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Tobias Jochum (Free University Berlin)

"The Weight of Words, the Shock of Photos" [1]: Poetic Testimony and Elliptical Imagery in Sergio González Rodríguez' *The Femicide Machine*

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the academic discourse around the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua has grown increasingly interdisciplinary and self-conscious—that is to say, self-reflexive about inherent ethical ambiguities and pragmatic limitations of writing about (and against) fatal gender violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. For politically-motivated scholars of feminicide, illustration and narrative became fundamentally necessary to help humanize otherwise often faceless research and academic work: hence, recent volumes of feminicide scholarship prominently incorporate photographic images and personal testimonials. In his monograph The Femicide Machine (2012), Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez likewise adds testimony and illustration to his dense study of Ciudad Juárez, but with an unusual twist. Guided by reflections on graphic representations of violence by Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière, this paper aims to uncover the specific strategies deployed by González Rodríguez, as he turns testimony into poetry and deflects the reader's urge for visual gratification, thereby opening a space for critical self-reflection. I posit The Femicide Machine as a case study for the larger argument that politico-ethical urgency and analytical complexity posed by atrocities such as the Juárez feminicides are pushing cultural producers to transcend genre boundaries and seek out novel or alternative modes of representation in the quest to engage audiences in meaningful ways and ultimately elicit political responses towards effecting social change.

Keywords: femicide / feminicide, Ciudad Juárez, testimony, photography, representation

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Introduction

In the increasingly international intellectual debate around feminicide in Ciudad Juárez and the state of Chihuahua, the public discourse has gradually come into focus over the past decade, conceivably as a way of out the political and discursive gridlock experienced in academic and activist circles alike. The public sphere, as it were, can offer a site in which to carry out "the struggle for interpretative power" (Jean Franco, qtd. in Schmidt Camacho, "Body Counts" 47) and thereby impact more effectively the unyielding status quo of criminal impunity and political inertia. With state institutions throwing insurmountable bureaucratic roadblocks in the way of any effort to implement substantial social change from the outside, the realm of public opinion, while hotly contested from various fronts, promises at least a more accessible forum for mobilizing support and applying pressure to the state (Fregoso, *Encounters*; Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán; Domínguez-Ruvalbaca and Corona; Volk).

Conventional academic publishing and human rights reports ultimately proved to hold relatively little drawing power for larger audiences and were often dwarfed by other "louder" lines of discourse. This helped foster a palpable sense of frustration and fatigue among politically motivated scholars and activists, reflected in much of the scholarship published after public interest peaked in the early to mid-2000s when several key events galvanized international outrage and protests (Gillman and Jochum 4). With *The Femicide Machine*, Sergio González Rodríguez delivers an updated synthesis of his seminal earlier account of the Juárez feminicides, *Huesos en el desierto*, repackaged for an Anglophone audience. In it the Mexican author classifies the public discourse into four categories: the "official version," disseminated by state authorities and government spokespeople and, as such, notoriously riddled with misinformation and manipulation; the day-to-day "journalistic narrative," locked in a more or less critical dialogue with the former, state-sanctioned discourse; the academic and human rights angle on the violence; and, finally, the "cultural narrative," a diverse body of cultural and artistic texts produced in a variety of written and audiovisual genres and a large spectrum of sources, from investigative reporting, critical analyses, fictionalized accounts, first-person narratives, views held by the local communities, rumors and myths, each of which seeking to, in various degrees, "reinvent reality or defend historical truth" (82). [2]

As scholars grew increasingly aware of the delicate ethics of their work and its limited access to the broader cultural narrative, they responded by seeking out new ways to mend traditional confines of academic writing. The formal vocabulary of academic discourse struggled to render accessible the multifarious complexities behind the perpetuation of the violence, while conventional scholarly rhetoric seemed increasingly ill-equipped to address human suffering on such a scale,

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often hampered, as it were, by a sense of analytical disconnect. While feminicide scholars such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Melissa M. Wright, were imbuing their writing with a passion, urgency, and political outspokenness that owed much to Gloria Anzaldúa and her deeply personal and unapologetically political writing, discursive constraints persisted. By the late 2000s, with public attention in decline and the anti-feminicide movement losing momentum, the affective tone in feminicide scholarship grew increasingly exasperated. Pondering the failure to achieve palpable progress, authors struggled to find new ways to convey the persisting urgency and jarring specifics of the continued violence without succumbing to fatalist pronouncements or losing professional countenance. [3]

From the very brief and streamlined progression of feminicide scholarship delineated above, we can detect the emergence of two fundamental needs to assist and alter otherwise faceless and powerless discourses of research and theory: illustration and narrative. The medium of photography offered the most obvious tool for addressing the former, and had, in fact, already featured prominently within public discourse, albeit in forms that provoked controversial debates (see my discussion of Charles Bowden below). Photography as such brings with it a long history of documenting injustice and human suffering, accompanied since its invention by critical reflections over inherent ethical risks, rewards, and responsibilities. In these debates, exploitation and sensationalism delimit one end of the spectrum, while the potential of utilizing the power of authenticity to elicit genuine empathy and political responsiveness marks its opposite end. Particularly in light of a media environment characterized by the inflationary display of—or, in any case, *access to*—graphic images of calamity from virtually anywhere on the globe, the use of photography warrants a careful interrogation over its practical advantages and ethical pitfalls. For this, let us now turn to one of the earliest and most problematic photographic takes on the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez.

1. Problematic Pragmatics

Shock and Symbolic Violence in Charles Bowden's Border Reporting

In order to demonstrate what is at stake when it comes to the representation of violence and victims of the Juárez feminicides as well as to exemplify the bitterness that has become characteristic of the debate, let us consider the example of Charles Bowden who, until his recent passing in 2014, had been writing prolifically about the borderlands and particularly about Ciudad Juárez. Bowden first introduced the historical occurrence and graphic imagery of the feminicides to a U.S.-American public, drawing both controversy and critical acclaim. [4] His award-winning 1998 photo essay *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* opens with Noam Chomsky's introduction that

predictably frames the abject poverty and physical violence afflicting the region as directly caused by neoliberal forces, in particular as a manifestation of the devastating consequences of NAFTA. In the main body of the volume, Bowden then showcases the personal stories and work of a group of local photographers, most of whom specialized in crime scenes of violence and death in Ciudad Juárez, often risking their lives in the pursuit of their motives. [5] According to Bowden's account, these adrenaline-driven renegade reporters, or "street shooters," genuinely regard their work as a vital service to an otherwise ignorant, indifferent, or deeply cynical public that had its back turned on the alarming levels of brutality and suffering right in front of their doorsteps. However, some of the photojournalists also display a rather morbid fascination with their subjects, regarding singular shots with the undisguised pride a hunter might harbor over a particularly rare or prestigious piece of game (73-75; 76; 90).

The most notorious among more than a dozen photographs of slain bodies that are dispersed throughout the pages of *Laboratory* depicts a face in close-up, belonging to a sixteen-year-old rape and murder victim. Enlarged to approximately the size of an actual human head, the face fills out the entirety of the page (66). Bar any discernable background, the image impedes any sense of top and bottom, and offers no hint as to the body's position. As if reinforcing this decontextualizing quality, the photograph was actually printed in two different versions, first a smaller version in horizontal scale in *Harper's Magazine*, suggesting a probable prone position of the body, and then, in *Laboratory*, larger and turned upright to unsettling effect. Disembodied and disorienting, the head appears to jut out of the US-letter-sized hardcover book, as if leaping directly towards us. The face is mummified beyond recognition from prolonged exposure to heat and light, the skin visibly blackened yet in some parts glistening bronze in the sun: a ghostly and a ghastly image. *Harper's* had first published the shot in 1996, adorning an article by Bowden titled "While You Were Sleeping", his first exposé on Ciudad Juárez and the local photographers chronicling the city's violence.

Two years later, he used the piece as one of the chapters of the transnational collaboration that became the photo essay *Juárez: Laboratory of Our Future*, featuring close to a hundred more of the street shooters' photographs in color prints. In the *Harper's* piece (as in *Laboratory*), Bowden writes in his characteristic first-person mode, the classic style of New Journalism, to relate how he first mistook the image for "a beautiful black carved mask" and admired its aesthetic faculties ("The face is smooth with craftsmanship") before realizing the horror of what the image actually portrays ("Sleeping" 46; *Laboratory* 67). The photo catches his attention as he is given a private slide show by Jaime Bailleres, the photojournalist who authored the shot and who then volunteers relevant background information—at least to the minimal extent available: where the body was found, the victim's forensically determined age, her never-resolved status of anonymity, and the fact that the

local paper had refused to print the photo. Obviously fascinated, Bowden resumes his aesthetic contemplation: “The lips of the girl pull back, revealing her clean white teeth. Sound pours forth from her mouth. She is screaming and screaming and screaming. […] A deafening image” (ibid.). At the close of the book chapter (or article), Bowden returns to this synesthetic association of the 'silent scream' that so distinguishes the image for him—an image he admits being both obsessed with and haunted by: "[S]he stares at me. The skin is smooth, almost carved and sanded, but much too dark. And the screams are simply too deafening" (ibid.). Bowden here elevates the dead girl’s countenance to the level of the symbolic, a metaphor for the incomprehensible discrepancy between the inhumanity of the violence in Juárez and the indifference and silence with which it has been met: a silent cry, too loud to be heard.

While Charles Bowden’s writing expresses in unequivocal terms his shock and outrage over the physical and economic violence, as well as his solidarity with those afflicted by it, he nonetheless came under scathing criticism—and with due justification—for never truly engaging with the murder victims as individual human beings, or in this case, as one critic put it, never bothering to listen to “what the dead girl might be saying.” (Schmidt Camacho, “Body Counts” 39). Beyond the moral question of whether to publish such an image at all—and Bowden does seem to take an irksome amount of misplaced satisfaction in the fact that he, against Bailleres' repeated prediction, has indeed managed to get the shot published—the objections against Bowden’s particular use of it would seem obvious. With no apparent hesitation he bypasses the victim’s individuality, her dignity, and any hypothetical objections by her unknown family to instrumentalize her death into a literary metaphor in the service of making a point about the savagery and surrounding silence he sees in Ciudad Juárez. Conceivably, Bowden took the anonymity and unclaimed status of the corpse as sufficient license not only to turn its destruction into a public spectacle and rhetorical tool but also to claim it as his own, symbolically, through his written projections, and physically, by keeping a copy of the picture in a folder by his desk, as he informs us, as a kind of talismanic memento that can haunt him on demand (105). This is reckless misappropriation par excellence, bar any legitimacy, sensitivity, self-reflexivity or meaningful engagement with the depicted human subject (cf.: Delgadillo).

Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Alicia Schmidt Camacho are two among a number of feminist critics to excoriate Bowden, accusing him of transforming the image of the girl into an exoticized fetish (Fregoso, *Encounters* 16) and of reenacting “the violence of the murder itself [through the] deliberate conversion of the dead body into an aesthetic object” (Schmidt Camacho, “Body Counts” 39). They lambasted the author’s unmitigated male gaze as “perverse,” “possessive,” and “misogynist”, in particular pointing to extended passages in which Bowden eroticizes Mexican girls as he observes them in local bars and dance clubs, imagining what sexual thoughts they might be

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thinking. Fregoso denounces his “racist and colonialist gaze” as he indulges, laconically, in the classic chauvinist Western fantasy of rescuing a sex worker—a “whore” in his self-incriminating term of choice—from the dreadful fate her own savage culture has in store for her. To Fregoso, the fact that Bowden is quite obviously being facetious here, seeking to sell his trite digression as a swipe against sanctimonious Western liberalism, does little to alleviate his offense. To the contrary, she reads his resort to humor as an insult to common civility, given the grave immediate context of rape and murder. In her scathing final verdict, Bowden’s “perversity," as manifested in the cited litany of harmful gazes, "constructs border women as abject” (*Encounters* 15).

These readings, while sharp-tongued and somewhat selective, are pertinent, productive critiques of a manifestly problematic writer taking on most sensitive issues—criticisms to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. In what follows, I by no means seek to issue a recuperation or defense of Charles Bowden's transgressions. His lifelong public refusal to critically reflect on them speaks volumes. His writing reflects and perpetuates longstanding hegemonic and patriarchal forms of conceiving and constructing the borderlands, fed by a literary aesthetic tradition by authors such as Cormac McCarthy and Carlos Fuentes. What I would like to propose, then, is a stance that, instead of disqualifying his work altogether based on its worst offenses, allows for further critical inquiry that might unlock more nuanced or ambivalent insights into the modus operandi of even the most misguided attempts to represent violence. And for better or worse, the border, according to Bowden, continues to resonate in a popular transnational cultural imaginary.

A self-styled nature recluse in the individualist-masculinist tradition who came of age in the sixties and seventies, Charles Bowden not only missed the feminist call as a student and later continued to ignore its widely available lessons, he also developed an ostensible attitude of disdain for ivory tower intellectualism throughout his career, presumably dating back to his walking out of his dissertation defense in frustration before turning to journalism and his own writing projects fulltime. In interviews he fashioned himself as dutiful working stiff simply out to Report The Story, the sort of seasoned crime beat writer who has seen too much to bother with political correctness or complications of deconstruction. He was plainspoken about his intentions to write the capital-t Truth to capital-p Power. Despite extensive ground research and close cooperation with local women’s rights activists, journalists, and photographers, Bowden dismissed activist intentions on his part, and routinely deflected inquiries into the dangers of the job to his Mexican peers south of the border, whom he lauded as the ones to literally be putting their lives on the line, working, as they were, under the constant threat of intimidation, kidnappings, torture, and assassination (see: Driver "Femicide"; Blake). [6]

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On the page, his terse prose, often described as darkly poetic, betrays a deliberate kinship to the testosteronic writing traditions of Hemingway, McCarthy, the New Journalists, and authors of hard-boiled detective fiction. His bleak visions of Juárez as harbinger of an apocalyptic future of free-market capitalism marked by environmental destruction and extreme violence have to answer to the charge of perpetuating the notion of the Mexican borderlands as an inherently violent space while minimizing the possibility of local resistance (Delgadillo). And yet, the force of his lyrical, well researched, and deeply personal narratives of the dire, oftentimes previously ignored consequences of global economic dynamics and U.S.-driven policies cannot be refuted so easily. Thus, even as an arguable anachronistic misogynist with a Cassandra complex, Bowden's writing continues to demand our clear-eyed critical attention, perhaps especially as feminist readers and scholars.

The political conclusions that Bowden drew from his analyses, meanwhile, run almost entirely congruent with the practical prescriptions by critical scholars and feminist activist-artists working on human rights issues on the border. His three propositions for the United States to alleviate—or rather, to stop aggravating—the violence and hardship south of its border remain judicious and comprehensive—albeit miles removed from the limited possibilities of contemporary U.S. realpolitik: renegotiate NAFTA so that Mexican workers are paid a living wage and ecological destruction is curbed by effective regulations; end the disastrous War on Drugs and reframe substance addiction as a medical problem; and, finally, implement progressive immigration reform that would open a path to citizenship for the "secret underclass" of undocumented workers, on whom the United State's economy, in fact, crucially depends (Blake). At the same time, he readily acknowledged that concrete solutions that could diminish criminal impunity and corruption would have to be negotiated and executed on the local level. Ultimately, as he liked to quip, "Mexicans have to fix Mexico" (*Perspectives*). [7]

Bowden's major fallacy remains his willful ignorance and insensitivity regarding gender as a vital factor in these murders of women in the borderlands. While lamenting domestic violence as commonplace and culturally accepted in Northern Mexico and acknowledging rape as a form of applied gender terror, he remained skeptical of using the terms "femicide" (/"feminicide") or even "hate crime" as analytical concepts, since he took neither to adhere to an officially deployed social policy (Driver "Femicide" 375). [8] Bowden crucially ignores the central distinction of violence against women as directed against them *because* they are women. The rationale behind the analytical term "feminicide" (or "femicide") as a useful concept to separate these crimes from male-on-male homicide, has little to do with direct legislation, as explained by, among many others, Fregoso and Bejarano:

> [Unlike] most cases of women's murders, men are not killed because they are men or as a result of their vulnerability as members of a subordinate gender; nor are men subjected to gender-specific forms of degradation and violation, such as rape and sexual torture, prior to their murder. Such gender differences in the experience of violence suggest the need for an alternative analytic concept, such as feminicide, for mapping the hierarchies embedded in gender-based violence. (Fregoso and Bejarano 7)

Bowden's disavowal of the gender dimension can be read as a misguided expression of the concern that femicide/feminicide—at least in the popular understanding of the term [9]—may not provide the key diagnostics for solving the ongoing crisis of the Mexican state and the associated explosion of seemingly non-gender-specific violence. His point that the "the murders of men aren't investigated either" may unproductively pit one kind of offense against the other, but remains factually accurate on face value (Driver, "Femicide" 376). [10]

Given the opportunity to publicly defend his representational choices against allegations of exploitation and sensationalism in an interview with Alice Driver, Charles Bowden resorted to an almost naïve candor:

> I thought if I used photography readers would identify more because it is an art form, and that if I used dead girls instead of dead boys that they'd pay more attention. That's it. […] 'Does it worsen things to show corpses or does it help things?' No one on earth knows. I thought that in this instance it helps things. I thought people needed a wake-up call. ("Femicide" 372-3)

Specifically probed about the term *porno-misery*, clarified by Driver, who first applied the term to representations of the Juárez feminicides in her book *More or Less Dead*, as "the voyeuristic exploitation of misery," Bowden reveals both a basic grasp of the practical risks—if not necessarily ethical problem—that arise with the distribution of graphic images of extreme violence and, simultaneously, shows his lack of a definite answer to the problem. Working from his own off-the-cuff definition of pornography as "deadening [and] redundant imagery," Bowden acknowledges the possibility of *porno-misery* "when you produce enough of these images that people don't react to them. […] There isn't a rule," he concludes, "It's a judgment." Still, rights and sensibilities of the subjects in front of the camera do not enter his equation. But unsurprisingly, he goes on to insist that people did in fact have "a real reaction" to the photos in *Laboratory* back in 1998 ("Femicide" 378).

While Bowden's point about the precise *kind* of response to *Laboratory* among its readership remains up for debate, one would be hard-pressed to question the desperate need for a wake-up call at a time when U.S. media and politicians still unanimously fawned over Ciudad Juárez as a role model for successful free trade policies. Again, none of this would suggest that Charles Bowden deserved absolution from accusations of misogyny, ethnocentrism, or a proclivity toward

the sensational and the self-righteous. However, in the spirit of political pragmatism, I would simply suggest that the work by one of the most vocal—and, not least, highest-selling public U.S. critics of precisely the U.S.-policies that, as most academics and activists agree, directly contribute to the violence at the border against both men *and* women—merits a more constructive critical engagement than a wholesale dismissal and vilification of its author. Calling out and holding responsible cultural workers and intellectuals for their symbolic transgressions is a vital and productive part of shaping public debate; foreclosing the possibility of dialogue is not. Eventually, broader and more diverse coalitions willing to work through ideological differences will have to be forged in order to tackle the multiple interconnected fronts of gendered (and classist and racialized) violence in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere. Meanwhile, Bowden's inconclusive assessment of the effect that graphic displays of violence may have on a given viewer is indeed worth further elaboration. This elusive threshold where shock turns into oversaturation and, consequently, numbness, calls up the late Susan Sontag, through whom we shall examine more closely the potential functions, merits, and limits of shock as an affective trigger for awareness and action.

2. The Spectacle of Suffering Reconsidered

Susan Sontag's New Nuance and the Return of the Real

In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) Susan Sontag offers a nuanced and decidedly un-dogmatic examination of precisely the ethical and practical considerations around the reception of visual imagery graphically depicting human suffering, the precise problem of representation that Charles Bowden stumbled into somewhat clumsily. With *Regarding* Sontag devised a follow-up and partial revision of her 1977 seminal work *On Photography*, in which she lamented the diminishing impact of visual representations of suffering as a media landscape apparently oversaturated with visual images of violence and atrocities. Back then she concluded with a proposal for an "ecology [...] of images" to preserve our capability to react in meaningful ways to a visual confrontation with human misery from a safe distance (180). Two and a half decades later, however, Sontag came to harbor serious doubts about her former line of reasoning, and challenged several of her own claims head on, effectively complicating the issue at the cost of prescriptive moralizing and catchy generalizations. "There isn't going to be an ecology of images," she concedes in 2003. "No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate" (97).

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This insistence on the true nature of human suffering forms the moral center around which Sontag's ruminations gravitate. She forcefully rejects the postmodernist truism that holds reality as but a spectacle in an echo chamber of media simulations and self-referential representations (or simulacra, to use Baudrillard's popular turn of phrase), and fiercely denounces the underlying cynicism and narrow viewpoint of this discourse:

> To speak of reality becoming a spectacle [...] universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment. […] It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. [It] is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and massive injustice and terror. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality. (98-99) [11]

For Sontag, the assumption that images of atrocities were categorically impotent to engage any viewer, the knee-jerk presupposition of "something innately cynical" about their circulation are but cosmopolitan clichés of a privileged elite and ultimately further evidence that, "[s]ome people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved" (ibid.).

Sontag's blistering critique of postmodernism is to be read in context with a number of intellectual endeavors arguing for a departure from the postmodernist era of irony and play toward a new paradigm of sincerity, bringing with it a cultural revalorization of the real and the authentic, in however non-essentializing forms. Sometimes loosely referred to as post-postmodernism or, as theorized by art historian Hal Foster, the "Return of the Real," it is a project that emerged in the mid-1990s, then gained popular currency in the wake of the events of September 11, whereupon it was predominantly negotiated within the critical discourse on trauma with its emphasis on suffering, memory, and marginalization (Haselstein, et. al.). Exploring the popular reemergence of Holocaust literature and its accompanying scholarship at the time, Michael Rothberg proposed "traumatic realism" as a new genre template, one infused by testimony and offering an ethical response to the conflicting demands of trauma representation. Contesting previous takes on trauma by theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, who placed extraordinary historical horrors such as the Shoah beyond the confines of what is aesthetically, or artistically, representable, Rothberg postulates documentation, self-reflection, and a critical engagement with commodity culture as urgent demands for what he deems the essentially necessary endeavor of representation (7).

Sontag's cautious optimism regarding the moral justification and political potential of representations of suffering through aesthetic means then can be read as part of an "ethical turn from trauma theory to a generalized theory of suffering" (Haselstein et. al. 17), in line with thematically linked works by Judith Butler (*Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* [2004]; *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* [2009]) and others (ibid. 14-19). The renewed hope in a post-postmodern viewership capable of differentiation, empathy, and political agency also interlaces with French philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion of an "emancipated spectator" in his evolving philosophy of political aesthetics, which I will engage in further detail below.

In *Regarding the Pain*, Sontag displays deep ambivalence about photography's potential to invoke meaningful responses. She emphasizes the medium's unique ability—hence, its *responsibility*—to establish visual immediacy and emotional alertness to atrocities occurring in geographically, culturally and/or socioeconomically distant spaces. She further argues that only through the power of shock can violent images provide the initial spark to trigger a chain reaction in the viewer from awareness to critical reflection and thought, to, ultimately, taking the plunge to political action.

To a certain extent, Sontag defends the spectacular in war or disaster photography, scrutinizing the conventional wisdom on the ethical etiquette of media representations of suffering. "For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance" (23), Sontag writes. She then goes on to question the impulse by 'morally alert' photographers to artificially downplay spectacular scenes of violence to appear less visually dramatic for the sake of chasing an aesthetic that would better correspond to popular expectations of realism. In religious narratives throughout Western history, she argues, suffering has often been conveyed in spectacular terms without apparently forfeiting any affective power over the pious viewer (71-72). Moreover, Sontag holds the feeling of guilty titillation we often experience at the sight of gore and horror as less morbid and abnormal than our moral conscience may suggest, when in fact, it is an age-old sentiment traceable in philosophical consideration all the way back to Plato (86). Our urge to gawk at images of horror becomes diluted with shame over our self-awareness as distant onlookers, safely positioned out of harm's way while impotent to interfere. With our gaze fixated on the image we become uncomfortable, self-conscious voyeurs. When it comes to pictures of *ongoing* atrocities, however, a simultaneous sense of *obligation to look* may arise as we wonder: isn't there something to be done after all?

Eventually, Sontag comes to the assertion that "for photographs to accuse, and possibly alter conduct, they must shock" (72) only to put that jolt, along with similar affective responses, under close inspection. The apparent volatility of emotions that wear off over time unless transformed into

action is the key problematic for her. Sympathy or pity often remain self-serving sentiments that merely help us wash our hands clean of any co-implication with the suffering while reinforcing our perception of impotence when it comes to stopping it (91). We also use certain defense mechanisms to shield ourselves from inconvenient or overwhelming realities—for instance, we disassociate when faced with the suffering of people who look different from us (64-65) and we grow detached and indifferent in order to cope with overpowering dread and despair, long-term frustration, or merely, again, our impotence to interfere (89). The much-maligned "apathy" then emerges not so much as the *lack* of a real reaction but the transformation of emotions such as fear, terror, and frustration, which, over time and through relentless intensity, have become too unbearable to maintain. Isolated from an instructive context, all our affective responses remain fleeting impulses. What ultimately dulls our emotional responsiveness is perpetual passivity rather than repeated exposure (91). "Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock," Sontag asserts, "But they are not much help if the task is to understand" (80).

Photographs depend on explanatory captions and supplementary analytical interpretations to make us understand and direct our shock and outrage, our compassion and empathy. The formal context in which images are displayed then take on fundamental importance—the CGI-rendered artificial gore pervading the entertainment industry, for instance, precisely does not constitute the equivalent to actual war photography—and Sontag insinuates that perhaps "the weight and seriousness of such photographs survive better in a book [than in an exhibition], where one can look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking" (109). From the advantages of the book format, Sontag moves to the benefits of narratives, for the sheer duration of the reader's emotional engagement: "A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel" (110). Photographs haunt us, but narratives can establish substantial understanding (80).

Do Susan Sontag's nuanced ruminations help justify the crude spectacle Charles Bowden makes of border violence? Not exactly. Part of the criticism directed against *Laboratory of the Future* concerns several appallingly insufficient photo captions: "a raped and murdered woman" next to the image of a brutalized dead female body, even if factually anonymous, is likely not what Sontag envisioned as satisfactory explanatory captions, even as it may be argued that, on the whole, Bowden's writing on Ciudad Juárez does, in fact, establish—or construct—rational contexts and arrange narratives around the puncturing moments of shock. Sontag's qualified confirmation that all "images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic" (85) likewise denounce Bowden's reckless use of such imagery. However, the inherent worth she ascribes to the mere shock value of graphic imagery, particularly when it comes to ongoing as

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opposed to historically sealed atrocities, does in a general sense apply to Bowden's aesthetics of shock.

Sending out mixed signals is no automatic disqualifier—the signals do not cancel each other out (and neither does an imperfect messenger). Audiences are capable of emotional ambivalence, of standing in awe at the sight of a murderous spectacle *and* at the same time genuinely resolving to stop it. But Rosa-Linda Fregoso's charge that Bowden "crosses the line between titillation and information" (*Encounters* 15) disregards the fact that such a neat line may often not actually exist—much less in contemporary Mexico, where news media covering state/narco violence have become subject to pervasive forms of (self-)censorship. [12] Ultimately, the outcry and controversy Bowden managed to stir up, by whatever flawed means, shed an unyielding light on the situation in Juárez at a moment when scarcely anyone outside of the region was paying any attention to it. His work thus played a part in instigating a substantial debate not just about the violence at the border per se but also, unwittingly, about (in)appropriate ways to represent and discuss it. Noise can be a good wake-up call, just as long as we get up and start to face the day instead of turning over and hitting the snooze button.

3. The Need for Narrative and the Power of Testimony

Coinciding with Sontag's assessment, from the early 2000s on, academics, activists, and artists working on the Juárez feminicides increasingly deployed narratives as auxiliary tools to humanize complex analyses, contextualize visual images in meaningful or engaging ways, or simply to create some broader awareness in the first place. The use of testimonies, meaning here the public dissemination of subjective experiences as remembered and (re)presented by survivors, family members, and friends of victims, provided a way for academics and other writers to incorporate raw and personal narratives to affectively illustrate and ethically validate their work, ideally helping to bridge the distance of their privileged positions of observation. The latest wave of feminicide scholarship has indeed tapped into testimony as an essential ingredient. The three 2010 anthologies *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera,* edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán; *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representations and Public Response,* edited by Hector Dominguez-Ruvalbaca and Ignacio Corona; and *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas*, edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano all prominently incorporate *testimonios* by family members of victims and/or local *juarense* activists to complement their compiled essays.

The testimonies included in *Terrorizing Women*, for instance, are spread throughout the anthology, one placed at the respective beginning of each of its three subsections, providing recurrent reminders of the concrete human toll behind the murders via the unmediated voices of women who were directly impacted by feminicidal violence. The testimonies cover a range of human responses to loss, suffering, and injustice. Eva Arce, mother of one of the feminicide victims, has abandoned all hope of ever finding truth, justice, or closure after years of rejections, threats, and physical abuse by the authorities have worn down her spirit (45-8). Julia Huamañahui, the sister of another victim, speaks of their shared history of sexual abuse in their family upbringing, of the terror, trauma, and guilt she felt after her sister's death along with an overwhelming sense of devastation and powerlessness in the face of dismissive or outright hostile misogynist investigators. Struggling for words to explain her desperation, she momentarily transcends the level of the descriptive narration and taps into a powerful emotional immediacy: "if you could see my heart, you would see it is bleeding and bleeding from all the sorrow I feel" (179-81). Rosa Franco, the mother of another girl who was kidnapped, tortured, raped, and murdered, appears to have psychosomatically literalized the same metaphor of cardiac ailment. She suffered a heart attack nine months after her daughter's death and her account emphasizes the lingering effects: "I still suffer from after effects and will have to take many medications for the rest of my life. I suffer from high blood pressure, insomnia, and heart trouble" (273-74). At the book's closing, a final *testimonio* stakes out the possibility for hope, as Norma Ledezma Ortega, who lost her daughter to feminicide, describes the comfort she found in the community of other mothers as a transformative and empowering experience that gave her new meaning in life and the strength to go forward in the joint struggle for justice (331-33). All these testimonies help turn *Terrorizing Women* into a captivating volume, as they bridge part of the distance between academic critics and affected communities, injecting outrage and empathy, and ultimately, hope into an excellent collection of dedicated scholarship.

Sergio González Rodríguez' English-language monograph *The Femicide Machine* deploys testimony in quite a different and unfamiliar way, vividly illustrating what would otherwise remain a problematic treatise. González Rodríguez is a Mexican journalist, essayist, and art and culture critic who distinguished himself early on as one of the most prominent and outspoken experts on the *feminicidios* of Juárez from outside the academic/activist sphere. In the mid-1990s, he began to investigate the murders for the Mexico City-based newspaper *Reforma*. The result was his unconventional nonfiction account *Huesos en el desierto* from 2002, in which he merged his findings with literary experimentation and academic analysis, referencing reputable feminicide scholars, such as Melissa Wright and Julia Monárrez Fregoso, and applying, as one of the first to do so, Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" theory to the peri-urban "death space" along the Texas-Chihuahua borderlands. [13]

With *The Femicide Machine* the Mexican writer offers an updated synthesis of his past work on Ciudad Juárez to an English-speaking audience. The small-sized volume's main part is a multidisciplinary analysis of the border city as a space where various transnational geopolitical, socioeconomic and cultural forces coalesce to paint Juárez as a surreal urban dystopia steeped in extreme violence. His study of Ciudad Juárez makes for a dense and alarming read, informed by sound analysis, but probably hampered by a slightly awkward English translation. However, through precisely this unfavorable style, *The Femicide Machine* performs the essential challenge for nonfictional writing about feminicide, to wit: how to communicate in an emotionally engaging way the cumbersome analysis of real-life horrors of such an epidemic scale, without sensationalizing the issue or alienating the common reader.

González Rodríguez' writing retains a mode of analytical distance and semi-academic register, but frequently slips into hyperbolic phrasing that strains the limits of analytical vocabulary—a profusion of intensifiers, superlatives, and absolutisms that overwhelm the reader and create an overall sense of impotent verbal rage. The Juárez feminicides are introduced here as "normalized *barbarism*" in a "*lawless* city sponsored by a State in crisis" (7); "*extreme* [and] plutocratic, corporate, monopolistic, global, speculative, wealth-concentrating, and predatory [capitalism]" converges there (12); the border displays a "*complete* alienation from the larger nation" (36); the level of brutality reveals an "*unlimited* psychopathy" (13) and constitutes a call for a "*savage* disorder" (92); the militarized escalation of the drug war meant the installment and normalization of an oppressive "police state" (52; 55), while the criminal machine of the drug-trade remains "inherent in [Mexico's] political and economic institutions," with U.S government institutions critically involved (59); the Mexican public, meanwhile, has become paralyzed by an "*incredible* degree of amnesia and indifference" (94; emphasis added in all previous citations). At the end of this verbose onslaught of grievances, the author shrugs off any pessimism on his part, insisting his analysis to simply constitute "the observation of a negative inertia that systematically grows and expands" (97).

In an evident attempt to organize his multi-angled, interdisciplinary analysis into a manageable structure, González Rodríguez divides Ciudad Juárez into four separate cities-in-one, each corresponding to one analytical vector: the Border Town in its geopolitical and historical relation to the rest of Mexico and its northern neighbor; the Global City of Assembly, as embedded in the transnational economy; the War City, ravaged by the bilaterally conducted, heavily militarized so-called war on drugs; and finally, the City of Femicide. The cumulative effect of these angles, however, is more overwhelming than illuminating, as they generate the sense to be competing for the bleakest aspect of the city. As González Rodríguez' writing rages against these "machines," as it were, Ciudad Juárez emerges in the shape of a Hydra-shaped beast growing more terrifying and

indomitable with each added layer of analysis. Tackle one of its heads and another of the three flame-spitting heads already appears in its place. [14] Nevertheless—or perhaps precisely *because* of this—*The Femicide Machine* reads like an accurate condensation of the state of criticism at the time of its publication, down to the sense of exasperation, the exemplified representational shortcomings of nonfictional analysis, and the resulting need to branch out into unconventional modes of expression. [15]

Only by way of its "Epilogue", then, does *The Femicide Machine* transcend the analytical and representational impasse hampering academic and nonfictional literature on Juárez. Over the book's final twenty-odd pages, González Rodríguez presents a mother's account of her daughter's kidnapping, rape, killing and the aftermath for her family. It is the 2001 case of Lilia Alejandra Andrade, a young *maquiladora* worker, then 17 years old and a mother of two, who was abducted, held captive and physically and sexually abused for five days, then killed; her dead body found in a vacant lot next to a shopping mall. If the story rings familiar to readers with any prior knowledge of the Juárez feminicides, it is because the case was prominently featured in the Amnesty International report "Intolerable Killings" in 2003 that played a vital role in generating international awareness (2; 7). The 2006 feature-length documentary *Bajo Juárez*: *La ciudad devorando a sus hijas* also featured Norma Andrade's testimony, the mother of Lilia Alejandra. And finally, Gonzalez Rodríguez himself had already included Lilia Alejandra's story in his experimental nonfiction book *Huesos en el desierto* in 2002, as a result of personal encounters and interviews with her mother (personal email). The injustice suffered by the family propelled both Norma Andrade, who co-founded the grassroots organization *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, and Lilia Alejandra's sister to become vocal anti-feminicide activists.

Indeed, in many ways, Ale's case may be seen as, if not the most representative statistically speaking, then still a highly *emblematic* case of feminicide in Juárez. In *Huesos*, her case is presented briefly in formally unremarkable language and without any mention of her mother to effectively exemplify the blatant failures of criminal investigations in Juárez at the time (221; 235; 244). Her name appears again in the book's final chapter "La vida inconclusa" among over a hundred feminicide victims listed chronologically backwards according to the respective dates of their discovery from September 2002 to January 1993, each annotated with as much or little factual information as the investigations had yielded: "21/02/01, Lilia Alejandra García Andrade, 17 años, baldío frente a Plaza Juárez Mall, envuelta en una cobija, semidesnuda, fue atada, violada, mutilada y estrangulada." (...17 years, empty lot in front of the Plaza Juárez Mall, wrapped in a blanket, half-naked, was found tied up, raped, mutilated, and strangled) (259). This section became one of the key inspirations for Roberto Bolaño's "The Part About the Crimes" in *2666* (Driver "Risks"). While Bolaño's novel weaves elaborate storylines around the recurring

descriptions of mangled bodies and stagnant investigations, the list in *Huesos* performs an act of commemoration yet fails to sustain consistent reader attention due to its uninterrupted monotonous repetitiveness. Individually heartbreaking, in accumulation the words merge into an overwhelming blur of dates, names, places, numbers, physical attributes, articles of clothing, clinical terminology, and over and over again, "no identificada" ("not identified") (257-73).

By contrast, *The Femicide Machine*'s *re*-presentation of Lilia Alejandra's story conveys immediacy and accessibility, narrated over the span of seven small pages in a colloquial first-person account that stands as a striking contrast to the preceding word clusters of the book's portentous analysis. The conclusion of what happened to Norma Andrade's daughter instills a particular jolt in the reader. The last paragraph relates Alejandra's ordeal in a few short, plainspoken phrases that carry an enormous power in their blunt, bitter, and accusatory simplicity, while assuming the formal shape of a prose poem:

> They kidnapped my daughter, like so many other girls, right off the street.
>
> They beat her.
>
> They tied her hands.
>
> They tortured her.
>
> They mutilated her while she was alive.
>
> They burned her with cigarettes.
>
> They killed her by strangling her until she was asphyxiated.
>
> And then they threw her into a vacant lot like she was garbage.
>
> Alejandra.
>
> I looked at her in the coffin and I almost didn't recognize her: She who had such a pretty, long neck was now like a hunchback, sunk down into her shoulders. They broke her. She faced an inhuman death all alone. She was just on her way home, like so many other girls. (105)

In the face of overwhelming atrocity and hopelessness, the individuality and authority of testimony becomes operational to convey the human element, countering the distant observer's self-protective impulse to simply write off the 'hell' of Juárez as a lost cause. Through its disarming immediacy, testimony has the capacity to bridge the gulf that divides subaltern subject and privileged audience. These are real people, they live here, and they tell their own stories—"human cannon fodder" they are not (González Rodríguez, *Machine* 12).

4. Nothing to See Here?

Un/*Real Pictures* in Sergio Rodríguez González' *The Femicide Machine*

Until he turned into an unlikely early expert on the Juárez feminicides, Sergio González Rodríguez was an intellectual mainly versed in the fine arts in his career as a culture editor for the liberal-leaning newspaper *Reforma* in Mexico City. With an evident nod to this background he frames the account by Lilia Alejandra's mother with a deliberate conceptual twist. The chapter is titled "Epilogue: Instructions for Taking Textual Photographs", the testimony itself then introduced as a "Photographic mise-en-scène" (99). Its language is kept deceptively plain, comprised of simple vocabulary and arranged in short, straightforward sentence structures. Yet it contains a wealth of detail and vivid imagery that effectively portray the daily life of a humble lower/middle-class family, allowing for deeper insights into their socioeconomic woes. Some of the passages may evoke Sandra Cisneros' deliberately child-like poetic prose of *The House on Mango Street* to the effect of invoking the universal through the specific:

> Lilia Alejandra was seventeen and had two small children.
>
> You'd see her with her babies and she looked like a little girl playing with her dolls.
>
> She was very disappointed with her boyfriend, so she preferred to live with us. (99)
>
> […]
>
> Since she was pretty, they used her as a model to pose next to the products the factory produced. They took her picture a lot. (100)

The theatrical allusion of the "mise-en-scène" subtitle issues an unmistakable request for the reader to approach the text in decidedly visual terms, as if setting up reading stage directions in a written play, activating the reader's imaginative faculties as if announcing, "and *this* is what the Femicide Machine looks like in reality; *picture* this!" The frame also acknowledges the utilitarian artifice of the testimonial account without diminishing its claim to truthfulness. [16]

But González Rodríguez' masterstroke is the opaque concept of the "textual photographs," the meaning of which is revealed after the testimony's harsh conclusion. On twenty blank pages, titled "Photograph 1" through "Photograph 20," we find twenty captions placed in the center of each page, each describing one nonexistent (or rather, non-displayed) photo to the ineluctable effect of making us pause to imagine and reflect. Some of the captions to the absent photographs simply specify locations and settings relevant to Alejandra's case. Others describe impossible snapshots of key moments of her kidnapping:

> Alejandra resists abduction on Rancho Becerra
>
> Street, not far form the plant where she worked. (110)

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Two individuals force a woman—Alejandra—into a
white Thunderbird in front of a TV repair shop, the
night of February 19, 2001. (113)

Others still describe what, if depicted, would be facsimiles of official documents or technical recording devices, meticulously dated and classified:

Image taken from security cameras at the factory
where Alejandra worked, the day of Alejandra's
kidnapping on February 14, 2001, at the end of
the workday, 7pm (108)

Printed notice of Alejandra's disappearance (112)

Alejandra's semi-hidden body as seen on television (117)

Add to these three "Satellite images," complete with date, time, and precise geographic coordinates (123-5). Some of the described images are likely to actually exist in one form or other, such as a "[photo] taken of Alejandra at the factory where she worked" (107) or a family picture "taken years after her murder" (122). The length of the captions ranges from minimal one-liners (112) to a detailed description of Alejandra's physical appearance, including clothes and attire, on the day she went missing (109), which is mirrored, ten pages further on, by an equally elaborate description of her dead body in the medical precision of an autopsy, printed in nineteen lines that form a justified block of text that visually fills out the center of the page just like a medium-sized photograph would (119).

González Rodríguez borrowed the device—unwittingly so, as he assured me via personal correspondence—from Chilean-American conceptual artist Alfredo Jaar. In 1995, he conceived an evolving series of installations on the genocide in Rwanda named *Real Pictures*. The exhibition consisted of an arrangement of black boxes that contained photographs of sites and victims, survivors, volunteers, and other people somehow linked to the genocide, but the boxes remained closed, the images kept hidden from the viewer. Instead, only white-on-black inscriptions detailing the concealed contents of each container were visible. Here the "real" evades being captured in representation; the black boxes are anti-representation, a refusal of the hegemony of representation. [17]

Jacques Rancière uses Jaar's *Real Pictures* to explicate his concept of "The Intolerable Image" in *The Emancipated Spectator*—and we may then, in turn, apply his illuminating explications to González Rodríguez' "Textual Photographs." In certain ways Rancière echoes Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, similarly demanding that we reconsider visual representations of

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atrocity and their political potential, the ways in which they operate on and are being received by the viewer. Seeking to "rescue the analysis of images from the trial-like atmosphere in which it is still so often immersed" and to "challenge [...] identifications of the use of image with idolatry, ignorance or passivity" (95), Rancière questions a series of traditionally upheld but on close inspection collapsing constructs of binary oppositions: between viewing and knowing, activity and passivity, (surface) appearance and (hidden) reality, which underlie most postmodern denouncements of the spectacle. "Emancipation," he declares, "begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting" (12). Since the act of viewing entails observing, selecting, comparing and interpreting, it is automatically in and of itself a productive act "that confirms or transforms [the] distribution of position." (13). For Rancière, much of the critique of the spectacle invariably reproduces the logic of postmodernism's diagnosed nihilism that it purports to criticize, just as political art, when anticipating and, indeed, depending on its audience's prior understanding of—including their own incrimination in—what it is that is being denounced, often merely serves to have the spectator "wallow in guilt" as opposed to "prompt her to political action" (88). Another presumed opposition Rancière takes on is testimony as oral narrative versus photographic images as documentary proof (90-3). To him, both are to be located on the same map of representation, which he defines as "not the act of producing a visible form, but the act of offering an equivalent—something that speech does just as much as photography" (93).

Turning to Jaar's *Real Pictures* installation on the Rwanda genocide as an example of a text that succeeds in disrupting accustomed viewing habits, thus enhancing the active potential of the viewing process instead of laboring to anticipate the effect the images would have on the viewers, Rancière observes: "Here the words are detached from any voice; they are themselves taken as visual elements" (95), and then more to the point: "The words do not replace images. They *are* images" (97; my emphasis). If representation is not an act of producing a visible duplicate but rather an equivalent, then Alfredo Jaar's black boxes, much the same way as Sergio González Rodríguez' Textual Photographs, create precisely that "certain connection between the verbal and the visual" (ibid.), effectively turning them into examples of visual objects that "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects," that Rancière sought to champion at the outset (82). "As such," he writes, "[art] can open new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation" as long as it remains aware of that unavoidable "aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions" (ibid.).

This is where *The Femicide Machine* struggles, in its premeditated intentionality and in spite of itself, against Rancière's pronouncements. The intentions of Rodríguez González' project are very much a given through the deliberately created frame of the preceding critical analysis. The author insists his work to be understood as journalistic reportage rather than artistic conceptualization.

The "Epilogue" remains a complementary addendum—unlike Alfredo Jaar's installation; it is not supposed to be the main event here. In a generous email interview, Sergio Gonzalez Rodríguez confirmed that he precisely anticipated "hacer que el lector imagine la tragedia que narro como si fueran evidencias fotográficas. Las palabras se desdoblan en imágenes mentales (...to have the reader imagine the tragedy that I narrate as if through photographic evidence. The words unfold into mental images)" (my translation). In utilitarian terms, he deems testimonial accounts necessary to oppose those re-emerging revisionist voices fundamentally questioning the reality of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez as such. In my reading, however, González Rodríguez is selling himself short. More than mere illustrative supplement to support his analysis, the blank pages stage a powerful intervention in the dominant visual hegemony of human rights discoures and journalistic conventions, one that potentially carries lasting repercussions for the individual reader's habits of perception.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, allow me a personal reflection over my own initial encounter with these evocative captions and elliptical photos. It occurred to me that in my previous research, working my way through articles and books of scholarship on gender violence and the specific history of the situation in Juárez—several of which included sections of photographic illustrations—I had tended to skip over those sections, or at best, hastily flicked through those pages, casting no more than a fleeting glance over images of protests, *rastreos*, victims' families, crime scenes, urban scenery, desert landscapes, makeshift homes and memorials. What Rodríguez González achieves here, by experimenting with form in such a perplexing yet simple way, is to create an effective miniature model of Susan Sontag's notion of how a written narrative structurally engages us for a longer period of time than an image—without even resorting to the use of a *narrative* proper.

It takes no more than a split second to take in even quite complex visual images, much less time than needed to process even the shortest caption presented on these pages. Confident to have earned our full attention through the preceding testimonial, González Rodríguez plays with our sense of anticipation, tricking us into a sort of ethical self-interrogation: We are curious to *see*, now that we have come to know this story and met its characters; we are eager for illustration, for the gratification of seeing the victim (not only because she was said to be attractive), her family (in their grief and in struggle), the unpunished perpetrators (for the small cathartic reward of

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channeling our outrage), and even her brutalized body (for all the darker age-old reasons put forth by Sontag). Our gaze lingers on these pages between compassion, curiosity, and confusion. But our impulse for voyeuristic gratification is denied, an increasingly rare experience in today's image-driven world of instant access, and the blank pages reflect back our puzzled gaze onto ourselves. While our eyes zigzag through lines of a block of text that list in medical precision the grisly injuries inflicted upon Lilia Alejandra's body, we invariably come to question this urge to see more. What would possibly be gained by it?

Sergio González Rodríguez flips around that old slogan from *Paris Match*, retrieved by Susan Sontag and here repurposed for the title of my article. The recycled testimonial by Norma Andrade shocks with words, and it is his textual photos that trigger a deeper, weightier reflection. Rancière calls this the "redistribution of the sensible": the mapping out of new ways of seeing, thinking, and understanding, through images that "change our gaze and the landscape of the possible" (105). When I think of Charles Bowden's "carved wooden mask" image always first and foremost remember Bowden's enacted personal associations, his flagrant fantasizing and his troubling gaze; *The Femicide Machine*, however, will stay with me for forcing me to confront my own gaze. Needless to say, González Rodríguez holds little control over the broader media discourse in which his readers are immersed or immerse themselves. In fact, as one of his captions indicates, news outlets have already broadcast footage of Alejandra's half-covered body. And yet, within the confines of his thin little volume, he does successfully create an artificial space devoid of sensationalist imagery without diminishing the level of shock, outrage, and empathy elicited. And for once, someone does get to play that "guardian of rationed horror", realizing Susan Sontag's elusive old goal of an "ecology of images."

Endnotes

[1] This is the old advertising slogan from the French magazine *Paris Match*, borrowed for my purposes from Susan Sontag's mention of the phrase in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (20).

[2] For an extensive, if by no means complete, selection of books, films, and music taking up the topic of the Juárez feminicides, see: Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán, 298-300.

[3] Consider, for example, Kathleen Staudt's concession in 2009 that "national and state human rights commissions lack authority to compel changes in Mexico," just as academic criticism does (Staudt 2), or Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán's palpable and representative frustration in their introduction to their 2010 essay collection, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade and La Frontera*:

> Nowadays, we know too much, and yet we continue to know nothing. [Throughout years of] learning; reading; researching; raising consciousness; signing petitions; writing stories, poetry, and music; making art; organizing conferences; and collecting anthologies, there are only two things that have changed. The number of victims continues to grow. And now the Juárez femicides have become a legend. (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán 1)

[4] His 1996 article in *Harper's* magazine "While You Were Sleeping"—subject of the subsequent discussion—was awarded, among other accolades, The Hillman Prize for outstanding journalism dedicated to social justice (Smith).

[5] The term "economic violence" is proposed by Julian Cardona, a recurrent collaborator of Bowden and one of the *Juarense* photographers featured in *Laboratory,* to refer not to physical forms of violence that are individually induced, but rather to systemic victimization associated with poverty and marginalization (Driver "En Juárez" 180-81).

[6] Since the escalation of the drug war under former president Felipe Calderón, self-censorship has become a crippling problem in the Mexican press, and many periodicals in regions most severely affected by organized crime stopped posting their journalists' bylines under articles on *narco*–related issues. In 2009, Mexico was declared the most dangerous country for journalists worldwide by *Reporters Without Borders*, even ahead of war- and terror-torn Iraq. By 2012, Sergio González Rodríguez cites 65 journalists killed throughout Mexico since 2000 (*Machine* 86) and seventeen murdered human rights defenders and activists in the state of Chihuahua alone since 2009 (*Machine* 51).

[7] Lourdes Portillo, the activist filmmaker behind the lauded documentary film *Señorita Extraviada / Missing Young Woman*, for instance, lists precisely Bowden's core factors as root causes behind the gender violence in the Mexican borderlands (PBS).

[8] While Bowden's use of statistical data to relativize femicide in comparison with the escalating (and overwhelmingly male) death count of the drug war neglects the particular forms of victimization and power relations at play, his criticism of the term "femicide" and the disproportionate focus on the murdered women in the media ties in with recent research on the war over the public discourse as presently conducted by the state with regard to the *narco* violence. In 2011, Melissa Wright predicted an uphill battle for activists trying to contest the official line of interpretation, which cynically holds the violent deaths of thousands of young poor Mexican males as merely criminals killing each other off and, simultaneously, evidence for the state's success in destabilizing the cartels. This new re-manifestation of the blaming-the-victim discourse will be even harder to discredit when the victims-to-blame were young women and girls. A preliminary step could be the new term "juvenicidio" that seeks to redefine the thousands of casualties of the drug war as young, disenfranchised victims as opposed to categorically guilty criminals (Wright, "Necropolitics").

[9] Charles Bowden's critique of the popular and narrow understanding of "femicide" in Juárez as exclusively spectacular abduction/rape/murder cases also echoes Kathleen Staudt's proposed shift of attention toward the pervasive quotidian forms of gender violence.

[10] There is no shortage of statistical evidence to back up alarmist denouncements of the Mexican justice system as de facto non-existent. Impunity rates for Mexico are notoriously overwhelming. Already before the militarization of the narco war plunged entire regions into escalating cartel- and state-induced terror and judicial chaos, Alicia Schmidt Camacho cites an impunity rate of 97 percent from a 2000 study of the criminal justice system ("Ciudadana" 268), and in 2012, at the tail end of what has since been called "Calderon's War", González Rodríguez speaks of a nationwide impunity rate of 99%-- a number so high that it entails a declining rate of *reported* crime while *real* crime keeps rising (cf.: Schmidt Camacho "Ciudadana" 269). González Rodríguez' blunt conclusion: "Rule of law does not exist in Mexico, just as it doesn't exist in Ciudad Juárez" (*Machine* 46). For a comprehensive critical engagement with precisely the kind of feminicide-skepticism displayed by the late Bowden and other critics, see Steven Volk's contribution to this issue.

[11] Jacques Rancière, for one, compellingly opposes the readily accepted assumption of our media as oversaturated with violent imagery of atrocity:

> For the dominant media by no means drowns us in a torrent of images testifying to massacres, massive population transfers and the other horrors [...] Quite the reverse, they reduce their number, taking good care to select and order them [...] What we see above all in the news on our TV screens are the faces of the rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the images, who tell us what they show and what we should make of them. If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. (96)

[12] The post-Christmas 2004 earthquake and tsunami in South East Asia may serve as an apt illustrative example here. The distribution of spectacular apocalyptical visuals through TV and amateur footage online both seemed to titillate dark voyeuristic impulses of Western audiences watching from the safe distance of comfortable living rooms while simultaneously mobilizing a wave of international solidarity, as evidenced by the considerable volunteer response and money donations.

[13] Today, Sergio González Rodríguez' is perhaps best known for his role as Roberto Bolaño's foremost on-site source of information while the late Chilean novelist was conceiving his magnum opus *2666* (2004) that centers around a thinly veiled fictionalization of Ciudad Juárez and the feminicides.

[14] More than just the "femicide machine," González Rodríguez also theorizes the war machine, crime machine, police machine, and "the machine of apolitical conformity" in Ciudad Juárez' (10; 97).

[15] Invoking Susan Sontag and Georges Didi-Huberman, González Rodríguez explained his stance on graphic images of violence to me as follows: "hay que dejar que las imágenes atroces nos persigan. Asimismo, Didi-Huberman ha añadido a tal punto de vista un concepto: tenemos que desarrollar imágenes-escudo contra la barbarie." (We have to let the atrocious images haunt us. Likewise, Didi-Huberman has added a concept to this point of view: that we must develop image-shields against atrocity; my translation)

[16] In our email correspondence, González Rodríguez was adamant about the absolute accuracy of his retelling of Norma Andrade's account: "el testimonio refiere lo sustancial de los hechos acontecidos ... Mis libros de non fiction se limitan a narrar hechos" (the testimony relates the substantial of the facts as they occurred. ... My non-fiction books merely narrate facts; my translation) and only after I clarified that I was merely speaking of a stylization—as opposed to a fictionalization—showed himself willing to entertain my question regarding the chosen narrative mode. It is a further reflection of a media environment, in which a recent "revisionist tendency" is launching ad hominem attacks against those writing about feminicide, seeking to paint the very existence of feminicide in Ciudad Juárez as a mere "myth" or academic invention. (ibid., my translations)

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[17] Robert Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* (2013) is another example that uses this technique of detaching explanatory captions from their visual signifiers in order to foreground, destabilize, and renegotiate the interaction of text, image, and narrative, while playing with viewer/reader perception. A US-based scholar and poet, Fitterman used actual captions of photographs from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. and rearranged them into the shape of a long poem, split into several thematic sections, across almost 100 pages.

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