

# PERIFÉRICA BLVD. OR A (NEO)-BAROQUE INQUIRY AT LA PAZ<sup>1</sup>

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**Recommended citation** || RENJEL ENCINAS, Daniela (2013): "Periférica Blvd. or a (neo)-Baroque Inquiry at La Paz" [online article], *452°F. Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 9, 143-161, [Consulted on: dd/mm/aa], < [http://www.452f.com/pdf/numero09/09\\_452f-mis-daniela-renjel-encinas-en.pdf](http://www.452f.com/pdf/numero09/09_452f-mis-daniela-renjel-encinas-en.pdf)>

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**Article** || Received on: 13/01/2013 | International Advisory Board's suitability: 12/05/2013 | Published: 07/2013

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**Abstract** || *Periférica Blvd.* by Adolfo Cardenas stands out as one of the works that best represents the detective novel genre in Bolivia. Its prolific nature is related to its intelligent use of parody, described by Linda Hutcheon as “repetition with critical [ironic] distance” (1985: 37), which offers one of the most suggestive representations of the city of La Paz, through the use of humor, a baroque writing style, a palimpsest of roles and the reconstructed peripheral speech of its characters. All of these features defy what is normally expected from this genre, and position the work as one of the best (if not the best) Bolivian novels written in the last thirty years.

**Keywords** || Detective Novel | Parody | Baroque | Humor.

It is always a verification of the ironies that arts and life are made of; the fact that in a country in which daily menaces brought to unfortunate extremes is a way of day-to-day communication between citizens and citizens-government, the same way corrupt practises influence peddling, impunity and the more varied sorts of crime and elusion of justice, the crime genre has not had more than a few, though fortunately valuable, representations. With the excess of cases which could be made into fiction material, and an overwhelming creativity that could exert pressure, crime literature from Bolivia has been only visibly explored since the nineties, with *American Visa* by Juan de Recacoechea (1994), an almost foundational novel of a practice that, little by little, has captivated writers that are well known at the national level. Such is the case of Cé Mendizabal, who writes *Alguien más a cargo* (1999), a novel of inquiry-enigma; Ramón Rocha Monroy, creator of *Ladies Night* (2000); Gonzalo Lema and his detective Santiago Blanco, who appears for the first time in *Un hombre sentimental* (2001) and later in two more works (*Dime contra quién disparo* and the novel *Fue por tu amor, María*), all of them compiled in a special edition: *Santiago Blanco, serie completa* (2010); Wilmer Urrelo Zárate with *Mundo negro* (2000) and *Fantasmas Asesinos* (2006), and Edmundo Paz Soldán, who wrote *Norte* (2011) which is very close to the genre.

In spite of the lack of publication of novels within the limits of the genre—which causes Urrelo Zárate to state in “38 apuntes acerca de la literatura policial” (2009) that “[...] la literatura policial es la vida loca. En Bolivia todavía vivimos en casa de papá”—, I consider that *Periférica Blvd.* (2004) by Adolfo Cárdenas deserves a special mention and attention, since its quality and resources are a sample of crime novel at the limits of the detective genre permeated by parody, the world of comics, and a deep intertextuality with cultural references—altered by humor and irony—, which in the musical night of the *paceños* margins are the outline and engine of a particular way to understand a certain Andean culture and society. Although the denunciation that crime genre carries out as an implicit mission is present in this work, it is paradoxically a celebration of life and of the kindest, more significant face of the outskirts of a tangled city.

*Periférica Blvd.* comes to be, at a first level, the continuation of the short story of Cárdenas, *Chojcho con Audio de Rock P'eshado* (1992), which becomes the first chapter of this polyphonic novel that narrates the death of a graffiti artist and gangster carried out by another graffiti artist who, far from being a gangster, is a police lieutenant. Near the end of this chapter, it is known that said lieutenant (El Lobo) has killed El Rey for revenge, given that the latter had been stealing his “ideas” since childhood and “apoderándose de su mundo” through advertisements and graphic representations on the public walls of the city. Surprisingly, when he was doing his duty as usual,

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## NOTES

1 | A very brief version of this article has been published in the magazine *Identidades*, 5. Ministerio de Culturas, Bolivia, 2013, pp. 18-19.

the lieutenant finds out that the extravagant celebration in which the city of El Alto is immersed (the most complex, poorest among Bolivian big cities) is a homage to El Rey; and this is the moment in which, blinded by rage for what he considers unfair, he decides to kill him. All of this would seem destined to obscurity but for the fact that his driver, Severo Fernández, an Aymara and thus always denigrated by him, comes through a series of deductions to understand that his boss is involved in the murder, and after confronting him, it begins a series of manipulations and counter-manipulations, bringing into play subordination to status, exchanging at times the power for decision that both of them have before the case. In that way, during the chaos of the psychedelic homage, lieutenant Villalobos does not count on the fact that somebody had seen the scene of the shooting and, knowing that by a radio broadcaster which the witness is communicating with, the policeman and his driver visit unlikely places of the peripheral night city; a search translated into lavish meetings, staging a La Paz as mythic—in the Barthesian sense of this term: the sign of another sign—as ironic, and having its best expression in a neo-baroqueism that the novel does not cease to express and reinvent as one of its main characteristics.

Even though literary critiques on the work by Cárdenas are limited, and as a general rule they are manifested in the form of reviews in newspapers—which I think is due to the complexity of the writing and not to indifference—and some electronic blogs, *Periférica Blvd.* has just been reissued in Chile by Espora Ediciones. The prologue for this edition, written by Ana Rebeca Prada, possibly becomes the more serious critical effort on Cárdenas' work. There, it is stated that the novel “es la apuesta por las hablas y los cuerpos excéntricos, desechados, extraños a un orden comunitario” (2012: 13), and approaches it from the genres of “ópera buffa”, neo-avant-garde, and patchwork, for example, in a reading that explores the eccentric, or off-centered, connections from an assumed national canon, in a literary practice that is absolutely new in the Bolivian panorama.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, and following this rough review of the impact of this work, a comic book version will be ready in the next months; no surprise, considering that the novel includes clear winks at such genre, and we cannot fail to mention that the short story *Chojcho con Audio de Rock P'esshado*, seed and first chapter of the text, has been adapted as a theatre play and as musical play by the Grupo Mondacca (2002) and the Compañía Patas Arriba (2011- 2012) respectively.

Thus, it can be said that *Periférica Blvd.* is a milestone that demarcates a before and after in Bolivian literature, thanks to its ability to overflow any literary sub-genre; it means that no matter if it is read from the crime genre or as an urban novel; as a baroque representation or a sonorous-musical novel, *Periférica* is more than a hybrid or unusual novel that therefore demands an equal unusual effort from the reader.

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## NOTES

2 | As of today, Cárdenas has something like an entourage of interesting authors that write, or try to do it, following his aesthetics, which confirms the privileged place that his writing and style have within the Bolivian literature.

The fact of its apparent complexity was celebrated by the owner and director of the publishing house Gente Común, Ariel Mustaffá, who never imagined the sales this work was able to generate,<sup>3</sup> as he told me in an interview where he also stated that,

cualquier lector puede disfrutarla, aunque sin duda quien viva en La Paz enriquece su lectura al entender mayores referencias, como, por ejemplo, que el nombre de los tenientes son nombres de calles de la ciudad. La novela apostó por el humor para hacerse legible; un humor difícil, pero accesible (Renjel & Rico, 2007).

Nevertheless, the difficulty in reading is due less to the ignorance of spatial or historical references than to the grade of polyphony that the novel presents; which makes some voices, such as that of the corporal Juan, an indigenous emigrant to the city from a community in Lake Titicaca, an experience worthy of being listened.

En la caro peloteyando... mensaje recebero campeo... ono cuatro ciro, campeo foira... aqué onerar efe quence a dos menotos de zona en conglequeto... asé; pero toro siacaba asé comuén Sacaba y la moción destar en el ceurad de noches también aido mencuando meeeencuando, los nervios me han cominzaro a tradecionar e pa' no enloquecerme asé como la Siuiro, como el Tejerenas, como la tenente, me refogiaro en el mósicas en el teorías del composishon yen los alcoles pa' distensarme, sembré con gente del miro, ¿no? (Cárdenas, 2004: 140)<sup>4</sup>

This sample confirms without effort that Aldo Medinacelli is right affirming in “La ironía de Adolfo Cárdenas” (2008) that it is a “novela de una diafanidad solar para unos y de un cripticismo irresoluble para otros”. Without any doubt, as Mustaffá says, to know the transformed referents adds a “placer especial” to the reading, especially when it comes to the sonority of certain speeches—it is not for nothing that language is the star of this work—but it is certain that, even ignoring them, this work can be appreciated and enjoyed; the crime genre and its parody through cartoon genre, the said baroquism, the different sonority of each chapter, and the level of literary artifice, which make the writing by Cárdenas, as Roland Barthes would say “le rapport entre la création et la société, [...] le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale” (1953: 22). Such ideas rotate around the intention and the speech of the Bolivian author, who affirms, in an interview issued in number 1 of *La lagartija emplumada*, that his novel “está dedicada exclusivamente a un lector paceño”, but the social destiny of which extends when rescuing the oral word of the Aymara emigrants, to note the most visible example, but especially in creating something else from what could be just superficial acoustic forms of a reality. What the reader is facing are true buildings of a psychological, social and imaginary thickness, less a reflection than transformations of the consciousness of a reality perceived as spectacle and, therefore, worthy of celebration.

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3 | It is important to mention that P. B. concurred to the National Novel Prize 2003 and received a special mention, though not the first prize. Unofficial information has confirmed that the reason for this was the complexity of its reading for a “no paceño” reader; but behind the informal curtains of the academy, each of the members of the jury asserts to have supported it as the winner novel for that year.

4 | “En el carro piloteando... mensaje recibido, cambio... uno, cuatro, cero, cambio y fuera... Aquí unidad efe quince a dos minutos de zona en conflicto... así; pero todo se acaba así como en Sacaba [mina donde hubo un gran conflicto político que terminó con varios mineros muertos] y la emoción de estar en la ciudad de noche también ha ido menguando, meeeenguando, los nervios me han comenzado a traicionar y para no enloquecerme así como el Severo, como el Tejerina y como el Teniente, me he refugiado en la música, en las teorías de composición y en los alcoholes para destensarme, siempre con la gente del medio, ¿no?” This would be the ‘translation’ of this paragraph, at times proposed for the whole novel, aiming to manage a bigger understanding, but, as we can see, something that would eliminate one of the merits of Cárdenas: the reproduction-invention of a language faithful to the character.

For his part, Camacho, in the afore mentioned interview, refers with reason and irony that “alguien como el cabo Juan en la vida real no podría entender al cabo Juan, si accede al capítulo donde él es el narrador, ‘Sueño de reyes’”, which makes clearer the double power of writing that, following Barthes, shows things better, assuming them as a mask, and signaling the mask at the same time. Such *larvatus prodeo* to which Barthes refers makes possible the restatement of Camacho: “la sinceridad necesita aquí de signos falsos” (Barthes, 1953: 46). And for “alguien como el cabo Juan en la vida real” could recognize himself in the novel, he would need to look at himself in outline, as Lezama Lima advised when he thought of the baroque; that is, a glance that allows to see what a frontal reflex would hide: the mask that reveals the reality of the character.<sup>5</sup> Only that way, *Periférica Blvd.* can point to a reader from La Paz, but not any reader from La Paz, but the one engaged with the language and significant at play (which, ironically, makes a universal reader of that reader): a rebuilt, reinvented imaginary of La Paz, celebrating the fictional excess of that reality that can be located in this eminently baroque.

Besides the said work by Prada, Juan González (2009), editor of *El Cuervo*, offers on his blog a provocative reading from little ‘posts’ that could be made about the novel, and which I find lucid though debatable, as this fragment, to quote an example: “PB orbita en torno a un centro ausente, un original imposible. En PB no se describe, se enumera: como en el Pop, no hay ya objetos, únicamente hay datos”; a quote that at the same time is recognized as a mention to Barthes’ *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. I doubt that *Periférica* is only a stockpile of data, as Gonzales suggests. If anything, I think that the “objetos” not only are there, but are transformed and have a profoundness that is given with delicacy and intelligence, which makes the characters, for we to move away the objects, not plain beings, mere functions or clichés of their social environment, but beings with a past, choices, a history, a strong ironic charge and a great ability to surprise the reader.

## 1. A Policeman Against the Police

As I had pointed out, the particularity of this novel lies in making of parody an instrument to depict the city, the night and the thread of languages that drive the enquiry. Within such a logic, the first “transformación” (or should I say “travestimiento”) —in the way parody is understood by Linda Hutcheon, that is, as a “imitación con diferencia crítica” (1985: 37)— which the genre goes through, conventionally speaking, concerns to the tasks of detective, criminal, assistant and victim, assumed between the characters: the lieutenant —official investigator— is at the same time the murderer of *El Rey*;

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5 | Such “giving voice” to a subaltern is understood in this work as an ironic wink to the known question of G. Spivak (“Can the subordinate speak?”), since, as Camacho sustains, is almost impossible that in the speech of the corporal Juan, a native and inhabitant of the lake Titicaca, can recognize himself, and the irony is even bigger, because that difficulty would not lie in a lack of echo of his political or social demands, but in the linguistic barrier. Just the sonority of the speech captured by Cárdenas, which the readers whose mother tongue is Spanish can find and celebrate as ‘real’, it is hardly perceived this way by the ethnic-social group to which direct reference is made. Therefore, I consider this position appeals more the way fiction can be supported than a pseudo-reclaiming speech looking to politicize any ethnic or social subordination (however this paradoxically occurs), since this novel, that allows laughter without end, it also allows to reconsider reality very seriously.

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the inquiry falls on the witness of the murder, who is not, logically, a criminal, but somebody who knows or who thinks he knows the truth, which is for sure harmful for the policeman. The assistant (the driver of the police car), in theory ignorant, and who holds the stigma, before his white boss, of his social-racial condition, is actually the one who obtains the data and who makes the needed conclusions, in agreement with his wish from childhood of being a detective of the police. Nevertheless, he could have killed, not wanting to, the father of the Tamar, the man whom he interrogates, together with his boss, about the whereabouts of the Maik; which would turn him, victim of the orders from the lieutenant, into another murderer. As we can see, traditional roles are reversed from the very beginning, and are not only amplified, but they are carried out even being antagonistic, in a palimpsest way. The novel unfolds in fiction what René Zavaleta Mercado called “sociedad abigarrada” (1986: 50), thinking on Bolivian society; that is, a nation which did not manage to really subsume the productive, political and cultural shapes in any kind of hegemony. At this respect, Luis Tapia, the most important scholar of Zavaleta’s work, points out that the nation is the reflection of a baroque cultural production; that is, one where proliferate nuclei are multiplied around a central axis: “Mi intención no es equiparar lo barroco a lo abigarrado, porque lo barroco connota ya un grado de fusión mayor que justamente lo abigarrado no tiene; pero el barroco es un tipo de producción cultural que se hace sobre las condiciones del abigarramiento social” (2002: 319), and one of the most legitimate forms of expression of the culture of La Paz, as Cárdenas well knows.

But, returning to the police, lieutenant Villalobos embodies the figure of a formal detective: white middle-aged man, who joins the institution forced by his mother, but whose true vocation is to be an ‘artist’, as it is sketched out through drawings on the exercise book and graffiti on the walls later. Logically, in such an election, a mocking wink to the modern conception of arts can be found. Even though graffiti has an important social valour through which a wall becomes a public and open space, subject to occupation, empowerment and conceptual struggle; it can even be understood as the expression of citizens, who by anonymity, code or messages —ideology, in short— represent the “actores marginados de las vías letradas” (Rama, 1984: 50); in the novel, the true valour of the writings or drawings, those that carried El Lobo to see the murder of El Rey as an indemnification for the world he was supposed to own, are never known. Furthermore: counting on the graffiti that are actually read in the novel, they are at the same time making up a parody of this practice that was started as a militancy of those who were not able to print, following Rama, and continued as a non-regulated activity of protest, demand and territorialisation of identities, until it became an artistic practice, representative of numerous speeches and conceptions of arts. The graffiti by EL Lobo and El Rey depart

from this conception, or at least Cárdenas, in not reproducing them in their meaningful density, in their capacity to represent the said “stolen world”, allows the reader two things: either understand them as a mocking parody or to assume that they have an importance both transcendent and hard to reproduce; and such absence of the representation of a highly significant world (if we believe El Lobo) is what tries to fill the emptiness, the reason why I think the first choice is a better one.

Returning, anyway, to the official investigator, Villalobos is, as almost every character, a man who hides an identity, maybe more emotive and soppy, almost melodramatic, behind a sharp and simple-minded profile. His capacity for deduction is very low, as seen by the insufficient and useless notes he takes on the facts, when the most advisable thing would be to act. Let’s see, as an example, this note that is shown in one page of the novel:

Caso reabierto a las 0:40

*Sujeto de pesquisa momentáneamente perdido*

*Locación actual: Celebración gay donde*

*supuestamente se esconden líderes marginales*  
*(otra de las estupideces del Oquendo)*

*Datos adicionales obtenidos: hasta el momento*  
*ninguno*

*Tareas inmediatas: retomar pesquisa sujeto*  
*llamado Mike*

*Comprometer más activamente al chofer de la*  
*unidad en la búsqueda de supuesto testigo.*

(Cárdenas, 2004: 37)

He is also, as it could be expected, a racist and exploitative of Severo, who, due to his indigenous background in a society that is still colonialist, as well as to his rank, is deprived of all real defence against the lieutenant, as we can see in the following dialogue:

-Che, campestre, ¿dónde te metes?, hace media hora que te estoy esperando... te me haces anotar 24 hrs. de arresto, ¿oído?, ¿no oído?

-Oído, mi teniente (qué desgraciado este q’ara).

-Y no me mire torcido porque se hace anotar otras 24... ¡Ya, adentro!  
(Cárdenas, 2004: 15)

Although it would be baseless to assign to Cárdenas the least anti-colonialist intention in favour of any sort of racial claim, it is difficult not to sense that the weight of orality in this writing could hardly have a political print. It is a second level subject from any optic, one that lets its voice speak, its insult, its reasoning and its conclusion, permeating structures that are apparently homogeneous in a world whose actors absolutely are not; even more, bifrontism is deep in their souls. Thus, post-colonial thinking appears in,

la palabra oral que se va subsumiendo en discurso letrado; los mitos,

testimonios o imaginarios colectivos que se ven reducidos a los lineamientos genéricos, lingüísticos e ideológicos de la ‘alta cultura’<sup>6</sup>; el performance popular visto desde la perspectiva del receptor urbano o desde los registros excluyentes de la historiografía liberal (Moraña, 2003: xi),

and whose main consequence is the confirmation of the current interest and the vigency of these tensions, from which the day-to-day is defined.

In that sense, Severo, who embodies the real detective, is the only character who, in a context in which the imposition of power and destiny are the guidelines of the action, lives his vocation: researching. His humble origins and lack of training, as well as his (bad) use of Spanish, do not impede that his (other) voice in the tradition of the national police becomes audible and achieves to ‘solve’ the case—that is, the confirmation that the Maik cannot recognise the murderer of El Rey, which maintains the innocence of his boss—over the assumed ability of origin, racial and social class and training of the lieutenant. When he understands that the crime could not be a political one, as Oquendo indicates, Severo says: “Pero a mí no me convence para nada, y sigo pensando cómo puedo agarrar y decirle que pruebas tengo de que mi teniente Oquendo solito se ha lactado y quel caso nuestá cerrado” (Cárdenas, 2004: 28), showing a reasoning which, relying more on common sense than on academic technique, may well allegorize an unreal, useless and not very practical discourse.

In that sense, what we should rescue it is not only the deductive component of his method of reasoning, key for the traditional detective novel, and his ability to appeal the basics of the researching process, but the basic request of the one who asks and confirms from the most elementary, defying, in a context boundless of laughter, an inefficient system and its way to do the things. Severo tries to obtain the data from those who can help him: barmen, drunkards and outcasts are his indiscriminate sources of information. That way, when he sees that the dead—El Rey—contains evidences of gunshots instead of stabbing, for example, he deduces that the murderer cannot be a simple graffiti artist from the area. Later, he observes the paleness and discomfiture of his lieutenant, as well as his nervous annotations and the way he gets his hands dirty to get the truth.

Pero de pronto se me prende el genio y «ajá», digo: «El Lobo tiene que ser o el malandro de su hermano del jefe o si no uno de sus compinches y que lua templado al loquito». «¡Claro!, me contesto yo mismo. Peor con el Oquendo; por eso su prisa por despacharlos aisos desgraciados. Aura me pregunto ¿sería su problema de los Desputes (o como se llamen) con El Rey? ¿O sería, ¡uyuyuy!, por orden de mi teniente que luan enfriado al pobre?, y measusto de lo que pienso pero digo también, ¿no?: “Tengo questar ojo al charque”». (Cárdenas, 2004: 24)

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## NOTES

6 | We should not forget that *Periférica Blvd.* requires an important level of commitment for its reading, even for the degree that could be understood as the most ‘superficial’; that is, who is paying attention only to the sound and gives way to the laughs, given its ‘imitative quality’, which could be a trail, at least elementary, of which nowadays could be called still ‘high-art’.

Nevertheless —and here we have another parodic gesture, related to the traditional detective novel— it is the presence of a *yatiri*, a coca leaves fortune teller, who in the middle of the dawn reveals to them the place where they can find the Maik and his buddies; exact data (a wedding, and he even says that he will be not alone, but with two more people) that would be impossible to obtain with reasoning only, thus echoing that Hutcheon maintains: “la parodia, burlesca o no, dialoga con los textos a los cuales parodia y produce una transformación de su sentido” (1985: 13), which particularly in this genre equate to put ‘reason’ at the same level that any other mechanism that illuminates such an already odd searching. To search for the Maik is to travel through spaces of excess, of linguistic, sexual, spatial and sound excess; that is to say, a tour by which the city seeps, its marginal characters, its stories, its smells and assessments, things that in a certain manner are not foreign to the detective genre, which go hand in hand with social critique. The qualitative distance between *Periférica Blvd.* and most of the works within this genre lies in the implied ability to celebrate the search — deep down, very tragic — and those distracted ways of life that inhabit the city, which is not the same as looking for the “estetización de un mundo de injusticias y miserias atroces”, as Mabel Moraña maintains in the prologue of *Escribir en el aire* (2003: vi).

## 2. Of Crime and Other Sorts of Criminality

The traditional detective novel works the crime as a manifestation of the moral decomposition of society. Crime is the undeserving path through which a good is obtained, impossible to obtain through the legal way. It is, in this sense, a sample of the almost pathological ambition of men for being and having, or the vengeance for not being or not having, and although the reader tends paradoxically to identify himself in the victim, he does not cease to be engrossed in the assailant, which leads José F. Colmeiro to state that:

la novela policiaca negra sirve simultáneamente como medio de crítica social y como válvula de escape colectiva a los conflictos y tensiones provocados por choque de intereses en la sociedad y por ambiguas posturas con respecto a ciertos valores morales particulares (1994: 220).

This way, the first crime in *Periférica Blvd.* is seen as an act of justice. El Rey, according to El Lobo, deserves to die because he is a thief; but what kind of thief? A thief of ideas and, therefore, guilty of an *appropriation of the world*. Is there such a categorization in any Penal Code? Are we referring to a crime of injured mental sanity, which would suppose more than mere plagiarism? The *appropriation of the world* could be, this way, an open mock of what society comes to punish; but, on the other hand, an extreme act of vengeance

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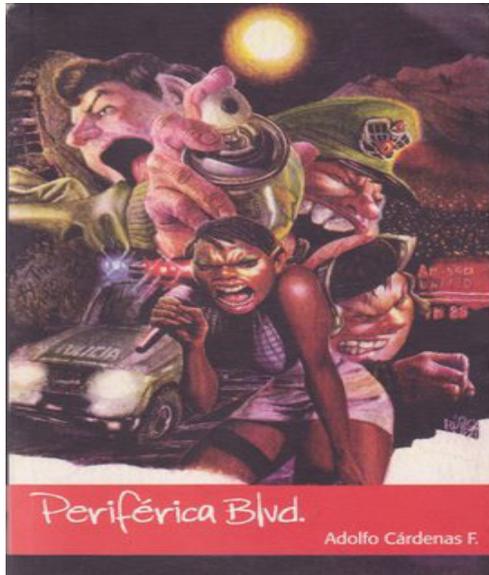
established on the fact that once the ideas that support a vocation or a life have been stolen, there is, in a striking manner, an attempt on that very life. However, this kind of crime that we could call psychological is not punishable enough in most codes, from where social critique, under such a hint, would be clear. Behind laughter, an even macabre laughter, vanity of vanities sticks out, sustaining more than one crime. Certainly, the same question could be moved to an upper context if we refer again to a post-colonial context. Is it not what the imposed culture has done to so-called subaltern cultures?

However, beyond this double possibility for interpretation, the fact is, that there is an unpunished crime; even more, lieutenant Villalobos not only murders El Rey with a shot, but very likely the father of Tamar too, while Severo goes for water to reanimate him, which shows that the abusive power of police is actually unlimited, especially against the most marginal and therefore anonymous populations. *Periférica Blvd.* builds a very well worked kind of humour to interact with both policemen and their ambitions, but not giving in any moment a positive image of the institution as such, or of its servers. On the contrary: the narration exists because they are trying to hide a crime committed by a lieutenant; later there are two crimes and there well could be three, if Severo had not pitied the Maik, who did not avoid a beating and a night of arrest anyway, for being present at the place of the first crime and seeing that somebody —whom fortunately he could not recognise— killed a man. This was his mistake: to see and to say he saw, when in certain societies it is better to ignore what one knows, to forget it, “hacerse el opa”, as Severo would say.

On the other hand, we have the decision of lieutenant Oquendo to close the case after a simple deduction based on a couple of signs which sustains that the murder of El Rey is a political crime; that is to say, the fact of avoiding the inquiry required for a murder, a correct and formal one, resigning himself to an only possible explanation, which equals to close the case without it being even open. The same way, the detention of the presents without any proof is a natural culmination of this manner to behave, so that police, besides inefficient, is totally abusive, synecdoche of a corrupt state power.

As a consequence, it is also worthy to mention the lack of vocation of most of the members of the ‘verde oliva’ institution, as National Police is known in Bolivia. With the exception of Severo, who since he could remember, wished to be a detective —“pero yo quiero ser gendarme, policía, patrullero, detective de tercera de segunda y de primera clase respectivamente y mi madre: pero llockalla desgraciado ¿Estás loco? No. ¿Plata te falta? No” (Cárdenas, 2004: 242)—, the rest of civil servants took their positions because of “cosas de la vida”, by discard, comfort, contacts, etc., which, without any kind of doubt, has had a social impact that in the novel is only suggested. The

presence of “frustrados” as pointed out by Camacho in the already mentioned interview is impossible to not generate consequences in an institution of order.



Cover of the third edition in Bolivia

One more aspect that is openly satirized in the novel, is the total alienation of the social group from El Alto, searching for an identity that mixes north-American —rock— and Andean gangster<sup>7</sup> in its music and expressions, in a fight for physical space, which understands the writing printed at the surface of the city as urban textual art where the “poder ser” is at stake (part of the version of a city, as Rama would say). Two ways of expression that in mixing to celebrate a fact result in that untranslatable thing streamlined as the culture of El Alto, or something like what the sociologist present at the tribute to El Rey defines when she is arrested by the police as a “masa marginal sometida a un proceso de psicosis colectiva” (Cárdenas, 2004: 25).

Finally, it is clear one more time within the practice of the detective fiction that knowing the ‘truth’, in this case that lieutenant Villalobos killed El Rey, that he is or was a graffiti artist who, besides that, killed the father of the Tamar; that the Maik is unfairly arrested; between other revealed truths, can be possible, but such an exposed truth will come to change nothing. Probably, society is not interested in knowing who killed these marginal or antisocial people either, which is equal or even more serious than the impossibility of doing justice. Luckily for the lieutenant, the Maik is not able to recognise him, which ensures his impunity as I previously said, showing that those who have power do have neither guilt nor social debts to pay. The only possible compensation, if we bet for this interpretation, would be to kill the thief of ideas, or ‘world’, and the rapist father of the Tamar, which would point to some sort of divine justice. The end of

## NOTES

7 | Which is also a space under construction; if we consider that El Alto is one of the youngest cities of Bolivia and that it is made on the immigration of communities of farmers, established on the upper outskirts of the city of La Paz.

the novel is, nevertheless, comical, following the classical precepts of comedy, since both policemen and the Maik have a soup to put an end/beginning to the day, given the case as closed and doing the tragic story an even bigger guffaw.

### 3. Of Periphery and its Relations

Given that *Periférica Blvd.* is a novel that pays homage to the genre through parody, it comprehends some important aspects of the classical detective genre, to point out, with a humor that is rare to Bolivian literature, the strategic places of the culture, the style, the sense, and the power of a reading that allows such appropriation of the genre, leading it to the limit. Thus, the first evocation to mention, for being the more evident, is that of Holmes and Watson. The Conan Doyle's characters play a sort of inversion in the novel about La Paz, since Severo Fernández is a mere Watson only in his appearance. Behind the figure of the assistant, driver of a police car, "indio precolombino" by the lieutenant's account, the true brain of this funny and complex searching is hidden. Brain, gaze, voice and something that is vital in a frame where notions like "subalternity", even in a context of humor, are present, and around it, it is more convenient, as pointed by Cecilia Méndez G., to forget the question of whether the subaltern can speak, or who ultimately rescues her voice, to think about subalternity as "la misma instancia de lo 'irrescatable'" (2010: 203).

A similar lieutenant-corporal relationship is found in *Quien mató a Palomino Molero*, a detective fiction by Mario Vargas Llosa (1986), though not in the same way and with the same intensity. In the novel by the Peruvian author, lieutenant Silva and officer Lituma have a different relationship than lieutenant Villalobos and Severo; that is, a relationship in which the 'white person' abuses neither his position nor his social-racial origin in respect Lituma. Even if differences exist and they are marked by other members of the community, the relationship between them is almost friendly. This way, we would say that assimilation would occur by opposition, although in the novel there is no gesture that confirms that Cárdenas wanted to pay any kind of homage to the novel by Vargas Llosa.

Besides, a degree of "asimilación híbrida" exists, to use Bakhtin's term (1992) with the novel by Paco Taibo II, *Cosa fácil* (1977), where the figure of a radio DJ, as key character and assistant to solve a crime, is also present. Although the DJ of the Spanish writer does not get involved at the same level as Alex does, the DJ in the Andean novel, it is interesting to establish relationships between media figures that, behind a microphone, are able to take part at an

important level in the course of an inquiry, either in the search and handling of information, in the generation of opinion, or through the power given by the media to speak or to keep quiet, and the ways of doing it: an invisible power in appearance, but that, not for nothing, has come to line up as the four power of the State.

I therefore consider it unlikely that such assimilations have been conscious; they are coincidences rather than echoes, which in the case of Cárdenas acquire larger complexity and significance.

#### 4. More Than a Detective Novel

As seen until this point, there are a lot of literary qualities of this novel. The presence of parody is key for the transformation of language — to read also in such a sense ‘betrayal’ to language—, which from orality goes to writing and makes the detective genre a different thing. Writing down the orality of possible social groups is the first and main creation of Cárdenas, but he does much more than this. Thus, it is difficult not to remember Guillermo Cabrera Infante in *Tres Tristes Tigres* and his desire to remark that “sus héroes (o mejor heroínas) son la nostalgia, que llam[a] la puta del recuerdo, la literatura, la ciudad, la música y la noche...” (Warning to the 1997 edition: 7). Cárdenas works for the same effort and commitment, even in his bet to make a possible Andean language, represented and invented, the show girl of this learned show. In that sense, the consciousness of representation that the author has searched for the reader to have at the moment of going through the novel is noticeable. This way, together with the traditional characters, the language is another character of equal importance within the notion of ‘work’; a language that knows itself as representation of a language, and a conflict that knows itself as artifice, opera, “opera Rock-oco”, as the first page of the book suggests; that is, the staging of an extreme Baroque, as it was the case of Rococo.

It is noteworthy that the author wants to emphasize the fact that this musical performance, as opera does, is presenting the characters as the cast and giving them even a vocal register —soprano, tenor, baritone...— as well as the designation of special guests (Batallón 2 morados de artillería o la Fundación orquestal de rock sinfónico) (Cárdenas, 2004: 9), which marks, from the beginning, at least two things: the importance of reading this novel as if we wanted to see a spectacle (real, vital, daily, as sly, built, assembled to take us out of the diurnal and known city) and the importance of listening to the speech of its characters as a homage to the culture of La Paz and all its constructions. This is a book of deep acoustic knitting, which is even advisable to read aloud, and, when possible, sing the transcribed

melodies as part of the story and the social imaginary. However, we have not only the presence of the listened and annotated sound (a quite ironic gesture, when it is known that folkloric popular music have not a written tradition) but a level of intertextuality with opera as a genre that includes almost every art and their technique of scripting. The chapters represent acts and such acts are narrated by different characters, with aria in mind, where the singer accounts for his subjectivity, being the only one in the stage, ready to summon a state: his or her state.

Though this gesture we can find the wink, parodic one more time, sardonic in this case, to academic over-interpretation of this kind of simple and popular constructions, subjected almost by force to a de-contextualised analysis that, favouring a vain intellectual effort, imposes meanings to texts which were never intended by their creators or by the texts themselves. There is, like this, as an example, the song that corporal Juan composes with the help of Severo: “Domitila no me dejes/ Domitila no te vayas/ No me dejes amorcito/ no te vayas mi cholita” (Cárdenas, 2004: 143) about which, certain review in a newspaper —the novel says— had stated that:

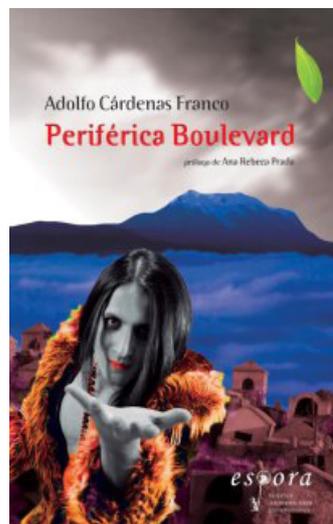
*... retrata tan magistralmente la soledad del hombre andino trasplantado a la urbe, donde desintegrado de su medio, nómada por obligación, construye un elaborado pedido de auxilio por debajo de la aparente simplicidad del texto estructurado a partir de prefijos simbólicos, que juntos casualmente forman el nombre Domitila en el que se puede entre- leer: DOnde MI Tierra Laja, búsqueda recurrente del retorno que se eterniza en la salida sin llegada-encuentro con la tierra-mujer añorada...* (Cárdenas, 2004: 246).

Again, this gesture is a sample of the multiple jokes about culture and academics made by this detective celebratory novel.

Moreover, the incorporation of comic book as visual-textual writing that breaks the traditional format of the novel is important, including scenes that are not described narratively but shown through designs and the own aesthetics of comic books. There is a scene in which, after a “eso”, for example, saves a verbal narration by including a graph, expressing thus a culture that is read this way, not through complete texts but through anonymous writings: camouflaged, violent, and codified. This is more than a thematic aspect of the novel: it is about messages which lead us to think over its underground communicative power and the games of power that, through the said marks, are revealed and empower imaginary: alluding, drawing, naming at a glance authentic manifestos, are presences and threats to its (de)codifiers.

These characteristics are enough to understand what *Periférica Blvd.* generates in the space of the Bolivian detective-baroque;

nevertheless, it is vital to emphasize that this list of inventions and transformations would not be possible without an efficiently constructed humor, which also constitutes a deep spin within the genre, which eventually appeals to irony and humorous winks, but without taking pleasure of the most tragic aspects of the society. The interesting thing is that behind the apparent wearing of the characters—which just make us laughing if we think of it as a comedy—a very tough social critique is hidden, which is noteworthy not only for laughing instead of crying, but above all to see it from another angle. This way, all the characters are downgraded, each one by the others, forgetting places and posts, like in a party or a carnival.



Cover of the Chilean edition

I cannot stop to emphasize, then, the importance of the already mentioned Baroque in the shaping of this ludicrous and significant world, which enlarge the deep transformation this novel introduces to this genre. Where reasoning and austerity, accuracy in the data and convergence of the information was expected, we encounter abundance, excess, hot air, divergence of images, sounds, drawings, fragments of music, changes in typography, unimaginable past of the characters, who show us their unknown face, drag coronations, whorehouses... that is, a world that emerges in chapters which have little relation to the search for the Maik, and are beautiful digressions, “núcleos proliferantes” in flight, as Alejo Carpentier would say (1990), and which does not concentrate anything, because they are there rather to celebrate the dispersion cultivated by the popular culture of La Paz. This way, when the novel refers the incursion of the Maik in the sewers of the city, inhabited by dozens of marginal junkies which he cannot leave without being forced to live a similar experience, where the “hermanos de la clefa” take advantage and rob him; he tells:

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Con la orgía ya en reflujó y el desenfreno escapando por las bocas de tormenta, el vuelo se hace más tranquilo, alterado tan solo por esa lluvia ácida que persistentemente se desprende del reverso del asfalto, empantanado más esa geografía apocalíptica regada de insepultos acurrucados, semidesnudas de sonrisa patética, lactantes apelotonados, enfebrecidos espectrales, madonas yacentes o majas vestidas, todos despojados de sus disfraces de guerreros de cloaca, indefensos, desprotegidos que roncan, pedorrear, eructan, vomitan, tosen, se ahogan, se buscan y rebuscan tratando de inventar la fórmula que les permita vivir otra hora... (Cárdenas, 2004: 53)

This centrifugal movement, this come and go and wandering through the surface and the depths of the city, accounts for what Macarena Areco called “novella de la intemperie” in “Cartografía de la novela chilena reciente”, as opposed to what she would call “novella de la intimidad” (2011: 183), that is, a novel of interiors, of inner shifting, subjective and almost minimalists. *Periférica Blvd.* is the entire contrary, is the adventure of outdoors, the celebration of the street, the exhibition, the movement, the contact between worlds, the always pleasant presence of the contraries.

This exhibition is revealed at the end of the novel, when we realize that the narration is made by officer Severo Fernández to the memory of lieutenant Villalobos, who died on February 12th, 2003; the day the police confronted the army in the city of La Paz, so we can deduce this really historical event killed the lieutenant/character. However, the decision to kill him poses a mystery; in the first place, because he dies the same year the novel was written, and in the second place, because such death is not narrated, and remains only visible to an attentive, and probably a Bolivian, reader. Figure it out if Cárdenas wanted to avoid apocryphal lieutenants or simply to close every possibility of a second part. The truth is that with his dead and the dedicatory by Severo, unexpected possibilities are open to him, not only as a possible detective, but even as the author of a book. But there is something more, the superposition of traditional roles this detective novel presents and which is core in the novel; this ‘being in part’ a subaltern, detective, almost an assassin, for example, is at the same time another allegory of the impossibility of homogeneity and cohesion which affects the story of so many people. Cornejo Polar says that in his research on the literature of this lands, far from finding a cohesive “I”, what he has found is “un sujeto complejo, disperso, múltiple” (2003: 12); a subject that is parodic, parodied, and parodying, we should say, in the light of this proposal, and if nothing is earned in the face of this reality, that if differences are not reclaimed, the chaos that generates significance and the palimpsests that constitute us, all we can do is to celebrate them.

At the beginning of the present analysis, I said that *Periférica Blvd.* is a novel that exceeds all we could say about it from any

traditional perspective. It is even more than a hybrid novel, and that is where most of its value lies. That is: in putting in contact genres and expressions which firsthand are not compatible with the genre founded by Allan Poe, like the analytic capacity with partying, the accumulation of roles in the characters with the proliferation of the Baroque, the strong presence of referents that are masked and point their own mask; in other words, the great beyond of every genre and every convention, to make possible a world where signs do not stop multiplication and every inquiry is lived as a humoristic scenic and sonic representation. “Adolfo Cárdenas confiesa que aquella fórmula de Woody Allen: tragedia + tiempo = humor, le sirve a la hora de tratar temas como la prostitución, el racismo, la homosexualidad o la transculturación de la(s) sociedad(es)” Medinacelli states (2008), and it is clear that such combination may open unusual spaces within any genre which admits any kind of reader: both the one who wants to have a good time and not stop laughing, and the one who is looking for deep significance and enjoys the rabbit trails of a work that probably marks the most important moment of the Bolivian literature so far this century.

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