

Social Criticism or Banal Imitation?: A Critique of the Neo-realist Novel Apropos the Works of José Ángel Mañas

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La gente no hace amigos, coge rehenes
(*Raro*, Benjamín Prado)

I'm scared of God and scared of Hell
And I'm caving in upon myself
How can anyone know me
When I don't even know myself
(The The: "The Giant" *Soul Mining*)

In 1994, José Ángel Mañas, all of twenty three years of age, exploded on to the literary scene with a novel whose principal characters, themes, language, style, even narrative space and structure, portrayed an overt, social disillusion and discovered a barely contained violence within the social relations of a young generation of Spaniards. Success for this first published novel, *Historias del Kronen*, was immediate. The work was a finalist that year for the prestigious Premio Nadal, ten editions of the book were published in the first year alone, and, soon after, the novel was adapted and brought to the big screen by the well known director Montxo Armendáriz. The reasons for this novel's immense popularity and its best seller status have been widely discussed, and the critics have been both glowingly laudatory and severely critical. Whatever its merits or faults, *Historias del Kronen* struck a chord with the critics and the reading public and Mañas came to be recognized as one of the leading figures of a generation of young novelists in Spain who themselves experienced tremendous market, if not critical, success during the 1990's both at home and abroad.(1)

The list of young, successful writers who belong to this newest generation is quite extensive (see Urioste 1997, and Dorca 1997). While their respective works are of course varied, several basic narrative characteristics dealing with theme and style can be noted as representative of the group, and will be addressed as this essay develops.(2) Like most generational labels nonetheless, this one is somewhat arbitrary. What most unites these writers is: 1) the presence of a general disillusion, a social malaise that permeates the storylines of their works and which molds the characters, and 2) the fact that almost all of these novelists were born after 1960 with their literary and commercial success belonging to the decade of the nineties. With this article, I will analyze, discuss, and critique the literary production of one of the leading members of this young generation of Spanish novelists, José Ángel Mañas. I will focus on three major, symbolic elements in his works -sex, drugs, and rock and roll- and, in this manner, enter into a broader application of these themes regarding the newest narrative expressions of reality for Spanish youth at the turn of the millennium.(3)

No matter what forces drive these writers to produce their works, what calls one's attention to this literature is their attempt to return the novel to its rightful place as part of the material reality that forms and informs everyday existence. In a somewhat ironic twist however, their symbolic representation of this material reality is the key. In the end of this study, I will address the following central question: Are Mañas and the newest group of Spanish novelists that Gullón ardently defends inventively creating a social criticism of their time or is their literature not much more than a banal re-creation (imitation) of the very social elements they look to represent and critique?

As mentioned above, these novelists were born during the 1960's and 70's. Their works then dialogue with the reality of a new generation of Spaniards; a generation which Vázquez Montalbán has described as, "la primera promoción biológica de españoles rigurosamente posfranquistas [cuya] memoria lógica se forma con la muerte de Franco o incluso después. Ni siquiera ha sido suya la expectativa de la transición" (378). In spite of their having been born into calmer times, a spiritual and social angst flows through the pages of their work. The two quotations cited earlier in the epigraph are representative of the *weltanschauung* attributed to this post-Franco generation; a type of disenchantment that is abundantly legible in the novelistic production at the end of the twentieth century in Spain. The quotation from Benjamín Prado (1961), one of the "older" novelists discussed here, expresses in no uncertain terms an inherent, violent nature of social relations among this latest generation of Spaniards. Indeed, an aggressive and violent language is common to many of the contemporary narratives. The second quotation (lyrics from the song 'The Giant' by the British band, "The The") is part of the passage that opens and closes Mañas's work, *Historias del Kronen*. It is a passage which provides the psychological framework, a type of existential disillusion (*desencanto*) expressed by the characters, for the entire novel. These two narratives portray a common pessimism, fatalism and resignation related to a "lost" generation. Where does this *desencanto* arise from given the fact that most Spanish youth live in a thriving, capitalist society and, as Vázquez Montalbán states, most have been born into a strong, established democracy with the shadow of Franco now long distanced from their lives?

Contra el Felipismo escribimos mejor

In the early 70's, the Spanish intellectual class was still necessarily marked and affected by a utopian idea of radical and revolutionary social transformation. Many of the intellectuals from this period maintained a leftist/Marxist orientation which, in the measure that Marxism was at the time identified as the only viable means for achieving social change, allowed them to operate and incite critically

both at a macro-political level as well as in the realm of daily life. However, as Teresa Vilarós, in her book about the transition years in Spain, has argued: "El fin de la dictadura en España enfrenta a los intelectuales con el problema de tener que reconocer que su antiguo papel histórico de conciencia crítica del país tiene que ser radicalmente revisado" (23).

Indeed, if Franco's death brought about the end of a long, cruel, and oppressive authoritarian rule, it also seemed to bring about the end of a possible counter-utopia. What happened to the socially compromised intellectuals whose dreams were to create a new society once the corpse of Franco's dictatorship gave up its last breath? Again, from Vilarós: "Después de 1975, pensadores y escritores implicados hasta entonces en proyectos totalizadores de crítica y de renovación social se refugian en una estética introspectiva, cuando no buscan simplemente la aceptación social general mediante el cultivo asiduo de los medios de comunicación de masa hasta entonces desdeñados" (23). This evolution of political thought in Spain finds extraordinary parallelism in the cultural and literary production of these years of transition. The old literary projects, profoundly connected to socio-political questions in the Franco era, change over to a drastic negation of any globalizing metanarrative. In literature, genres break all boundaries and commercialism begins to exercise a strong control over artistic production. During these years detective novels, erotic literature, and science fiction flood the kiosks and bookstores (Vilarós 24, 25). What is common for many of these cultural productions is a feeling of urgency, a compulsion to say and to act in the moment since that may be the only way of recognizing what is real.

For writers such as Mañas, this is the inherited cultural legacy and socio-political environment that faced them when they began to produce their first works of fiction. Positive, economic development in the country and a rise in the political prestige of the new socialist regime (Felipe González and the PSOE), drove the modernization of the country and its progressive integration into Europe during the 1980's. However, scandals related to political and economic corruption in González's administration and a recession at the beginning of the nineties soon were seen to be synonymous with national life as a nostalgia developed for the "splendor" and bonanza of the eighties. High unemployment and an ever-rising cost of living created a sense of futility amongst Spanish youth in regards to their future. The socialists seemed to have sold out to capitalism and this newest generation, at the doorstep of adulthood, found that there was little space or opportunity for personal and professional growth in the new, Spanish society. As a character in one of Mañas's novels puts it:

Si es que esto es Europa: el cinturón de seguridad, prohibido fumar porros, prohibido sacar litros a la calle.... Al final, ya veréis, vamos a acabar bebiendo horchata pasteurizada y comiendo jamón serrano cocido. [...] Encima, todos los españoles contentísimos con ser europeos, encantados con que la Seat, la única marca de coches española, la compre Volkswaguen, encantados con que los ganaderos tengan que matar vacas para que no den más leche.... Así estamos todos con los socialistas: bajándonos los pantalones para que nos den bien por el culo los europeos, uno detrás del otro.... (*Historias* 204)

At the same time, as Toni Dorca has stated, this conflation of political, cultural, and economic changes "coincidió con el momento en que los empresarios del libro decidieron entrar a saco en los dominios de la gente joven." Youth wanted to see their worries and desires reflected in works more suited to their tastes and ways. "Orquestados por un aparato publicitario de muchos decibelios, los nombres de Loriga o Mañas [por ejemplo] sintonizaron pronto con un público que descubría... que en la letra impresa de la novela era posible también hallar un testimonio del mundo en que vivían" (309, 310). From this conflation of socio-historical and generational changes arose a new kind of literary realism in the Spanish novel.

Paraphrasing Vázquez Montalbán's now famous statement in regards to leftist, artistic production fueled by Franco's monolithic presence, it seems that this new generation found their own target against which to base their narratives: González, his political party, and all that they stood for (*el Felipismo*). Mañas's narrative situates his reality and his critique in the margins of conventional, adult society and, as we shall see, exalts the culture and values of a young generation of Spaniards. Or, as Carmen de Urioste has written, "[s]e observa en estos nuevos narradores, la necesidad de desarticular la conciencia del bienestar de la sociedad democrática española" (463). The protagonists of the youth culture appeared to translate a generational pessimism which, historically, was situated between two wars (1898-1939), into a pessimism that was now situated between two disenchantments. The first was that which manifested itself in the challenge and radical distrust on behalf of the protagonists of the *movida* in the latter part of the seventies and the first half of the eighties towards almost everything previous to them.

The second was generated as a result of the "get-rich-quick" culture (*la cultura del pelotazo*) and the culture of corruption which, for many, sprang from the ecstasy and excess of power that the socialists experienced during the latter years of the 80's and the beginning of the 90's. The nihilism of 1898 gravitated to a nihilism of 1998. As we shall see, a significant cultural response to this social malaise, it appears, was to seek refuge in the image.

Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll: or Image, Image, Image

A general perusal of the works written by this latest generation of novelists reveals storylines that, in the majority of the cases, deal with the hedonistic lifestyle of young Spaniards who "live" their environment through the drugs, sex, and rock and roll of the bars and clubs that they frequent in urban party life.⁽⁴⁾ This, in essence, is the same urban milieu that the reader encounters in the majority of Mañas's works. Indeed, part of the realism attributed to the production of this fiction is derived from the very narration of the urban presented in the novels. The hectic, fragmented, city habitat that one would experience as s/he flies by in taxi, for example, is recreated in the narrative structure of the work itself. In the opening scene of *Mensaka*, any tourist with a decent map of the city could follow David's delivery route as he transverses Madrid on his motorbike:

Pillo Castellana hacia Colón, doy la vuelta en el primer cruce, me meto por el lateral, subo por María de Molina y me paro un momento para llenar el depósito en la gasolinera que hace esquina con López de Hoyos. Luego llego a la Avenida de América, cruzo la M30, pillo Arturo Soria, y a la altura del Plaza me meto por el parque Conde de

In this manner, Mañas creates an immediate bond with his reading public who frequent the very areas that they experience fictionally in the novel and who can almost feel the familiar, frenetic rhythm of the city in the short, choppy, and aggressive narrative style. This is part of a wonderful play between the reality of fiction and the fiction of reality that Mañas achieves with his first novel. In fact, his critique of the abstract, theatrical nature of contemporary, urban culture is one of the strongest elements of this work. Unfortunately, as will be discussed later, the innovative play loses its interest as the same style is repeated scene after scene, and novel after novel.

Also common to all of his works, as well as to many works of his contemporaries, is the use of street slang (borrowing heavily from jail language and gypsy *caló*), the use of a limited and precise habitat, and of a narrative style that reflects the fragmented and superficial nature of the personalities, their urban space, and their cultural environment. This all comes together to create the image of a generation that is lost and struggling to find their way. The characters that the reader comes to know are generally disinterested and disillusioned with their personal situation, their city, and their country.

The storylines of Mañas's novels center around the apparently bleak future, the dead-end jobs, and the nightlife of young Madrilenians as well as the drugs they take, the sexual relations they maintain, and the diversions they use to fill their lives. The characters experience and live a "light" culture (the culture of MTV, of the movies and television), a culture of the image. References to the outside world - politics, economy, etc... - are commonly filtered through popular culture and most often affect them only in the manner that these references affect the possibility of their being able to satisfy the most immediate needs.⁽⁵⁾ Especially in *Historias*, this all comes together to reveal a certain abstract and theatrical element at the level of language, narrative, and storyline which serves to distance the reader from the work, creating in this way, the possibility of a differential or critical space from which to read Spanish, urban culture at the end of the millennium.

The cult of the image: sex and the theatrical space of reality

Upon reading Mañas' novels, the first question that comes to mind is: Madrid and its youth culture really is like this? The incredulity of this question reveals not only the feeling that he who has ever been in the Spanish capital (this author for example) has missed the better part of the *juerga* that it offers, but also discovers a compulsion to continue the reading in order to experience, at least in a vicarious manner, all the sordid details of the life of these young people. This voyeuristic question fits perfectly within the framework of a book, *Historias*, whose principal character, in his free time at home, plays over and over again his favorite scenes from a slasher/porno film called *Henry: Portrait of a Killer* (or, as Mañas transcribes it phonetically, "Jenriretratodeunasesino"). Carlos, the narrator, professes that, "[l]a única realidad de nuestra época es la de la televisión. Cuando vemos algo que nos impresiona siempre tenemos la sensación de estar viendo un película" (42). This cult of the image informs every aspect of his personal life. It even plays a role in his sexual relations since, for Carlos, the major sexual satisfaction is derived from seeing the act turn out "igual que una peli porno" (78).

In one passage portraying a graphic sexual encounter between Carlos and Rebeca, a drug addict, the act is accompanied by filmic images of the movie *A Clockwork Orange* ("Lanaranjamecánica") which Rebeca has put in the VCR. The violence and sex seen in the movie excite Carlos and after the initial sex he tells Rebeca to turn over. "No, Carlos, que tengo que descansar un poco,... No, por ahí no,... que no me apetece. ...Ay, que cabrón eres, ten cuidado, joder." In spite of Rebeca's pleas, Carlos continues. "Cuando estoy a punto de correrme, me doy cuenta de que la película ha llegado a mi escena preferida. Alex está violando a la mujer del escritor. Rebeca gime debajo mío y el orgasmo es bastante prolongado" (34). Beyond the violent nature of this scene, what is truly disturbing is that, along with the desire and the physical stimulation that Carlos experiences while watching the scenes of violence and sex in the video, the young man also experiences a certain indifference revealed in his relationship with and his reactions to the "real" event in which he is participating. Carlos, in his sexual encounters, acts with the same fascination that he experiences in the violent films and, what is more, in a certain way tries to reconstruct "live" what he sees in the videos. Thus, not only is pure stimulation converted into the main preoccupation upon watching these scenes (or reading this book), but also, it is this stimulation, and not the participation, that is converted into the principal characteristic of any "real" experience.

In fact, in Mañas's novels the narrator often times becomes more a spectator than an active participant in all that happens. S/he seems to feel a constant need to make life more theatrical and visual. The prose of Mañas's works underlines this virtual lack of identity in regards to many of the characters. In *Historias*, even though Carlos is the narrator throughout the novel, his conscience is at times so unobtrusive that many passages read as if they were written in third person:

En el coche, Manolo corta unas rayas [de coca]. Roberto pone Parálisis Permanente y Ramón le dice que quite esa mariconada, que ponga algo de Trashmetal. Roberto le responde que en su coche pone lo que le da la puta gana y, para joderle bien, cambia la cinta y pone bakalao a tope.

-¿A DÓNDE VAMOS AHORA? - pregunto.

- A MÍ ME ES IGUAL. A CUALQUIER SITIO CON MARCHA - dice Manolo.

-...¿VAMOS A MALASAÑA?

-...PODRÍAMOS IR A CHUECA, PARA VARIAR.

- O A UNA DISCOTECA, A BAILAR.

-...VENGA, DÉJENSE DE COÑAS Y BAJEN AQUÍ LAS NARICES, JÓVENES, QUE ESTAMOS YA EN FASE DE DESPEGUE. ROBERTO, NO TAN FUERTE, TRONCO. QUE TE LLEVAS LAS RAYAS DE LOS DEMÁS.

Roberto arranca. Un Ibiza en la Plaza Castilla nos pita, al abrirse el semáforo. Roberto saca el brazo por la ventanilla y enseña la barra del coche. Manolo y yo reímos. (108)

The fact that the reader loses the line of the narrative voice in middle of the action not only demonstrates an unreflective attitude on

Carlos's part, but also shows how the indifferent flow of images and events narrated here resembles the flow of the flat images seen on television.

A similar narrative structure is found in *Ciudad rayada* with dialogues that pass by without concrete references to guide the reader:

-Bueno, ¿y qué?

Tijuana se rayó de nuevo.

- ¿Y qué, qué?

Kiko recuperó la sonrisa rápidamente. ¿qué y qué pasó... quiero decir cuando Pablo...? Y Tijuana fichándole con su mirada peligrosa. De repente, ¡clik!, sonrío y trago a la birra, como si nada. (16,17)

In these last two passages one finds encapsulated many of the principal narrative elements read in Mañas's works. The language hints at a certain repressed violence. The dialogue is, at times, short, superficial, and often lacking in descriptive character. The narration can be difficult to follow, almost cinematographic, with abrupt changes in the narrative voice and theme.

Indeed, film and television play a role in the novelistic production of this latest generation of writers as never before. This, of course, should not be a surprise given the virtual world of mass communication in which today's youth live and thrive. That the adolescent public is more attracted to the image, to the visual, to instant gratification, seems to deepen even more the crisis of the written culture. Carlos's obsession with the violent and pornographic, for example, is equaled by Zenon's passion for Marilyn Monroe (*Grasa, De Madrid al cielo*), or by Israel's affinity for "B" Westerns in Prado's, *No les des la mano*. In this way, these works, as well as Mañas's prose discussed above, share in the desire of television and film to continuously change the image and maintain the rhythm of the action. This is a desire, nonetheless, that, as a means to an end, can falsify the image and trivialize the action. Resonating with Vilarós' comments on the early transition-period literature, these cultural productions too suggest a feeling of urgency in their narratives, a compulsion to say and act in the moment. The very identity and the conscience of Carlos, in *Historias*, are replaced by a series of events that, just like the movies that fascinate him, can entertain for a while, but, in the end, never satisfy completely.

Coca, güisqui, tripi, litrona y otras drogas del montón

"La meditación budista es algo así como estar muy puesto de tripi. ...Cuando has tomado el suficiente ácido puedes llegar a olvidarte de ti mismo, a olvidar tu nombre y tener que preguntarte quién eres, qué haces en este lugar y en este momento" (*Historias* 36). This simplistic comparison that Rebeca makes between a spiritual and psychological state achieved through the intellect and the senses, and the ephemeral, psychological state produced by the drugs that, in the end, come to dominate she who uses them, is another revealing element of the escapist attitude demonstrated by the characters in Mañas' novels.

The road to the abstraction of their *puto mundo* (worthless world) passes through the glasses of Coke with J.B. Whiskey (*Jotabé*), the bottles of beer they drink, (*las litronas*), the acid they drop (*los tripis*), and the rows of cocaine that they sniff (*la coca*). These, and other drugs that the characters procure through dealing, scoring with their parents' money, or with the little that they themselves manage to earn, serve as another artificial stimulus (like the movies). They are another means, although not lasting, of mediating their everyday experiences. Or, as Cristina, in Lucía Extebarría's novel, *Amor, curiosidad, prozac, y dudas*, puts it, "Drogas, drogas, drogas. El éxtasis es el pan nuestro de cada día y no sabemos vivir sin él" (229).

In rather phantasmagoric and psychedelic tones, Mañas presents the desolate reality of the drug subculture. In the passages that depict the use of drugs, the narrative structure itself reveals the tensions and deterioration of the main characters in the book. Incomplete and barely coherent thoughts are used to express the melancholic reminiscences of Ricardo, a drug addict, in *Mensaka*. "El New World, colega. Aquello sí que eran tiempos. El M. de entonces. Uff, qué música. Un castillo, macho. Quince horas, tronco. Se tiró quince horas y todos locos..." (76). In *Historias*, the reality of drugs is dramatically presented in a long, fragmented, and almost schizophrenic first person description of a party in which the group of friends has at their disposal cocaine, sangría spiked with acid, and whiskey. Enough drugs, as they say, to kill a horse. The relentless narration of this scene constitutes six or seven pages of actual text, it is reduced here to a couple of paragraphs:

Ya empiezo a notar el saborcillo de la coca que baja por la garganta. ¿A cuántas rayas toca por persona? () Joder, qué subidón que me está pegando. ...Creo que ya está empezando a hacer efecto el tripi. ¿No ves allí los globitos y las serpentinas? ¡Qué colores! Lo mejor del tripi son los colores, pero hay que mojarlo todavía más. Vamos a darle otro trago a la sangría y vamos a meterle mano a esas botellas de güisqui. () ... Huy, joder. Qué susto me ha dado el globo al explotar. () Qué emplame está cogiendo el Manolo, ahí bailando como un loco. (217,218)

Once again, as in the movies, the images pass before our eyes at a frenetic pace, disconnected and arbitrary. Mañas is able to emphasize this distancing and abstracting effect of the drugs by means of the narrative structure of his scenes. As is evident, Carlos reacts to the stimulation of the drugs and to the actions of his friends but the supposed dialogue taking place between him and the others is represented by an empty parenthesis () which simply interrupts at intervals the young man's monologue. The signs that he receives from without lack any specific reference, any meaning, or any importance for him and once again he places stimulation above active participation in order to experience "reality".(6)

The abstraction and distance that the drugs allow Carlos to construct also take him to such a heightened state of stimulation and separation however, that he is indeed capable of killing. Not a horse in this case, but rather, one of the participants in the party, a diabetic who Carlos forces to drink a bottle of whisky. In a moment of rage and apparent insanity he loses control over his constructed

reality:

Sí, [Fierro], te vamos a atar. Eso es, ríe, ríe, ríe. Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja. () ¿Véis cómo se ríe? Venga, sujetadle y traed una silla. ... () *Parece una película, ¿verdad?* ... () Que no seas llorica, joder. Aunque seas diabético, un poco de alcohol no te va a hacer nada. ... () Métele el embudo ahora por la boca, Roberto. ... () Así, muy bien Fierro. Glu, glu, glu, glu. ... () Miguel, te lo has perdido. Fierro acaba de beberse él solo una botella de güisqui enterita. ... () Pero no digas bobadas. ¿Cómo va a estar en coma? ... () Está sólo durmiendo la borrachera. () ¡VENGA, DESPIERTA, FIERRO! ... () Eres un débil. ¡UN DÉBIL, ¿ME OYES? ¡UNA MIERDA DE HOMBRE! ¡MERECE QUE TE ESTAMPE LA CABEZA CONTRA EL SUELO ...HASTA QUE TE MUERAS DE VERDAD! () Vale, vale, tranquilos. Sólo estaba bromeando... . () Sois todos unos débiles. () En el fondo os odio a todos. (221-223 emphasis added)

In the moment that the line between spectator and participant is crossed, when what is "real", trivialized by the abstraction of the image, becomes a real tragedy, the differences between imagined experiences and lived experiences are erased ("parece una película, ¿verdad?"). Indeed, many characters found in the new narratives share in this incapacity to perceive the limits between what is real and what is imagined, between what is seen and read and what actually happens in their lives. Elder Bastidas preaches that "lo que uno se inventa es más real que lo que a uno le pasa" (*Lo peor de todo* 38); Israel, in *Nunca le des la mano* becomes so wrapped up in his books that he becomes a part of them (81); and Vania Barcia (Bustelo, *Veo, veo*), in an epiphanic moment, realizes that her life has become a "puñetera película" (150). In the case of Carlos, the drugs are what finally allow him to cross that line and make "real" the "imagined" world he has constructed so many times.⁽⁷⁾

The violence of the previous scene cannot be equated solely to the amount of alcohol and drugs that Carlos and his friends consume. It can also be related to the linguistic deficiency attributed to these protagonists (see note 6). In the new narratives being produced today, the physical (sex, the stimulation from the drugs, violence), it seems, takes on dimensions of greater importance since sincere, verbal expression is so forced or is simply impossible. The "messages" that these characters emit are few and the majority of their moments of real communication are transmitted only through physical movement leaning towards violence.

Ray Loriga's main character, Elder Bastidas, in *Lo peor de todo*, narrates a picaresque life (see Dorca 312-315) of dead-end jobs, classism, social indifference to suffering, and a society obsessed with violence. As he plans just how he is going to "machacarle la cabeza al empleado del mes" in the hamburger joint where he works, he also very simply states the reasons why he hates people:

La gente ve un niño esperando su turno en la compra y va y se lo salta, y luego empuja en las puertas y adelanta cuando no hay sitio suficiente y tienes que frenar para no matarte y se ofende por cualquier cosa y pone vidrios rotos en las vallas y pone el culo para que le den por el culo y escupe en el suelo y a mí todo eso no me gusta nada. (121)

Many times, characters in these contemporary novels appear only to talk in a defensive, counter-attack mode. Reminiscent of Prado's statement about contemporary friendships quoted in the epigraph, words and dialogue seem to retreat and, like kidnappers, they take the person (the hostage) with them. In the end, Loriga's narrator, similar to the colonel in García Márquez's, *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, is reduced to expressing his frustration with a "VÁYASE USTED A LA MIERDA" (126).

From Alaska to Nirvana by way of the "ruta del bacalao"

The first step in the *ruta del bacalao* (an insane "road trip" from Madrid to Valencia and back that became popular during the early 1990's) consisted of taking a designer drug such as *la felicidad* which offered a high of up to thirty hours. The next step was to go out dancing nonstop from Saturday afternoon to Sunday morning in Madrid. After this, the participants would jump into their cars and drive to Valencia (the city in which *bacalao* was born) in order to continue the party there until the early evening when they would return to Madrid, burned out and exhausted, but at break-neck speed in their cars (Hooper 208).

Designer drugs were directly identified with the bacalao music and environment - a type of super-loud and super-rhythmic club music that evolved from techno music. In the same manner, the music presented in Mañas's novels is presented as a natural extension of the drugs, of the frenetic rhythm of the characters' life, of a certain nihilistic attitude they express, and of the violence that lurks just below their daily activities. In *Historias*, the lyrics of a song by the Ronaldos threaten that "TENDRÍA QUE VIOLARTE Y DESNUDARTE Y LUEGO, LUEGO, BESARTE HASTA QUE DIGAS SÍ" (140) while one of Nirvana's songs warns that "UNDERNEATH THE BRIDGE ANIMALS ARE CRAWLING... THERE IS A LEAK... IT'S OKAY WITH THE FISH CAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE FEELINGS... UH, UH, SOMETHING IN THE WAY..." (107). These, and other songs mentioned in the novel, reinforce the abstract character of the narrative structure in the work while utilizing a model that is not strictly literary. They represent more accurately a structure appropriate for telling rock ballads. They emphasize the linguistic element of the novel (and thus are intimately connected to the image) that has been highlighted up until now. However, they also constitute, like the movies, part of the variety of narratives that Mañas draws upon to construct his representation of contemporary Madrid and Spanish culture.

Other novelists such as Benjamín Prado (*Raro* and *No le des la mano a un pistolero zurdó*), Lucía Etxebarria (*Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*), and David Trueba (*Cuatro amigos*) utilize music as a kind of Bakhtinian chronotope with references to such genres as jazz, the rebellious and socially conscious music of the 60's (Dylan or Joplin for example), or the nihilistic work of groups like the Sex Pistols and Nirvana. They then are able to create historical markers and imply certain connections between the present, social angst expressed through the characters with other more famous, artistic expressions that represent marginalized or disenfranchised groups in the past.

Conclusion

In Mañas's works the conflict between the representation of the "real" and the "imagined" is reduced by equating real space with textual (theatrical) space - a simulacrum. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll construct the Madrilenian *ruta del bacalao* for the young protagonists of his novels, diminishing their urban space to a series of film-like images in which they are the actors. The superficial and created world of the television, of the cinema, and of the bars and discos is transposed onto the private dominion in which supposed intimate, human relations often take on shades of the sadomasochistic and misogynistic images of pornographic movies. David Harvey has commented on an inherent danger in this conflation:

The reduction of experience to a series of pure and unrelated presents implies that the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and material. The image, the appearance, the spectacle can all be experienced with an intensity (joy or terror) made possible only by their appreciation as pure and unrelated presents in time. (54)

In this way, the immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle (political, scientific, as well as those of entertainment), threaten to become the stuff of which consciousness is made.

Sensing, perhaps, that his MTV-like prose style threatens to become as banal as MTV itself, Mañas utilizes irony in order to create a critical edge in some of his characters. Not only is Carlos, in *Historias*, the example of a passive television viewer who lives his life like he watches a video, he is, at times, also a critic of this same attitude, ironically describing the state of his generation's cultural capital. "La cultura de nuestra época es la de la televisión. Cuando vemos algo que nos impresiona siempre tenemos la sensación de estar viendo una película. ... Cualquier película, por mediocre que sea, es más interesante que la realidad cotidiana. Somos los hijos de la televisión, como dice Mat Dilon en *Dragstorcauboi*" (42). By combining both elements in one character, Mañas attempts a critique of mass culture from the inside. He places the text squarely in the middle of the materials from which it takes its life. This "insider", however, has an implausibly schizophrenic consciousness. Carlos as the passive spectator accepts his surroundings as real and submits to their logic, no matter how artificial, distorted, or manipulative. Carlos as critic takes an opposite tack by critiquing, through irony, the very same object which the spectator so uncritically accepts.

Mañas is also aware of the critics of his works: those who view his narrative "innovations" as little more than a recognition of what sells in the youth-driven market and a superficial imitation of current popular culture. By placing himself in the fictional world of his novel, *Ciudad rayada*, Mañas creates another critique from the inside - this time of his very own works, and by extension of the narratives produced in Spain by others in his 'generation'. The novel opens with the narrator Kaiser telling about the time that Mañas, "que se dedica a contar historias de los demás," met him in a bar to ask if Kaiser could get him a gun. Even though Kaiser confesses that he is impressed with those who write, he assures the reader that "hay un mogollón de cosas que [Mañas] exagera y otras tantas que el muy listo se calla." In order to emphasize and affirm the fictional nature of Mañas's profession, Kaiser pronounces his final verdict as to the character of the writer who literally produced him. "Ahí está, ahí tienes al Mañas, puesto hasta las muelas y queriendo pillar una pipa. ¿Eso lo ha contado en alguna de sus novelas? ¿No, verdad? Pues hazme caso, que lo que cuenta él no es nada comparado con lo que pasa por ahí" (9,10). It is as if Mañas were retorting to his critics: the "reality" of the contemporary, Spanish, youth culture described in his novels does not even come close to what goes on out there in the real *ciudad rayada* that the readers themselves inhabit. The real novel is life itself.

Historias del Kronen is an inventive, insightful, and entertaining read. Through a focus on the imagery of popular culture, Mañas captures the power that this industry has not only over the youth culture, but also over the dissemination of information and over the production of power itself in Spain, Europe, and the world. However, this style, when repeated in succeeding novels, soon grows tiring. Since it is based on a superficial and ephemeral element such as the image, it is a weak, creative catalyst for further literary creation. Many of the contemporary narratives being produced by his colleagues also rely heavily on this cult of the image. They read like a montage of references to pop culture icons and artistic figures from the 20th Century. The liturgy of references in Prado's *Raro*, for example, runs from Peter Lorre to Borges, Dashell Hammit to Mark Twain, Elvis to Captain Thunder; or just as easily from Madonna to Kurt Cobain. Ray Loriga's works are saturated with allusions to movies, rock and roll, soccer, boxing, videos, and comics. They are narratives that almost radically distance themselves from traditional literary materials. This they do in order to ingeniously create "a novel about a generation that is not the generation of '68" (back cover, *Lo peor de todo*), or perhaps because the formula sells?

In either case, there is a self-defeating element built into the attempted pro-creative innovation of many of these novels and it can be read, for example, in the aforementioned efforts to mix parody and hip cynicism. Returning to Carlos's cultural critique in *Historias*, he states that: "A mí no me gusta la poesía. La poesía es sentimental, críptica y aburrida. Me repugna. Es un género en extinción: no hay nadie que pueda vivir de la poesía en estos tiempos. Es una cultura muerta. ...*Ésa es la puta verdad*" (emphasis added 42). Poetry, it seems, does not appear to have been able to ride the coat tail of the commercialization of literature (or more specifically, of the novel).

It is quite obvious that many editorial houses are more interested in making money rather than making good literature and Mañas is not unaware of this very criticism. In *Mensaka*, the three main characters are members of a "hardcore" rock band on the verge of signing with a multinational company. The novel opens with a parodic, imaginary interview of the members, Fran, David, and Javi, after having made it big with their first compact disk.

FANZINE: Sabemos que tenéis a Ramón Fernández como mánager. ¿Cómo habéis conseguido que alguien tan importante... se interese por vosotros?

(Todos sabemos que Ramón Fernández SÓLO apoya a los verdaderos lameculos con tufillo comercial.)

J: Ramón nos vio una vez en Revólver y se entusiasmó con el grupo.

FANZINE: Ahora una pregunta un poco metafísica. ¿Qué es el Hardcore para vosotros?

F: Uff, ésa es chungu.

(Caras concentradas. Está claro que no han pensado mucho sobre el tema.)

D (iluminado...): Pues yo que sé, chunta-chunta.

FANZINE: ¿Cómo?

D: Que chunta-chunta.

F: Vamos a ser un poco serios. No puedes poner chunta-chunta.

J: ¿Por qué no?

F: Joder. Es verdad que consideramos que la música está por encima de las ideas, pero.... (12)

Pure and parodic emptiness and triviality lie behind the "creative minds" of this hardcore band who want to believe that their music is "above" mundane ideas or classifications of commercialism. Is this a "knowing wink" from the author of *Mensaka* to his readers, reminding them that the cover sometimes *does* make the book? Likewise, in *Historias*, Carlos's criticism of poetry discussed above, in turn, is ridiculously based on its lack of commercial power and the fact that it cannot be put on the T.V screen.

These attempts at criticism notwithstanding, it seems that Mañas and others in his generation imply that the characteristics of that which would normally be considered "bad art" (parodied in the passages above) may acquire new meaning because they turn out to be the "bad reality" (*la puta verdad*) that they portray in their works. The question is however, whether these works reproduce bad reality because they are actually trying to parody it or because they are unaware of their inadequacy? Mañas, after the success of *Historias*, fell prey to this problem. In either case, simply resorting to the reproduction of clichés in reality, in the end, demonstrates a lack of inventiveness and a fascination with the inane which, over time, numbs one's senses. One needs to take care that the fiction of the creating subject does not give way to frank confiscation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images.⁽⁸⁾

These criticisms are not to say that there are no talented writers to be read in this group. To the contrary; Mañas is a talented story teller, while novelists such as Juan Bonilla and Belén Gopegui stand out for their complex and rich narratives. Gopegui, in her works *La escala de los mapas* and *La conquista del aire*, reveals a wonderfully reflective manner of confronting the same disenchantment and unknown future with which others have tended to deal through a simple imitation of pop culture. A dark, cynical, and interesting humor often underlines the works of Loriga, Grasa, and Bustelo and, though at times the images can be somewhat forced, Benjamín Prado's talent as a poet shows through in his very poetic prose work (see the opening paragraph of his novel, *Raro*).

José Angel Mañas's work, as representative of much of the narrative production of his generation, realistically portrays (in its language, narrative structure, and themes) the abstract, postindustrial, and urban environment that has so influenced the youth culture of today. Capitalism has played a role in creating a narcissistic and hedonistic generation of youth who struggle with a world that, for many, seems to lack a center. Globalism, technology, the movies, television, drugs, rock concerts and sex: all of these function like "señas de identidad" and contribute in the construction of a porous environment whose limits have been dissolved and whose reality is in constant construction. In like fashion, these same elements contribute in the construction of the narrative expressions discussed above.

Certainly, Mañas and his contemporaries have no obligation to critique anything with their works. However, in their desire to show, reflect, or interact with the real, does this not, inevitably, require them to position themselves critically? What is their responsibility towards that which they produce? Gullón credits these writers with having reinserted their characters "en la vida social, no en la imaginada, los espacios etéreos de los cuentos de hadas, sino en la cotidiana, donde la gente reacciona y siente como en la realidad" (xi). I would argue that this is the very trap, however, in which Mañas and others fall because their reality *is* the "imagined" and it is indeed "like" reality. As is evident from the discussion presented previously, much of the narrative production analyzed above does not seem to account for the real (for the history) that these texts must confront. They seem to view history and the present, like literature, as a fantasy or a linguistic construct, though a collective one to be contrasted with the singular visions our desires can contrive. In the end, they have to confront history, and not hide behind the television or movie screen.

In spite of the overall critical bent of this essay, it should be said that the literary production of Mañas and his contemporaries have demonstrated great promise for the future of the Spanish novel. What this "neo-realist" narrative is able to do (assuming that it can go beyond the status of a mere imitator of bad reality) is allow one to understand how the human conscience, the individual identity of "man" in our current times, may extend itself through unedited, non-traditional paths: through postmodern roads and highways for which we have just begun to produce a map.

Notes

(1). Germán Gullón, in his "Introducción" to the 1998 edition of *Historias del Kronen* (Clásicos Contemporáneos Comentados), provides a bibliography of 25 writers and critics who have dedicated time, paper, and ink to the works of Mañas (mainly *Historias*) as well as to the works of others grouped into his so-called generation. Gullón himself analyzes this "nueva generación de narradores de menos de cuarenta años" whose works he defends and praises: "buscan sin cesar ignotos horizontes verbales, de argumento, técnicos y de acercamiento al lector" (v,vi). In his words, these "neorrealistas reingresan al personaje en la vida social" (xi). Toni Dorca (1997) and Carmen de Urioste (1997) debate the merits of Mañas's work within the framework of a "generación X", while yet others analyze the works of Mañas and other young novelists defined as belonging to the "tribu del Kronen" (Carabantes, 1995) or the "generación Kronen" (Vázquez Montalbán, 1996).

(2). First person narratives predominate, as does a literary style that one could classify as realism. In fact, Gullón classifies writers such as Lucía Extebarría, Mañas, Ray Loriga, and Pedro Maestre as "neorrealistas" (v). Another common element is the urban, which plays

an extremely important role in many of the storylines. Subsequently, much of what the characters say and do and most of the environment with which they interact has a decidedly cosmopolitan feel.

(3). These three themes are central to many of the narratives being produced by Mañas's "generation" *De Madrid al cielo*, Ismael Grasa; *Amor, curiosidad, prozac, y dudas*, Lucía Extebarría; *Lo peor de todo*, Ray Loriga; *Abierto toda la noche*, David Trueba; or *Matando dinosaurios con tirachinas*, Pedro Maestre, are just a few examples. The themes can be read as representative, artistic responses to contemporary, cultural changes that have taken place in Spain during the past quarter of a century.

(4). As mentioned in note 2, the city is the most common topos of these fictions, with Spain's capital providing a consistent fictional setting. This is especially so for writers such as Ismael Grasa, Ray Loriga, and Mañas.

(5). Historic personalities and events rarely appear (at least explicitly) in the novels except when they interfere with the "juerga" of the young protagonists. An example of this is the reference in *Historias* to the councilman of the "Distrito Centro" of Madrid, Angel Matanzo, who, during the historical time of the narrative, formed part of the mayorship of José María Álvarez del Manzano. Talking about the possibility "de pillar unos gramos de coca", Roberto explains to Carlos how difficult the purchase of drugs has become "ahora que están las cosas muy chungas, sobre todo desde que está el Matanzo... Cada vez somos más europeos..." (29).

(6). The passage also attests to an all important oral component which stamps this and many of the contemporary fictions with a peculiar character. They are saturated with similar dialogues and monologues which the authors utilize in order to break away from the restrictions imposed by the more traditional standards of language. Such tropes as unstructured dialogue, cut short, and containing unfinished phrases and unconnected words, give a certain freedom to the linguistic signs. "Conversations", which quite often are pointless, many times do not even advance the action. They simply reflect a kind of anxious search for meaning in the very actions of the protagonists themselves. Such linguistic abstraction and disconnectedness allude to the same relationship the characters maintain with life. As shown in the passage above, Carlos's alienation is all the greater given that his abstraction of reality goes beyond the visual into the verbal: into the very means of self-expression.

(7). *Historias del Kronen* resonates strongly with the novel *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis. The principal character in Ellis's work is Pat Bateman, a wealthy and good-looking yuppie, whose major worries are his clothes, his hair, and his sun tan. By day he works in Wall Street, exercises in exclusive clubs, and lunches with clients and colleagues in elegant and trendy restaurants. By night, however, he is a psychopathic, serial killer who frequents the popular bars and discos of New York. There he picks up young women and takes them home where he rapes, tortures, and kills them, later dissecting their bodies in order to prolong his morbid pleasure. Some of the young protagonists in *Kronen* are obsessed with Ellis's novel and its psychopathic hero Bateman - "todo un filósofo [que les] ha enseñado a despreciar la humanidad" (190). Carlos, above all, admires the detached and dehumanized, ontological outlook of this fictional character who lacks any affective ties to the world which surrounds him. Again, Mañas is playing with the different levels of perceived reality in having a fictional character admire and envy another fictional character who has lost all ties with reality.

(8). Belén Gopegui, in the prologue to her novel, *La conquista del aire* (1998), states it this way. "[L]a novela no es un mero artefacto estimulador de sensaciones, ... no es equivalente a esos productos televisivos o a esos juegos de ordenador concebidos para que los destinatarios se sientan ya perspicaces, ya intrigados, ya gratificados en sus carencias emocionales" (9,10). Of course, an appeal to the emotions cannot be eliminated given that novels often propose structures, criteria, and directions for human experience. However, she concludes, novelistic territory should deal with "emoción y conciencia, razón y sentimiento, el mito y el logos" (11).

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Social Criticism or Banal Imitation?: A Critique of the Neo-realist Novel Apropos the Works of José Ángel Mañas. Carter E. Smith. University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. La gente no hace amigos, coge rehenes (Raro, Benjamín Prado). I'm scared of God and scared of Hell And I'm caving in upon myself How can anyone know me When I don't even know myself (The The: "The Giant" Soul Mining). Books with genre: social criticism. Economic and Social Literary Criticism | Great Writers Inspire An understanding of the economic and societal pressures affecting authors can provide a point of reference for comparative papers, as well as offering students a wider awareness of the co. Recommend headline. Things to Do in Nashville TN. Outline and explain two criticisms of the Functionalist view of society (10). To be on the safe side you want to provide two very different criticisms, develop both of them and briefly evaluate. This is probably overkill to get you the 10 marks. You could take this criticism even further by arguing that Functionalist theory is itself ideological by arguing that societies need nuclear families to provide effective socialisation, this theory itself reinforces the social order. Radical Feminists would argue against the idea that the nuclear family is necessary, as shown by the fact that most single parent families do just a good job as socialising children as nuclear families.

Learn about the confusing words criticize, criticism, critique, critic, and critical. These are all similar and they come from the same roots, but they have different functions and some slightly different meanings. For example, my boss is very critical of my work, he's always making changes and corrections to it. But when you say a thing is critical, it means the thing is essential, it is necessary, it is very important. For example, honesty is critical to a good relationship. critique a verb/noun referring to evaluating and identifying positive and negative points; critic a person who judges or evaluates, and sometimes a person who only finds negative points; critical two meanings: a person who tends to find fault, or a thing that is very important or essential. Despite much criticism of this formulation and disagreement about whether the gains in question are actually "relative," Grieco clearly captures an essential quality of realism, namely its assumption of underlying conflict-a quality we highlight in our statement of core assumptions. Grieco is aware that states do not always forgo "absolute" economic benefits for "relative" geopolitical gains, so that any theory must state the antecedent conditions under which relative-gains seeking occurs. Given that not all states in all situations are equally sensitive to gaps i Criticism: There are different criticisms for the neo realistic theory like it has the problem of Indeterminacy, federalism and democratic peace. These all can be summarized as follows: Problem of Indeterminacy Criticism: Basically Neo Marxism was a relaxation of the economic determinism and positivism of classical Marxist theories. Its main focus was more on the society rather than on the system alone. The Marxist perspective lends itself to always examining social relationships in terms of their conflictual basis (just as the Functionalist perspective tends to look at those same relationships in terms of their consensual basis). This emphasis might be misplaced.

Conclusion