

Trauma, Violence and Pornography: *Un mal año para Miki* by José Ovejero

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José Ovejero (1958), a Madrid-born novelist and journalist who won the Premio Primavera for his novel *Las vidas ajenas* in 2005, constructs a world of isolation in his 2003 book *Un mal año para Miki* (www.ovejero.info). After suffering the trauma of the loss of his son and his wife to violent crimes, the protagonist, Miki, turns to technology and pornography as ways of coping with the trauma of violent loss. In this article, I argue that Ovejero presents a compelling critique of postmodern reliance on virtual reality and simulation. Ovejero accomplishes this critique through the narrative of his main character, Miki, whose turn to simulated fulfillment proves isolating and psychically devastating. After providing a brief synopsis of the plot, I will show how Ovejero accomplishes his critique of contemporary dependency on the virtual by showing how simulations of sex and violence function as a form of escape for Miki. In the latter part of my essay, I will analyze how these forms of escapism interact in the novel. For Ovejero, our virtual world blurs the distinctions between sex and violence, producing a stream of images that desensitizes viewers and leaves real, corporeal violence as the only way to regain connection with oneself and others.

After the accidental death of his son, Boris, and the murder of his wife, Verena, Miki avoids contact with his friends and colleagues through the use of surveillance cameras, answering machines, television, videos, and computers. He sets up cameras, controlled by his computer, around his house so that he can see (and ignore) anyone who tries to visit him. He turns on his answering machine, not answering any calls in person, has his groceries delivered after ordering them online, and orders his anti-panic drugs through offshore online pharmacies. In this way he is able to completely remove himself from the outside sphere of influence. To entertain himself, he plays Tetris and Bejeweled on his computer, watches porn on TV and masturbates. By shutting out any outside contact, Miki relies on visual representations of interactions instead of actual interpersonal communication—instead of talking to someone, he listens to them leave messages; instead of having sexual intercourse with a woman, he watches sex on videotape.

Miki's behavior fits into what Jean Baudrillard sees as the postmodern condition: the real has been replaced by the simulation, and "...simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (3). While Ovejero recognizes that layers of mediation exist between us and reality, through Miki's character, he also criticizes this loss of the real and strives to remain in touch with the human condition. Miki's grasp on reality weakens throughout the novel, going from traditional, when his wife and son are alive, to pitiful, when he sits by himself watching pornography, physically unable to interact with other humans.

Echoing Baudrillard, Franklin Menéndez, in his article “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,” considers pornography to be a postmodern category, a “specific construction of pleasure” that is “purely visual and given over entirely to the consumption of commodity images” (401). He also states that pornographic viewership “betrays postmodernism’s greatest anxiety . . . the displacement of the real by the simulacra” (401). Menéndez examines pornography as a “complex intersection of visibility, sexuality, commodity, and technology” (402). In *Un mal año para Miki*, the connections among these four areas are clear—Miki turns to porn, which is commodified sex acts provided by technology, in order to stimulate himself both visually and then manually. Pornography in this novel displaces the real with the simulated; instead of having sex with other women after the death of his wife, Miki uses simulated sex, just as he uses his answering machine to simulate phone conversations. While Miki watches porn, “Miki se bajó los pantalones y calzoncillos, aguardando a que alguna escena le hiciera efecto. Se le ocurrió rebobinar la cinta del contestador para escuchar la voz de Lucía mientras tanto, pero le dio pereza levantarse” (51). Miki has become desensitized to the video representation of sexual acts. He not only needs another sensory input—the voice of Lucía on the answering machine—but he is not interested enough to get up out of his chair to rewind the answering machine. Miki has been consumed by this “virtual” world.

Since Miki does not find the porn video he watches to be tantalizing, he begins to analyze what he is seeing while watching porn: “la escena de siempre: una felación; primer plano un pene descomunal . . . La chica se la mamaba a tal velocidad que parecía querer ganar una carrera; era una cosa curiosa de las películas pornográficas, que siempre follaban, masturbaban, y chupaban a toda prisa . . . como rodados a cámara rápida” (51). Ovejero’s description of the sex act that Miki views in the video is clinical. Through Miki’s eyes, Ovejero presents a world in which sex has become unexciting. Instead of focusing on the arousing images of two people having sexual intercourse filmed solely for the purpose of the viewer’s pleasure, Ovejero focuses on the technical aspects of the scene, the “escena de siempre”, filmed at a fast pace with a close-up view of the penis. When constantly bombarded with scenes of various types of sexual activities, viewers become increasingly desensitized to them, allowing them to take a step back from what they are seeing to question the details—why must the sex in porn always be so fast? To keep viewers coming back for more, the producers of porn must find new ways to entertain their customers.

Sex and violence are so embedded in daily life that they form part of our cultural landscape explains Vartan Messier in his article “Violence, Pornography, and Voyeurism as Transgression in Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*” (73). He also states that there is an “ongoing and growing trend to push the envelope of the unbearable and the permissible even further, suggesting that the general public has not only become deeply obsessed and fascinated by gore and pornography, but embraced them as a form of popular entertainment” (73). Although the Messier’s work refers to an American phenomenon, this same change can be seen in Spanish culture as well.¹ Various forms of media work to incorporate entertainment into their programming. Movies, TV shows,

and even news media try to keep audience's attention through constantly pushing at the edge of what is acceptable for the overall industry.

In *Un mal año para Miki*, Ovejero draws attention to this obsession of the public to violent images and their lack of effect on the viewers, emphasizing the fact that the virtual at some point becomes just as removed as the real. At the end of the novel, Ovejero juxtaposes violence and pornography when Miki flips between images of the 9/11 attack and a porn video. He describes the pictures of the planes hitting the twin towers, much like the earlier description of the porn video, with an eye for detail and a disinterested voice:

Un avión, al parecer de pasajeros, se estrellaba contra una torre y entraba en ella como si estuviese hecha de mantequilla. Al momento la torre estallaba. . . .

Cojonudo.

Repitieron la toma desde varios puntos de vista. . . . Por lo visto, era cierto; un avión se había estrellado contra una de las torres gemelas en Manhattan.

Grandioso.

Miki vio el segundo avión entrar por la izquierda de la pantalla. Se clavó en la segunda torre, algo más abajo que el primero, y la explosión hizo reventar varios pisos.

Guau.

El locutor estaba histérico, parecía un comentarista deportivo anunciando un gol increíble de la selección nacional.

Miki quitó el volumen. Pasó un buen rato viendo imágenes de los aviones estrellándose contra las dos torres. Era perfecto. Una obra de arte. . . .

Miki se quedó aún varios minutos contemplando una y otra vez el impacto. Gente corriendo. Humo. Y de pronto una de las torres se desplomó. Como un anuncio del fin del mundo. . . .

Increíble. (223-24)

The comparisons that Ovejero makes while describing the falling of the Twin Towers call attention to themselves: the panicked voice of the commentator who sounds like a soccer announcer; the constant looping of the same video over and over again; the plane entering the tower as if it were made of butter. Although he describes the images as “un anuncio del fin del mundo”, his interspersed exclamations of *conjonudo*, *increíble*, *guau*, and *grandioso* show the impression caused by these images. The character then describes the representation of the terrorist attacks as “una obra de arte”, even while describing the victims of the attack jumping from windows, once again relating to the desensitization from overconsumption of violent images. Media must report news, and the more shocking the news, the more times the story and its images are replayed on TV. After the 9/11 attacks, these images of the smoking buildings and the second airplane hitting the side of the World Trade Center were shown worldwide repeatedly. These images represented a national trauma for US citizens, while causing international sources to vary in the way both the images and the attack were interpreted. Although many

nations joined the US in mourning the loss of life caused by the terrorist attack, others celebrated the completion of a long-planned mission.

In *Crimes of Art + Terror*, Frank Lentricchia quotes Karlheinz Stockhausen, a German electronic musician, who states that the attack on the World Trade Center was “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos”(6). Lentricchia talks about our fascination with the “transformation of the World Trade Center into a narrative of spectacular images. Terrorism for the camera” (6). He also states that “Art is representation; to claim otherwise is not only to announce one’s insanity, it is also to impugn what is presumed to be at the core of art: its so-called humanity” (7-8). The point that Lentricchia makes is this: the attacks themselves were horrific; no one can debate that. However, the media representation of the attacks becomes one step removed from the attacks themselves; the reproduced images are compelling—terribly so. As Aristotle states, “objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of . . . dead bodies” (quoted in Lentricchia 8). The media changed the incredibly violent terrorist act into an “aesthetic act” that transformed American consciousness. Baudrillard states that, “. . .all the holdups, airplane hijackings, etc are now in some sense simulation holdups in that they are already inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences,” suggesting that the media coverage of the event is just as important—if not more so—than the event itself to the perpetrators (21). By turning 9/11 into a series of images instead of a violent attack, Ovejero removes Miki from the trauma of the event. Miki, and now the reader, can view the news images of the attack as visual commodification of the attack, as essentially an aesthetic and consumeristic phenomenon.

Ovejero continues to blur the distinction between violent and sexual acts with the juxtaposition of this violent act with pornography. Miki, searching for more visual stimulus, flips to a pornographic video (223-24). He continues to flip between the images of the towers and the images of sex:

Dos mujeres en la pantalla, dedos, lenguas, agujeros, clítoris, los gemidos, los berridos, más, más, así. . . . Con el mando a distancia, pasó a las imágenes de las torres, que seguían hundiéndose una y otra vez, se regeneraban a sí mismas para volver a derrumbarse, pero segundos después estaban otra vez en pie, incólumes. Se podían ver las torres y su destrucción desde diversos ángulos, planos largos, medios, cortos, los aviones penetrando a cámara lenta el cuerpo de las torres. Gente arrojándose por las ventanas y cayendo en silencio. (224)

The juxtaposition of pornographic lesbian intercourse to the collapse of the Twin Towers creates an uncomfortable comparison. What do these two visual inputs have in common? The narrator directs the way in which we interpret the images being described: instead of terrorism in the destruction of buildings, we see the phallic symbol of the Tower, which is then penetrated by the airplane. The narrator manipulates the way in which our gaze construes what is happening in order to readjust our interpretation of the images. Instead

of seeing violence and loss, we see sexual imagery. By removing the spectators from the realness of the attack, the images become just that—images made for interpretation and appreciation. We see this same manipulation of the spectator’s gaze when examining the camera work that creates pornographic films.

According to Frederick Kaufman, camera work in pornography has influenced many other media outlets. In an article entitled “Debbie Does Salad” in *Harper’s Magazine*, Kaufman compares the photography done on the *Food Network* to that done on pornographic movies. According to Kaufman, “Like sex porn, gastroporn addresses the most basic human needs and functions, idealizing and degrading them at the same time” (57). Barbara Nitke, a porn director, states in the article that every porn video—and every cooking program on the *Food Network*—has a “pussy” shot and an orgasmic moment (57). She also states that they stretch out the cum shot, running it in an endless loop (57). Here, Ovejero makes this comparison between the visual images of the violation of the Twin Towers and lesbian pornography. In these comparisons, the crashes are the “money-shot”, which in pornography refers to the careful presentation of the orgasm. He refers to the penetration of the airplanes into the towers, the constant falling down and then becoming erect again of the towers as the networks constantly loop the video coverage that they have. He mentions the different angles from which we see the penetration occur. If that were not enough, Ovejero contrasts them with the surgical precision of the lesbian porn that Miki watches on video: “Pasó de nuevo al vídeo. Un primer plano como de operación quirúrgica: el coño abierto como una herida, sonrosado, chorreando mucosidades y la otra . . . aplicando allí una lengua puntiaguda como un cuchillo” (224). In the video, the descriptions, instead of being sexy or arousing, are medical; we read a description of an actual “pussy shot,” but the sexuality that normally surrounds this shot is lacking. A terrorist act is equated with the sexual act; a sexual act is compared to surgery. Both associations break down the link between what was originally signified, instead leaving us to reevaluate the images constructed for us not only by the media but also by the narrator. By deconstructing the images, we can begin to see them in new ways; the danger lies in our becoming desensitized to these visual stimuli.

Access to pornographic and violent images is almost inevitable when technology allows for the easy encounter and dispersal of them. The Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, in his Manifesto, warns us that technology robs us of our autonomy (Lentricchia 25). Kaczynski describes television as an electronic form of valium and suggests that to remove ourselves from the torpor caused by the world of television, it is necessary to commit an act of “original violence” (Lentricchia 26). After viewing both the images of the falling Twin Towers and of the lesbian pornography, Miki takes the pistol that he has been sitting with and shoots himself in the foot, “Miki se miró, espantado, el pie. Humeaba. Y la sangre se había extendido alrededor de él. . . . De entre la sangre y la carne chamuscada asomaba algo blanco, que podía ser el hueso. La garganta de Miki producía sonidos como si lo estuviesen estrangulando” (229). This “original” act of violence ends the novel. We see Miki standing in his house, alone, howling in pain (we are unsure if it is physical, mental, or both) with his foot destroyed by a self-inflicted injury.

Committing a real act of violence, such as this one, is a way of escaping the world of simulacra and trying to reintegrate oneself into the actual physical world. This connection between the Unabomber and Baudrillard seems unorthodox at first; however, Kaczynski and Baudrillard both point out problems they see with today's society: Kaczynski focuses on the evilness of technology, while Baudrillard emphasizes the displacement of the "real" by the simulation, a byproduct of technology. Miki commits an act of self-inflicted violence, but he does so to reintegrate himself into the society he has eschewed since the violent loss of his wife and son. Previously, he replaced the simulacrum with the real—visual representations of violence replaced violence itself; masturbation replaced sexual intercourse. Now, however, he tries to return to the "real" through a shot to the foot.

According to critic Luis Antonio de Villena, quoted in an article from *El mundo*, *Un mal año para Miki* reverts to existentialism; Miki becomes dehumanized, isolating himself both physically and mentally (www.elmundo.es). Villena, cited in an article in *El país*, states that, "Es el prototipo del antihéroe contemporáneo, que se refugia en el sexo y la droga para hacer frente a la soledad" (www.elpais.es). But Villena misses the point. Miki has not lost the belief on the transcendence of the real or the idea that life has a purpose. I see Miki's behavior as a reaction to the violent loss of his family, a psychological necessity in dealing with trauma, not a personal choice of avoidance. Ovejero shows that, regardless of virtuality, simulacra, and mediation, we cannot help but crave the real and even if our ability to connect with reality is shattered by trauma, this craving is manifested through a deep nostalgia for the real.

I have analyzed how violence and technology can overwhelm interpersonal interactions and how this leads to problematic interpretations of sex, life, and art. In the novel, the main character hides from the violent life that surrounds him. Miki experiences life through television and computers, shuns interpersonal relationships, and distances himself from reality, only experiencing life as he sees it through technology. Ovejero juxtaposes the "art" of the collapse of the twin towers with the "art" of pornography, causing Miki to reevaluate the difference between reality and images and showing how overreliance on technology robs us of our autonomy. He condemns the postmodern "simulated" life—caused by trauma, violence, or societal malaise—that withdraws us from the "real" world through his juxtaposition of pornography with images from the 9/11 terrorist attack. The combination of these two unlikely similes suggests the need to question visual commodification of violent and pornographic images as a way of confronting reality and dealing with loss.

Notes

1. Alex de la Iglesia's 1995 film *El día de la bestia* and Alejandro Amenábar's 1996 film *Tesis* and their popularity among viewers show that Spaniards also support violence and gore in their entertainment.

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