

**The Creative Art of Crime Reporting: Journalism and Metafiction in Claudia Piñeiro's
Betibú and Alberto Fuguet's *Tinta roja*.**

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Traditionally considered polar opposites, journalism and fiction frequently cross paths and accompany each other in today's postmodern world of blurring boundaries. This is especially true in Spanish America, where, as Aníbal González points out in his book *Journalism and the Development of Spanish American Narrative*:

journalism has always been present, fulfilling multiple functions: acting sometimes as a shield for social criticism, sometimes as a foil for aesthetic experimentation or philosophical speculation about the nature of "reality," and serving as a marker for social and economic contexts that form the background of Spanish American fiction. (125)

In this article, I will examine the role played by journalism, and more specifically crime reporting, in two novels written during the last twenty years: Alberto Fuguet's *Tinta roja* (1996) and Claudia Piñeiro's *Betibú* (2010). While very different in style and structure, each novel is self-reflexive and metafictional in nature. Each revolves around the crime section of a fictional newspaper, and each comments on the blurring of the boundaries that traditionally separated the act of crime reporting and the act of writing fiction.

Furthermore, each novel also comments on the question of freedom of the press (or lack thereof), political and economic corruption and information control.

Alberto Fuguet's *Tinta roja* is set in Santiago, Chile, at a fictional tabloid named *El Clamor*. The novel begins and ends with two sections narrated in the first person by Alfonso Fernández Ferrer. In the first section, entitled "Verano," Fernández is a middle-

aged man, a journalist who would have preferred to be a fiction writer. The main part of the novel, framed by the opening and closing chapters, is entitled *Prensa amarilla* and is a sort of flash back, written in the third person, that chronicles Alfonso's own experiences as a young intern at *El Clamor* under the mentorship of Saúl Faúndez. *Prensa amarilla* consists of sixty-five episodes. Although there is some degree of continuity, the episodes are not directly linked to each other. Instead, they give us isolated cinematographic glimpses into the life of young Alfonso and the crimes that fill the streets of Santiago and provide him with writing material. *Tinta roja* closes with a section entitled "Otoño" in which we return to Alfonso's first-person narration in the present. Two years have passed since the end of the opening section and Fernández has once again returned to writing following the death of his own intern, Martín Vergara. The title of the upcoming novel which also mirrors that of the framed novel, *Prensa amarilla*, has been significantly borrowed from the hypothetical title of a book of memoirs that Saúl Faúndez had planned to write but never did.

Tinta roja clearly demonstrates the blurring of the boundary between journalism and fiction. Rather than represent reality, crime reporting is designed to sell papers, and can therefore be elaborated with the help of the journalist's imagination. The journalist, then, becomes a figure quite similar to the author of fiction. Alfonso learns this lesson early on in his apprenticeship, when he writes a short and objective article that conforms to all the rules and regulations learned in journalism school. Upon reading his intern's first attempt at journalism, Faúndez rejects it and proceeds to re-write Alfonso's story, adding colorful details that contribute emotion and suspense to an otherwise dry report. When asked by Alfonso how he knows all this information, Saúl replies: "Uno tiene los datos y rellena los espacios" (114). Saúl continues to "fill the spaces" left open by the original

report for several more paragraphs, expanding Alfonso's original seven lines into a thirty-two-line unfinished narrative, to which Alfonso has to write an ending. Faúndez further advises Alfonso to "[p]onle harto color, eso es lo que quiero. No te reprimas y usa tu imaginación, que para eso está: para ponerse en el lugar del otro y ver lo que uno no vio" (115). We can clearly see from this example that there is no longer a boundary between journalism and fiction. As long as the report provides a good story that will raise sales figures, it does not have to be completely objective or faithful to reality. In fact, using one's imagination is strongly encouraged.

Also present in the novel is the notion of crime reporting as an act of writing fiction. Immediately before Faúndez tells his intern to add more color to his reporting and focus on the story, he gives Fernández the following advice:

Métete por la raja tu universidad y tus notas y estas malditas pirámides invertidas. Si te veo escribiendo una, te bateo hasta alisarte las bolas, ¿me entiendes? ¿Cuántas veces hay que decirte las cosas, por la puta? Si la gallada quiere información, por eso escucha la radio ... Quiero que tú escribas lo mejor que puedas. Quiero lo más parecido a la literatura. Rasca quizás pero literatura al fin y al cabo, ¿me entiendes? (123)

Saúl's statement makes explicit the connection between journalistic reporting and literary fiction. Journalism becomes an activity performed by fictionalizing the events that occur in the realms of reality and turning them into a story worthy of publication, a story that will allow the paper to sell more copies than the competition.

Further fictionalizing journalism is the notion of it as a spectacle. El Chacal Ortega, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, informs the interns that "En *El Clamor*, nuestro deber es

entretener. Somos parte del espectáculo” (254). The putting on of a quasi-fictional spectacle becomes equivalent to journalism in this scenario. Ortega goes on to make a connection between the newspaper as an entertainment medium and reality as he states: “Contamos historias, señor. Relatamos hechos. Así no más es, jóvenes. Le sacamos el jugo a la realidad. Olemos el sexo, la sangre, el poder, la envidia, la venganza. Todo hecho, hasta los económicos, posee estos ingredientes” (256). Nevertheless, although the newspaper has to entertain, it cannot entirely invent. It needs to contain a semblance of reality that can then be turned into a story through the use of the journalist’s imagination.

While *Tinta roja* focuses mainly on the paradox of the fictionality of non-fiction, there are also a number of metafictional discussions within the novel that focus on the act of writing fiction. These discussions create an inversion of the notion that journalism is a practice in writing fiction, leading us to conclude that writing fiction is, in turn, an act of imitating one’s reality, of writing about one’s experiences. Fiction, therefore, becomes not so much a product of the author’s imagination, but a recording of his or her experiences. Saúl Faúndez directly expresses this idea when he tells Alfonso of the novel he had once planned to write about his experience as a journalist. The novel, significantly, was to be entitled *Prensa amarilla*, a title later taken up by Alfonso for his own novel. In a sense, Alfonso writes the book that Saúl was never able to write. Saúl has the following theory about writing:

- Ninguna novela es del todo inventada ... Las buenas, digo. Pero ficción-ficción, no. No era esa la idea. Eso es lo que me carga de los escritores de novelas. Que no sepan exactamente lo que van a narrar porque aún no

saben lo que les va a ocurrir a los personajes. Eso no es vida. Demasiada sorpresa, Pendejo, te destroza.

- ¿Realmente lo cree?
- Lo creo. Mira, cuando escribo mis notas sé lo que pasó, tengo todo bajo control y tengo que hacerlo corto. Pero lo más importante, Pendejo: sé que voy a tener lectores. Escriba lo que escriba, sé que me van a leer mañana por la mañana. Aunque sea un cargador de La Vega o un matarife como mi padre. Un autor sin lectores no es un escritor. Es como una puta sin clientes. (237-8)

Alfonso later adopts Saúl's theory leading to the successful termination and publication of his own *Prensa amarilla*. According to the theory, literature needs to be completely controlled by the author, and based in part not only on reality, but also one one's own experiences. Furthermore, an author is not an author without his or her readers, who serve as a validation of the author's existence. The author, therefore, acquires an ontological existence as such only when it is granted to him/her by the reader. Because Faúndez's reports have an audience, his existence is validated and he does not feel the need to write outside of the newspaper. Furthermore, Faúndez bases his writing philosophy on his experience as a journalist. The control required of a journalist over his report is the same one required of an author of fiction over his writing, at least according to Faúndez. What we have, then, is a two-way paradoxical equation. Journalism is equal to fiction and fiction is equal to journalism.

The publication of Alfonso's first short story further blurs the boundaries. Initially, the story appears to be based entirely on Alfonso's experiences. It is entitled "No solo la

lluvia moja,” and we witness Alfonso writing it in a section of the book entitled “Primera persona.” The story, as the section’s title suggests, is written in the first person and narrates a day in the life of the narrator-protagonist who initially appears to be a character based on Alfonso himself. In the second paragraph, however, Alfonso’s narrator refers to “*el pendejo que estaba haciendo su práctica conmigo*” (326), revealing to the readers of *Tinta roja* that he is, in fact, a character based on Saúl. By writing from the point of view of Faúndez, Alfonso is creating a fictional account that is entirely based on his daily experiences of reality. The story is fictional in the sense that Alfonso is not writing from his own point of view, but from the point of view of another character. The character of the narrator, however, is not exactly a fictional invention. Although Alfonso cannot know Saúl’s thoughts, he can and does observe his behavior on a daily basis, using that behavior as a point of departure for the reality-based fiction of his story. Because of his daily personal experience with Saúl, Alfonso can more or less faithfully reproduce the man’s language and character in the story where we see precisely the kind of profane language and expressions that Saúl utilizes at all times. We do not have access to the complete text, but it appears to be a segment of a day in the life of a crime reporter, much in the same way as each of the chapters that comprise *Tinta roja* presents us with segments of Alfonso’s life as an intern in the crime section of *El Clamor*. What we can never be certain about, however, is the degree to which Saúl’s character is faithful to the real Saúl given the fact that all representations of Saúl come to us through the medium of Alfonso.

As readers we cannot know whether the story is as mimetic as it claims to be, further leading to a blurring of boundaries. In fact, although *Prensa amarilla* appears to be non-fictional in nature, we can never be completely certain that it is not a fictional

invention of its author, based loosely on a reality that occurred in the distant past. Memory is a fictionalizing agent in literature, and *Prensa amarilla* was written many years after the events it describes took place. Therefore, although the text never explicitly questions its ontological status as non-fiction (within the fictional world of Fuguet's novel, that is), there is an element of doubt created by the fact that Alfonso is not necessarily as reliable a narrator as he claims to be. Furthermore, Patricia Waugh reminds us that in some metafictional novels:

The author attempts desperately to hang on to his "real" identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The "author" discovers that the language of the text also produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text. The reader is made aware that, paradoxically, the "author" is situated in the text at the very point where "he" asserts his identity outside it. (133)

While Waugh's description refers to "real" authors, the same can be argued for Alfonso Fernández who enters the world of his own novel as a character, readers can come to question the degree to which the Fernández of *Prensa amarilla* is representative of the Fernández of *Tinta roja* and what that implies for the claim that literature should represent life.

In the novel as in life, political and economic corruption abound in Santiago and with them the question of freedom of speech and information arises. When a military leader murders his wife, a gag order is imposed. Similarly, when a soap opera star commits suicide, an immediate gag order is placed on all journalists, banning them from making any

official reports about the case. Even before the judge places the gag order, however, the policeman in charge can foresee it, initially refusing to give Alfonso the names of those involved:

No podemos. En forma oficial, digo. Si te los doy es para que tengas más información - le explica el detective Norabuena - . Pero no creo que puedas publicar nada, Alfonso. Esta gente tiene poder. Nos costaría el puesto a los dos, cada uno por su lado. (297)

After some persuasion, Norabuena gives Alfonso some of the details, which include the fact that large amounts of cocaine were present in the room at the time of the incident, and the fact that the actor had needle marks on his arm. Although there is no explicit political criticism in *Tinta roja*, the corruption of those in power is made evident by the fact that crimes concerning anyone with money or political power are immediately covered up. Furthermore, by describing the abundance of crime in Santiago, as well as the corruption of the police forces, some of whom are involved in drug trafficking and prostitution, the novel makes a clear critical statement regarding the inability of political leaders to control the spread of drugs and violence in Chile, and their subsequent attempts to silence the press in order to protect their reputations. Jason Summers sees the information control in the novel as an accusation towards those in power of purposefully attributing violence onto the lower and middle classes while exempting the truly guilty. "Clearly, certain things can 'only' happen at the lower socio-economic levels" (67) Summers states, underlining the "power of the elites" (67), who appear to be untouchable in Fuguet's novel.

Written fifteen years after *Tinta roja*, Claudia Piñeiro's *Betibú* deals with many of the same themes and issues. The fictional newspaper of Piñeiro's novel is based in Buenos

Aires and called *El Tribuno*. The main character is Nurit Iscar, known to some as Betibú (the phonetic Spanish pronunciation of Betty Boop), due to a physical resemblance to the cartoon character. Iscar is a writer of crime fiction, “la dama negra de la literatura argentina” (21). She is currently not engaged in writing fiction after a bad review appeared in *El Tribuno* following her breakup with the editor-in-chief. Early in the novel, Iscar accepts an offer from *El Tribuno* to write “non-fiction,” reporting and speculating from the inside on the murder of Pedro Chazarreta, a crime committed behind the impenetrable walls of the world of the rich and famous in the gated country club community of La Maravillosa. Meanwhile, *El Tribuno*’s famous crime reporter, Jaime Brena, has been demoted to the lifestyle section for publically ridiculing the newspaper and saying he prefers to read the competition. He finds himself forced to write stories of no importance to society such as the sleeping habits of men vs. women. A young college graduate has been hired to replace Brena at “policiales.” The young man, known only as “El pibe de policiales” represents the new generation of journalists whose only means of research is the Internet. Brena becomes a mentor to the kid, much like Saúl Faúndez mentors Alfonso Fernández in Fuguet’s novel. The two eventually learn from each other, Brena accepting the value of technology and the kid learning that there is a world beyond the Internet. Brena, “El Pibe,” and Betibú unite together to investigate and solve the murder of Pedro Chazarreta. The investigation leads the three to uncover a series of deaths and cover-ups that would require high political and economic resources and power. Under threat that they may be next in the series, they are forced to keep their discoveries secret. As an author of fiction, however, Nurit Iscar is under no obligation not to “invent” a story that takes place at a country club where a man is found dead by his maid. Nurit, then, becomes the fictional

writer of the novel we have in front of us, which is narrated in the third person and utilizes the present tense, giving us a feeling of listening to a live feed of the unfolding events as well as the thoughts of the characters.

Corruption is perhaps more strongly present in *Betibú* than it is in *Tinta roja*. The characters' investigation leads them to connect Chazarreta's death to four other deaths of Chazarreta's high school friends. One dies in a skiing accident, one in a car accident, one in a random shooting in the United States, and one is found hanging from a tree and ruled a suicide. Each death corresponds to the lifestyle of the person and is the most likely death they may have suffered. All of them, however, were guilty of raping a little boy, one of their high school classmates. The victim of the rape is quickly eliminated as a suspect, leading the trio of investigators to the only witness, the little brother of one of the rapists. The brother is now a powerful figure who owns a firm called "Business developers" (312). Significantly, there is no specification on the kinds of business Roberto Gandolfini's firm develops. When confronted by Nurit about being behind the murders, Gandolfini replies:

¿No cree entonces que yo sería alguien demasiado poderoso e intocable? Yo y mi compañía. Una compañía "matagente". Sería una empresa muy exitosa, todo grupo de poder recurriría a mí, yo les prestaría servicios y me deberían favores. Gente de política, otros empresarios, hasta religiosos de distintos credos, por qué no. Me convertiría así en alguien intocable. Imagínese que yo, o mejor dicho mi empresa, pudo haber hecho caer el helicóptero del hijo de un presidente. O pudo haber tirado a una secretaria indiscreta por la ventana de su casa simulando que quería cortar un cable de televisión. ... Mucho

poder tendría yo, Señora Iscar, mucho, ¿no cree? Sería lo que se dice “un intocable.” (315-16)

Gandolfini demonstrates just how powerful and untouchable he considers himself to be, and why Nurit should not report her discoveries by pulling out a yellow folder and reading the most likely causes of death for herself, Brena, and her friends. He then sends her off, telling her if what he thinks is true, he should know the brand of her underwear she is wearing, only to inform her what it is. Gandolfini represents power, corruption, and information control in Argentina. He thus controls what comes out in the media, adding an element of fiction to the published articles much like the “elites” in *Tinta roja* have final information control over the masses.

The level of corruption, however, goes much higher in Piñeiro’s novel, far beyond the “untouchable” Gandolfini who is gunned to death in his supposedly impenetrable high security office. Earlier Gandolfini tells Nurit that in this 21st Century, “el asesino es el que queda vivo al final de todo, ese al que nadie pudo matar” (316). Gandolfini’s death demonstrates that there is another killer, one who controls Gandolfini and can control almost anything that happens in the country. We do not find out how high above Gandolfini this organization goes, but we do see the player on the next level, Comisario Venturini, who is in possession of the yellow folder (or one just like it) following Gandolfini’s murder. Just like *Tinta roja* presents police corruption and their involvement in the drug trade as a problem in Chile, *Betibú* hints of police corruption that controls events and information in the entire country.

There is a group, however, that defies the censorship imposed on them. That group is the independent media for which the “pibe de policiales” abandons *El Tribuno* after

having circulated Nurit's final report on the Internet. These are the true journalists, the ones whose preoccupation lies with informing rather than selling newspapers and who are willing to do so at any cost. This kind of journalism is new and has not yet been corrupted by the powers that run the country as the mainstream press whose articles are examples of quasi fiction.

Fiction and journalism blend together in *Betibú* much like they do in *Tinta roja*. Just like Saúl Faúndez advises the young Fernández in *Tinta roja* that crime reporting needs to look like literature, Brena tells the kid, who has just admitted to not reading much, "si querés ser un buen periodista, tenés que leer ficción, pibe, no hubo ni hay ningún gran periodista que no haya sido un buen lector, te lo aseguro" (96). Reading fiction is a prerequisite to good reporting, according to Brena. Furthermore, according to the newspaper's editor-in-chief, Lorenzo Rinaldi, the two are not that different, hence he prefers to hire a fiction writer rather than a reporter to cover the murder. Nurit's repeated protest that she is not a journalist, Rinaldi replies,

Ya lo sé, te quiero a vos porque sos novelista ... Te instalás desde mañana allí con quien quieras ... y escribís. No me interesa que busques la verdad, me interesa que escribas algo que a la gente la atrape, que cuentes ese mundo, que describas los personajes que vas a ver pasar, eso que vos sabés hacer tan bien. (76)

Once again, just like in *Tinta roja*, the "truth" does not matter. What matters is adding suspense and emotion in order to attract more readers and sell more copies. Although he tells Nurit to "invent," Rinaldi informs the "pibe de policiales" that "Nurit Iscar se va a ocupar a darle a este caso un toque de *non fiction* ... y de buena escritura. ... Y vos vas a

hacer el trabajo más de investigación, más policial, de pura técnica periodística” (92-3), ordering him to call her with any information he may find out from his research. By calling Nurit’s work “non fiction” after having ordered her to “invent,” Rinaldi also crosses the line that separates fiction from its counterpart leading readers to ask how much of what they read in a newspaper traditionally dedicated to reporting facts are the inventions of the journalist trying to add more color and life to the story. One of Nurit’s warnings in her final report is precisely a warning to readers to be careful how they interpret what they read in the press:

Lo que pasa con esta noticia policial es trasladable a cualquier noticia y a la situación general de los medios hoy. Una agenda de prioridades informativas que deja afuera ciertas noticias es censura. No permitan que nadie les arme su agenda. Ni los unos ni los otros. Lean muchos diarios, vean muchos noticieros, todos, hasta aquellos con los que no están de acuerdo, y recién después armen su propia agenda. La comunicación hoy dejó de ser emisor-receptor, la armamos entre todos. (330-31)

The message is clear – the press is no longer a reliable source of information due to the fact that there are interest groups in control that make it impossible to distinguish fact from fiction in what was once considered objective and unbiased information.

Much like in Fuguet’s novel, the assertion that fiction and journalism are becoming indistinguishable is accompanied by a metafictional reflection on the very nature of fiction. Throughout the novel, Nurit asserts her reality by separating it from her novels and constantly reflecting on what she would do if she were a character in her own novel. At the conclusion of the novel, when Brena and Nurit go home together, the reflection is the

following: “Si ésta fuera una novela de Nurit Iscar, ella no contaría qué pasa un rato después. ... Apenas contaría el beso que se dan en una esquina, que él le acaricia el pelo... Pero no contaría el recorrido en el ascensor, donde las manos ya se sienten libres” (344). This purposeful separation between the “real” Nurit and a hypothetical character in her book appears to be trying to combat the possibility of readers doubting the reality of her existence and of the existence of the world being described. As a result, the feeling is one of reading non-fiction and suspending disbelief in order to accept the descriptions as “true.” Nevertheless, in her final note to the readers of *El Tribuno*, Nurit asserts:

Yo soy escritora. Invento historias. Y a ese mundo de ficción volveré cuando termine este último informe. Porque en ese lugar no tengo miedo, porque en ese lugar puedo inventar otra realidad, una aún más cierta. Allí es donde puedo empezar una novela cualquiera, la próxima, con una mujer que viene a hacer las tareas domésticas a la casa de alguien como Pedro Chazarreta, por ejemplo, y que tiene que pasar como cada día por todos los controles de acceso a La Maravillosa sin saber, sin sospechar, que cuando llegue al chalet de su patrón se encontrará con que él fue degollado. ... Total, todo será apenas una realidad que yo inventé. Una novela es una ficción. Y mi única responsabilidad es contarla bien. (333)

The novel she describes is the very novel we have in front of us. Just like in Fuguet’s novel the text turns out to have been the narrator’s published new novel, here we come to the end to find out we have actually been reading Nurit’s novel. At the same time, however, due to the constant separation between herself and her character, we come to question whether or not Nurit’s novel is fiction or a journalistic report on a reality she cannot

describe. If journalism has been replaced by fiction, perhaps fiction can take the place of journalism and tell the story through the secure lens of invention and the traditional separation of fiction from reality.

It is important to remember, however, that we are dealing with two fictional novels written by Alberto Fuguet and Claudia Piñeiro. As they explore the changing roles of journalism and fiction, Fuguet and Piñeiro create fictional authors within their novels, causing us to both doubt and question the nature of truth and our ability to represent it. They bring up problems of corruption and crime and focus readers' attention on the way in which the press is also involved in furthering these problems by either sensationalizing or silencing coverage of the problems. Neither author provides solutions, but they both hint at the satisfaction of writing. Each features a character whose writing career is refueled after an experience with journalism. The boundaries have been blurred, but the act of writing assumes central importance.

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