers and the postrevolutionary artists and intellectuals whose objective was to promote modern, nationalistic goals by erasing undesirables from their performance of Mexican identity.

In Chapter Three Sánchez analyzes Rafael Bernal’s *El complot mongol* (1969) and Carlos Fuentes’ *La cabeza de la hidra* (1978) to argue that the spy novel functioned as a critique of this age of “latent national crisis,” characterized by the peak of the “Mexican miracle” and also by state-sponsored violence. Whereas the murderers of the previous chapter were seen as productive, in the sense that their acts of violence were allegories of the violence perpetrated by the state and the intelligentsia in crafting a postrevolutionary narrative, Sánchez highlights the “destructive nature of murder/assassination” in the texts under analysis here.

Bernal’s novelized murderer, Filiberto García, fought in the Mexican Revolution, having once even “executed one of Villa’s leading

generals" (92). As an older man, he straddles the realms of "crime and legality" (92) in that he is now a detective/hit-man assigned to investigate an alleged Chinese plot to assassinate the U.S. president in Mexico. Later Bernal finds out that Mexico's Chinatown crime is actually drug trafficking, and that president at risk is actually Mexico's president who is vulnerable to a coup d'état by military leaders. Sánchez analyzes this murdering detective as a manifestation of the revolutionary-era violence in a postrevolutionary context, an anachronism that "exposes the tensions and ideological fissures that the governing regime and its official intelligentsia had collaborated in concealing" (93). It is the murderer who narrates the story and thus wages direct critiques of the nation's contemporary leadership for its hypocrisy and corruption. It is moreover the murderer, lacking a way to revive the revolutionary ideals, who seeks his own path beyond the parameters of law and order by detaching "himself from notions of patriotism or duty to country" (98) and refusing to act as a mirror for "the official image of the Mexican nation" (99). Instead, as a metaphor for the more accurate image of the nation, Sánchez concludes that "García's violence, although used for the defense of Mexico, is, in the end, marked by old age, unfulfilled love, infertility, and loneliness. Filiberto García is a man whose imminent demise announces the moribund state of the regime that he has 'saved.'" (101)

The following reading of Fuentes's novel is highly influenced by Sánchez's biographical sketch of Fuentes as a public intellectual, high-culture author, and friend to president Luis Echevarría (111). Sánchez thus distinguishes Fuentes from the other authors by questioning his ability to represent a critical stance against the elite. Sánchez's analysis of the novel's depiction of murder and the state, nonetheless, seem to parallel the themes and critical objectives of the other works. Fuentes' murderer, Félix Maldonado, blends the boundaries between legality and crime in that he is "a mid-level bureaucrat in the government office that sets the official prices of Mexican oil" that "becomes involved in attempt to assassinate the Mexican president, who appears to be a character created in the likeness of president Luis Echeverría" (113). Nonetheless, Sánchez concludes that Fuentes "criticizes the regime, but for the most part he respects the

symbolic network created by the state” (116). Calling his novel “a partial critique of postrevolutionary Mexican politics” (117), Sánchez argues that Fuentes adheres to the official narratives of national identity by “using a poetic discourse that tends to exalt masculinity” (116), creating a protagonist who “does in fact believe in the validity of his patriotic motivations” (118), representing the murder-protagonist’s disdain for the popular classes (120), and making references to Shakespearean dialogue (122). Sánchez finds in the protagonist’s elitist attitude a manifestation of Fuentes’ own disdain for the crime genre and, by extension, Sánchez describes Fuentes as “an author who provides the nation with narratives designed to help assure its continued unity and existence” (123). While Sánchez is certainly not alone in waging these types of critiques against Fuentes, this line of attack perhaps overstates the power relationship between literature and national politics in Mexico and too easily dismisses the potential for critical distance that can be achieved by *high literary* forms.

With the most theoretically and thematically unwieldy set of works under analysis, the fourth chapter is perhaps appropriately contextualized as the “age of national disintegration,” characterized by a “crisis of postrevolutionary modernity” or “the exhaustion of developmentalism” (127). Sánchez argues that the three works under analysis, Paco Ignacio Taibo II’s *Cosa fácil* (1977), Elmer Mendoza’s *Un asesino solitario* (1999), and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Amores perros* (2000), “sever once and for all, the connection between the Revolution, the state, Mexico City and the capital-dwelling intellectual” (128).

Taibo’s novel differs from the model set forth in *Artful Assassins*’ previous chapters because here the protagonist is a detective rather than a murderer. Hector Belascoarán is hired to investigate three crimes. The first one is to find the still living Emiliano Zapata; the second is to prevent a woman’s daughter from committing suicide; and the third is to investigate the death of an engineer (132-133). The readers may, as Sánchez suggests, react to this *neopolicíaco*’s quest for knowledge about these cases with “an awakening of [their] critical consciousness” (134). Nevertheless, and despite interesting discussions of the novel and its author, Sánchez does

not discuss the ways in which the representation of murderers or assassins *per se* provoke that awakening, except to suggest that the novel depicts the city and the ideals of the Revolution as metaphorically under assault by the crisis of modernism.

Mendoza's murderer in *Un asesino solitario*, Jorge Macías, is routinely hired to carry out political assassinations on behalf of the PRI, including a character closing resembling the real-life Donaldo Colosio. Sánchez argues that unlike the previous "agents of violence" analyzed in *Artful Assassins*, "Macías shows no desire for regeneration, nor does he show himself to be linked to the past" (149). He thus "lacks a legitimizing narrative to provide a transcendent meaning for his acts" (149). Sánchez concludes that Macías' role as political assassin reveals the extreme violence of the state and also the complete disconnect between contemporary political beliefs and the ideals of the Mexican Revolution.

Although including an assassin as one protagonist among this film's ensemble cast, the inclusion of *Amores Perros* in this chapter's analysis feels out of place. Sánchez acknowledges that only the storyline about Chivo, a university professor, then a guerrilla fighter, then an inmate and finally a state-sponsored hitman, coincides with *Artful Assassins*' thematic focus. On the one hand, Chivo's violent acts reflect the corruption of the state and the values of the upper classes. On the other hand, based on Chivo's realization of his need to abandon the life of crime, Sánchez argues that he becomes an "allegory of Mexico's abandonment of its postrevolutionary national identity and its simultaneous entrance into the 'post-Mexican' condition" (164). Sánchez elaborates on that sentiment when he later refers to Chivo's efforts to reform and to reconnect with his estranged daughter as "a search that allegorizes Mexico's need for its own symbolic restructuring" (175). In other words, the film's message is that Mexico "must abandon the ruins of its former identity—its neurosis, its violent masculinity that was the base of its political power—to discover a new political order" (175).

The book ends with the feeling that certain topics have not been being fully addressed while others have not been fully tamed. And yet, the conclusion of *Artful Assassins* boldly suggests that, within the

representations of murder, modernity and nation in this series of works, we can find a sweeping narration of “the birth and death of postrevolutionary modern Mexico” (181) in which the representation of murder has played a creative and destructive role. Indeed Sánchez has brought together a diverse array of texts broadly characterized as part of the crime genre with an, at times, overwhelming contribution of theoretical angles regarding modernity, identity and literary representation. His book will be useful for those interested in how the universal trope of murder and the formulaic genre of detective fiction have been used in Mexico with particular, local meanings. Moreover, *Artful Assassins* will serve as a valuable bibliographical resource for further reading suggestions stemming from Sánchez’s extensive discussions regarding theories of national identity and modernity, previous studies on the crime genre, the history of Mexico’s literary and artistic traditions, as well as other authors and works related to the crime genre.