



México Interdisciplinario / Interdisciplinary Mexico

ISSN 2193-9756



XII. NEGOCIOS EN MÉXICO / BUSINESS IN MEXICO

2017/2, año 6, n°12, 162 pp.

Editores: **Guido Rings, Antonio M. Ciruela Lorenzo**

DOI: 10.23692/iMex.12

The sex industry in fiction: Rolo Diez' *Poussière du désert* and women's exploitation in Mexico

(pp. 115-127; DOI: 10.23692/iMex.12.8)

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Abstract:

The frontier between Mexico and the United States is known for some of the most violent crimes in contemporary Mexican society, and these include women's exploitation. Argentine writer Rolo Diez chooses to set his crime novels in this context of violence and criminality: *La vida que me doy* (2000) and *Matamujeres* (2001) explore the exploitation of women through brutality, prostitution, disappearances and murders. Certainly willing to depict the brutality of this lawless chaos, crime novels often comply with sensationalist codes such as eroticization of female bodies and complaisance in representing the extreme violence of cartels and prostitution. Thus, they cannot avoid the ethical questioning they are willing to submit contemporary Mexican society to. This essay explores to what extent literature is able to examine brutal exploitation without being endangered by exhibitionism. After examining the possibility for literature to represent obscenity without perverting both the author and the reader, this article will analyse Rolo Diez' representation of sexual business and violence towards women in Mexico, and question whether or not his crime novels avoid the risk of voyeurism.

Keywords: Mexican crime novels, Rolo Diez, sex industry



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Website:

www.imex-revista.com

Editores iMex:

Vittoria Borsò, Frank Leinen, Guido Rings, Yasmin Temelli

Redacción iMex:

Hans Bouchard, Bianca Morales García, Ana Cecilia Santos, Stephen Trinder

The sex industry in fiction:
Rolo Diez' *Poussière du désert* and women's exploitation in Mexico

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1) Preliminary remarks

Due to its importance for economic migration, the frontier between Mexico and the United States remains a major topic of international debate. Of particular media interest is the increasing female diaspora, which has become associated with exploitation, abuse and even mass murder in the context of maquiladora-migration to Northern Mexico in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the often foreign-owned and still popular *maquiladoras* mainly hired inexperienced women, and local authorities quickly voiced their concern about the risks entailed in the massive affluence of young working women and their financial emancipation. However, this was mainly linked to notions of sexual depravation. Based on field research in Tijuana, Lopez' work stresses that women working in *maquiladoras* have frequently been labelled as depraved simply because on Friday nights they go out dancing. Influenced by notions of the American Dream, which are particularly strong close to the border, these women are often perceived as liberated and promiscuous because they do not follow traditional moral roles attributed to housewives (Lopez 2013: 459-463). Recent social science studies confirm that female migration tends to be shaped by gender stigmatisation (see Ribas-Mateos / Manry 2013; also Juliano 1999, quoted by Meneses 2013), with theft, mistreatment, abuse, rape, disappearance and sexual slavery an invariable tragic reality for migrant women despite the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 adopted by the American Congress.

Such social violence finds its literary portrayal in the crime novel genre, in which the detective appears often as a committed character who offers the possibility of justice (Voionmaa 2012). However, crime novels often comply with sensationalist codes such as the eroticization of women's bodies and complaisance in representing the extreme violence of cartels and prostitution (Close 2012). While certainly willing to depict criminal society in order to denounce its violence, crime novels cannot avoid the ethical questioning they are willing to submit contemporary society to. It is precisely in this context of violence towards women that Argentine writer Rolo Diez chooses to set his crime novels.

This essay asks how his crime novels portray women's exploitation in Mexico. Does the literary genre take advantage of crimes to address editors' and readers' interests and desires - which are often based on sensationalism and voyeurism, or does it primarily use fiction to denounce women's exploitation? After examining the possibilities for literature to present obscenity, this article will analyse Diez' representation of the sex industry and violence towards women in Mexico, and question whether or not his key crime novel, *Poussière du désert / La vida que me doy* (2000), avoids the risk of voyeurism.

Before analysing how exactly this novel portrays the sex industry in Mexico, we would like to underline the success of Diez' novels in France: edited in the prestigious Série Noire at les Éditions Gallimard, Diez' novels seem to be part of the vivid French taste for *polars*. Testifying for this success in France, *La vida que me doy* is difficult to find in its original version, whereas the French version *Poussière du désert* is very easy to find. Rolo Diez' novels are quite famous in France: Claude Mesplède praises Diez' novels such as *Paso del tigre* (1992), *Gatos de Azotea* (1992), *Una Baldosa en el valle de la muerte* (1992) and *Luna de Escarlata* (1994), respectively described as 'a total success', 'two texts typical of the work and its great stylistic beauty' and a 'masterpiece'¹. He presents Rolo Diez as 'one of the most talented writers of Spanish speaking *roman noir*' (Mesplède 2003: 515-516). In French reviews, Rolo Diez is frequently mentioned as one of the most famous writers of the Argentinian and Mexican *roman noir*². One could argue that with his coarse way of speaking and his obsession with sex, Diez' detective Carlos Hernández reminds French readers of Frédéric Dard's detective San-Antonio, who was a tremendous editorial success in France after the war and during the cultural revolution of May 1968. Moreover, as many Mexican *romans noirs* inherit their aesthetics from European and Northern-American traditions (Mateo 2010), French readers are accustomed to this literary genre which is still successful in the editorial market, as shown by the numerous festivals dedicated to *polar*³. As we try to perceive the way Diez' fiction could seduce his readers even with – or thanks to – a questionable ethical guidance, we will draw our attention on the successful French version of *Poussière du désert*.

¹ 'une totale réussite', 'deux textes typiques de l'œuvre et de sa grande beauté stylistique', 'chef-d'œuvre', 'l'un des plus brillants auteurs de roman noir de langue espagnole'. All translations from French are mine.

² See for instance Ramon Chao 1999, Marc Fernandez 2006, Philippe Ollé-Laprune 2009.

³ More than twenty famous festivals dedicated to *polars* take place each year in France and most of them attribute reputed awards, such as the international Festival in Lyon Quai du Polar (Prix Quai du Polar), the Festival Sang d'encre (Prix Sang d'encre), the Festival Polar in Cognac (Prix Polar).

2) Prostitution and crimes: women exploitation in Diez' fictions

Born in 1940 in Argentina, Rolo Diez went into exile in 1980 in Mexico. He was rewarded with the Dashiell Hammett Award in 1995 for his novel *Luna de escarlata*, which depicts the links between violence, corruption, drug trafficking and power in contemporary Mexico, where many of his crime novels are set. In the manner of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's Pepe Carvalho or Frédéric Dard's San-Antonio, Rolo Diez creates a recurrent character who reappears in many of his novels, the detective Carlos Hernández. On the one hand, Hernández embodies the cunning avenger, easily evolving in the lawless Mexican world of criminality, driven by corrupted figures and Mexican cartels; the reader could thus be pushed into liking him. On the other hand, Hernández is a cynical, vulgar, misogynist, polygamous and corrupted detective. Mainly driven by material, sexual and financial pragmatism, he constantly schemes to get and give money to his two wives, i.e. his spouse Lourdes and his mistress Gloria, and their respective children.

In *Poussière du désert*, set between Tijuana and Mexico City, Hernández investigates the death of a young girl, Carmina Pérez Sánchez, who belonged to a cartel leader in Tijuana but had a lover at the same time. The young girl died of an overdose during an orgy involving many high-ranking personalities, and Hernández is supposed to cover up Carmina's death in order to avoid scandals. Just like powerful people in higher positions, the Mexican police is corrupted and all the more perverted in the novel given the fact that Hernández happens to be a procurer himself: the cynicism is complete when he claims to feel responsible as an uncle figure for a young girl named Rosario, although he takes 35% of her prostitution money and occasionally has sexual intercourse with her. In this way, *Poussière du desert* paints a picture of a very dark Mexico, torn between drug trafficking, cartel violence and corruption – the essence of *roman noir* –, a place where women's exploitation is omnipresent through crimes, prostitution and constant sexualisation.

Diez' novels belong to the genre of the 'border novel' (Adriaensen / Grinberg Pla 2012) – in the same style as *Tijuana City Blues* and *Loverboy* by Trujillo Muñoz, or *Fiesta en la madriguera* by Juan Pablo Villalobos, in which the extreme violence of the Mexican frontier is perceived through the prism of irony, a typical tone in detective novels. In these violent fictions,

la ironía contribuye a cuestionar el 'exotismo de la violencia' (Sánchez Prado 2005) que se ha convertido en un fenómeno ampliamente difundido en el cine y la literatura latinoamericanos, al tiempo que enfatiza las relaciones de esta narconovela con el género policial (Adriaensen / Grinberg Pla 2012: 22).

In this perspective, crime novels appear to answer an epistemological purpose. Quoting Walter Benjamin's analyses on skull as an historical allegory, Adriaensen and Grinberg Pla offer to read this morbid fascination for dead bodies as an allegory of our contemporary world:

Según Walter Benjamin, el cadáver, específicamente, la calavera, es el lugar por excelencia en el cual es posible inscribir un sentido histórico por medio de la alegoría [...]. *Mutatis mutandis*, podríamos pensar que en el siglo XX y a comienzos del siglo XXI, el género negro nos confronta con la "historia sufriente del mundo" acuñada en los cuerpos mutilados, violados, vejados, en descomposición, brutalmente asesinados que pueblan el cine y la literatura policiales, porque estos cuerpos remiten alegóricamente a la violencia del sistema (Adriaensen / Grinberg Pla 2012: 20).

However, key questions remain: Can we analyse the literary exhibition of violence towards women in the Mexican frontier as a fictional allegory, or does this exhibition raise questions about ethics in literary productions? To what extent can aesthetics be separated from ethics?

3) Literature and the question of evil, or the encounter between aesthetics and ethics

Why are crime novels such a popular genre? In his essay, Close explains how success can sometimes proceed from sexuality and voyeurism. '*Desnudarse y morir*', the title of Close's article, is explicit regarding the way women's bodies are dealt with in many contemporary crime novels, in which eroticization is deeply linked with sadism, violence and voyeurism, dead—or close to dead—women's bodies being reduced to objects of men's sexual perversions. Even if Eros and Thanatos go far back in the detective novel tradition, Close observes a contemporary turn in crime novels inherited from the massive success of pornographic and sadistic novels by best-seller writer Mickey Spillane (Close 2012: 90). As Glen Close clearly demonstrates in his essay '*Desnudarse y morir*', a title that is borrowed from the "hard-boiled" detective novel written by Hispano-Mexican author Juan Miguel de Mora (1957), the American hard-boiled tradition, exported in Spain and Latino-America, is a successful and popular "sous-genre" of crime novels. Close reminds us that in this prosperous field of crime novels, many writers

[s]on escritores cínicos y cobardes que han empleado sus modestos talentos literarios para vender y perpetuar la fantasía de una violencia erótica vicaria y sin culpa, la fantasía de un mundo "duro" en el que el deseo masculino reina y las mujeres mueren elegantemente y se exhiben, aun muertas, de acuerdo con los mandatos pornográficos masculinos (Close 2012: 105).

Hence the question raised by the possibility for fiction to represent sexual violence, perversion and sadism, notions Bataille calls 'evil' (1957), connects to something we could call its ethics. Indeed Bataille offers to see literature and eroticism as ways for man to dive into himself precisely because literature and eroticism are ways to represent evil. When Bataille analyses the encounter of horror and sexuality, or the presence of evil in literature, he never separates it

from the deep human desire to understand human nature. Eroticism, but also literature as it can show evil, enable the mind to 'go [...] deep into the abyss that man is for himself' (Bataille 1957: 72)⁴. In doing so, the human mind opens to 'the truth of evil' (Bataille 1957: 71)⁵ and, far from avoiding the horror of evil, looks into its depths with lucidity. Thus the literary representation of evil should not be reduced to a simple leaning for voyeurism or perversion, but it cannot be separated from human desires. In this way, aesthetics are deeply linked to ethical questions.

Considering such a violent context as Mexican criminality, morality in Mexican crime novels cannot consist of a hypocritical or reactionary absence of sexuality, but in the integrity of the literary process. Here lies the author's responsibility, which has been studied in greater depth in French Comparative Literature (Forest 2007; Bouju 2005, 2010). In particular, the author must answer the reader for what, how and why (s)he chooses to write. When literature takes on the horror and the evil, what are the consequences for the author and for the reader? In the sixth lesson of his novel *Elizabeth Costello*, entitled '*The problem of evil*', J. M. Coetzee questions the possibility for a novelist to come out of his fiction unharmed. Deeply troubled by the reading of a fictional novel written by Paul West, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, fictitious memoirs in which National Socialist atrocities are described in the first-person narrative, Elizabeth Costello wonders about the contagion of evil: 'Can anyone [...] wander as deep as Paul West does into the Nazi forest of horrors and emerge unscathed? Have we considered that the explorer enticed into that forest may come out no better and stronger for the experience but worse?' (Coetzee 2003: 161). According to Elizabeth Costello, evil must be kept unspoken of and hidden because it is obscene:

Obscene. That is the word, a word of contested etymology that she must hold on to as talisman. She chooses to believe that obscene means *off-stage*. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain off-stage. Paul West has written an obscene book, he has shown what ought not to be shown (Coetzee 2003: 168-169).

Relying on a most likely false etymology, the obscene for Costello is what has to be kept out of sight, even if Costello herself does not completely understand the urge of her feelings. The immersion in horror and perversion could be dangerous for the writer and for the reader as well, plunged into the depths of evil, as they both might lose their humanity.

⁴ 'aller [...] profondément dans l'abîme que l'homme est à lui-même'. All translations from French are my translations.

⁵ 'la vérité du mal'.

Thus, writing about prostitution, crimes, rapes, and physical and moral violence towards women in Mexico is not to be taken with frivolity because it entails both the author's and the reader's moral responsibility and, fundamentally, their humanity. Such integrity is obviously not easy to ascertain, but Close sees it in Bolaño's masterful novel *2666* (2004), particularly in the chapter '*La parte de los crímenes*':

Allí arma Bolaño una larguísima serie de relatos de femicidio que reflejan de cerca los centenares de casos irresueltos de secuestro, violación, tortura y asesinato de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez y en otras regiones de México en los últimos años. Al alternar entre los relatos del descubrimiento de cadáveres, las biografías de las víctimas y los esfuerzos ineficaces de los agentes de policía, Bolaño recuerda la mecánica del *police procedural* sin conceder nunca el consuelo justiciero que promete ese subgénero. No pretende ofrecer ninguna explicación abarcadora para la ola de femicidios, pero sí se refiere a la producción de películas *snuff* y pseudo-*snuff*, y estas referencias marcan la aguda sensibilidad de Bolaño con respecto al peligro de explotar imágenes de los cadáveres de mujeres asesinadas para excitar a un público lector o espectador. Esta sensibilidad lo distingue nítidamente de la tradición que he descrito arriba [es decir la estética necropornográfica] (Close 2012: 104).

Far from exploiting women's bodies to excite the reader's imagination, an auctorial integrity such as Bolaño's shows how crucial it is for literature to take violence upon itself without sacrificing its ethics.

4) *Lector in fabula: questioning ethical guidance in *Poussière du désert**

Ponce emphasizes the way '*el policial argentino existe y progresa a través de la mimesis, la transgresión, la disolución y la confusión genérica*' (Ponce 2001: 152): even if its controversial possibilities mostly consist in parodies towards traditional codes, narrative frameworks and character typologies, such as Borges' metafictional games, Adriaensen and Grinberg Pla stress the modernity of crime novels in Latin America. They point out that these contemporary fictions tend to obliterate the traditional detective character in order to shift traditional points of view:

En estas novelas, tanto la ausencia del detective como su sustitución por un periodista o su desplazamiento del centro de la trama [...] resultan en la consecuente focalización del relato en los parias de la sociedad (asesinos a sueldo, estafadores, ladrones, drogadictos, soldados o ex-guerrilleros desmovilizados). [...] Desde el punto de vista discursivo, este tipo de novela negra ofrece una mirada sobre el crimen y la violencia desde los márgenes de la respetabilidad y la institucionalidad, por lo que abre un debate sobre los términos en los que estas se definen, invitando a reflexionar sobre la relación dialéctica entre la aparente violencia subjetiva ejercida por este o aquel criminal con la injusticia social del sistema [...] (Adriaensen / Grindberg Pla 2012: 15).

No longer constructed according to the moral filter of the centre – this Christian bourgeois mentality where ethics and justice are meant to stand (Foucault 1961, 1975) – which presented virtuous detectives aiming to bring justice upon criminals, contemporary crime fictions disturb traditional borders between good and evil, with good citizens and policemen on the one hand,

and criminals on the other hand. Settling their narrative point of view in the margins, a symbolic, lawless area of illness, madness, and violence (Foucault 1961), contemporary crime novels question individual violence as well as social injustice. In doing so, they remind the reader that sometimes, the most violent crime is perpetuated by the impunity of the state system, reducing and crushing individuals (Foucault 1975).

Divided into three parts, *Poussière du désert* clearly illustrates the general corruption of powerful people in Mexico and Tijuana, where business is led by drug and prostitution money. The first part of the novel deals with the corpse of Carmina, a young girl from Tijuana who died in Mexico during a party. Carlos Hernández' mission is to repatriate Carmina's corpse to Tijuana to avoid scandal, as his chief clearly states:

Une affaire à Tijuana. Il y a eu une de ces fêtes, vous savez. Une fille n'a pas bien supporté certaines substances qu'elle avait ingérées, elle a eu un malaise et elle est décédée. Des gens respectables exigent la plus grande discrétion. Nous allons remettre le corps aux autorités de Tijuana afin que la jeune fille, originaire de là-bas, meure chez elle, de mort naturelle (Diez 2001: 12).

Whereas the Mexican police try to stifle the crime and fake it as a natural death, the media reports that Carmina Pérez Sánchez was linked to the Pomars, an influential mafia family deeply involved in drug trafficking in Tijuana. The press reveal that Carmina died of drug poisoning and sexual abuse and point out the persons at fault, i. e. politicians, the police and even military senior officers:

sans doute attrapée par la pieuvre noire du trafic de stupéfiants, Carmina Pérez Sánchez, jeune femme de vingt et un ans dont la famille est liée au groupe des Pomar, lui-même associé aux frères Arellano Félix, chefs du dénommé cartel de Tijuana, a trouvé la mort au cours d'une orgie à Mexico. [...] Intoxiquée par diverses drogues et peut-être violentée par les débauchés participant à cette soirée, l'organisme de Carmina n'a pu résister. [...] Notre source soutient que des personnalités politiques ainsi que des hauts gradés de la police et même de l'armée seraient impliqués dans cet épisode inqualifiable et consternant (Diez 2001: 26).

Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, the reader clearly understands that business in Mexico is mostly about drugs and prostitution, mainly because of the extreme poverty endured by the Mexican people. Diez' novel indicates two ways in which the characters try to avoid poverty: to work for the cartels or to become corrupt. To stress this tragic social situation, the novel underlines the contrast with the North: on the one hand, rich and young North American people coming to Tijuana for drugs and sex, on the other hand, poor Mexican people trying to escape for a better life in the North. This gap is outlined when Carlos Hernández lands in Tijuana and depicts the deprivation of the city:

Tijuana, en février, a la couleur de la poussière qui arrive en tourbillons du désert. Si les rêves avaient des couleurs, le mythe de la terre promise brillerait sur les murs rouillés du Bordo, et si la convoitise en avait aussi, il faudrait imaginer un arc-en-ciel de LSD plongeant dans le vert-de-gris d'une cascade de dollars. Cela faisait quinze ans que je n'avais pas mis les pieds à Tijuana et pourtant, je savais ce que j'allais y trouver. Il y aurait davantage de cabarets et de restaurants à chili, davantage de hamburgers et de puttes de plus en plus jeunes, davantage de shopings, de bazars, de dealers et de camés, davantage de bistrots, de flingueurs et de flingués, davantage d'usines de sous-traitance et de crève-la-dalle traînant à la frontière, à l'affût d'un moment d'inattention de la Border Patrol pour sauter de l'autre côté et, bien sûr, davantage de connards débarqués de San Diego pour faire la bringue en grand (Diez 2001: 17).

Exploitation, prostitution and drugs prevail in this world that is only led by money. To prove it, Diez shows that everything can be bought, from police to justice. Powerful people in high positions are corrupted in the novel: the magistrate of the Supreme Court Céspedes Aguilar, the judge Medina, the Congressman Raúl Malacara and his personal secretary Silverio García as well as the Tijuana police chiefs Rossi and Rosales. The less guilty of them benefit from the corrupted system and the guiltiest commit murders and are even part of the cartels, as the second and third parts of the novel prove.

Effectively, the story of Carmina is followed in the next chapters by another investigation concerning women's murders in Mexico. Carlos Hernández finds out that the Congressman Raúl Malacara and his personal secretary Silverio García raped and murdered these women to cover the accidental death of Malacara's wife. But even if the culprits are found, the execution of justice is questionable: the mafia head Pomar gives information to Hernández, the corrupted policeman and cartel member Rosales becomes chief of police in Tijuana, half a kilo of cocaine is given to the judge to clear the case and no questions are asked nor answered concerning the rest of the cocaine:

Nous avons presque terminé le bilan de l'opération « Tijuana » et, à en juger par la tournure de la conversation, plus personne n'aborderait le thème des deux sacs de poudre blanche contenant peut-être du talc ou de la farine, vu qu'on ne pouvait pas vraiment se fier à la parole d'un trafiquant. Équitablement répartis, l'un entre les mains d'un haut fonctionnaire du pouvoir judiciaire, l'autre gardé aux fins du secret de l'instruction, ils devenaient de plus en plus secondaires et oubliables. Cela justifiait amplement que l'on fasse l'impasse sur le sujet. *Laissez faire, laissez passer* [en français dans le texte]. Sagesse empruntée au vieux continent comme taillée sur mesure pour le Mexique (Diez 2001: 269-270).

Corruption, murders, drug trafficking, prostitution: characterized by this social and moral darkness, business in Mexico is completely *noir* in Diez' novel, and it is all the more *noir* that at the end of the novel, even if the crime is solved, the reader finds himself more disturbed because of the perverted and corrupted world he has been plunged into (Guérif 2013) and mainly, because of this generalized impunity. Obviously the ethical issue raised by *Poussière du désert* does not lie in this immersion in a corrupted world, which is a traditional way for

crime novels to denounce and criticize moral perversion and social abuses. However, to find his way in the *fabula*, the reader seeks ethical guidance and supposedly he expects some kind of justice to be maintained by the figure of Carlos Hernández, the upholder of the law who happens to be the narrator: in a moral as well as in a narrative perspective, Hernández represents the authority in the novel. But what happens when the authority bearer stands for objectionable values? To what extent can corruption spread in the fiction without questioning the ethics of the novel itself?

Carlos Hernández plays by the rules in a world dominated by sexual business and misogyny: a married man and a father of numerous children, Hernández earns a part of his living exploiting the young Rosario:

Le mot pognon m'a rappelé que ma protégée [la jeune Rosario] ne m'avait pas payé ma part depuis trois semaines, m'obligeant à lui prêter certains défauts de caractère, notamment une tendance à confondre l'amour de ce petit soldat du bitume et son obligation à elle de me verser trente-cinq pour cent de ses revenus (Diez 2001: 18).

Always perceived as a sexual stereotype, as an object to possess or as a corpse to dispose of, women embody many issues of this corrupted business in Mexico and question the ethical guidance offered by the detective narrator who always appears to be sarcastic and cynical about the necessity to manage and get money, as if general corruption and perversion could justify his own misbehaviour. Carlos Hernández does not hesitate to blackmail the magistrate of the supreme court Céspedes Aguilar, extorting money in exchange for some photographs given by the mafia head Pomar, showing Aguilar having sexual intercourse with two young men. From illegal phone surveillance to verbal and physical violence towards suspects: Hernández' methods when executing justice raise ethical issues.

To justify his violence and corrupt way of living, Carlos Hernández often refers to the perverse global system which condemns average people to find alternative ways to avoid poverty. From his perspective, pragmatism justifies everything, even when the mafia head Pomar offers to pay for Hernández' family's holidays in Cancún at the end of the novel. The last image of a smile on Hernández' face helps the reader guess that the detective will accept the deal, which is a way for Pomar to rest assured of Hernández' silence about his criminal actions. Then, to justify his choices and the absence of justice that avenges the victims of drug trafficking, Hernández uses a vulgar metaphor which contrasts the smell of the perfume and the smell of excrement:

Je me souviens d'un mystérieux parfum et d'un relent de marijuana. Il est trop tard pour Pancho, il est trop tard pour Carmina et pour la longue liste des victimes du trafic de stupéfiants. Ils font partie du passé, ils ne sont rien, et personne ne se soucie qu'il en soit autrement. Je pressens vaguement qu'entre l'herbe et le parfum plane une métaphore. On

peut l'envisager de deux manières. La manière A dit : « On ne recouvre pas l'odeur de la merde avec du parfum. » La B, en revanche, propose ceci : « Rien de plus facile que de couvrir l'odeur de la merde, il suffit de l'asperger de parfum. » Et elle ajoute : « Ce qui compte, c'est le doux arôme du succès. » Autrement dit : la merde et le parfum existent en fonction du nez qui les hume (Diez 2001: 280).

Typical of Carlos Hernández' philosophy of life, the metaphor is supposed to prove the reign of relativism and consequently, the necessity of pragmatism. According to his metaphorical philosophy, the smell of perfume and the smell of excrement respectively represent innocence and crime, justice and violence, good and evil; both smells exist, but the prevalence of one of them depends on the person who smells it. In other words, justice and crime coexist, we only have to choose which one of them we want to see to taste success, i.e. money and material comfort. Using this vulgar metaphor, the narrator affirms that the end justifies all means: transposed in a quotidian life where it does not have any sense, Machiavelli's philosophy is reduced and stands for cupidity, corruption and injustice. This simple, popular and inoffensive pragmatism actually induces a fallacious philosophy where sophism triumphs.

This treacherous way of justifying the philosophy of pragmatism is also conveyed by cynicism, allowing the narrator to affirm something without standing for it. The use of cynicism, irony and black humour in Diez' novels has been analysed as a way of denouncing the limits of traditional detective novels and particularly, their rationalism (Tongerren 2012). As indicated, relativism and humour are certainly meant to satirise the dysfunctional social system, and to question rationality in the novels means to question the limits of any absolute perception in social systems. However, as relevant as the use of humour and relativism are in theory, their omnipresence does not help the reader to understand the ethical guidance in the novel, keeping him from grasping where the narrative authority is precisely because the narrator is a cynical, corrupted, polygamous and misogynist detective. As highlighted by his coarse way of speaking and his constant sexual remarks or thoughts every time he sees a woman, this character appears as a caricature of the rude and popular detective brilliant in solving cases but vulgar in every other way, someone in the manner of Frédéric Dard's famous French detective San-Antonio. Since he works in popular areas very successfully, his vulgarity associated with the first-person narrative could be seen as a way to create some empathy with the common man. However, considering the tragic narrative setting (women's murders, prostitution, women's exploitation...), the reader cannot help but wonder where the ethical guidance lies in Diez' *Poussière du désert*.

In the history of the occidental novel, the 20th century marks a profound turn in the perception of authority. Predominantly associated until then with an omniscient narrator in realist tradition, the "democratic novel" (Wolf 2003) sees the rise of pluralist narration over auctorial authority.

However, in a polyphonic novel, or in a novel where the main narrator is untrustworthy, who is the reader to trust? The impersonal and omniscient narrator is a traditional way for the reader to detect the normative system of validity in the novel (Hamon 1997), but in the absence of a trustworthy narrator it is difficult to recognise the normative system. Yet the possibility for the reader to determine the normative system is a condition for him to understand the novel and its ethics. Hence, when playing with these codes, the novel takes the risk of being misunderstood and sometimes, becoming a scandal⁶. This is a risk Diez' novels are willing to take, evolving on a very precarious balance between provocation and disenchantment, brutality and despair, as if literature itself couldn't contain the violence towards women and turn this savagery into catharsis, as if it were only able to confirm the banality of evil.

5) Concluding remarks

Confronted by the extreme violence endured by women in Mexican frontier cities, the reader of Diez' works also has to deal with a problematic narrator whose sense of morality is quite disturbed. Torn between the cruelty of a lawless society on the one hand, and a perverted and corrupted narrator on the other hand, the reader is sometimes lost in the normative system of Diez' novels and has to decide where his own ethics lie. Hence his responsibility: In front of a world forsaken by morality and justice, in reality as well as in fiction, he has to maintain the necessity of what is called in French 'le sens', in order to give both meaning and direction to the chaos thrown in front of his eyes. In this perspective, Diez' crime novels express very clearly a contemporary tendency of fiction, including novels, movies or television series, in which the authority cannot be found in the narrative nor the auctorial instances, but only in the reader who is dangerously attracted by evil.

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⁶ This is particularly the case with the dictator novel in the first-person: Choosing a first-person novel turned towards the criminal's subjectivity imposes an ethical interrogation. How can the novel articulate the personal writing of the dictator and the commitment of the novelist? See Brochard 2015.

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