Abstract:
In light of the reflections on violence and power of Hannah Arendt, I will approach the impeccably fictionalized chronicle of Selva Almada that delves into the complex mechanisms of the normalization of violence – both real and symbolic – exercised against women. The text focuses on the murder of three teenagers – María Luisa, Andrea and Sarita – in the Argentina of the 1980s, but also shows how internalized socially misogynist mental structures are – the patriarchal power in danger derives from violence – and outlines the close links between systemic violence against women, poverty and the rural world and the past military dictatorship and the state repression of bodies and minds whose imagination extended to democracy in Argentina. The author of Ladrilleros puts her finger on the wound and clears with intelligence how patriarchy works and to what extent can we all become accomplices in horror.

Keywords: Argentina, violence, gender, normalization, body.

Streszczenie:
Przedmiotem rozważań w niniejszym artykule są fabularyzowane kroniki Selvy Almady zinterpretowane w świetle refleksji Hanny Arendt na temat przemocy i władzy. Almeda zgłębia się w złożone mechanizmy normalizacji przemocy – zarówno rzeczywistej, jak i symbolicznej – skierowanej przeciwko kobietom. Choć tekst koncentruje się na zabójstwie trzech nastolatek – Marii Luizy, Andrei i Sarity – w Argentynie lat osiemdziesiątych, pokazuje też, jak zintermalizowane są misogynistyczne struktury mentalne – wobec zagrożenia patriarchalna władza wykorzystuje przemoc – i podkreśla bliskie powiązania systemowej przemocy skierowanej przeciwko kobietom zarówno z ubóstwem i światem wiejskim, jak i z dyktaturą wojskową i represjami państwa wobec ciał i umysłów tych, których celem była demokracja. Autorka Ladrilleros nazywa problem po imieniu i błyskotliwie opisuje działanie patriarchatu i współodpowiedzialność wszystkich nas za popełniane czyny i przemoc.

Słowa kluczowe: Argentyna, przemoc, płeć, normalizacja, ciało.
Can violence be verbalized? Can it be narrated? Can it be written? For the French philosopher and sociologist Georges Bataille it is impossible to speak about violence from a distant perspective. In the first place, because violence is always closely linked to fear and fear provokes unutterable anonymous excitement. This excitement not only affects the relationship between the executioner and the victim but also extends to those who contemplate and narrate violence, interpellates the witness, or the narrator, because as he puts it, “la violencia no nos asombraría tanto si no fuéramos por lo menos un poco conscientes de que nos puede llevar a lo peor” (Bataille, 1994: 64). Violence is unspeakable, it destroys speech, it is diluted in mere noises. Pain occurs beyond language (Scarry, 1992). In violence people shout, babble, reshuffle. Nothing else.

Secondly, in the mirror of violence – and this is what unsettles and what prevents us from distancing ourselves – the human being sees their dark side or, as Todorov declares, discovers that we all can become victims or victimizers, that the hearts of human beings are inhabited by good and evil alike, and that under extreme circumstances one prevails over the other and, in this sense, the unspeakable violence can always be repeated. We can never fully tame it, eradicate it. On the other hand, it is legitimate and required of us, from an ethical perspective, that we at least to try to domesticate it:

Esto no quiere decir que la especie humana es horrorosa y que sólo debería suscitar lástima, sino que bien y mal forman igualmente parte de nuestras potencialidades. La esperanza de alcanzar un estado definitivamente libre del mal es una esperanza vana, no bastarán ni la guerra, ni las ejecuciones, ni la prisión. Sin embargo, esta evidencia, esta obligación de vivir con el mal en nuestro interior es difícil de aceptar, y preferimos levantar un alto muro entre los “monstruos” y nosotros, condenarlos al oprobio y creernos diferentes por esencia, asombrándonos de cómo semejantes seres han podido existir siquiera (Todorov, 2009: 21).

Thus, according to Bataille, it is not possible to assume a distanced perspective, when speaking of violence. Bataille does not trust the potential of the language to represent violence, in its conceptual, organizational capacity. He considers violence a form of communication that is superior to the language, as it opens us to the indescribable. In the same sense, says Riekenberg, two constellations are distinguished in which the language is incapable of narrating violence, and the impression causes forces it to remain silent. The first constellation was described
by Elaine Scarry (1992: 13) with respect to corporal torture, in which physical pain defeats the tongue. The second constellation is panic, because “[…] el pánico le quita a las víctimas de la violencia toda capacidad de dar sentido y significación” (Isaac, 1994: 120). Fear alerts of the danger, but if it is felt over a long period, it numbs, and paralyzes. A society stricken with fear never looks up. The language loses its significance. It is very revealing that Bataille should describe this opposition between the fact and the language as a point of discrepancy between the civilization and the barbarity.

That is why violence itself is “mute” and, therefore, a quality of the barbarity, since it does not command the language of civilization. Only the civilization speaks of violence, although without understanding it for violence is not intrinsic to it. For Bataille, in this case it is a discourse of civilization; Violence itself speaks another language. People who exercise violence do not feel embarrassed. They understand themselves within the violence, but they do not understand the way in which they talk about it because that language is irrelevant in the place they live. In this way, the science that talks about violence becomes, too often, a monologue (Riekenberg, 152). Science creates a language, which keeps violence at a distance. This objective, distanced journalistic discourse is a code chosen, in the first instance, by the fiction writer Selva Almada in *Chicas muertas*. She pretends to make a “civilized”, rational, structured discourse based on her own memories of adolescence about the murder of these three young people, which she superimposes on other press materials, oral history and interviews. Argentina knows that violence only takes on meaning when people narrate it and show it to themselves and other people. That narration is a process opposed to contraction. It supposes a development in time, beyond the specific moment. The narrative generates something that is not important for the violence itself, that is: a before and an after – and through these – also a why and a who (Riekenberg, 21).

Thus, in the story of violence there would be two opposite times: Roland Barthes calls them chronic time, in which violence happens, and time of speech or time paper, in which people talk about it, heal and let pain become a scar (1967). However, what responsibility does the witness bear? Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* reminds the risks of putting oneself in the place of the other, and how easy it is to give in to sensationalism and, in certain way, to barbarity. How to avoid morbidity or indifference towards the pain of others? What to do to transform the act of seeing a broken body into something other than voyeurism or empty fascination? How to avoid the commercial shock of violence and the touching and the upsetting of the world of the sufferers? (Rivera Garza, 2015: 41). Against the constructions that reproduced the violence – in all their
harshness or in their impotence – studies that privilege the perspective of the weak, of the victims, of the subalterns have emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century (Spivak). Where is the person, who is devastated by suffering, placed, asks Rivera Garza, if, even afterwards, they only manage to enunciate it so raggedly? The Mexican says:

   El dolor paraliza y silencia, es cierto, pero también satura la práctica humana y, en ocasiones, la libera produciendo voces que, en su profundidad o desvarío, nos invitan a visualizar una vida otra, en plena implicación con los otros (Rivera Garza, 2015: 43).

To speak of the pain and the victims is to talk about the body, as Bolaño pointed out in the homage to the dead women of Ciudad Juárez in 2666, and as shown by Almada in this book where young and poor bodies appear stark, mutilated for private masculine “parties”. The aching body speaks, but speaks in its own way, hesitates, stumbles, pauses, speaks raggedly. You have to find a way to write, says Rivera Garza, who, despite a certain distance – because the other is never there completely – emulates and embodies that way of speaking. Pain speaks of violence and humanizes it. “El dolor no sólo destroza, sino que también produce realidad: de ahí que sus lenguajes sociales sean sobre todo lenguajes de la política: lenguajes en que los cuerpos descifran sus relaciones de poder con otros cuerpos” (Rivera Garza, 2015: 44).

Thus, although Chicas muertas belongs to the time of discourse or time paper and pretends to be an objective, civilized, scientific and neutral discourse that explains violence without paternalism in its eyes, it ends up being configured, inevitably, as a discourse of pain, a discourse that hesitates, goes and returns, and is messy at times. The murders are described three times in the text, as if they were the result of the victim's post-traumatic stress: announced by the radio, remembered years later by the press, recounted by different witnesses that confront disparate versions. Maybe we cannot talk of violence itself, but of what people say about it; the narrator thinks that she looks for a pattern, a structure, but she finds that the pattern is a short-circuited, circular and non-linear story, always with gaps, empty, white unknowns. The interesting thing is that even if the stories that try to narrate violence are repeated, even if they are always disconnected, incomplete, and lacking, they lead to a critical reflection and a better understanding in that still painful way, that violence is political and denounce the violence of the system. Thus, Almada manages to emulate, embody in her journalistic prose the language of pain as the Huesera, that mythical character whose task is to gather and keep the bones that are in danger of getting lost, arm them and then let their owners run freely wherever they have to go. That is the meaning that the three candles at the end of the story have. Narrate and then let go.
State violence and community violence

“Porque no sólo ha dejado de coincidir el progreso de la ciencia con el progreso de la humanidad (cualquiera que sea lo que esto puede significar) sino que ha llegado a entrañar el fin de la humanidad” (Arendt, 2005: 47).

The image of violent Latin America emerges again and again in our heads. However, the violence organized by the State on the continent has never reached the dimensions of the state-destroying violence generated by Europe. What happens when people who live in a State do not expect it to offer them protection and they hold a monopoly over violence because they seek security in other communities or associations, in which they trust more than they do in the State? In Latin America, the language defines violence as a practice of people. In Spanish language, as Julio Ortega says, there is a memory of the war, the subjection and the violation that took place at the beginning of modern history of Latin America.

How does the state violence arise? According to Hobbes, the incessant fear of violence at the hand of the other created the need to exercise violence in order to anticipate the violence of others. It was the state that repressed this violence of all against all. In some way, organized state violence is opposed to that “other” chaotic form of violence described as savage, anomalous or chaotic – to the violence of men threatening vulnerable women, as in the case of gender violence. That other form of violence, the violence of the community, of the people, also has, same as the official or state violence, a significant arbitrary component, as Hannah Arendt affirmed:

Como los resultados de la acción del hombre quedan más allá del control de quien actúa, la violencia alberga dentro de sí un elemento adicional de arbitrariedad; en ningún lugar desempeña la Fortuna, la buena o mala suerte, un papel tan fatal dentro de los asuntos humanos como en el campo de batalla (Arendt, 2005: 13).

As Hannah Arendt points out, no one can deny the role that violence has played in human affairs and yet, it is always considered as a marginal, secondary, singular act. When power falters, violence appears. Violence, then, replaces power. Although they are different phenomena they are interconnected and usually appear together. Violence may be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate. Violence can always destroy power. What it cannot give rise to, however, is power; it is unable to create it.

When the neoliberal state – with its growing inequalities – put aside its responsibility in regards to the bodies of its citizens, when it stopped “playing its part” in the care for their health and the well-being of their communities, it gradually drifted away, little by little but ineluctably, from the relationship that it had established with citizenship in the early twentieth century:
Los Quevedo, luego de denunciar en la policía la desaparición de su hermana y de que les respondieran lo de siempre: que esperaran, que seguro se habría ido con un noviecito y que ya iba a volver, decidieron consultar con una vidente (Alameda, 2015: 41).

Almada points to the state as the generator of economic violence that is the basis of all other forms of violence, when speaking of gender violence as one of the multiple consequences of the socio-economic gap in Argentina. There is a custom or a game that Almada mentions that is called “making a calf”. The goal is to mark a girl, always from a low class, have one of the group to seduce her for a few days, and then trick her and lure her to a solitary place where all friends can rape her. Andrea, María Luisa and Sarita are humble girls from the Chaco or Entre Ríos, not from Buenos Aires: they are young, inexperienced domestic workers, unprotected by their families, unprotected by the State. Their murders are never clarified, they are ignored by the authorities also after their death:

María Luisa abrió los ojos y se incorporó en la cama, lista para levantarse y salir a su trabajo en lo de la familia Casucho. Hacía poco que trabajaba allí, de mucama. […] De su ropero de muchacha pobre eligió una musculosa y una falda de bambula, adornada con un cintito de cuero que se ajustaba rodeando la cintura […]. Era una chica menudita que todavía no había terminado de echar cuerpo. Tenía quince, pero parecía de doce. María Luisa había estado desaparecida por unos días y, finalmente, su cuerpo violado y estrangulado había aparecido en un baldío, en las afueras de la ciudad. Nadie fue procesado por este asesinato. […] La habían ahorcado con el mismo cinto de cuero que se había puesto la mañana que salió de su casa al trabajo (Alameda, 2015: 18-26).

Normalization of violence and banality of evil

Why do people get used to violence until it becomes routine? In the sociology of violence, it is said that human beings become familiar with violence that comes to stay and permeates daily life completely, so that they become brutalized and act as automatons in a climate of permanent violence. It is the image of violence that in certain moments and in certain places spreads to such an extent that it paralyzes everything and forces people to get used to it, all the way until insensibility. It dominates all the senses and behaviors and permeates daily life. It seems that violence ceases to be frightening just because it is permanent for a long period of time. In its presence people end up exhausted because violence goes beyond the line of exhaustion. It ends by accepting implicitly as part of the rules of the social game:

Visitá a un hombre solo que a cambio ayuda con plata es una forma de prostitución que está naturalizada en los pueblos del interior. Como la de la empleada doméstica que fuera del trabajo se encuentra con el marido de la patrona y esos encuentros le arriman unos pesos más al sueldo. […] Nadie pregunta nada (Alameda, 2015: 59).
There is also what Arendt calls “domain of Nobody” (dominio de Nadie) which is nothing but bureaucracy, that complex system of offices where men cannot be held responsible:

El dominio de Nadie es claramente el más tiránico de todos, pues no existe precisamente nadie al que pueda preguntarse por lo que se está haciendo. En este estado de cosas, que hace imposible la localización de la responsabilidad y la identificación del enemigo, una de las causas más poderosas de la actual y rebelde intranquilidad difundida por todo el mundo, de su caótica naturaleza y de su peligrosa tendencia a escapar a todo control, al enloquecimiento (Arendt, 2005: 53).

Arendt’s other theory about the evil that accompanies the bureaucratization of violence that eludes all personal responsibility (“where everyone is guilty, no one is”) is that of the banality of evil. The German thinker argues that violence is not bestial or irrational. On the contrary, it is rational to the point where it is effective to achieve the end that must justify it. This is what disturbs the “banality of evil”: we can all commit abuse, and evil can have the face of a father, a brother, anyone. I quote Almada:

Yo tenía trece años y esa mañana, la noticia de la chica muerta, me llegó como una revelación. Mi casa, la casa de cualquier adolescente, no era el lugar más seguro del mundo. Adentro de tu casa podían matarte. El horror podía vivir bajo el mismo techo que vos […] Los violadores siempre eran hombres desconocidos que agarraban a una mujer y se la llevaban a algún descampado o que entraban a su casa forzando una puerta. Desde chicas nos enseñaban que no debíamos hablar con extraños y que debíamos cuidarnos del Sátiro. El sátiro era una entidad tan mágica como, en los primeros años de la infancia, la Solapa o el Viejo de la bolsa. Era el que podía violarte si andabas sola a deshora o si te aventurabas por sitios desolados. Nunca nos dijeron que podría violarte tu marido, tu vecino, tu abuelo, tu maestro. Un varón en el que depositaras toda tu confianza (Almada, 2015: 55).

Micromachismos

Creí que un gran dolor desplazaría los pequeños dolores.
Y sin embargo chillan allí, debajo de su ala,
hacen crujir sus dientes, no renuncian
al pedazo de carne al que se aferran
mientras que yo suspiro
me canto una canción
y digo soy la madre que los pare,
tendré que hacer del hueso mi instrumento
Piedad Bonnett

The text of Selva Almada detects, denounces and verbalizes also the small everyday machismo. Accustomed to living with certain situations, comments and expectations since we are small, we do not even realize that in addition to the large-scale violence-gender violence that results in intra-family violence, bidirectional, suicide as
a result of repeated violations, constant sexual assaults of minors, pedophilia-, in ad-

tion to these “dead girls”, we are surrounded by small macho practices, as the case of the reporter Selva Almada shows in her fictionalized chronicle:

Estas escenas convivían con otras más pequeñas: la mamá de mi amiga que no se maqui-
llaba porque su papá no la dejaba. La compañera de trabajo de mi madre que todos los
meses le entregaba su sueldo completo al esposo para que se lo administrara. La que no
podía ver a su familia porque al marido le parecían poca cosa. La que tenía prohibido usar
zapatos de taco porque eso era de puta. Me crié escuchando a las mujeres grandes comen-
tar escenas así en voz baja, como si les avergonzara la situación de la pobre desgraciada
o como si ellas también le temieran al golpeador […] como si hablar de eso fuera mala
palabra o, peor, les diera un pudor inmanejable (56).

Also, those *micromachismos* are normalized, naturalized and for that reason
they need to be named, so that they stop happening unnoticed. Its effect is that of
a fine rain, which at first you do not notice but you end up being soaked and fed
up with the downpour. This is very well seen in “the iceberg of gender violence”
drawn by Amnesty International. At the tip are murder, rape, torture and physical
aggression, but deep down, submerged under water, and therefore not immedi-
ately visible, are sexist language, control, nullification, contempt, abuse, and the
invisibility of women. You have to act in the small dimension and in the big di-
mension to avoid, as much as possible, the small pain and the big pain.

Hemos aprendido, con no poco dolor, que no basta con ser víctima para tener razón, y,
sin embargo, en la experiencia de las víctimas de la historia emerge una conciencia irre-
nunciable. La de que no todo puede estar disponible, de que lo humano sólo se salva en
el *noli me tangere*, en la capacidad de abstenerse, de no instrumentalizar la dignidad del
otro. Ni del sufrimiento. Ni su memoria (Gómez Toré, 68).

**Bibliography**


