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Violence and Apocalypse in Ricardo Chávez Castañeda's *El día del hurón*

Kristina Puotkalyte-Gurgel

Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, the author of *El día del hurón* (1997), belongs to a generation of Mexican writers born in the 1960s and is a member of the Crack, a group of writers who appeared on the Mexican literary scene in the mid nineties.¹ Chávez Castañeda is a prolific writer with over a dozen books published in adult fiction alone, and his work has been featured in a number of contemporary anthologies. He has won numerous national and international literary competitions, and has been a finalist in others. Chávez Castañeda's literary repertoire is wide ranging and includes children's literature, adult fiction (novels and short stories) and essays.

El día del hurón addresses a troubling issue for 1990s Mexico, in particular, and the world, in general: the spread of violence. In his novel, Chávez Castañeda situates the problem of violence within an apocalyptic framework. Violence is shown to lead to the self-destruction of a community and, by extension, as I argue here, the world. Chávez Castañeda's intent in linking violence to apocalypse is to find a way to control the former.² Here I analyze the novel's proposition of a unique and rather unorthodox way to control violence: to inflict even more violence. I draw upon the work of René Girard and Mikhail Bakhtin to highlight Chávez Castañeda's inventive use of notions of sacrifice and carnival in the creation of his fictional apocalypse.

In his own way, Chávez Castañeda has been making a mark as an apocalyptic writer for some time. In fact, Chávez Castañeda's novelistic production can be qualified as apocalyptic, though this adjective is more specific than the broader "situaciones límites" which the author himself singles out as his interest. In his novels, Chávez Castañeda tends to explore spaces of boundaries and limits. The titles of some of his novels are telling of this tendency: *Y sobrevivir con las manos abiertas: una historia de todos los fines del mundo* (2001), *El final de las nubes* (2001), *El fin de la*

pornografía (2005) and *La última epidemia de la risa* (2011). In an interview, Chávez Castañeda explains his interest in these limit-type situations: “Siempre pensé que las situaciones límite hacen brotar algo en nosotros que puede ser terrible o maravilloso. Las situaciones límite sacan en verdad lo que eres . . . Yo creo que el escribir sobre el fin del mundo es otra vez poner al mundo en situaciones límite” (Méndez). In one of his essays he describes his writing in these terms: “Siempre se está acabando el mundo para alguien, podría ser el resumen de lo que hago. Por eso en mi literatura todo trata de las amenazas y de los derrumbamientos” (Chávez Castañeda “La creación de la destrucción”). In a number of his novels, he creates situations in which, either the entire world has ended or is about to end (*Y sobrevivir con las manos abiertas*), or a common element or aspect of life has disappeared (in *El fin de la pornografía* all males have lost their penises). Chávez Castañeda considers limit or end-like scenarios to be especially fitting literary grounds for experimenting or testing ideas, preconceived notions or realities that have been taken for granted. As I argue here, *El día del hurón* is markedly apocalyptic and fits well within Chávez Castañeda’s literary repertoire. In *El día del hurón*, Chávez Castañeda proposes to view violence as endemic to human coexistence, and uses an apocalyptic framework to test this notion.

In the city of Zagarra, where the action takes place, violence runs rampant and is irrational, nonsensical and meaningless. The day of the ferret is the Zagarrians’ way of dealing with the chaos in the city. My analysis of the novel centers on the significance of the day of the ferret, since the day marks the main apocalyptic element of the novel and is an enigmatic event whose meaning needs further explanation. I propose to consider the violence presented in the novel not only as a Mexican problem (paradoxically, Mexico is nowhere to be found in the novel), but also as a global one. I understand violence as an experience conducive to change.³ Girard’s notion of sacrificial violence, which I present here, falls under this general view of violence.

The Novel

Narrated in an omniscient third person, *El día del hurón* depicts life in the imaginary city of Zagarra, whose geo-political location is unidentified. The city is besieged by chaos and violence on an unprecedented scale. In the opening pages of the novel we meet Rosas Palazán. He is a hired assassin who arrives in the airport of Zagarra, the point of entrance into the mayhem of the city. As bomb alerts are announced in the airport, there seems to be nothing extraordinary about them: “En el aeropuerto de Zagarra todos están acostumbrados. Se han vuelto monótonos los gritos y los arrebatos histéricos. . . . Se responde con la misma eficacia del aviso que cancela todos los vuelos en la pantalla de los monitores: sin titubeos ni conciencia” (*El día* 8). While on a train from the airport, Palazán witnesses a stabbing that takes place in front of apathetic bystanders. As Palazán continues his stay in Zagarra, the novel

gradually unravels the different levels of havoc in the city.

Bombs and bomb threats have become routine, and innocent people are assassinated for no apparent reason. Lafaveiga, a neighborhood in the lower part of the city, has been infested with a mysterious plague that causes injuries to bleed unstoppably. Strange mobs of mutilated youngsters wander throughout the city terrorizing, vandalizing and assaulting anybody they encounter. Graphic displays of violence in the media are shown without scrutiny and seem to match the reality of Zagarra. Nothing appears to be sacred or spared from violence. Dead pregnant women with disfigured faces are found throughout the city. Even nature seems to have turned its back on Zagarra. A river in the city is inexplicably white, infested by unknown contaminants. Nobody understands or can explain this citywide mayhem.

The novel tells the story of this community's ways of dealing with the chaos. A special proposition is made to all Zagarrians as a possibility of overcoming the current predicament: to stage one extraordinary occurrence, *el día del hurón* or the day of the ferret. The events that take place in the city before the day of the ferret make up the plot of the novel. As I explain below, the day of the ferret is Chávez Castañeda's version of the apocalypse.

Hermilio Borques, a major character, is an officer of the scientific police in Zagarra who specializes in the history of behavioral control. His work and expertise are initially presented as useless and unimportant, but this changes when a strange figure called Verdugo begins making illegal televised appearances and convokes the city of Zagarra to the day of the ferret. Posters and signs counting down to this mysterious and frightful day spread throughout the city. Borques's obscure investigations spark the interest of the authorities, and suddenly he becomes a member of the police task force set on preventing the day of the ferret from taking place.

Vania, a pregnant biologist neighbor with whom Borques becomes romantically involved, explains the ferret phenomenon to Borques. It has been observed that ferrets instinctively feel the proximity of their own death, and the prospect of death causes them to engage in a violent rage, attacking and killing members of their own species. Inspired by the ferrets' behavior, Verdugo convokes the city of Zagarra to a day of complete mayhem, a day of becoming ferrets. This will unleash any inhibitions and barriers that otherwise prevent the city's inhabitants from attacking or killing each other. Verdugo's goal is to provoke the citizens of Zagarra to do something drastic, to elicit change by engaging in a violent, ferret-like rage. Yet it is only a proposition, a provocation, because the novel ends on the day of the ferret. This day could very well be either Zagarra's end or a new beginning, a chance to start over.

Although Verdugo proposes the day of the ferret as a necessity for Zagarra, it is up to each Zagarrian to participate. Actualizing such a day is not Chávez Castañeda's main concern, as he is more interested in human psychology than in the reality of the day of the ferret. As Chávez Castañeda explains:

A mí me interesa reconocer las situaciones límite y enfrentar a mis personajes con ellas, con el umbral entre lo humano y otra cosa. Cuando cruzas un umbral en algunas ocasiones las personas se transforman y en otras no. Es como querer construir un mapa humano. (“Biografía”)

As is common in his novels, to illustrate his point Chávez Castañeda creates an inversion. In *El día del hurón* Chávez Castañeda uses an inversion essential to carnival, studied by Bakhtin. If what is normal are the prohibitions that keep our so-called animal instincts at bay, then an inverted situation would be one in which prohibitions and repression were to disappear. The day of the ferret is precisely such a situation. The limits between human and animal-like behavior are a threshold that intrigues the author. The novel thus unravels separate individuals’ ways of dealing with the prospect of a self-imposed, communal apocalypse. The life stories of Palazán, Vania and Borques illustrate how each one of them faces the possibility of the end. These stories reveal the choices made by the characters on or before the day of the ferret.

Although it was released by the respected Mexican publisher Nueva Imagen and received recognition as one of the finalists in the international Dashiell Hammett *novela negra* competition in 1998, *El día del hurón* has gone unperceived by literary criticism. Perhaps this neglect is due to its lack of overt or direct engagement with contemporary political issues. Or perhaps a boom in *novela negra* in recent decades has led some of them to fall off the critical radar. I believe that it is the obscurity of the fictional day of the ferret that detracts from its appeal as a novel. A related aspect of the novel that contributes to its difficulty is Chávez Castañeda’s narrative style. The writer demands the reader’s full attention and participation when, for example, he expects the reader to fill in the details of cause and effect relationships in his narrative expositions. In his narration, Chávez Castañeda tends to minimize details or explanations when describing situations, and he often assumes that the reader understands or shares his assumptions, intuitive explanations and interpretations of events and situations.

On Violence

The absence of historical, political and cultural context in *El día del hurón* is not exceptional within Chávez Castañeda’s work. However that may be, and however much Chávez Castañeda may resist writing about concrete historical or political situations, the contemporary world has a bearing on the writer, for he does not live and write in a complete social vacuum. Mexico is nowhere to be found in *El día del hurón*, nor does the novel directly address any concrete issues of globalization. Yet the modern social and cultural context has left a mark on the narrative. The novel’s premise and concern with issues of violence address the modern culture of

violence seen in 1990s Mexico and around the globe.

The period of transition to the neoliberal economy in the late eighties and throughout the nineties was especially difficult for Mexico. Increased levels of violence were particularly emblematic of this period. A number of political and economic problems during this time had a direct effect on the spread of violence and contributed to the deterioration of public security.⁴ Criminal violence coupled with social violence created horrific results. Concepts such as the “city of fear” and the “ecology of fear,” used to refer to Mexico City and the ethos of its citizens, are telling of the seriousness of the situation (Close 48). A climate of extreme insecurity and distrust in law enforcement predominated. Studies from the 1990s show, for example, that “less than one in five crimes are reported, arrests are made in less than six percent of cases, and nine out of ten [Mexico] city residents express little or no confidence in their local police forces” (quoted by Close 48). Crime and violence in Mexico were pressing issues, and Chávez Castañeda could not have been immune to them while writing *El día del hurón*.

The novel is attuned to violence that permeates deep levels of society, both in Mexico and globally. Chávez Castañeda focuses on daily experiences of violence that have become a cultural norm. Numerous instances of bodily injury found throughout the novel posit bodily harm as the primary form of violence. In the opening scene, Palazán witnesses the stabbing of a young woman on a train, an event that is televised throughout the city. What is disturbing about the diseased pregnant women found throughout Zagarra is the gruesomeness of their lifeless bodies. Their faces or heads are disfigured beyond recognition. Gangs of homeless youngsters traverse the city physically assaulting anyone who comes their way. Finally, Verdugo’s televised shows display Zagarrians who are subjected, often voluntarily, to physical pain, injury, homicide or suicide.

This violence is a global issue. Since the city of Zagarra is of unspecified geographic location, it can represent any violent city in the world. Although violence is widespread in Mexico City, Zagarra might just as well allude to Ciudad Juarez, Cali, Cape Town, Detroit or Bogotá.⁵ Zagarra could also be read as a metaphor of the “one world” advocated by supporters of globalization. Readers do not know if the events in Zagarra have any further reaching causes or effects, and, in this sense, the novel advances the notion of the “world” as a place circumscribed by city limits. It is typical of Chávez Castañeda to depict the life of a community as a microcosm of all humanity.

Violence in the novel has cultural significance. “We forget too easily,” writes Jean Baudrillard, “that the whole of our reality is filtered through the media” (90).⁶ One of the most obvious points of entry into the modern culture of violence is the prominence of violence in the media, known as “media violence.” Although it is hard to pinpoint what exactly media violence is, we would be hard pressed to deny the proliferation of violence in the media (Trend 3). The increase in volume and intensity of

violent images is partly due to the development of technology and market prerogatives. As David Trend notes, “[r]ecent advances in digital-effects technologies, the exploding popularity of computer games, and growing consolidation of profit-driven media conglomerates are pushing violence with unprecedented velocity . . . Besides appealing to the broadest domestic audience demographics, the visual quality of violent fare makes it easily marketable in non-English speaking ‘after-markets’ around the globe” (8).

The prominence of violence in the media does not follow, however, solely from advances in technology and the demands of the market. Something has to be said about its audiences as well. The public appetite for violent imagery across a broad spectrum of formats has established violence as a production staple. As Redding puts it, “[v]iolence has become one of the privileged tropes by which Westerners have understood and represented the contemporary world” (6). Violence has always been part of civilization, and there is no such thing as a world without violence. At the same time, however, the current media violence is a complex phenomenon. A common reaction to the increased intensity of violence in the media has been moral outrage against the negative effects of violent images. The actual extent of these effects is a matter of intense critical debate better left to the experts.⁷ The outcry against the media’s ill-effects, however, signals an increase in scale and intensity of violent images in the media.⁸ Media violence plays a fundamental role in creating the narrative setting in the city of Zagarra: violence proliferates in both city streets and on television screens.

Violence in Zagarra can also be said to have reached a level of hyperreality, the postmodern paradigm described by Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard’s theory, the social has ended in a world dominated by images and signs produced by the electronic media. Realities of modern social life have been superseded by electronically generated images and signs, making social reality redundant because “simulation” dominates the cultural life and replaces social life. Consequently, images and signs produced by the electronic media relate only to other images and signs, and their relationship to the “real” objects dissolves (Heaphy 62). Although it is debatable whether the social reality in Zagarra has reached the extreme of complete dissolution, the general desensitization to violence in Zagarra is symptomatic of the saturation of violent images central to Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality.

Locating Apocalypse in *El día del hurón*

The novel begins as an example of hard-boiled crime fiction and follows the conventions of the genre. Yet the narrative also adopts tenets of apocalyptic discourse, in what turns out to be a unique crime-apocalyptic hybrid. These two discourses, hard-boiled and apocalyptic, compete to make meaning of the irrationality of violence and criminality in Zagarra, and to offer possible solutions to the problem of violence.

The broad outlines of the crime novel identified by Julian Symons apply to *El día del hurón* (162). Plots in which crimes are not resolved and justice is not restored are typical of the genre. The disfigured pregnant women found throughout the city, for example, fall victim to acts of atrocity, and the police are set on locating the culprits. None of the clues surrounding these deaths, however, seem to have anything in common, and the police cannot find the criminals. Borques's friend, a forensic doctor, presents a plausible theory: the pregnant women are victims of their own crime. He argues that these are suicides of insanity resulting from an alteration of the brain caused by a strange substance found in a saline solution. But the doctor shares his theory only with Borques, while deaths of pregnant women continue to multiply. Palazán, a hired assassin who, upon arrival to Zagarra, loses the envelope that contains the name of his victim, is pursued by the police because they think he is an instigator of the day of the ferret, as well as a murderer. However the day of the ferret hardly qualifies as a crime (since it has not actually taken place), and other evidence against Palazán is unsubstantial.

While the absence of a detective and the vagueness of clues are typical for a crime novel, it is the psychology of the characters and the setting that take center stage in the genre. This is especially true of the setting in Zagarra, which is an integral part of crime in *El día del hurón*. Chávez Castañeda capitalizes on the genre's interest in characters' psychology, though he is not necessarily interested in providing explanations for their inclination to criminal behavior. Palazán is perhaps the most criminal character, yet he is a failed criminal, since he does not commit an assigned murder, other than his own suicide, to which I will return below. As the novel progresses, through a consistent third-person omniscient narration, we are led to understand his state of mind not as that of a criminal, but as that of a father suffering from a mid-life crisis who falls into despair while in Zagarra. Crime novels also often present a radical social attitude that questions some aspect of the way society is run. Such an attitude is most clearly seen in the character of Verdugo, who instigates the citizens of Zagarra to reshape their own community by doing something out of the ordinary on the day of the ferret.

As a crime novel, Chávez Castañeda's narrative also fits well within the tradition of a specifically Mexican variant of the *novela negra*. Glen S. Close traces the trajectory of this tradition and outlines its clearly detectible stages of development. The 1970s and 1980s, heralded by Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Rafael Ramírez Heredia, were the era of the Mexican *neopoliciaco* (46).⁹ During the 1990s, with the growing epidemic of violent crime and disenchantment with public institutions and with the police force in particular (49), the *neopoliciaco* mutated into what Close calls the post-*neopoliciaco* (52). This new variant abandoned Mexico City as the primary scene of action, and instead displayed notable diversification and decentralization, as other cities such as Puebla, Monterrey, Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez came into view. Chávez Castañeda's novel fits within this trend, as Zagarra is not a megalopolis, and is, furthermore, unidentified in

terms of national origin. Another common feature of the post-*neopoliciaco* seen in the novel is a view of violence as “depoliticized, intimately subjectivized, and . . . removed from reductive schemes of moral containment” (52). Such is the case of all crimes in Zagarra, whose origin and nature are not political, but subjective. Chávez Castañeda is especially keen on emphasizing the loss of instrumentality of violence in Zagarra, and a general sense of dehumanization in the city.

Another interesting feature of the novel is the mix of two opposite reactions to the chaos in the city. A criminal (Palazán) is subdued by the chaos, while the police try to control it. A criminal’s vantage point in crime novels tends to question clear or rational demarcations between guilt and innocence. Subsequently, readers are more prone to sympathize with the criminal (Hilfer 2). Palazán’s situation is a case in point, as he reveals himself as a victim of his circumstances. The swirl of chaos and violence in Zagarra is detrimental to a lonely and suffering individual such as Palazán, and as readers, we are likely to sympathize with his despair. Borques’s way of handling the situation, on the other hand, coincides with that of the police and reflects his interest in the detailed investigation of crimes. Borques and the police are determined to locate the culprits, restore justice and, most importantly, prevent the day of the ferret from taking place. Their goal is to stabilize the wavering sense of reason and rationality in Zagarra. By introducing this point of view, the narrative diversifies and further convolutes any possibility of clarity in understanding and making sense of violence and crime in Zagarra.

In summary, as crime fiction containing the approach to the situation of both the criminal and the police, simultaneously seeking and refusing to provide a rational explanation of crime, the novel makes the spread of violence in Zagarra ambiguous. As readers, we are left uncertain as to who is wrong and who is right, what is rational and what is not, and which is better, order or disorder. Since it is directly related to the crime genre, this ambiguity questions the forensic perspective as that which can provide a full understanding of crime and violence, and, by extension, confirms the general distrust in the rule of law in Mexico (Close 29). Notions fundamental to forensic discourse such as guilt, innocence, justice, truth, crime or punishment are shown to be inadequate for understanding the full scope and scale of the violence besieging Zagarra.

In fact, Borques, while researching the history of crime and punishment, arrives at a similar conclusion:

El infierno es el más antiguo sistema de apaciguamiento, y hasta hoy, sin duda, el más efectivo . . . Funciona [el castigo] como presa para los comportamientos transgresores: el origen de la simbología atemorizante, de donde a su vez ha emergido los rostros del terror a lo largo de la historia. (*El día* 17)

Historical and religious evidence points to the power of retribution, drawing a line between right and wrong behavior. The current problem,

observes Borques, is that this epoch has not produced an appropriate fear, a fear that could dissuade anyone from engaging in certain types of behavior: “No existe un miedo idóneo para esta época. De alguna manera y por razones desconocidas se ha dado una demora, y los símbolos anteriores han perdido su poder represor” (17). As Borques sees it, the solution would be to create a new fear. But only an ideal punishment, described thus, can create this: “El castigo ideal sería la suma de todos los suplicios. Llevar al criminal de tortura en tortura. La venganza infinita. Un castigo intolerable por saberse de antemano que no llegará ninguna tregua. El megacastigo” (87). The magnitude of such a mega-punishment would surpass that of any other known type. Completely unaware of Borques’s research, Verdugo comes up with a crime that would fit this kind of punishment: the day of the ferret, a day on which to unleash violence against and among all, committing a perfect mega-crime.¹⁰

Notions of mega-crime and mega-punishment, as described in the novel, go beyond the parameters of a judicial system. The “mega” of both crime and punishment indicates proportions on an unprecedented scale, and suggests that they cannot be repeated or replicated. As such, mega-crime and mega-punishment are suggestive of apocalypse. It is at this juncture that examination of the novel’s apocalyptic discourse can begin.

In his novel Chávez Castañeda imagines a secular and fictional apocalypse in which elements of the classical Apocalypse are transformed. The apocalyptic mindset copes with the problems of the present age by understanding them as temporary, and looks toward a future that promises vindication from evil. Also important to an apocalyptic point of view is the intervention of a deity in world affairs. Bernard McGinn provides a succinct summary of the apocalyptic myth:

Apocalyptic texts from various religious backgrounds and different ages display family resemblances in key areas that include: first, a sense of the unity and structure of history conceived as a divinely predetermined totality; second, pessimism about the present and conviction of its imminent crisis; and third, belief in the proximate judgment of evil and triumph of the good, the element of vindication. This vindication can take many forms—historically or other-worldly, individual or collective, temporary or definite, or a combination of some of these elements. (*Visions* 10)

In another place McGinn reiterates and synthesizes two essential characteristics of apocalyptic discourse: the deterministic view of history and the divinely predetermined pattern of crisis-judgment-vindication (“Early Apocalypticism” 10).

In *El día del hurón*, the role of a deity and a divinely predetermined view of history are not detectible. Throughout the Bible the Apocalypse is referred to as “the day of the Lord.” Not only is the apocalyptic day in Zagarra named after an unlikely creature as a deity, but the utter and complete destruction of Zagarra is self-imposed. Lack of historical context

for the crisis in Zagarra and the general senselessness of violence in the city also invalidate a view of history as a predetermined totality.

The novel does, however, follow the apocalyptic pattern of crisis-judgment-vindication, though the author creates his own versions of these elements. Problems in Zagarra have reached a critical level. The atmosphere of havoc in the city resembles the familiar apocalyptic turmoil of the end of time. In the manner of the biblical linear progression, Chávez Castañeda introduces temporal movement into this atmosphere. He emphasizes the accumulative aspect of the events in Zagarra, as new dangers continue to come into view during the countdown to the day of the ferret. Particularly unique to this novel, however, is the fact that the narrative does not realize apocalyptic destruction; it only projects it. The novel ends on the dawn of the day of the ferret or the dawn of apocalypse. The prospect of the end of the world is shown to be as powerful as the event itself.

The novel subverts the power of divine judgment and vindication by suggesting that what will happen on the day of the ferret is a matter of individual choice. Each individual is free to choose either to engage in ferret-like behavior that leads to destruction, or to choose life instead. The end and the rebirth are not a punishment and a reward but a choice. In this sense, the narrative fosters a disconnection from other-worldliness. Traditionally, the apocalypse has provided answers from the other world about man's predicament on Earth. Even the modern apocalyptic mentality, which underlies much of today's ecological discourse, imagines human existence in terms of man's relationship with the environment. But in Chávez Castañeda's novel, man is not a victim, but a master of his own circumstances. The apocalypse is here understood as not a cosmological, but a man-made event. Consequently, characters in the novel must choose whether to contribute to this self-made apocalypse. When faced with the day of the ferret, some characters give into despair, others choose to leave, and others change their lives. It is the making of these "apocalyptic choices" that the narrative traces.

Palazán wanders the streets of Zagarra aimlessly and sinks into the city's atmosphere of hopelessness. During the days preceding the day of the ferret, he undergoes a mid-life crisis. He begins longing for his loved ones, his wife and his daughter, and he makes desperate phone calls in hope of reconciliation. His wife, however, stops answering his phone calls and moves away. Palazán is no longer an accomplished assassin. As he sinks deeper into despair, he eventually commits suicide before the day of the ferret.

Vania makes a significantly different decision when faced with the prospect of apocalypse. Eight months pregnant, she is a potential victim of the fatal beatings often suffered by expectant women in Zagarra. While numerous terrified women line up in front of abortion clinics preferring the death of their fetuses to their own, Vania does not give into the panic. Vania's determination to have her baby is further contextualized by two important factors: her family's medical history and her physical condition.

Since Vania's mother died giving birth to her, chances are that this will happen to Vania as well. The odds against her and her baby's survival double when she contracts preeclampsia, a life-threatening gestational disease. But before the apocalyptic day of the ferret, she chooses to leave the city. A potential victim of her physical ailment and of crime against pregnant women, she chooses to escape the havoc, taking her meager chances of survival elsewhere.¹¹ Zagarra will not bear yet another death, nor will it witness a miracle of survival. Vania's "apocalyptic choice" is to flee the apocalypse.

Borques also faces tough choices on the day of the ferret. On the eve of the fatal day, when Vania leaves Zagarra, Borques, lonely and in despair, is about to commit suicide. He changes his mind unexpectedly, overwhelmed by pity for a homeless girl who stubbornly follows him around. Unable to proceed with his suicidal act in front of this child, he decides instead to return to his ex-wife, taking the girl with him. This is Borques's gesture of reconciliation, his chance for a new beginning. Earlier in the novel, we discover that the couple's inability to conceive children was the primary reason for their separation. In this sense, Borques's choice can be read as a possibility of apocalyptic rebirth. At the climactic moment, Borques recalls the ruins of a city buried by lava that he saw some time ago, and comes to an important realization about apocalyptic choices, including his own:

El desplazamiento de esa marea pedregosa, que solidificó a toda una ciudad en su apocalipsis íntimo, preservó un muestrario de comportamientos finalistas que son todas las opciones. Si no se hace lo uno se hace lo otro y no hay más: anticiparse al fin y matarse por cuenta propia o abandonar la ciudad o esperar resignadamente el desenlace o, por fin lo advierte, emprender una búsqueda. (208)

Borques's thoughts sum up the possible choices that are made on or prior to apocalypse in Zagarra. Palazán kills himself in anticipation of the end, Vania abandons the city and Borques begins to search for a new beginning.

When faced with the prospect of self-imposed apocalypse, the novel suggests that individuals will make life-changing choices that will determine their destiny. The novel is also a narrative study of the psychological capability to withstand the prospect of a person's world, already collapsing, finally coming to its destitute end. Although Verdugo provokes the citizens of Zagarra to create an apocalypse, it is up to every one of them to engage in ferret-like behavior, to turn against their fellow men and to become savage. The novel advocates the view that social conflicts reflect individual problems. Chávez Castañeda's emphasis on the possibility of individual transformation is telling of his view of societal dynamics. The novel establishes a direct relationship between the fate of individuals and the fate of communities, whereby social groups can change, if and when their members change. Yet individuals also need

catalytic, communal events such as the apocalyptic day of the ferret to be able to change.

El día del hurón's narrative engagement with crime fiction sets out to find answers and solutions to the havoc in Zagarra. The apocalypse is also a discourse meant to provide answers to present world predicaments. In his use of apocalyptic discourse, Chávez Castañeda singles out the communal aspect of apocalypse: in the apocalypse we are bound together by a common destiny. It is precisely because it is a communal event that the apocalyptic day of the ferret inspires more confidence and hope than the rule of law in controlling and condemning violence.

Ritual and Violence

The entire notion, however, of inflicting more violence as a way of controlling violence remains an enigma. In this section, I discuss Girard's theory of violence, and especially his study of sacrificial ritual, as a way of shedding more light on the meaning of the day of the ferret. Girard views violence as a force in constant need of an outlet. Otherwise, chaos will ensue, jeopardizing the stability and equilibrium of a society:

Violence is frequently called irrational. It has its reasons, however, and can marshal some rather convincing ones when the need to arises. Yet these reasons cannot be taken seriously, no matter how valid they may appear. Violence itself will discard them if the initial object remains persistently out of reach and continues to provoke hostility. When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen because it is vulnerable and close at hand. (*Violence and the Sacred* 2)

For Girard, self-protection and well-being are the ultimate goals of a society. Violence, as if having a mind of its own, poses a continuous threat, not only from outside the social group, but also as a danger that can spread among its own members and lead to self-destruction. Violence, therefore, needs to be kept at bay; it requires continuous supervision and demands "something it can sink its teeth into" (4). In Chávez Castañeda's novel, Borques is interested in precisely the kinds of systems that historically have been put in place to control violence.

A difference between modern social formations and what Girard refers to as "primitive" societies is the absence of judicial systems in the latter. Primitive societies have other systems in place for maintaining order and securing self-preservation. Girard points out that religious rites and rituals fulfill this function. "Religion," writes Girard, "in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventive means against his own violence" (*Violence and the Sacred* 23).

The most important religious ritual is sacrifice, or offering a surrogate victim to the gods. But sacrifice also performs another, equally important function. A sacrifice evades violence among many individuals by inflicting violence on a single victim. It functions as a “purifying” act meant to absorb all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community. “The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community,” argues Girard, “from its own violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice” (*Violence and the Sacred* 8). As a ritual of purification through the unanimous immolation of a victim, sacrifice has a “scapegoat effect” (“Mimesis and Violence” 11).¹²

The sacrificial ritual thus plays an important role in the channeling of violence. Situations arise, Girard further observes, in which societies experience what he calls “sacrificial crisis” (*Violence and the Sacred* 49). Generally speaking, the crisis arises due to neglect or decay of sacrificial rituals. Although in modern societies the observance of religious ritual has lost its meaning, the need for a sacrificial victim has not disappeared. According to Girard, it has degenerated into forms that do not produce the same type of mythical reconciliation and purification achieved in primitive rituals. Moreover, the lack of efficiency of sacrificial rites means that there are more rather than fewer victims, and “[i]n our world, sacrificial means have degenerated more and more as victimage, oppression, and persecution become predominant issues” (“Mimesis and Violence” 17).

Chávez Castañeda’s day of the ferret, a chance for communal purification from the onslaught of violence and chaos, can be viewed as the type of ritual described by Girard. Although the event is not exactly a sacrificial ritual, it shares some characteristics of sacrifice, including its ultimate purpose: communal well-being, self-protection and the reestablishment of societal equilibrium. The novel also concedes importance to communal rituals when Verdugo compares the day of the ferret with a popular carnival.

The notion of a carnival is familiar to us today. The publication of Bakhtin’s study of medieval and Renaissance carnival culture in his seminal *Rabelais and His World* (1968) has sparked much academic interest in the culture of carnival. Especially popular in the Middle Ages, carnivals and other carnival-type occasions were public celebrations, social and ceremonial events that took place in town squares and streets to commemorate particular days of the year.¹³ Although a number of features characterize carnivals, some of their most salient attributes are the mocking of the authorities and the reversal of social hierarchies. A carnival is an annual ritual of freedom from social constraints. Accordingly, Verdugo states this about social rituals:

Un desorden controlado; una mezcla de normas invertidas, fiesta y dilapidación. La pregunta no es si hay peligro. La pregunta es: ¿por

qué un día así? Las sociedades no perviven sin una explosión periódica. El caos compartido acerca, reúne y hace comulgar a seres absortos el resto del tiempo en preocupaciones domésticas y en inquietudes del carácter privado. Un estado de excepción. Dejar de ser los que somos para rendirnos a la desmesura, al instinto, y, ¿por qué no?, a la violencia. (117)

Periodic occasions for sanctioned chaos, disorder and inversion of societal norms are not only common, argues Verdugo, but necessary for societies to thrive. Verdugo suggests that societies are in need of such “therapeutic” measures, and that individuals are not capable of carrying out similar exercises on their own.¹⁴

Verdugo’s advocacy for a communal day of surrender to instincts that are otherwise controlled or repressed runs parallel to Girard’s argument that certain societies need a communal form of release. At the same time, for a number of reasons, the day of the ferret is not a carnival. The day of the ferret is meant to be a one-time, and not an annual, event; and, unlike medieval carnivals, it is not tolerated by the authorities. The police in Zagarra try to prevent the day of the ferret from taking place. Also, because it is an apocalyptic event, it jeopardizes the guarantee that life will return to normalcy afterward. Finally, generally speaking, carnivals tend to be joyous and festive, not violent occasions. Nevertheless, Chávez Castañeda relies on the readers’ familiarity with the idea of carnival to better frame the conceptual complexity of the day of the ferret.

While Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival helps us understand the need for the day of the ferret, it is Girard’s notion of a sacrificial ritual that best explains Verdugo’s strange call to create violence in order to control violence. Here again, however, Chávez Castañeda’s day of the ferret is not a typical sacrificial ritual as described by Girard. An obvious deviation is the absence of a single surrogate victim. While Girard insists that one scapegoat is sufficient, Verdugo believes that the current crisis in Zagarra will require many sacrificial victims, including victims from the community itself. Since Zagarra can be read as a microcosm of all humanity, this makes sense: external others do not exist. The novel suggests that in violence we are all bound together; violence crosses national and cultural boundaries indiscriminately.

Shaping the day of the ferret as a communal sacrificial ritual has the same goals and intentions as provoking an apocalypse—namely, to make use of the persuasive powers of an inescapable and all-pervading catastrophe to provoke change. Yet violence is not the primary force of destruction in the Apocalypse. Chávez Castañeda’s day of the ferret, therefore, can be viewed as a unique hybrid of apocalypse and sacrificial ritual. The two concepts are mutually reinforcing. The notion of sacrificial ritual contextualizes the use of violence to control violence, since in the Apocalypse violence is not the dominant force. The apocalypse provides the necessary timing, intensity and scale, all of which are imprecise in sacrificial ritual, for the full effect of the day of the ferret.

Conclusion

Proponents of globalization highlight multiculturalism, worldwide trade, communication and migration as defining aspects of the current global era. But to what extent is our experience of the global order also shaped by violence? Violence pervades our lives on multiple levels and is evident in the existence of a pronounced culture of violence. This is not to say that previous epochs were less violent, but to observe how, in the current global era, our understanding of violent experience is “enriched” by the work of imagination and is no longer circumscribed by our locality.

Chávez Castañeda’s novel *El día del hurón* addresses the issue of violence, which was especially pressing for Mexico during the 1990s. In his novel Chávez Castañeda proposes to solve a difficult problem: how does one control violence in a world mired in violence? Seen within the context of Mexican lack of confidence in the legal system and law enforcement, the novel proposes an unorthodox paradigm for both understanding and controlling violence. Here I have used both apocalypse and Girard’s theory of violence to shed light on Chávez Castañeda’s unique but enigmatic creation, the day of the ferret, a possible way out of the chaos and mayhem in Zagarra. Chávez Castañeda’s personal interest in the psychology of individuals faced with catastrophic situations reinforces the appeal of apocalypse as a narrative choice. The hybrid of apocalypse and sacrificial ritual can certainly be interpreted as an alternative approach to violence. This approach puts faith in communal and ritualistic action for societal equilibrium above any other system of control.

Chávez Castañeda’s depiction of life in a generic geographic and national location can be seen as an attempt to appeal to the same type of non-specific, global readership. This is Chávez Castañeda’s way of placing his fiction within the global literary repertoire.¹⁵ Yet such aspirations to universality are in danger of glossing over unique local attributes, particularities or problems. The same could be said about leveling and subjectivizing violence by uprooting it from specific historical, political or social contexts. Such universalism could diminish the importance of local or national problems and create indemnity for perpetrators of context-specific political or social violence.

Finally, when viewed within the context of Chávez Castañeda’s essayistic presentation of himself as a writer and the role of his writing, the premise of *El día del hurón* is ironic. In one of the essays from his personal webpage, Chávez Castañeda explains his view of humanity: “Se ve que son los niños, siempre la niñez humana, pero también a toda la humanidad que ha perdido pie, solidez, equilibrio, y que ha apoyado una rodilla para sostenerse o se ha sostenido en otro o que vacila y tristemente se viene abajo con lentitud del derretimiento . . .” (“La creación de la destrucción”). In our ways of being and behaving as humans we are yet to reach maturity, since our current stage of development, according to this diagnosis, is childhood. “Diría que escribo en espera del milagro. Diría que no hay

mayor gracia en esta desgracia de ser un especialista en desolación que ver recuperar el equilibrio a quienes trastabillaron,” continues Chávez Castañeda in the same essay. Acknowledging his own human struggles and writing from such a position, Chávez Castañeda hopes to communicate to others on the level of common humanity.

But Chávez Castañeda’s search for a better understanding and concern for the well-being of humankind is ironic because *El día del hurón* presents a limited, supposedly scientific view of human beings. The novel suggests that to injure or kill others is an instinctual desire in all of us. Such irrational behavior is held to be a scientifically-proven facet of human nature among some psychologists.¹⁶ As someone who has studied psychology, and whose psychological interests are aptly displayed in the novel, Chávez Castañeda is partial to this clinical view of humankind.¹⁷ Accordingly, Chávez Castañeda uses the ferret to make an analogy between human and animal instincts. Yet what hope can there be for humans except to struggle with their own animality?

Notes

¹ Though my analysis of the novel is not related to the Crack intrigue, here is a brief description. The Crack's literary manifesto, launched in 1996, electrified the Mexican literary scene. Since then, the Crack has been both praised and attacked in the Mexican press. See Tomás Regalado's study, "Trescientas sesenta y cinco formas de hacer *Crack*. Bibliografía comentada" in *Crack: Instrucciones del uso* (Chávez Castañeda et al. 227-64). Several attempts have been made to comprehend and historically contextualize the group. Critics have questioned whether it is a generation or a movement, how it can be characterized, and if the writing of these authors is innovative. The Crack is perhaps so enchanting precisely due to its elusiveness. As the name indicates, the writing of this group resembles a crack. It situates itself at the breaking point, in the tear, in the fracture, neither here nor there; it dwells on paradox. Any attempt to classify it is frustrated even as one reads the explanatory materials of the authors themselves. Their declarations and self-descriptions are often paradoxical, ironic, laconic and playful. Jorge Volpi, for example, declares that the Crack is "una broma en serio" (Chávez Castañeda et al. 188). Any rules or laws of this joke or game are broken just as easily as they are made. "Por contradictorio que parezca, los novelistas del *Crack* tienen el derecho de violar todos y cada uno de los preceptos que ellos mismos se han conferido" and "El presente reglamento no tiene, pues, validez alguna," declares Jorge Volpi in his description of codes of literary procedure (188).

² I use "Apocalypse" to refer to the classical Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation from the Bible, and "apocalypse" as a more general term to refer to the notion of the end of the world.

³ Assessing a number of scholars' positions on violence, Arthur Redding generalizes violence as that which produces change: "Violence, be it the mass product of revolutionary uprising or a private, possibly mystical experimentation in sadomasochism, has been understood to inoculate one with the capacity for radical change. As such, it is a veritable baptism by blood . . ." (5). Philosopher Hannah Arendt argues that violence is instrumental: "Since violence—as distinct from power, force, or strength—always needs *implements* . . . , the revolution of technology, a revolution in tool making, was especially marked in warfare. The very substance of violent action is ruled by the means-end . . ." (4).

⁴ A devastating financial crisis took place in each decade. The so-called "Mexican debt crisis" culminated in 1982, when Mexico's finance secretary made an announcement to the international financial community that Mexico was unable to meet its foreign debt payments. The "peso crisis" of 1994, marked by the drastic devaluation of the peso, took place during the transition of the presidential office from Carlos Salinas de Gortari to Ernesto Zedillo. The irruption of armed insurgents from the state of Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of Liberation, was a major political event of the 1990s. The implementation of neoliberal economic reforms began to limit the role of the state. In short, neoliberal promises loomed large over Mexico, but delivered little for the majority of the country's population.

⁵ Ciudad Juarez is an especially fitting example for comparison with Zagarra considering the prevalence of femicide in the former.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai adds an important nuance to the role of the media when he places it at the center of the current global order. The contemporary mass media and migration are not a technological novelty, but they introduce new forces into the work of the imagination. Neither the media nor the people of any locality can remain unaffected by media events that come from other localities, regions or parts of the world. "This

mobile and unforeseeable relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences,” writes Appadurai, “defines the core of the link between globalization and the modern” (4).

⁷ While there are those who argue that violence has detrimental effects on its viewers, most recent research on media violence tends to emphasize viewing as subjective and selective, resting on the viewers’ cultural background (such as collective cultural anxieties about violence), expectations, and belief or disbelief in the visceral authenticity of violence, as well as on the violent text’s ability to bridge the distance between lived experience and its representation (Symonds 3).

⁸ As violence gets commoditized due to demand, it must continually strive to be provocative or shocking. “How else to get one’s attention for one’s production or one’s art?” asks Susan Sontag (Symonds 17). Surrounded by so much violence, some would argue that we become desensitized to it. At the same time, however, certain types of media violence continue to appall audiences. It is “a given of the cultural and social response to violence,” observes Gwyn Symonds, “that one is appalled by its antisocial, nonculturally sanctioned uses, and sometimes, with the boundaries of textual exploration” (8). Such violence in the media is viewed an act of brutal transgression inflicted on the body, a “primal viciousness teetering at the limits of explication,” and as such is decried across a broad continuum of cultural discourse about violence (9).

⁹ The most prominent characteristics of the genre discussed by Close are the antagonistic role played by the police, the importance of the urban landscape, the view of power in Mexico as a plot against democracy, and political engagement (30-32).

¹⁰ Borques further explains the effect of big crimes versus smaller ones: “Un delito que espanta es a menudo de un efecto menor que una fechoría tolerada por todo el mundo y que, por lo mismo, se está dispuesto a imitar. Es el índice para calibrar la magnitud de las transgresiones: el desorden que introducen en la sociedad. El gran crimen lo es por el escándalo que suscita, por el ejemplo que da, por la multiplicación que convoca y, agregaría hoy Borques, por la posibilidad catastrófica que genera” (119).

¹¹ The possibility of going to or arriving from other places outside of Zagarra is a contradiction in the novel, considering the text’s own insistence on the self-containment of the city.

¹² Redding, however, calls this view of violence conservative and cautions against the problems associated with it: “Moreover, Girard, like all conservatives, is haunted by the irrational fear of what he analyzes. Presumably, there will be an outbreak, a contagion of violence, if we do not construct legal (which is to say, religious) barriers against it. ‘Give a nigger an inch, he’ll take an ell,’ [sic] seems to be the paranoid logic behind Girard’s book, for the whole social structure he envisions is everywhere under the siege by forces of chaos. This accords with a strong conservative tradition stretching from Matthew Arnold to John Gardner, a tradition that has conceived ‘culture’ as the containment or channeling of chaos. While there is certainly a great deal of popularity to this tradition, it is, as various critics have pointed out, a guilty truth. We should make ourselves aware of how *chaos* is defined in any particular case and with whom it is being identified (the foreign, the barbaric) . . . Moreover, the barriers, sacrificial or not, which claim to isolate the surrogate victim may be the very factors that ensure the ubiquitous conflagration . . . rather than the catharsis that forestalls it. In other words, under circumstances opportune to the chaotic proliferation of order, mechanisms of control may, in given situations, replicate themselves as furiously as might violence” (35).

¹³ We tend to view Mardi Gras, which takes place once a year, right before the start of Lent, as the primary modern-day manifestation of medieval carnival studied by Bakhtin. But the Russian scholar's study is dedicated to a larger array of medieval and Renaissance celebrations of a similar kind which represented a considerable part of the life of medieval men: "Large medieval cities devoted an average of three months a year to these festivities" (13).

¹⁴ However shocking Verdugo's proposition may seem, it has historical precedents. Historian Chris Humphrey calls attention to the two most common interpretations of the purpose of a carnival: "Either misrule works like a safety-valve, and the status quo is restored after a period of temporary inversion, or it is seen as the expression of class antagonism or gender politics" (20). That is, on the one hand, the carnival tends to function as a form of social control and venting of anxieties and frustrations within power relations, which allows for normal societal functioning during the rest of the year (11). On the other hand, the festivities and any confrontation detectable therein have some other, internal purpose defined independently of power relations within a given community (19). The day of the ferret fits within the first model.

¹⁵ Some of Chávez Castañeda's work, including primarily his short stories, has been translated into Korean, English, Slovenian and Chinese.

¹⁶ Konrad Lorenz is the best known psychologist in favor of the notion that violence is a natural, irrational aggression (Hanssen 248).

¹⁷ In her essay on violence, Arendt questions equating aggressiveness (and, by extension, violence) with other instincts such as the nutritive and sexual drives. As she explains: "But unlike these instincts, which are activated by compelling bodily needs on one side, by outside stimulants on the other, aggressive instincts in the animal kingdom seem to be independent of such provocation; on the contrary, lack of provocation apparently leads to instinct frustration, to 'repressed' aggressiveness, which according to psychologists causes a damming up 'energy' whose eventual explosion will be all the more dangerous. (It is as though the *sensation* of hunger in man would increase with the decrease of hungry people)" (61). Arendt's criticism is in line with her questioning of a scientific view of human beings, who are different from animals by reason alone.

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