

El hombre sin cabeza by Sergio González Rodríguez

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González Rodríguez, Sergio. *El hombre sin cabeza*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2009. 186 pages.



Sergio González Rodríguez is a Mexico City based writer, essayist, and critic whose style oscillates between serious and yellow journalism. Although not a journalist by training, he is listed as one in various sources. Like a journalist, he has been seriously beaten and left hard of hearing because of his focus on the feminicides on the border and the violence of the cartels; he is lucky to be alive. His works merge different narrative voices and are oddly destabilizing. *El hombre sin cabeza*—a beautiful poetic passage reflecting on evil—is interrupted at one point by an interview the author managed to hold with one of the cartel's official *sicarios* specializing in decapitation.

Best known among his many publications is *Huesos en el desierto* (2002). This book dealt with the feminicides in Juárez, which began in the early 1990s and have continued unabated since then, spreading to Guatemala and other Central American nations. The word *feminicidio* was coined by border activists and mothers of the murdered women to designate the extreme gender and sexual violence that characterized the crimes and the machista impunity with which these tragic and frightening events, occurring almost daily, have been greeted by the authorities and the Mexican press. The very graphic descriptions of the murders, the media coverage, and

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the interviews with the mothers of the victims (most often discovered in garbage dumps around the city, their identities disguised with a change of clothes, etc.) that *Huesos* reports were picked up by Roberto Bolaño, who incorporated them into the central section of his novel *2666*.

El hombre sin cabeza continues along these lines: it is an essay on the nature of evil and the symbolic and psychic impact of decapitation that has become the cartels' weapon of choice in their war against each other as well as the Mexican state. Indeed, while drug wars are typically fought with guns, in Mexico, the preferred symbolic method of killing "enemies" (gang members of different cartels and innocent by-standers caught by contingencies) is increasingly decapitation. Rodríguez González's at times rambling meditation traces a vague history of decapitation in history and art, recalling the myth of Medusa and Salomé, the invention of the guillotine, the pathos of the biography of Yukio Mishima, etc. The narration then switches to the recollection of an experience with that gruesome form of death in the author's own family history during the Mexican Revolution, among other deaths that are included, somewhat randomly.

Ultimately Rodríguez González ascribes the preponderance of decapitation in Mexico today on the images of torture at Abu Ghraib that circulated in the Internet; to which Islamic fundamentalists responded by circulating images of people they had decapitated. The book ends with a long chapter on sacrificial violence in the cult of the Santa Muerte, which is fast spreading among gangs in Mexico. This cult is also distorting pre-Hispanic shamanic rites, which, in their current misinterpretation, put a premium on the sacrificial death of their victims through decapitation. Throughout the book, González Rodríguez trawls works on evil and the abject by both major and lesser-known French, Hispanic, and US theorists, searching for illumination regarding Mexico's current fall into barbarism. The other thread that links the chapters is an analysis of the media and the Internet—in particular their role in the propagation of violent images. This has led to the normalization of torture, and, as González Rodríguez writes, "la tortura como ingrediente esencial del entretenimiento" (76).

El hombre sin cabeza is an interesting, deeply disturbing, and, as noted above, randomly composed chronicle of contemporary Mexico as a weak state and of the terrible consequences of widespread corruption. More interesting is the author's analysis of the fragmentary, contingent, and metaphorical nature of the "logic" of decapitation. But it is also unsettling how his own text falls prey to the very fragmentation he critiques. The lengthy debates around the differences between metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche that marred my graduate school days come to mind. Indeed, as González Rodríguez writes regarding the images at Abu Ghraib, the posture of the military personnel that took the images and of those that denounced them is essentially *similar* since they both are articulated within a planetary mass media that is US-dominated. Seen from the vantage point (or should one say low point?) of Mexico today, and through a typical Latin American anti-imperialist lens, the media reflects the double standard that characterizes the U.S empire

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(75). You torture, Rodríguez González claims, in the name of “liberating” a country, because the imperative is actually to exploit, expropriate, destroy, and exterminate (“explotar, expropiar, depredar, aniquilar son los mandatos”) (76). You torture and photograph and then denounce, but when you denounce and “cover” the naked victims’ private parts electronically (with a “parche digital”) out of some sense of shame, you really only manage to highlight evil through the metonymic transposition. Indeed, Rodríguez González claims that the objective is never to establish analogies between things, because if one were to succeed in connecting the dots one would in fact disarticulate “las sinrazones de la doble moral” (75).

In the end, it is in its attempt to connect the dots and to establish true analogies between things that *El hombre sin cabeza* fails. The book feels a bit disconnected because Rodríguez González approaches the theme of evil by fits and starts and from multiple vantage points. The answer as to why this is happening in Mexico today eludes him. Oddly, Rodríguez González, who had made it his mission to draw international attention to the feminicides in Juárez, does not go back to his previous work in *Huesos en el desierto*. Yet it is there that he could have found the most obvious answer to his question. Indeed, the murder of hundreds and hundreds of women in the last twenty years with not one person held accountable to date is the true source of the state of impunity that currently reigns in Mexico. *El hombre sin cabeza*, however, precisely because of its failure to come up with a coherent, convincing explanation succeeds in leaving the reader with the uncanny feeling that we are simply incapable of confronting violence of such an extreme nature.

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