



Scenery and Mass Grave: Main Models for Crime Scenes in 21st Century Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Violence in contemporary Mexico is displayed according to two models: the scenery and the mass grave. The first part of this paper examines the definition of these models. This exploration bases its existing differences between a model full of evidence, and one without any piece of evidence. The second of the paper shows the effects of the absence-model in Mexican political life.

KEYWORDS: *Violence, Mexico, Crime Scene, Death, Aesthetics*

INTRODUCTION

Shattered, fragmented, and mutilated: these adjectives describe a new kind of body in Mexico. Devastated by the effect of knife wounds and fire guns. Dismembered and torn apart too, then, be articulated with words written on cardboard. This new body works as a message. Absent: this is the other kind of body. Clandestine mass graves exist deep and shady, full of human remains. Human fragmented bodies lay under-ground waiting to be found.

In crime psychology domain, the term “crime scene” has acquired an outstanding relevance. After the profusion of crime scenes in Mexico today, it makes sense to employ Giorgio Agamben’s (2010) idea of considering German concentration fields as a paradigm to understand contemporary cities. However, when approaching violence in Mexico, a distinction seems necessary when it comes to crime scenes: there has been a displacement from crime to scenery crime. Robert Jan van Pelt has proposed the relationship mass murder-scenery in “Massive incineration machines and about the scenery” (Anstett, Dreyfus, Garibian, 2013). The change that serves here as a conceptual basis appeared early in *On murder considered as one of the Fine Arts* (De Quince, 2008).

The principal aim of this analysis is to outline two main models of sceneries of violence in Mexico’s 21st century. The use of the term scenery instead of the scene, related to crime, is going to be explained later. A definite, visible, even gaudy scene would feature the first scenery model. Some elements, taken as evidence, participate in the configuration of a spectacular appearance whose main objective is producing ominous messages. Pieces of dismembered bodies and a piece of cardboard with a written message (or even

messages written on the own dismembered bodies) work as a linguistic strategy to reach an uncertain meaning. These large-scale, mixed-media constructions could be taken as uncanny installations artistically. On the other hand, there is the mass grave: a scene model, whose main feature is the lack of any location and visual presence, as well as the last piece of evidence. If in the first model, the one of the sceneries, the spectator is bombarded with several signs in order to produce the *Unheimlich*, in the mass grave model, a very similar effect is reached by the total absence of them. Images appear here as a result of sign subtraction, while in the other model they are the result of exhibited signs.

From our point of view, there are two main reasons for making a distinction between the crime scenes and the sceneries of violence. On the one hand, the term crime scene is used to name the place where a crime took place. The use of it to de-scribe events such as narco messages would be mistaken, because the crimes, which yielded those bodies, took place in a different location of that of the messages. On the other hand, narco messages are produced to be seen, and they are an attempt of giving a message with aesthetic elements in a similar way as the scenery in a theater does. However, it is not always right for crime scenes.

This research focuses on the period corresponding to the Narco War, from 2006 to 2018. Started by Felipe Calderon (2006-2012) in 2006, this war was continued by Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) without interruption up until now. It has been announced Narco War for using the Mexican army to fight narco cartels abroad the regions they were located. However, this disastrous war has provoked the spread of cartels all over the country, multiplying the crime scene/sceneries.



The modeling of crime sceneries by criminals, to terrorize rivals, is a relevant feature of the models studied here. Mass media has played a crucial role. These events have overflowed forensic service capacity in Mexico, giving, as a result, an institutional PGR crisis (General Attorney General's Office).

Here the main features found in these models.

- It is about specific strategies whose aim is to produce terror. Unlike scenes featured by fortuitous crime, these models present a punctual plan for each detail.
- According to their mass-media nature, these models in which image plays an essential role, the aesthetic dimension must be considered as an ineluctable component.
- Based on their structural force, these models have been repeated with slight differences in many cases, spreading them all over the country.
- About their aesthetic and spectacular profile, mass media has become a reliable means to the projection of these models.
- It must be underlined that these are not crime scenes, in the traditional point of view, as much as crime sceneries. The crime took place in a different location. This scene works only as a locus for a criminal installation or mounting.

CRIME SCENE MODELS IN MEXICO (2006-2018): SCENERY AND MASS GRAVE

One of the most highlighted features of the contemporary culture of violence is the intense production and width circulation by mass media of images showing abused and destroyed bodies. Michela Marzano has analyzed this in her revealing study *Death as a Spectacle* (La Muerte Como Espectáculo). Such sinister exercise, political as well as artistic, was denounced by the artistic movement Viennese Actionism in the 1960s. Violence against a helpless body appeared then as a performance on stage.

If we think about the aesthetic dimension of violent acts in Mexico nowadays whose main feature is to exhibit body destruction, it is possible to outline two specific models. One related to the exhibition of images well designed with evidence; the other one related to the absence of images as well as evidence. The first model has been outlined according to a disturbing event happened on June 22nd, 2006, in Uruapan, Michoacán, a state in Central Mexico. This event could be taken as the foundational act of a violence model thought as scenery, it is to say, violence as a spectacular product of signs joint. As well as the scenery, mass grave appears to a model, based on an event happened on September 26th, 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero, a state in Central Mexico.

Models of Analysis

Crime Sceneries in Mexico (2006-2018)		
Category	Case Uruapan	Case Ayotzinapa
Scene	Dance floor	Mass grave
Aesthetic dimension	Full of images and sound	Whole absence of images and sounds

Scenery. Theater as the Basis of Horror

At midnight, in an ominous atmosphere more suitable to a nightmare than to everyday facts, a team of hooded men got into the club "Sun and Shadow" (Sol y Sombra) and gunned their assault rifles to the ceiling. Afterward, they threw five black plastic bags to the dance floor. All of a sudden, five severed heads went out the bags, demonstrating danceability similar to feet, unknown to everybody up to that very moment. Right away, before the surprised look of people -who could be called spectators- a piece of cardboard with a message was set close to the heads. As could be understood, according to all these elements, it is frightening and, above all, a spectacular act of violence.

It is a significant event if one looks for violence models in Mexico today. Dance floor, music, illumination, characters, choreography, and plasticity: such elements of a theatre mounting are found in a criminal demonstration of horror, it is to say, of power. It is about the artistic display of signs that volitionally reaches an excessive horror. It is a kind of theatre where hyper-violence is performed.

Mass Grave. Absence of Signs as a Basis of Terror

On the other hand, there is a model related to the total absence of signs and, it could be said, images as well: the mass grave. The model is based on a disturbing event that happened on September 22nd, 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero. This event could be thought of as the foundational act of a violence model whose main feature is the total absence of evidence and images. Nothing left and nothing to see, the opposite to the scenery model. Nothing left to see, all the images are to be imagined. It is to say, violence as an unspectacular product. No place, no signs, no evidence, no images. Total darkness.

On the afternoon of September 26th, students from the Rural Normal School "Isidro Burgos," from Ayotzinapa, arrived at the city of Iguala. They came to ask for money on the streets, looking to get enough money to travel to Mexico City to participate in a march celebrated each year, on October 2nd, to evoke a student massacre, which occurred in Tlatelolco in 1968. That day, the Iguala major's wife was in a political rally in downtown. As a response to the unexpected appearance of students, the policemen thought they intended to interrupt the rally. The municipal policemen lashed out against the students in a powerful way. That was a night full of persecuting, abusing, slaying and kidnapping. That night of constant persecution, as in a nightmare, the facts lost all clarity. It was an insane night of murder and disappearance. Some students were killed, and 43 disappeared. Nothing has been known from then until now.

Myth	Medusa, Minotaur	Persephone
Ritual dimension		
Narco message. Scene political quality	Simultaneous Close to the dismembered bodies	Later In different places of the same city
Victim Executed identity	Rivals Guilty people	Students Innocent people

Tuckman (2012) suspects the existence of a method in Mexican narco-violence. In our research, we have gone further, outlining two models, based on many violent cases analyzed.

The first category is the scenery one, which has to do with the suitable conditions that enable a witness to perceive a violent act. According to this, a location is needed to exhibit it. Under this principle, violence appears as a spectacle. It is not just a crime scene, but a stage or scenery, a planned location where performance or installation are displayed to a sudden public. From a symbolic point of view, the dance floor is the essential place in a discotheque. It is about a stage device to show the spectacular dimension; whereon bodies experience ritual eroticism. The lighting system emphasizes this spectacular stage of nature. Because of that, it does not seem strange that severed heads had been thrown over there. They took advantage of this theatrical space. The violent act becomes something else, a spectacular act featured with aesthetic components. Very similar to Hans Holbein's *Dance of death*, work in which the artist depicted a medieval ritual associated with death by plague.

With the objective in mind of explaining the Uruapan case, Antonio Sustaita (2014) had begun to develop the model explained here in the book *The Dance of Heads* (El Baile de las Cabezas). When Sustaita received an e-mail from Brigitte Adriaensen (from Nijmegen University, whose research line is the analysis of severed heads in Mexico narco-novel) on October 6th, 2014, asking for the analysis of Ayotzinapa event, he tried to implement the diagram. All the categories matched perfectly except for the first one. In the Ayotzinapacase study, there was not a scene: any piece related to the missed bodies, any image, any evidence. What we have here is not a scene but the opposite, it is to say, a no-scene. It is a mass grave, but not a located mass grave. We have only the assumption of that. Hence the only images produced by this model are not real images, only imagery, the ones produced by a person imagination.

Myth is the second category. With the term myth-analysis Gilbert Durand (2013) has explored the ways for interpreting artistic and cultural phenomena in terms of classical myths. We can go further to state that it works as well for the interpretation of social and political phenomena. Since the nightclub name, we get into the ritual dimension. "Sun and Shadow" it symbolizes the bullring, a place where a man and a beast fight against each other. The sun area and the shadow area form the spectator sitting total space. In the arena, extreme violence is expected to take place. Life is like flipping

a coin. In the end, it might fall to the ground showing only one face: the bull-fighter or the bull. Violence and spectacle in an intrinsic relationship reach an aesthetic level. Man and beast are forced to perform a bloody dance. All these things appear as signs of beauty: the red cape, the shiny bullfighter suit of light, the sun dancer's gestures and body motion. The Minotaur myth shows us that the divine being and the monster merge into one figure, Theseus. Only blood could pay off the knowledge debt to solve a painful otherness. The critical event performed in "Sun and Shadow" might be interpreted according to this myth. The second myth present here is that of Medusa. Hal Foster (2008) explained the presence of Benvenuto Canova's Perseus with the head of Medusa just at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (MET) entrance. The showing by Perseus of the severed head fulfills an apotropaic function, rejecting evil.

Similarly, the showing of severed heads in "Sun and Shadow" by the cartel La Familia would look like rejecting a kind of evil. That one related to justice crisis in Mexico. This apotropaic device draws new cartography in Mexico's political power, in which narco cartels participate in a very active way.

The central myth in the mass grave model is the one related to Persephone, Demeter's daughter abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld. The agriculture goddess searched for Persephone ceaselessly up to the time when she descended into the underworld to finally find her daughter. In a very similar way, the parents from Ayotzinapa victims have searched for them for more several years without any result. The mass grave-seeker is a new character in Mexico. It is generally a group of women who search for their missing relatives, specially sons and daughters. They have become full-time grave-seekers as Demeter.

The third category has to do with a message. This statement explains, in a certain way, the event. This narco-message would attempt to restore the broken balance of a perverse punishment economy. It is about the reconstruction process of judge-executioner and guilty-victim figures. It is about speech construction, and it is to say, a knowledge epistemology. Hence, it is about true. This cardboard placard was placed close to the severed heads. From a semiotic point of view, turning the message more complex and sophisticated. Now, there is a joint of symbolic and indexical signs: those related to a language and those related to a body. So, it would be harder to read the message without putting apart the body fragments and vice versa. In the Uruapan case, corresponding to the scenery model, the cardboard placard appears simultaneously to the severed heads. "The

family does not kill for money. It does not kill women. It does not kill innocent people, only those who deserve to die. Know that this is divine justice." In regard to this message, the speech joint depends on body dislocation.

In the Ayotzinapa case, the message did not appear simultaneously to the victims. The reason is straightforward: the victims have not appeared until now. The message was written on a blanket, and it appeared for the first time in several points of Iguala on October 10th. On these blankets, that repeated the same message, the criminal group Guerreros Unidos restate their demand to free the municipal police arrested by the Ayotzinapa case and warned that they would kill innocents if their request is not heard.

The last category, as expected, is interconnected with the previous ones. As it has been explained in the latter category analysis, in the Uruapan case, the victim's identity and his culpability are appointed on the cardboard placard. In the same way, the judge-executer identity appears clearly. There is no doubt about why this event happened. Nevertheless, in the Ayotzinapa case, the victim's identity and the reason for his liability are unknown. Why did those students be the object of violence? In these messages, the criminal group Guerreros Unidos reemphasize their demand to free the municipal police arrested by the Ayotzinapa case and warned that they would kill innocents if their request is not heard. It is about displacement from culpability to innocence.

THE POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS OF THE MASS GRAVES

Mass graves mirror a way of political thinking that for many years has expropriated the experience out of the subject, leading it to develop social behaviors based on destruction and death (Pereña, Francisco, 2002). In these borderless territories filled with violence, barbarism has acquired a new limit (Pereña, Francisco, 2002, p.60). In these particular places pain, hate, human nature, and an ever-increasing animality come together. There is not even a sense of survival over the others; there is just an appetite for destruction as a condition to belong somewhere.

In recent years the country, Mexico, has witnessed many encounters with this kind of spaces of death. Hidden places are being used to cast aside all that is useless. All that represented danger in any way or was a hindrance to executing the political or economic project in turn. Those black holes contain almost unrecognizable pieces of human bygones, pieces of a dry, broken life full of violence. The dilemma is then about memory and ethics. These corpses cannot remain silent, as people are losing their lives every day while trying to get them back even if they are incomplete. A recognizable piece, as little as it may be, is enough – a finger, a tattoo, a hand bracelet, or a birthmark. Families ask if they can identify something to stop searching any further and begin the grief.

What kind of question is it allowed to ask regarding this daily phenomenon in Mexico? Corpses are counted as grains of

sand and treated as things, like when one talks about trash. "Every time you open a bag, and you see a human being, that is something that is not to be forgotten" –commented a mother in search of his son more than three years ago. They are "human beings," notion that in recent years has lost its meaning for the general man. People have started to replace those human beings for adjectives such as "criminals," "gang members," "prostitutes," and "kidnappers." The shift from empathy into indifference is now a part of the culture in the country.

Mexican citizens have developed coldness towards slaughters and death. It is difficult to acknowledge how society remains distant to these findings taking place every day. There are several reasons to be named. Violence is around the corner in many territories of the country in the last twenty years. People have got used to kill each other, to destroy each other. Life is worth nothing. It does not even have a price. Speeches held by politicians are not enough in places where cartels have perpetrated so many killings. We all are becoming part of an endless feast of violence.

Lately, encounters with death are the outcome of stories not related to cartels. Stories as real and ordinary as terrifying. Husbands that kill their wives, jealousy, infidelities, stealing – ranging from smartphones to trucks – police on their duty or working for criminals, women walking on the street heading home, cartel fights. These are embodiments of the many ways in which human beings can be destructive. In these negative spaces, people have lost any will to maintain and bear life. In these Mexico, people here suffer an extreme loss of a sense that leads them to cannibalism, (Peña, Francisco, 2002, p.59) to the death of the other and its destruction. Usually, the responsibility of building a link in society is disabled by apathy and self-care and by running into a generalized solitude. Death of others takes place this way. In the burial pits, animality and violence are allowed to display their power and consume whatever comes close.

At the same time, they reveal another way of life: that of survival. They reveal the scenery of disaster and open a possibility to say what is lacking urgently now when everything is turning into debris (Blanchot, Maurice, 2015, p.7). When someone goes, missing life stops. Time stops. In such moments of life cannot be lived, just survived. Parents, wives, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, they all search amid a never-ending solitude for a clue that leads them to their loved one. The victims' mothers are making most of the concerning seeking of missing people. (Zavaleta, 2018) These lonely women dig in random places without legal help. They hope not to find their children in those places. They are nevertheless prepared for the worse – to find the corpse of their child. Some work with only one thought in mind: "to find a piece of my son to bury it, take some flowers and chat with it. To know where it is". Vengeance is out of the question. It is only about finding the rests of their children what gives sense to that search.

Corpses foster democracy. Surprisingly, such a statement gives an insight into the present condition of Mexican politics. Mostly those near death get involved in public affairs. 'They tried to bury us; they did not know that we were seeds' – the phrase, used since the forced disappearance of 43 students in Iguala later to be found buried, summarizes the present attitudes. Decomposition is the mother of democracy; graves are its cradles.

Since 2014 – marked by the events in Iguala – kidnapping and clandestine burial pits became the center of Mexican politics. The vanishing of the 43 students marked the beginning of a new period: political concerns aim to clarify what happened - not only to them but to all the other corpses found in the other burial pits around the country. As times goes by and the number of pits increases, the concern among the people does as well.

In the Special Report of missing People and clandestine burial Pits in Mexico, the National Commission of Human Rights reported that from January 2007 to September 2016, a total of 1,143 burial pits were found, containing 3,230 corpses and human remains. New reports show that from January 2017 to the end of August 2018, the National Commission of Human Rights found 163 new pits containing 530 corpses. Together with the pit found in Veracruz, containing 166 corpses, they make a total of 1,307 pits and 3,902 corpses since 2007, as it was published in the magazine Proceso on September 7th, 2018.

Among the changes brought by this crisis, there is the implementation of the General Law concerning Enforced Disappearance, which allows relatives of victims to take part in the investigations led by the police. Thus, the character of politics is evolving towards a more open, public participation. According to the new law, "it will be allowed that relatives of missing persons have access to the evidence and materials related to the case" (Gallegos, 2017) All this takes place in an environment of protests led not only by relatives but by the general population. The voices of thousands of people rise for answers. Many of these people do not understand the basics of how the government works, but they decide to take part in public life. The country faces a sort of enlightenment regarding politics.

Mexicans are not facing the transition from a total lack of political activity to the existence of it: it is rather the transition from political representation to the individual participation in public life. The citizen demands the power given to the government. One republic lays the power over a sovereign; a democracy on the individuals – thus citizens strive for democracy instead of the republic they live in.

Death seems to bear a relation to change, which sometimes happens to be expressed politically. The assassination of Lucretia started a process that led ancient Rome to the instauration of the republic. Lewis Mumford points out the role of the cult of death in the foundation of cities. In

L'étranger, the book by Camus, Meursault is condemned by society because he does not express any sorrow for the death of his mother, or in other words, he does not feel the need of making any changes in his way of life.

Much research has been done on the political nature of man regarding the role of the agora, the theater, the gymnasium, the factories, the senate, the parliament buildings, the banks, the palaces, the churches; but little has been done regarding the spaces of death, although they seem to have an essential role in the social transformations of societies.

CONCLUSIONS

For the purpose to get an analysis of the violence in a country like Mexico, that experiences a profound crisis of corruption and institutional dysfunction, it is necessary the analysis of several case studies in order to look for the outline of violence models. The two models explained in this paper share almost the same number of categories. The first one, scene, appears problematic when thinking Ayotzinapa case study, to the point that its absence causes a new model. On another level, the last diagram category, victim, points to a significant conclusion: in both models, we have gone not only to the absence of evidence and images, from one model to the other, but to a new quality of victim, innocent people. A real danger when thinking about society and citizenship.

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