

Russek, Dan (2015) *Textual Exposures: Photography in Twentieth-Century Spanish American Narrative Fiction*. University of Calgary Press (Calgary), x + 230 pp. US\$34.95 pbk.

In this readable and generously illustrated study, Russek, of the University of Victoria (Canada), considers the varied ways in which Spanish-American fiction writers have presented photography. Given that so much has been written in recent years on adaptation, intermediality, and the relationship between literature and technology, it is surprising that more has not been published on this subject. In his introduction, Russek surveys the field, including works by Ríos (2011) and Perkowska (2013), as well as the theoretical background, including such inevitable names as Benjamin, Barthes, and of course Sontag.

Russek argues that in their engagement with the visual image, writers 'critically reflect the media environment' (1). He is only partly interested in the presence or description of real photographs in works of fiction. Instead, through his key concept of ekphrasis, he looks at how invented photos come to operate as 'textual knots or narrative folds' in works of fiction. This is in part because of a clash between the forms. A short story or a novel, despite its realist effects, is not true. A photograph, by contrast, at least in its most traditional guise, as the register of light on a chemically sensitive surface, can claim to be a faithful record of reality as it was. It is this conflict that writers explore, as photographs lend credibility to fiction, and the reliability of visual images is called in question by narrative.

The first, and longest, chapter examines what the author calls the 'demonic' (p. 10) aspect of photography. He studies Rubén Darío's short story 'Verónica', in which a monk attempts to find the image of Christ in a host, with chilling and tragic results. Further sub-sections look at uncanny effects in Cortázar's stories 'Las babas del diablo' and 'Apocalipsis de Solentiname', in which photographs unexpectedly reveal violent realities – albeit of very different origins. The chapter ends with a study of Salvador Elizondo's provocative novel *Farabeuf*, with its almost obsessive depiction of a

photograph of the Chinese torture popular known as 'Death by 1,000 Cuts'. This image, which Georges Bataille did much to bring to the attention of artists and intellectuals, is also a recurring motif in Cortázar's *Rayuela*, so a comparison between the two texts not confined to a footnote would have been welcome. One also feels somewhat uneasy reading analyses so focussed on the reaction of the viewer, be she fictional or real, for this overlooks a simple fact: the suffering of the spectator is not greater than that of the tortured, burned, or otherwise abused subjects of the camera's eye.

'Family Portraits', the second chapter, presents a broad selection of texts in which images of relatives and loved ones defy our expectations. Examples are drawn from Horacio Quiroga, Juan Rulfo, Silvina Ocampo and Virgilio Piñera. Russek shows how photographs which should offer reassurance or comfort instead come to disturb and disrupt. In the case of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, it is the worn and perforated picture of Juan Preciado's mother that seems to lure him towards the world of the dead. In stories by Ocampo, snapshots that should mark happy social occasions instead function as indices of juvenile cruelty.

The third chapter examines the political potential of photos in fiction, looking at Cortázar's collage books and returning to 'Apocalipsis de Solentiname', as well as Tomás Eloy Martínez's historical fiction *La novela de Perón*. Martínez draws on different photographic reproductions, from political billboards to the metaphorical postcard of a car wing-mirror, reflecting demonstrators on the road to Ezeiza airport. This is not the strongest chapter, in part because it feels like it goes over ground already surveyed in Chapter 1, even though we are not given a clear account of what actually the significance of Solentiname is in Nicaraguan history. The comparison between Martínez's work and Sarmiento's *Facundo* is also somewhat forced.

In general this is a carefully written work, even if accents on names live in a state of flux (for example Martínez). One failing, which is only partly Russek's fault, is the use of published translations into English. It is now widely accepted that many of the available versions of, for

example, Cortázar's short stories and novels, adventurous and pioneering in their day, are not free from errors and infelicities. Filleting them as part of a critical commentary on the original shines a harsh light on failings that are perhaps less glaring in the wider context. No one would have criticised Russek for correcting mistakes such as rendering "vestido de paisano" (in civvies) as "they're dressed in outdoor clothes" (p.157); or the magazine "doblado en cuatro" (folded into four/folded into quarters) as "folded four ways" (p. 49) – an unnecessarily complex bit of origami. Nevertheless, this is a timely and vivacious work that will be of interest to students and teachers of Spanish American narrative alike.

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