

Body on Narrative:

Figurativisation and Ethical Assessment in the Effects of the “Narcotrafico” in Television

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Introduction: the corporeal body as a process of meaning

The process of constructing an image such as in the action of collective memory allows the formation of images, linguistic expression, and processes of identity that leave their mark over the time. The narrative organization of a story adapts the corporeal visual unit to the distinct expressive substances and to the structural possibilities of the stories in their adaptation from literature to film (*La Virgen de los sicarios*, 1993; 2000); from literature to

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film and to soap opera (Rosario Tijeras, 1999; 2006; 2010). In each adaptation, changes are made where the intertextuality and the intersemiotics act as strategies in the interpretive cooperation of the receptor, using complex visual processes. The body emerges as a part of a semiotic material available to narrate the events and it becomes the principal organizer of the meaning. The body is the instrument and the means at the same time.

The topic chosen for the present analysis is based on Colombian television productions that offer two identifiable characteristics: i) The first consists of the globalization that these television productions have enjoyed in recent decades. They are stories in a soap opera (telenovela) format that are capable of affecting local consumption by means of a cultural translation and adaptation of specific cultural forms; *Café con aroma de mujer* (1999), *Betty la fea* (1999), etc.; ii) The second characteristic consists of presenting the most recent story by means of a dramatization separated into episodes. In this perspective we find the most recent cases, *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2005 for the novel and 2006 for the soap opera), *El cartel de los sapos* (2008 for both versions and 2011 for the second season) and *Rosario Tijeras* (2010). All three cases present innovative forms of visual narration. Each one includes the focalization of an historic event to transform into a visual unit and place it in the interconnectedness of the soap opera. Due to this process, it is possible to understand the way in which Colombian soap operas participate in the collective reflection of the bitter period of drug trafficking (1970-2000), and to place it as a part of a recent past that is necessary to overcome with forgetting.

The second point refers to the body as a meaningful form and as a vehicle of meaning. The meanings of the concept of bodyness and the

semantics matrixes are manifested in television fiction and are identifiable due to a semiotic analysis of the story. The definition of bodyness is “the characteristic of what has body or consistency” and note as an example that “spirits do not have bodyness”, while the same concept is also defined as “quality of bodyness”. In both cases the colloquial use of the term is also a sense given in a conceptual way. In this way we observe that, on the one hand, it refers to a condition present in the body that permits the identification as part of a process of perception. It involves the materialization as a cause and effect relationship that derives from the ability to be perceived due to the senses and the outlines of the perception that precedes the ability to produce judgments. The described process shapes the construction of a series of instructions necessary for the comprehension of collective images, capable of being confronted at the interior of a community and that guarantee continuance and the circulation of meaning.

The derivative question should respond to the ways that the body assumes in order to be a vehicle and expression of passionate forms socially shared before events that mark difficult moments in the history of a small town, as in the case of narcotrafficking in Colombian society in recent decades.

1. Semiotics and the study of the body

Semiotics constructs the concept of the body through sources defined by the meaning of the body in primary systems and in their extension to secondary systems. In addition, the concept arises from methodological

models to construct taxonomic parameters necessary in a semiotic analysis of the body. The specific semiotic applications apply to the study of the body even in the philosophical reflection of concrete phenomenon such as the corporal materialization of drugs trafficking (*narco tráfico*) and its use in the semiotic systems of film and television. The body possesses meanings that permit the understanding of the vision that determines a specific here and now before a certain problem.

A semiotic analysis of the body is defined by the variable meanings of the semiotic term that include: i) a mental process fulfilled in a collective manner; ii) a system organized hierarchically by means of norms and rules that guarantee the arbitrary union of two levels: one conceptual and one material; iii) the equivalent of code; iv) the collection of methodological instruments governed by a scientific paradigm. In all of the above-mentioned cases, it is possible to speak about a semiotic analysis of the body only if it is conceived as a result of the interaction of distinct sub-disciplines. This is possible due to the contributions of physiognomic, proxemics, chronemics, gesture, kinesics, etc. (Nöth, 1985 [1995]).

The body has the capacity as signifier to develop a function as an object of analysis: as a taxonomical base for a methodology, such as segmentation for an explanatory typology of a theoretical nature, or as a point of departure for philosophical reflection. The semiotic analysis of the body resides in the corporal capacity to materialize images that arise from the collective memory transforming the matter in the body of the enunciation. Its distinctive characteristic, therefore, stems from the “transubstantial” capacity, known as “transemiotics”; in other words, it is a semiotic material capable of constructing meaning in any system, as is observed in film,

television, photography, objects, manners of dress, architecture, to cite the most studied. Furthermore, this malleable ability allows it to be an active part in the structural construction of a text. It is inserted in the basic principles of the narrative through the subject and participates in the structure of meaning, in its circulation and carries with it the culture in which it develops.

2. Semiotics, body and ethics

In the text “When the Others Appears on the Scene” by Umberto Eco there is a dialogue held with Carlo Maria Martini, bishop of Milan. In this forum, Eco observes how the body is the beginning that situates the individual in the world but at the same time separates him from others and marks fundamental differences that allow for the comprehension of the base of respect for human rights;”[...] (Eco, 1997 [1998: 97-111])

In the problem put forward, Eco pauses to grant an ethical value that is detached from the body as a beginning and from which we perceive our notion of the human being. The body, as a living entity, is conceived as a delimited space with which it is possible to generate actions in relation to its environment. It follows a coordinating principal of perception and it is the receptacle of values that stem from the universality of human thought. The body expresses its strength in order to construct transcendental values by means of chains of passion inserted in narrative processes. This is possible due to the relationship that emerges between the values and

the actions of the human body, whether they be transitive or reflexive. The cause and effect relationship, which is indeed observed and in its individual existence in the tight connection with the individual object that determines them, if we paraphrase the relationship present in Charles Sanders Peirce constitutes one of the ways in which meaning can be deduced from the corporal perception in a comprehensible way in a social dimension.

3. The body as a means of expression and the content of social values

Structural semiotics has given rise to the existence of “semiotics of passion” as a methodological instrument to become aware of the processes that generate texts, such as the addition of syntax of passion. The discussion of passions brings with it a task consisting of “advancing the comprehension of how to produce symbolic efficiency in discursive universes” (Bernardéz Rodal). In this perspective, the predominant idea is that of emphasizing the principal role that the body and bodyness plays, in the sense that passion does not exist without the body.

The conception of the body in semiology in the tradition of Roland Barthes is found at the interior of the function and of the disciplinary tasks of semiotics from this perspective (Marrone, 1994). The body is presented as a vehicle of action to emit verbal messages and as an instrument that generates passion, while at the same reflecting an ideology. Both function and task become possible when the body is placed in a process constructing meaning. This conjunction demonstrates two aspects i) the connection to problems of a phenomenological nature and ii) the relationship to an

interdisciplinary action when one studies that meaning that it possess.

The body as a sign of something allows us to conceive of the body as a meaningful unit and as a vehicle of an abstract concept that wants to be meaningful. One can speak of a corporal unit that materializes bodyness in the sense of embodiment. The opposition between soul and body, and analogically, the opposition between the intelligible and the sensitive, condition the difference that emerges between the level of content (meaning) and the level of expression (signifier). The separation is equivalent to the intention of awarding meaning, as a vital activity directed to a body that lacks its own life as far as quality of meaning.

The body acquires a condition that becomes the base of a semiotic analysis of the body in order to place itself in the level of expression and capable of being delimited and individualized, but at the same time replicated in an infinite number of texts to the degree of crossing the most varied semiotic systems.

4. The body as a model of analysis

The ways of employing bodyness vary when using the body as a point of reference. These different ways serve the following functions i) to categorize space, ii) to establish a relationship between the human subject and objects external to him: iii) to characterize and give form to the meanings through language, face, and memory. In the analytic dimension and taking the outline of the body as a point of reference, semiotics is concerned with the relationship that exists between sense and value in the theory of

meaning of values, which are tied to the *pathemic* dimension in direct connection to the corporal thinking which gives cause to aspects that emerge semantically (Violi, 1991: 136). The body is the initial measurement to transmit passions and sensations in connection with ethic values.

A use and a function for the body exist when it is presented and represented in mass communication. The body possesses values of composition and transcendental values that leave a trace, including ideological traces (Barthes, 1975). The analysis permits the recuperation of these values in a process of organization and hierarchicalization, as a base of comprehension for the memory of mass communication. Sergio Moyinedo (2003) maintains that bodyness acts as a hierarchical form to which a specific function of figuration of the body is assigned. One must differentiate the represented object from the subject of the representation in where the body crosses the mechanisms (technical and semiotic determinations) that make up the world and its image just as it is represented. The task consists of establishing the values of here and now at the moment of the representation, and are found in harmony with the values of the time period and they keep up to date the original conditions of interpretation permitting the establishment of characteristics that constitute the first step in recovered memory. In this way we get closer to a history of the mechanisms of representation by means of the identification of the conception of bodyness that has been represented. The body, in its condition of text is a product of a --- system to the degree of including meaning at distinct levels. The body permits the comprehension of a series of semantic relationships by means of processes of synecdoche. Metonymy is the condition with which the body and its relationship with other systems act by means of an

intersubjective condition. The condition is necessary for a social semiosis and has the job of depositing memory in the use of the body and in the images that are made of it.

Television fiction uses risky ways to arrive at meaning through use of the body: modified, ugly, attacked, mutilated, dismembered, shrouded, in some occasions penetrated by digital technology that reconstructs that process of destruction as an illustration of what could be. The body and television narratives live in an intense imperative and complementary relationship in the construction of genres and formats.

The depersonalization of the body also exists both as a legible text as evidence for a specialist, and in this materialization we see the necessary background for the police investigator: *Law and Order*, the CSI series (Vegas, New York, Miami), *Bones*, are only outdone by the series *Nip/Tuck* that is constructed through a canonical model of the classic text and dismembered following the rhetorical operations of removal in a scrupulous manner in each episode. The body goes from being contemplation to transform by means of a process of change that varies from episode to episode distinguishing itself by the double history that makes it up.

5. The use of the body in the series *Sin tetas no hay paraíso*, Rosario Tijeras and *El cartel de los sapos*

The analyzed *narco-narratives* are a representation of what it is seen in Colombian series, *telenovelas* and films. All are based under the same theme: stories taken from drug trafficking as an expression of their recent

past. The idea is to enclose similar elements in a subgenre: the *narco-novela* within a *telenovela* (soap opera), but strictly speaking we would talk about a common language in the *narco-series*.

If we examine the narrative structure of the dialogue patterns, it follows the traditional *telenovela* (soap's) narrative structure. The plots suggest the "untold stories" of drug trafficking. The breakdown of the stories and plots reveal a hierarchy of its parts and allow us to identify the different units of the contemporary Colombian history within the narrative.

Well-grounded accounts allow the insertion of visual language structures from a historical context; in this manner people are placed in a determined time and space. The texts develop in a hypothetic time that encloses several elements through the account of facts and real situations making an encyclopedic interpretation plausible, aside from letting the reader place the real time of the event. To suffice our purposes it's necessary to cast horizontal linkages to that of the story's red thread towards the thematic focal and achieve the inclusion of those visual narrative structures and the narratives projecting from corporal images.

Some of the narrative structures that we use as illustrative means for this analysis come from the historical characteristics already explained and are introduced in a more clear way in each plot. We can see: 1. the escalation theory, detriment of bodies due to drug consumption. 2. violence that mutilate, transform and torture bodies and 3. hired assassins (selective killings) and massacred bodies, which make up the main narrative assigning specific functions to include and evoke passion loads and not misleading the consecutiveness of the narrative.

The story's sense will be perceptible not only at the end of the story

but in various ways throughout the narrative. We have two clear examples: first, the life cycle and its bodily manifestation as part of the space-time construction necessary for the character's development. Visual language is included in certain parts of the plot and responds to the story in two of its functions; distributional and integrating, and in both cases transports the main characters to death. The actor goes through each stage with his body as a vehicle to prove change. In *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* the life cycle develops around Catalina, a young adolescent whose body is assigned to integrate the main course of the theme. A young girl, Catalina, taken care by a mature woman, Doña Hilda, two bodies that contrast and show two poles: the beginning and the end of the cycle. Catalina's death interrupts the cycle with her absence, which will be compensated at the end of the story with the birth of Doña Hilda's son, conceived with Catalina's ex-boyfriend. This kid, conceived out of love and unaware of the temptations of "easy money", will replace Catalina and Byron who were riddled by hired assassins.

The life cycle is less canonical in *El cartel de los Sapos* with distributional loads throughout the narrative. The body appears in two different forms, first with the Rodriguez family, where every member represents a developmental stage of a life cycle within a family and is revealed in the body representation: the paternal authority: a strong man, the oldest brother: young and athletic body, the youngest brother: a developing masculine body. It's through the body and its gestures that hierarchical structures are manifested: feminine figures, sisters: heftiness proving authority over sister in-laws, child protectors, etc.

There is a less canonical use of the life cycle within the narrative structure. The remarkable detail emerges in representing the cartel members

within a family structure. The clan shows the cartel members as a group, kind of a family congregation. The consecutive killings of members allow the continuity of the cycle, giving opportunity to ascend in the hierarchy. The bodies show their ferocity and reveal their meaning:

- The impoverishment of ethical values of the Drug Lords when handing over power with their disappearing, death or jailing.
- The body degradation in order to give in to their lieutenants and finally to their assassins.

The vital cycle allows the red thread of the narrative. Catalina, the bigger her breasts she thinks will improve her living standard, Rosario with her heftiness calls on continuous violence and Martin Gonzalez, “el Fresita”, young drug dealer of a new generation, his body is raped by an American policeman while caught and jailed as it is described at the beginning of the story, a trapped body, degraded and powerless. All will overcome the stages of the cycle with the development of their bodies and with their acting roll towards the conclusion of the story.

The **selective killings** as a narrative unit: 1. as part of a sequence, 2. as an active roll. The resolution is foreseen as part of the story that ends with a mutilated body. In *Sin Tetas no hay Paraiso* Catalina’s brother, Byron, emerges in the trafficking world as a hired killer. Throughout the narrative cycle he’s understood as a hired killer whose possibilities of dying are part of sequence. Death is imminent throughout the whole story. The killer’s roll is active and must insert himself as a helper or opponent, both in the same story. In *Rosario Tijeras* we can clearly see both

functions: Johefe as part of the story and Rosario as the central focal of the story. In *El Cartel de los Sapos* the killer is merely circumstantial to the needs of the narrative structure, which in its expressive richness proves the many ways this roll can be assumed in real life. The killer shows the beginning of a cycle, massacring others to end up being massacred.

A second type of semantic unit comes in the narrative syntaxes of a story building the corporeal structures. The invaded body, mutilated, utilized, the body in action are several categories in which the body is treated to express passion.

Despite having so many more elements of the recent history in Colombia, which exist in the stories, we have focused on those more evident in constructing the corporeal semantics and its effect in the trafficking world (narco world) of its culture.

6. Corporeal semiotic and the body as a narrative device

The unlimited possibility a performer's body has to construct a specific semiotic proves the existence of theoretic and methodological models. Models respond to the need of producing texts for mass media sources, as in television.

Corporeality works as a meaning organizer and responds to semiotic perspectives dictated by the forms of expression: plastic and figurative. The body becomes a prolific story generator and is capable of empowering the analytical tools needed to observe the various types of narrative styles: the desired object, the wrongdoer, treatment of time, and timing for passions.

The body is a guide and representation but becomes the subject of study, the text, the expression of abstract images represented in the imagery of a specific culture, the rage over the body through mutilation, torture and death.

The body is a measure instrument and starting point for the creation of texts. The body acts as an embryonic cell of a text within a text. It's the foundation to express passions, aesthetic canons, variations of norms that rule a system and changes through time. It's a place of torture, veneration, desecration, desire, etc. On one hand it's harmony, equilibrium and proportion and on the other it's change, modification and destruction. Through the body it is plausible to prove values that govern the occidental thinking. The positive value in its regularity, transcendence and continuity and all change or modification in the body becomes a negative value as transformation and transgression.

Drugs and their damaging effects have affected the Colombian conscience, which is fighting to recover credibility of a natural and normal life style. The slow narrative process allows the Colombian population to canalize the horrors in which it has been involved. The body, vulnerable to pain and suffering has become the best vehicle to express it. Thanks to the body one can achieve the comprehension of a social phenomenon that is aiming to become part of a healing past. A past shared in a body, corporeal and as a collective memory, a body never to forget to never repeat.

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Keywords:

Visual Semiotics, semiotics of the body, Narrative, television fiction, Television semiotics

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