The Shapes of Violence on the Narratives of Selva Almada

Abstract: The work of Selva Almada (Entre Ríos, Argentina, 1973) appears in tune with two tendencies of current Latin American literature inventoried by critics: the invention of peripheral spaces in forgotten provinces in response to processes of deterritorialization and transnationalization; and the creation of intimate microworlds that insist on the construction of subjective identities, often adopting a view from childhood. The ability of her work to bind together these trends rests on an element that acts as pivot and narrative core and that is at the center of our analysis, namely, the different shapes of violence that run through her stories: the recurring theme of death, the silent and internalized aggressiveness, the gender violence, and the violent inscription of language. All these modes design a particular topology of violence that becomes the most significant feature of her narrative. Departing from some current reflections on violence, this article deals with the shapes it acquires in the Almada’s work published until today.

Keywords: Argentine literature, Selva Almada, violence, politics, femicide.
All recent studies on violence coincide in one thing: violence does not disappear; it only changes its shape or the ways in which we perceive it. When it seems to recede, violence manifests itself in a new configuration. There is no society without violence. It is impossible to imagine its end.

Within this generalized agreement there are two ways of thinking about the phenomenon. On the one hand, it is possible to attend to those invariable aspects, those which allow to trace from the experience of violence a human continuity throughout history; on the other, we can pay attention to its variations, to the transformations that would talk not so much about violence per se as about the different cultures in which it manifests itself, about the different historical moments, giving account of the enormous plasticity of civilizations and the particularities of each era.¹

This paper aims to approach the phenomenon by taking the second of these two paths. The forms of appearance of violence will help us to think about the social constellation in which it emerges. For this, I will work with its representations: I will limit myself to a reflection on the different ways of representing violence in literature, more specifically, in the stories of the Argentine writer Selva Almada (Entre Ríos, 1973).² If I am interested in the different modes of violence in her texts today, it is because I consider that they offer us a royal way of thinking not only about their inscription in contemporary Argentine literature but also about their own present, which is ours.

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Before moving on to the specifics of Almada’s work, I want to introduce some concepts and distinctions about violence, a digression that only in appearance will take us away from the central theme of this article.

From very different intellectual positions, Slavoj Zizek and Byung-Chul Han coincide, in contemporary texts, in a separation between visible and invisible violence. At first glance, this opposition is quite understandable, one could almost say that it is “common sense”; but in the development that each author makes of it, different aspects of our time can be seen, which are pertinent to think about Almada’s stories.

¹ From very different theoretical perspectives, this is the position adopted by recent texts such as A History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present (2008) by Robert Muchembled, Violence: Six Sideways Reflections (2008) by Slavoj Zizek, or Topology of violence (2011) by Byung-Chul Han (here I indicate the year of the original edition of each text).

² The work of Almada burst into Argentine literature about fifteen years ago, gaining great notoriety in the last five, thanks to titles such as El viento que arrasa (2012), Ladrilleros (2013), or Chicas muertas (2014).
In Violence: Six Sideways Reflections, Zizek raises two major types of violence: subjective violence and objective violence. “Subjective” violence is that which is presented as directly visible (common crimes, civil unrest, international conflicts, political repression), being exerted by an agent that can be identified instantly (a murderer, a terrorist, a group of demonstrators, an armed organization, a State). It is a fascinating lure that, as a rule, monopolizes the attention of the media. It is perceived as the disturbance of a normal and peaceful state of affairs.

“Objective” violence, for its part, is invisible since it maintains that normality: it is inherent to that “normal” and “peaceful” state of affairs, and in this case, it is difficult to identify a responsible person, it is anonymous. Zizek divides this “objective” violence into two types. On the one hand, the “symbolic” violence that would be embodied in language and its forms: not only in the provocation and social domination reproduced in the habitual forms of discourse, but also in language as such, as the imposition of a certain universe of meaning. On the other, the “systemic” violence that would be materialized in the consequences of the homogeneous functioning of the economic and political systems: forms of coercion that impose relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.

For Zizek, objective violence must be studied if subjective violence is to be clarified: without the former, the latter is perceived as mere irrational explosions. We must resist the fascination of subjective violence if we want to analyze its interaction with the two types of objective violence. This fascination often covers other forms of violence, and in this way participates actively in them.

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In comparison with the seemingly more “political” course that Zizek presents in his reflections, Han proposes a more “theoretical” or “academic” itinerary in Topology of violence, contrasting his hypothesis on the mutation of violence in the present with different philosophical approaches to the issue throughout the twentieth century. One element, however, connects them: Han also distinguishes between visible and invisible violence. The difference is that this opposition does not correspond one to one with the one posed by Zizek.

In his diagnosis, Han argues that in our time there has been an internalization of violence: the violence that once was addressed to the other is now
directed at oneself. This internalization corresponds precisely to a change in violence that goes from visible to invisible. The first, the visible, is frontal, direct, real, physical violence. It is a negative violence, insofar as it establishes a bipolar relationship between the self and the other, between inside and outside, between friend and enemy. It is the archaic violence of sacrifice, and the political violence of the death of the sovereign, the violence of torture, the gas chamber and terrorism. It is also the linguistic violence, as far as it is exerted against the other. The result of this violence is an obedience-subject.

The other is the invisible violence, a viral, mediated, virtual, psychological violence. It is positive, insofar as it no longer needs enemies or domination. It is anonymous, desubjective, systemic. Negativity disappears from our culture (this is one of the effects of globalization) but violence does not disappear. What happens is that the typical violence of our time is not perceived as such, since it happens to coincide with freedom. One of its forms is what Han calls the spamification of language: the uncontrollable creation of content that produces over-communication, an excess of information. The result of this violence of positivity is an achievement-subject, as unfree as the obedience-subject.

Both in its visible and invisible form, Han seems to be thinking especially about a type of “public” violence, rather than a “private” one. Although he does not clarify explicitly, what apparently interests him is the kind of violence that produces subjectivities, the violence which allows governing a society from a “police” practice (as opposed to what would be a “political” practice according to the distinction proposed by Jacques Rancière). This is what brings him closer to Zizek. And this is what makes the proposal of both authors an interesting framework to think about the stories by Selva Almada.

* As a first approach to Almada’s works, I want to place them in the cartography of current Latin American literature. Identifying the trends that flow in her narrative will help us to think about the way in which the treatment of violence is inscribed in its political, economic, social time.

I would like to highlight two of the tendencies of contemporary literature that critics have pointed out in her works. Firstly, the invention of intimate microworlds that insist on the construction of subjective identities and that are

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3 Of course, these are trends and not absolute changes. Different forms of violence can coexist at the same time, and even, I believe, they can do it in a same violent act.
accompanied by the creation of fictional characters with a register close to the autobiographical (Waldman, 2016: 365). Without abandoning the fiction (or almost without abandoning it), Almada’s stories play with the “writings of the self” (personal narrative, testimony, memories). As she herself recognizes it, many of her characters and plots come from her own life.

Her tales and novels focus on family histories, on the conflictive relationships between parents and children that at times take up the topic of the search of the own identity. But in this search the private sphere is not abandoned: the lineage of the individual does not conflate, as in other texts of Argentine literature, into the lineage of the nation. The social and the political are narrated from the individual, from a non-totalizing subjectivity, hence the importance of intrafamilial relations, the protagonism of children and young people, and the child’s perspective that many of her stories adopt (Brescia, 2008: 286-288). If her texts work with memory, they do not do so with collective memory. The personal history is not interwoven with the history of the country. And if at any time it does, as in Chicas muertes, it is with the waste of national history, with those femicides that can reveal the logic of power in the countryside provinces but that do not go beyond the pages of crime reports.

This feature of her literature will be revealing to think what kind of subjective, visible violence (in Zizek’s terms) appears in her stories and how it interacts with other types of violence.

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The other trend that I want to highlight is the recovery of peripheral and forgotten places: the stories of Almada take place in small provincial towns, scenarios where the local is deliberately affirmed.

This feature can be read from two perspectives. First, it allows us to relate her narrative to the work by authors from other latitudes: these scenarios appear as a response to the processes of transnationalization of a globalized continent and point to the overcoming of “nation” as a privileged territorial framework (Waldman, 2016: 372). The territories of Almada, even being far from the city, are close to the dynamics of the “urban islands” described by Josefina Ludmer, those islands where the urban and the rural are no longer opposed, and where literature, even being local, it is no longer a manifestation of a national identity (Ludmer, 2010: 132, 135).

But also, these scenarios can be read (now at a national level) as a rereading of the countryside, that territory which in Argentine culture carries an
unavoidable semantic-ideological and interpretative load. As Lucia De Leone suggests, the Almada’s works can be read within a return to the countryside of contemporary Argentine literature, or a return to what remains of it, in a present in which rural tradition has become impossible. It is a resignified countryside because new disputes appear at political level (e.g., the clash between Kirchnerism and Sociedad Rural, the advance of agribusiness over the land), but also because new actors and new conflicts show up: in a space traditionally gendered as masculine, new narratives focus on female characters and plots where sexual diversity is negotiated (De Leone, 2016: 184-188, 196-199).

This current that flows in Almada’s works will allow us to read, in contrast to tradition, a sui generis version of that internalization of violence that in the model proposed by Han would be a sign of our time.

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The ability of Almada’s work to conflate these tendencies (private life, life in the countryside) rests on the different dynamics of violence presented by her stories, dynamics that serve as the pivot and narrative core of her tales and novels, and that propagate insistently in both fields. I refer to the recurring theme of death, silent and internalized aggression, gender violence, body to body dueling, suicide, the fierce uses of language, etc.

“¿A cuántos hombres vio morir?” The question is asked by the Gringo Brauer to Reverend Pearson in El viento que arrasa (Almada, 2015: 135), the most acclaimed novel by the author. It is a central question in the story. It comes to the end, just before the fight between the two men, a fight that does not end with the death of either of the two but externalizes the buried violence that runs through the text. The question is also central to the whole of Almada’s work, where death becomes a topic.

Within the set of violent acts present in their stories, the image of death returns again and again: the suicide of Denis in the short story “En familia”; the girl run over and the murder of Andrea in “Chicas lindas”; the transfer of his body in “Intemec”; the vision of the dead and the death of the father in “Niños”; the fatal accident in “Los conductores, las máquinas, el camino”; the filicide in “El incendio”; the engineer who blows the head of the other engineer and the hanged man in “El viento que arrasa”; the murder of Miranda and the double death in the final duel of Ladrilleros; the femicides in Chicas muertas, etc.
It is, as a rule, a violent death that presents itself as a kind of black hole, a hole density of which functions as a gravitational center in almost all stories. And this simile is not accidental: the violence of the different deaths radiates a darkness that seizes the atmosphere of each story, a darkness that weighs like an irreducible enigma inside literature. How many men did I see die? —seems to ask Almada’s literature.

Now, how to approach or from which perspective should we read these representations of violence? We can do it from those tendencies or trends that I pointed out before. Let us think, for example, of that return to the countryside that De Leone was referring to. The countryside, as one of the theaters par excellence of Argentine literature, is a scenario that allows to compare representations of violence from different periods.

Violent death in the rural environment, violence in general in the countryside and its surroundings has a long tradition in Argentine literature. It is not just another element; it acquires a foundational character. If we go back to the nineteenth century, the two limits of the gaucho genre pointed out by Ludmer (popular illegality and war) already suppose violence: the violence of a legal order (a liberal and state order) that is imposed in a territory that requires discipline. The focus is on the relationship of the individual with a law that is presented as an external instance. In this configuration, violence is central to the language of a literature that, using the voice of the gaucho and the mazorquero (the voice of the other), weaves an alliance with the State. “Las dos instituciones, ejército y poesía, se abrazan y complementan” writes Ludmer (2000: 23), there where genre and motherland touch each other.

In the twentieth century the unavoidable name is that of Borges. As Beatriz Sarlo points out, the stories of orilleros and the Borgean rereading of the gaucho genre take up the violence in the countryside or the intermediate zones, on the orillas, putting it also in relation with the establishment of an order. But there is a difference with the forms of violence of the previous century. This violence of the criollo culture, which is no longer state but individual, does not appear as means of a modernizing project but rather as a code that sets limits when that project fails, either because the formal institutions of the State are absent or because they are endangered by the rapid transformations of a society marked by immigration (Sarlo, 2003: 159). The law of the State gives way to a previous law, not written. In the words of Sarlo, the “historias de duelos, muertes, lanzas
y cuchillos” invoke those “fantasmas” that provide a common place, an identity and a sense of continuity with the past “cuando los mitos de una sociedad tradicional han perdido su fuerza sobre el presente” (Sarlo, 2003: 163, 166).

The reference to these particular moments of Argentine literature does not exhaust the issue of violence in rural areas or in the orillas, but I mention them because they allow us, in contrast, to point out the singularity of Almada’s work in relation to this subject or, it should be said, the singularity of the period in which Almada writes (the first decades of the twenty first century). Her stories usually have a rural or semi-rural scenario as their setting. Now, how is violence represented in them? How do they communicate, if they do, with tradition?

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Although the stories of Almada do not explicitly refer us to the literature of the past (this remaking is not part of their devices), the counterpoint seems anyway interesting because of the differences that are appreciated.

At the plot level, the contrast with these forms is more than pertinent. One of the figures of the violence that returns time and again in the stories of Almada is the fight, the body-to-body combat, the scene of two men dueling (this a central theme in Borges’ stories of cuchilleros, stories that already reformulate a scene that ultimately goes back to the gaucho genre). In El viento que arrasa, in Ladrilleros, in the short story “Un verano”, we find sequences that narrate the fight between two men. They are axial scenes in each story. They are narrated in detail, following the movements of the two bodies, sometimes as if they were a choreography. In “El incendio” this choreography becomes a dance: the father kills the son, surprisingly, when he hugs him in the middle of the cumbia.

Now, these stories of duels, deaths and knives in the work of Almada do not provide, unlike what Sarlo pointed out about Borges, any sense of continuity with the past. They do not seem to be looking for a common place for a new society. There are no ghosts in Almada's stories, even in her more haunted narratives such as Ladrilleros and Chicas muertas. If the individual violence in Borges’ tales (in opposition to the violence of the State) transcended the individual, either because it connected him or her with the origin of the nation or because it reached a universal or metaphysical dimension (Sarlo, 2003: 163) through the repetition of the same story (of the same plot with different coordinates), in Almada’s work violence does not reach that transcendence power. Not even in Ladrilleros, a story where the fight between Pájaro Tamai and Marciano Miranda could be reissuing the confrontation between their parents, not even there the stories are repeated.
The narrative does not insist on any type of family lineage, much less on family stories that are conflated into the nation’s history. Violence is presented as useless and unproductive. “¡Qué desperdicio, mierda!” —officer Rebolledo concludes before the crime scene, where the final fight in which the two young men die takes place (Almada, 2014: 196). And that is the last line of the novel. The interest of duel is elsewhere.

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Like all duels, those of Almada’s works also play with the figure of the double, with the identification with the other, with that image of the rival in which the character is reflected and confused. There are many examples of this in her stories. But, as I said before, the emphasis here is not on the archetypal dimension of the double. What her works emphasize is the double movement of seduction that the other generates in the character. To a large extent, the stories focus on that aspect: they try to understand the passage from attraction to rejection that is present in each fight between equals. What triggers that passage? How does violence arise in these Almada’s stories?

It is curious that at the plot level the trigger, the origin of violence, always seems to be lost. The people involved usually ignore it. The almost mythical rivalry between Miranda and Tamai in Ladrilleros (I say “almost” because there is nothing mythical in these characters) is lost in a bar night like so many others that nobody remembers. “Ninguno recordaba cuál había sido el principio del disturbio” (Almada, 2014: 53). This remote origin of violence, this somewhat mysterious origin (insofar as the characters themselves cannot explain it) returns once and again. The murder of Miranda is unsolved. The police can only imagine what happened that night. And not just the police, but also the narrator. “Como no hubo testigos, la policía imagina la escena del crimen” (Almada, 2014: 44). Another eloquent example is that of a same framed story that is repeated almost identical in Ladrilleros and El viento que arrasa. Two men, two friends or acquaintances, are in a bar, drinking together. Suddenly, without knowing why, one pulls out a gun and kills the other. In El viento que arrasa they are two foreign engineers in a countryside town. In Ladrilleros they are two Indians. In both cases what the narration highlights is the inexplicable, mysterious nature of that violence.

I tend to think that in the stories of Almada violence is latent in the characters, as a systemic, internalized, desubjectivated violence, a violence dispersed in society. Not so much because it is an atavistic violence, being part of the nature of the human being, but because it is the violence of a culture that approves,
legitimizes or simply accepts it as the way to deal with the other, with what is perceived as a threat. Violence appears precisely as a rejection of the different, of diversity; in this case, of a sexual diversity that divides the individuals. In that dynamic of attraction and rejection, the duel often seems to channel the homerotic tension between the two characters, or within the same character. Death usually arrives when that tension reaches a point of no return, when the desire already becomes intolerable in the subject itself or in the other. Like the foreman who stabs his son because he is tired of seeing him necking with the patrón of the estancia in “El incendio”.

This of course places the duel as a manifestation of a culture marked by machismo (a “fachistoide” culture, as Almada describes Argentine society). But it also makes it clear that it is an expression of an internalized violence, a violence which is exerted as much against the other as against oneself, or against the other as oneself. The law no longer appears as an external instance (being the State or the motherland). It has become inseparable from the subject.

These violent acts are still visible, according to Han’s terminology. They are still an example of a negative kind of violence that establishes a bipolar relationship between the self and the other. But unlike what happened in the past, that other is not a completely external enemy anymore, because what circulates between both (the self and the other) are not national identities nor different projects for a nation but flows of desire. The particular relationship that arises between the characters of Ladrilleros, both between the two young people and between their parents, suggests that there is no real antagonism. The duel, in this novel as in the other stories of Almada, embodies symbolically the internalization of an anonymous violence the origin of which is lost.

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This same internalized, fachistoide violence emerges in another axial form that is repeated in Almada’s works: the real femicides narrated in Chicas muertas and “Chicas lindas”. Although in these cases it is not used against oneself, the violence here also appears dispersed in society, as an anonymous phenomenon. It is no coincidence that the stories focus on unsolved, mysterious murders.

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4 Departing from Sarlo’s reading on Borges, one might say that cuchilleros’ visible violence substitutes another violence (also visible) in which the enemy is no longer the rival with whom the character is dueled (it is clear that here rival is not an enemy), but the immigrant who does not fit into the national project.
of women, in which the culprits have not been identified (which, of course, does not mean that there are not).

At this point and in the light of certain reactions from within and outside literature it may be necessary to remember that Almada’s narrative does not intend to replace the police investigation. A story like Chicas muertas, classified as non-fiction, should not be read as investigative journalism: it is closer to literature than to journalistic chronicles or, in any case, it moves in a blurred area between the two. In this sense, Almada’s work is not offered to us as an investigation into a series of crimes but rather as an exploration of violence, an exploration of the culture and the subjects that produce or coexist with such violence.

If the duel acquires another dimension within that rereading of the countryside proposed by her works, these femicides reach their full projection when they are read within that other tendency of the literature mentioned above, the invention of intimate and familiar microworlds. The private nature of Almada’s stories, that narration of the social from the individual, that confusion between fiction and personal that is present in many of her stories, is not at any time a denial of the political, nor a withdrawal from politics. On the contrary, I believe that these microworlds respond to a new configuration of experience and a new way of understanding the relationship between violence and politics, a new figure that today takes shape in narratives such as those of Almada, in their themes, in their language and form, in what they say and do not say. And the deaths of these girls play a fundamental role in it.

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The three femicides that organize the story of Chicas muertas occurred during the eighties. The first one, chronologically, is presented as a beginning. It is the murder of María Luisa Quevedo, whose body was found on December 11, 1983, the day after the national celebrations for the return of democracy in Argentina. This coincidence that the narrator points out gives her story an inaugural character. The new democratic government of the country opens with the death of a girl, as if the apparent disappearance of one type of violence (state violence, political repression) was replaced by another (gender violence). In fact, the text suggests that the details of the Quevedo case displace the consequences and derivatives of the violence of dictatorship: the illegal appropriation of babies, the finding of unidentified corpses, these ghosts from the recent past are relegated to a second place in the public attention. One type of violence is presented as a substitute of the other.
Now, it is clear that we are not facing a new kind of violence that appears suddenly (gender violence already existed before) nor we are in the presence of an old type of violence that disappears (political violence will continue to exist). The text itself suggests this. It is more as if there had been a change in the visible register of violence, in Zizek’s terminology. It is as if, in response to the political changes in the country, the subjective, visible violence, the violence that fascinates, was now another.

This can be seen in the fact that the subjective violence in the Almada stories does not hide another form of objective, systemic violence. On the contrary, her narratives insist on the interaction between both. On the one hand, we find this crossing in the plot level. In Chicas muertas, it manifests itself in the conflation of gender and economic violence. Social class is a fundamental variable in this work as in all the stories by Almada, which seem to remind us that in the current economic regime not all lives have the same value. On the other hand, the interaction reappears in the form level. Objective violence interacts with subjective violence through the linguistic and fatally social division that crosses the languages of Almada’s texts (Salas, 2013) or in the poverty of resources of a fragmented narrative that seems to work with remains, with recycled materials from one story and another.

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Here the differences with the past are again relevant. In this web of visible and invisible violence, within Almada’s works, neither the State nor the motherland seem to be the ones exerting this type of violence. It does not seem to be exerted in their name either. And when I say this, I do not believe that her works overlook the persistence of other forms of violence (political repression, for example, which is still in force in Argentina, where the State continues to kill those who organize to defend their land and culture). But Almada’s stories show that our way of experiencing violence changes and that together with these changes other ways of talking about it appear, and that, therefore, other strategies and other discourses are necessary. This is one of the most interesting perspectives to approach the issue, and one manner literature has to be political: to rethink the way in which each society relates to its violence.

To conclude, I want to open a new line of research. As for the changes in the visible violence that femicides enunciate in Chicas muertas, I think that the

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5 In recent years, feminist and peasant movements seem to explore this demand.
counterpoint should no longer be done with the gaucho genre nor with Borges’ cuchilleros tales, as I proposed about the duel. In the late fifties of the twentieth century, and far from those forms of literature, the work that knew how to crystallize the violence of its time and that of the next two decades in Argentina was, like Chicas muertas, also a piece of non-fiction. I think about Operación masacre by Rodolfo Walsh. At the beginning of the twenty first century that role comes to be played by the story of Almada. In the distance that separates both texts, two ways of narrating violence are cut out and, therefore, two ways of thinking about politics. And they are not necessarily discordant.

Bibliography


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