

## The “Truth” Behind a Scandal: Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s *Las muertas*

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In *Las muertas* (1977), Jorge Ibargüengoitia gives a humorous account of the arrest of three notorious *madrotas* in 1964 in the state of Guanajuato who became known as “Las Poquianchis”. For the most part, the novel has been interpreted as yet another satirical attack against certain moral hypocrisies present in Mexican politics and society as observed by Ibargüengoitia, one of Mexico’s sharpest and most ironic chroniclers until his untimely death in 1983. It is certainly true that social criticism is central to *Las muertas*. However, it is often overlooked that Ibargüengoitia’s novel can also be considered to be a parody of creative nonfiction, particularly of New Journalism, which is rather surprising given the popularity of the genre in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ibargüengoitia drew on the extensive press coverage which the Poquianchis case elicited, and adapted it into a witty collage composed of fictitious court testimonies and imagined eye witness accounts. This article will demonstrate that Ibargüengoitia not only denounces the false moralities which surrounded the scandal, but that he also makes use of various elements characteristic of creative nonfiction in order to evoke other investigative novels on infamous crimes such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965). The parodic adaptations in *Las muertas* of several literary techniques borrowed from the creative nonfiction genre serve to question its claims to objectivity and authenticity and, in addition, condemn the sensationalist style in which the Poquianchis case was covered by the Mexican press. Furthermore, the novel challenges the widespread willingness of readers to accept information as factual or “true” when published either in the form of journalism or creative nonfiction.

*Las muertas* is the grotesque fictionalisation of an infamous scandal. The novel criticises the press coverage triggered by the arrest of the Poquianchis sisters and the protective role played by the local authorities up until the closure of the sisters’ brothels. In Ibargüengoitia’s novel, “Las Poquianchis” – the sisters Delfina, María de Jesús and María Luisa (Eva) González Valenzuela – are renamed Arcángela, Serafina and Eulalia Baladro, respectively. Since the early 1940s, the González Valenzuelas owned the brothels “México Lindo” and “Guadalajara de Noche” in the states of Jalisco and Guanajuato. In 1964, two of the many women who worked for

the sisters over the years, often against their wishes, escaped and reported their ordeals of abuse and mistreatment to the police. Considering the dreadful state of the two women, malnourished and bruised as they were, the authorities reacted at once. Delfina and María de Jesús were arrested in their brothel in San Francisco del Rincón (Guanajuato). Shortly afterwards, Eva turned herself in to the police in Mexico City as she feared for her life due to the vicious portrayal of the sisters' crimes in the tabloid press. The two rescued women gave disturbing accounts of the disappearances of fellow prostitutes after either illegal abortions had gone wrong or when the women were no longer considered useful by the González Valenzuelas. María de Jesús's lover, Hermenegildo Zúñiga Maldonado, also known as "Captián Águila Negra", reportedly carried out the killings on behalf of the González Valenzuelas. After a police search of the sisters' unlawful premises (prostitution has been illegal in Guanajuato since 1962) 91 corpses were found buried in the backyards of the brothels.

Ibargüengoitia's research for *Las muertas* was based on the original press coverage of the Poquianchis case. The reporting was often exaggerated and supplemented with imaginary and colourful details to satisfy even the most morbid readers. Although Ibargüengoitia's principal interest was not factual accuracy, *Las muertas* gives the false illusion of authenticity as the author implements, albeit enriched with humour and irony, some of the literary techniques which are characteristic of creative nonfiction as made popular by the likes of Truman Capote (nonfiction novel), Norman Mailer (New Journalism) or, in more general terms, the documentary or testimonial novel. In other words, *Las muertas*, although marked by a deceiving nonfiction tenor, is by no means accurate regarding the representation of facts. However, it can be argued that the *madrotas*' "real" story is not necessarily compromised in the novel as Ibargüengoitia succeeds in portraying the fundamental "truth", in other words the essence of the Poquianchis case.

Truman Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1965) had an enormous impact across the Americas and Europe. A related form of the nonfiction novel is New Journalism as defined by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson in *The New Journalism* (1973). Some well-known examples of New Journalism are Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father* (1971) and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979). Undoubtedly, New Journalism was one of the most influential literary movements in twentieth-century American narrative and,

according to Wolfe, was “causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century” (15).

Wolfe identified four literary devices which are crucial to New Journalism: 1) scene-by-scene construction, 2) the recording of dialogue in full, 3) third-person point of view, and 4) the detailed recording of everyday customs and surroundings as adapted from the nineteenth-century realist novel (46-47). All of these literary devices feature prominently in Ibargüengoitia’s novel apart from “third-person point of view”. In *Las muertas*, the anonymous narrator juxtaposes different scenes, often presenting the same event from multiple points of view, instead of opting for a chronological or third-person narrative. Repeatedly, dialogues are written out word for word to create the illusion of authentic oral court testimonies. This technique of presenting (fictitious) documentation is particularly noticeable with respect to La Calavera, a retired prostitute and the sisters’ partner in crime. Another example of how Ibargüengoitia parodies some of the defining aspects of New Journalism as established by Wolfe, is the attention to detail given to the description of the interior of the “Cabaret de Danzón”, the sisters’ most spectacular venue. Also, the narrator dedicates several pages to the meticulous account of the everyday running of a brothel in order to share with the reader Arcángela’s wisdom and experience in those matters. However, in the case of *Las muertas* it is important to note that the narrator must not be confused with Ibargüengoitia. Unlike in genuine creative nonfiction (including New Journalism), the author is often also the narrator. Here, the narrator, in other words the fictitious author of *Las muertas*, remains anonymous despite his direct involvement with the Baladro sisters. His conflicting roles of supposedly objective chronicler of the depicted events *versus* direct participant will be examined in more detail in a later section of this article.

In *The New Journalism*, Wolfe also highlights the often underestimated element of reporting in its most traditional sense:

It seemed all-important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for:

namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters.

(35)

As *Las muertas* was written 13 years after the arrest of the González Valenzuelas, Ibarguengoitia's research methods clearly had to differ from the methods employed by creative nonfiction writers who tended to report primarily on present rather than past events. For example, at the core of Capote's research techniques lies the ability to "transcribe verbatim long conversations, and to do so without taking notes or using tape-recordings" (Plimpton: no pagination) in order to avoid a tense and artificial atmosphere during interviews. Capote wanted to ensure that interviewees provided him with an open and honest account of their experiences and observations. The transcriptions were then edited to create a fluid narrative. The process of creative editing of factual information is, of course, not exclusive to the nonfiction novel but is intrinsic to creative nonfiction in general, such as New Journalism, documentary narrative and the testimonial novel, with the latter two being particularly well-established in Latin American literature. Editing for literary purposes may involve fusing several interviews into one, transposing direct speech into indirect speech, shortening interviews and combining other people's observations with direct (personal) observations.

Capote's overall objective was to create a narrative that employed novelistic techniques without compromising factual accuracy (Plimpton: no pagination). However, the factual correctness of the nonfiction novel is questionable given the author's reliance on memory as practiced by Capote. Equally, note taking can lead to factual inaccuracies depending on the skills of the note-taker. Only the use of a recording device when collating materials could rule out memory lapses entirely, but, of course, it is not always possible to use one. Furthermore, the supposed objectivity of the nonfiction novel is debatable considering the editing required to create a fluid narrative and the author's unavoidable emotional response (empathy, hatred, scepticism, etc.) to an interviewee's statement. Paradoxically, Capote considered a strong and emotional identification with his interviewees not as a hurdle but as an advantage in his attempts to "truly" or "accurately" portray them. In effect, Capote never denied his sympathy for Perry Smith, the killer of the Clutter family and main protagonist of *In Cold Blood*. The consequently subjective portrayal of Perry is often seen as a shortcoming of *In Cold Blood* as, arguably, it encourages the reader to

accept the biased and sympathetic view which Capote offers of his protagonist. Interestingly, Nance notes that it is “this sense of identification with Perry that seems to give Capote his strongest assurance of accuracy” (215). I believe that Ibargüengoitia would have disagreed with Capote on this aspect. As will be discussed in due course, the fictitious author of *Las muertas*, just like the author of *In Cold Blood*, also identifies with the key characters he reports on and his narration certainly does not convey a strong sense of accuracy. In its place, the reader is given the impression that the narrator actively seeks to polarise his or her sympathies in order to excuse the crimes committed by the Baladro sisters.

However, the correct reporting of facts does not stand in the foreground of *Las muertas*. Instead, Ibargüengoitia depicts the essence of the Poquianchis case and therefore offers his subjective and personal interpretation of the scandal. As Clark argues convincingly: “El autor así juega con la división entre lo verídico y lo artístico, puesto que lo que parece interesarle es más bien el hecho en sí como una realidad arquetípica y no histórica” (28). In the epigraph of *Las muertas* Ibargüengoitia declares that: “Algunos de los acontecimientos que aquí se narran son reales. Todos los personajes son imaginarios” (no pagination). In his novel, Ibargüengoitia only refers to the main occurrences of the Poquianchis case: the existence of the brothels, the protective role the authorities played until 1964 and the finding of bodies in the brothels’ backyards. Nevertheless, *Las muertas* conveys a treacherous sense of authenticity as the historical events are clearly recognisable. Apart from those key incidents, however, the Poquianchis scandal is transplanted into the fictional space of the Estado del Plan de Abajo, reminiscent of the State of Jalisco, and San Pedro de las Corrientes, modelled on the State of Guanajuato. The police search is triggered by Serafina’s failed attempt to shoot a former lover (out of revenge, as Simón Corona is the only man who has ever stopped loving her), rather than by the escape of two mistreated prostitutes and, finally, the number of dead bodies discovered is reduced from 91 to seven.

In most forms of creative nonfiction, such as the documentary novel or New Journalism, the author does not intend to appear explicitly in the text to enhance the level of proposed objectivity. Obviously, the author is present implicitly through the act of having edited the material. Inevitably, there is scope for the author to manipulate the reader due to the presentation of episodes, the order of events being narrated or the omission and inclusion of facts. In *Las muertas*, the fictional

author/narrator endeavours to follow the principle of the absent narrator but, to the amusement of the reader, he fails to accomplish his mission. His flawed attempts of writing himself out of the story are without doubt entertaining but, on a serious note, they also challenge the core of creative nonfiction by laying bare the literary techniques required to create a fluid narrative. In other words, Ibargüengoitia's parody draws attention to the fact that the author of a creative nonfiction text is an active editor of facts and not a passive observer or distanced chronicler as deceptively suggested by a narrative which is characteristically marked by an objective and unemotional tenor.

Just like in genuine creative nonfiction, the narrator of *Las muertas* intends to transmit information objectively and accurately. He even tries to assume the role of the moral witness who neither judges the characters nor comments on the often curious turn of events, which is a further distinctive feature of creative nonfiction. However, the narrator's attempts to disguise his personal opinions are too transparent and undermine the supposedly factual discourse. Consequently, *Las muertas* is a humorous mosaic of fabricated transcriptions of interviews and quotes taken from imagined court testimonies given by the accused and juxtaposed with fictitious eye-witness accounts from victims. Although the chapters are short, they are divided into subsections to create the impression of a great multiplicity of events and changing points of view. In addition, the novel includes an appendix with supplementary testimonies and even offers a (fake) photograph of Arcángela and Serafina posing in idyllic harmony with some of their employees and future victims. In this context, Foster remarks that Ibargüengoitia implements such literary strategies in an attempt "to capture the journalistic primacy of fact and circumstances. The dominant criterion is the belief that meaning or interpretation arises from the accumulation and juxtaposition of details rather than from overt exegesis" (113).

Although Foster's statement is certainly valuable, it should be added that Ibargüengoitia's novel simultaneously shows how easily meaning can be manipulated through the careful selection and presentation of facts. In any creative nonfiction text, the author's first task is to choose the information to be included. Secondly, the author decides on how to present the selected materials. Therefore, events are not necessarily depicted accurately – be it on purpose or innocently – and it is often impossible to trace omissions or elements edited by the author for creative or other purposes.

In the case of *Las muertas*, the reader has cause to be particularly suspicious. Here, the narrator is highly unreliable because of his personal involvement with the Baladro sisters. Arguably, meaning arises therefore in an overt sense due to the obvious subjective selection and often clumsy editing of different segments by a (fictional) author who is driven by his own agenda when presenting the events which culminate in the *madrotas*' arrest. As stated correctly by León-Sánchez, it is "el autor quien controla los diferentes puntos de vista y aunque algunos documentos sean objetivos – las actas legales, por ejemplo – estos aparecen ya en tela de juicio por su posición en la novela" (321). In other words, the narrator's liberal twisting of facts to excuse or hide, unsuccessfully, his personal relationship with the Baladros plays a significant role in the delivery of the story. In fact, due to the subjective selection and manipulative juxtaposition of the documented events, the narrator enforces a certain degree of sympathy for Arcángela and Serafina. Thus the narrator's beliefs emerge fairly openly despite his feeble efforts to hide behind a nonlinear and fragmented narrative.

Many of the narrator's supposedly revealing interventions are introduced by phrases which indicate that he provides the reader with the fruits of his imagination rather than with verified facts. The novel is peppered with sentences such as "Lo que ocurre después es confuso" (12), "Podemos imaginar la emboscada [...]" (38) or "Podemos imaginar que Blanca [...]" (96). Occasionally, the narrator enriches the account of unfolding events by adding his personal opinion in brackets: "(Estos comentarios del capitán fueron posiblemente el motivo de que Serafina prefiriera no revelarle la verdadera suerte de Blanca.)" (116).

The narrator's speculations can only be of value if he has inside knowledge of Arcángela's and Serafina's business affairs, a possibility which is ultimately confirmed in the appendix of the novel. In the final extract of his testimony, El Libertino, one of the sisters' best customers, explains that he was drawn to the "México Lindo" out of "curiosidad intelectual" (181) because Arcángela "era filósofa" (181). However, he is also able to give an account on "varias mujeres notables" (181) which he got to know intimately. One of them made a particularly strong impression on him as she had sexual relations with the narrator "en más de veinte ocasiones y nunca lo reconoció" (181). It is only in the appendix that the reader's likely suspicion is confirmed: the narrator not only shares an "intellectual" interest with his friend regarding Arcángela's and Serafina's peculiar world, but El

Libertino's testimony also reveals the narrator to be an equally good client with respect to the services the "México Lindo" had to offer. The narrator's close bond with the Baladro sisters, and his intimate involvement with the women who worked for them, are surely a hindrance to any objective documentation, even if the narrator's attempts at doing just that were truly legitimate. Thus, Ibargüengoitia highlights the pitfall of treating a narrator as a reliable source of information. In *Las muertas*, behind the façade of an objective and well-researched narrative there hides a (fictitious) author who is clearly more than a mere gatherer of information as he describes external occurrences as well as personally experienced events while trying to present his favourite characters in the best light possible given the atrocities committed in the brothels.

The narrator's conflicting roles are of interest primarily for two reasons. Firstly, they enhance the humorous tenor of the novel which, by extension, mocks the characteristic seriousness of the creative nonfiction genre. The narrator's clumsy efforts to produce a serious and investigative narrative result in a parodic discourse to defy the gravity and earnestness of the typical documentary or testimonial novel which enjoyed increasing popularity in Latin America since the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, they highlight the impossibility of objectiveness as often proposed by creative nonfiction authors such as Capote or Wolfe, although this is not to suggest that misrepresentations of facts are necessarily deliberate.

In *Las muertas*, the objectiveness of the narrative is impaired because of the narrator's close and even intimate links with some of the characters. Nevertheless, a certain impression of objectivity is created after all thanks to the narrator's (flawed) efforts to edit himself out of the story in order to encourage the reader to accept his personal interpretation as an accurate and non-biased representation of the events. The narrator's relationship with the Baladros remains unclear until his clumsy editing of the appendix which confirms his direct involvement with the sisters. However, the narrator's final revelation adds to the humour as it suddenly becomes evident why he persistently defended Arcángela and Serafina. In addition, El Libertino's testimony is a humorous and ironic statement against creative nonfiction's pretence to deliver a truly objective narrative; even if the efforts of genuine creative nonfiction writers are

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the most influential texts of the testimonial genre include Rodolfo Walsh, *Operación Masacre* (Argentina, 1957), Miguel Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón* (Cuba, 1966), Elena Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (Mexico, 1967) and *La noche de Tlatelolco* (Mexico, 1971),



more sincere than the rather less convincing attempts of Ibargüengoitia's narrator. However, Ibargüengoitia's criticism should not be considered as a pointed attack as it is not marked by satire or cynicism. It is true that Ibargüengoitia's narrator tries to deceive and manipulate his readers but his inexperienced attempts to do so are free of malice and his clumsiness makes him, at least to a certain degree, a likeable character in his own narrative. In other words, it is not the existence of subjectivity in creative nonfiction which is criticised by Ibargüengoitia but the unrealistic claim to objectivity and accuracy within a literary account which is supposedly free of misrepresentations.

As mentioned earlier, Ibargüengoitia did not take on the role of a reporter and refrained from interviewing any of the accused. He focussed his research to the reading of the original press coverage — such as the local newspaper *El sol de León* and the tabloid *Alarma* — and parts of the official court records. Ibargüengoitia refers to the press coverage of the Poquianchis case as:

[...] uno de los casos más tristes de información periodística. Además, presenta todas las taras del periodismo: sensacionalismo, morbosidad, pasiones; hubo que quitar y quitar material hasta dejar un esqueletito que es la visión que tengo de este caso y creo que corresponde en general a él, según fue juzgado. (Delgado 53)

By condensing the material, followed by its enrichment with humour, Ibargüengoitia successfully criticises the sensationalist press and, by extension, its readers.<sup>2</sup> It is characteristic of Ibargüengoitia to communicate his critical observations of Mexican society through sharp and ironic discourse. Often in his works, complex situations inspired by real events are simplified and told by not overly intelligent characters whose main interest is to present themselves favourably to hide and excuse their inadequacies.<sup>3</sup> This results in novels which are as amusing as they are critical. Or, as noted by Escalante, Ibargüengoitia's narrative is “como el ácido; no pretende edificar, sino corroer, demoler, volver cuanto toca” (99).

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Hernán Valdés, *Tejas Verdes* (Chile, 1974), Rigoberta Menchú, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (Guatemala, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> This method, of course, is not unique to Ibargüengoitia. Most famously, it was employed by Jorge Luis Borges in *Historia universal de infamia* (1935).

<sup>3</sup> Two particularly representative examples of Ibargüengoitia's likeable anti-heroes are the General Lupe Arroyo in *Los relámpagos de agosto* (1964) and Matías Chandón in *Los pasos de López* (1982).

In this context, Aníbal González points out that, despite the fact that the tabloid press is widely regarded as fiction, “they, like all other forms of journalism, still claim to tell the unvarnished truth” (105). This is indeed a worrying claim given the enormous popularity of the tabloid press, and even more so when considering journalism as a powerful shaper of public opinion. Therefore, *Las muertas* is not just an amusing and grotesque fictional account of an already absurd episode in Mexico’s recent history. Firstly, Ibargüengoitia’s novel challenges the perceived authority and reliability of journalism. Secondly, *Las muertas* puts into question some of journalism’s most important functions by doubting its appropriateness as a medium charged with the duty to inform and the power to influence public opinion.

By stripping the Poquianchis case of its notoriety, Ibargüengoitia also denounces some deeply-rooted hypocrisies in Mexican society by shifting and adjusting the balance between the multiple culprits who were ultimately to blame for the crimes committed in the sisters’ brothels. It is interesting to note that Ibargüengoitia always perceived the reporting on crime as an insightful mirror of society. In one of his regular columns entitled “En primera persona” published in *Vuelta* from 1977-1983, Ibargüengoitia explains:

Leo notas rojas con frecuencia sin ser sanguinario ni sentirme morboso. Creo que de todas las noticias que se publican son las que presentan más directamente un panorama moral de nuestro tiempo y ciertos aspectos del ser humano que para el hombre común y corriente son en general desconocidos; (1983: 34)

This statement was not written with Mexican journalism in mind, however. In the same column, Ibargüengoitia expresses a preference for the British and French press as they, in his view, report on crime using “presentacion[es] incolora[s]” and do not offer direct moral judgements (1983:34). As mentioned previously, Ibargüengoitia felt disillusioned with the Mexican press and its coverage of the Poquianchis case. Articles and press reports were riddled with inaccuracies and gruesome, sensationalist details. However, the business of prostitution was generally tolerated – certainly in Ibargüengoitia’s fictional world of the Estado del Plan de Abajo and the Estado de Mezcala – as long as it did not disturb “la armonía que existe entre poder y erotismo

mercantil; una vez rota la armonía, viene la censura, la persecución pero no la erradicación de la prostitución” (María R. González: 129). In order to denounce those widely accepted moral hypocrisies, Ibargüengoitia offers an alternative interpretation of the Poquianchis scandal. Thus, *Las muertas* is free of sensationalist language, albeit that it details an accumulation of grotesque events. Nava Moreno describes *Las muertas* as a novel without heroes: “Los personajes viven en el mundo de la comedia: sin posibilidad dramática ni trágica” (24). As a result, the sisters’ crimes are moderated because the novel reveals and satirises the roles played by the local government and community. Paradoxically, Ibargüengoitia’s fictitious account of the scandal is possibly closer to the “truth” than the sum of the journalistic publications covering the case.

When Arcángela and Serafina celebrate the opening of their most ambitious venue, the “Casino del Danzón”, the crème de la crème of local politicians, lawyers and businessmen join the festivities. Canales, private secretary to the local governor Cabañas, honours the sisters by shouting: “¡Viva México, viva la independencia Nacional, vivan los Héroes que nos dieron libertad, vivan las hermanas Baladro, viva el Casino del Danzón!” (57). Canales’s emotional outburst signifies the beginning of the end for the Baladro sisters. Cabañas, ambitious and with presidential aspirations, dismisses Canales, one of the sisters’ main protectors in the local government, to make a moral statement to the voters of the Estado del Plan de Abajo. To raise his profile yet further, Cabañas builds expensive monuments and renames all existing official institutions. To finance these costly and, in his opinion, important projects, Cabañas increases the local taxes and tries to silence the growing protests in his constituency by launching the “Ley de la Moralización del Plan de Abajo” (61) to prohibit the business of prostitution. Consequently, Arcángela, Serafina and twenty-one of their remaining prostitutes are forced into hiding for the next two years (1962-1964) and events begin to escalate. Although neighbours and passers-by are aware of the fact that the former “Cabaret de Danzón” is used as their hiding place, nobody dares to report the Baladros to the authorities, possibly due to their former associations with the sisters’ lucrative business. The economic impact of Cabañas’s law on the community is illustrated by the narrator with the following words:

La aplicación de la ley [de la Moralización del Plan de Abajo], que nadie esperaba, afectó a cerca de treinta mil

personas cuyas fuentes de ingreso estaban relacionadas directa o indirectamente con la prostitución, a los gobiernos municipales, cuyos ingresos estaban formados, en un treinta o un cuarenta por ciento, de impuestos que pagaban los prostíbulos, y a cientos de empleados públicos que recibían propinas de los lenones. (61)

*Las muertas* was, of course, not written to defend the horrible crimes committed by the Poquianchis. However, the novel seems to suggest that their crimes should not been seen in isolation. After all, the sisters' career began in the 1940s and they were under the protection of the authorities until 1964. Many individuals took advantage of the financial benefits generated by the brothels and only condemned the sisters once they had fallen from grace. The novel points an accusing finger to society as a whole as the sisters' success was only possible because of their symbiotic relations with the people in their community (Alfonso González 150). In Bárbara Aponte's view, the reader does not have to choose between "el mundo de la prostituta y el de la sociedad respetable (compuesta de jueces, abogados, periodistas, soldados y políticos). Los dos son corruptos, degradantes, inhumanos y explotadores" (77). Indisputably, neither of the two worlds portrayed in *Las muertas* are worth striving for. However, and in disagreement with Aponte, Ibargüengoitia's criticism appears harsher regarding the members of the "respectable" world because of their double-standards and ever changing morals. For example, the headmaster of the local school expels Humberto, Arcángela's son. He does this because the other children never stop bullying Humberto on account of his surname, and the classes are disrupted as a result. Arcángela is forced to send her son away for schooling and, as a loving mother, begins to send him weekly letters in which "le daba consejos, untarse sebo detrás de las orejas, para protegerse del enfriamiento, [...]" (68). It is implied by the narrator that it is his upbringing away from his mother which turns Humberto into a drug dealer and violent thug. Shortly after his return to the Estado del Plan de Abajo, Humberto is murdered by the brothers Zamora as he was courting their sister Conchita. On the day of Humberto's funeral, Arcángela receives a court order which she signs without understanding its implications as she was numb with grief. By signing the court order, Arcángela agrees to give up her licence to run the "México Lindo" "por no cumplir el local con lo dispuesto por el Reglamento de Salubridad del

Estado de Mezcala: la ventana de los excusados de hombres tenía ochenta centímetros de ancho, en vez de uno veinte, como marca la ley” (78). The law’s attention to detail is not always followed so strictly. Humberto’s case, although undeniably more serious in nature, is not brought to justice. In other words, murder is not prosecuted – and might even be believed to be rightly deserved – if the victim is an unwanted element of society. The narrator insinuates that there is a general interest in Humberto’s case being hushed up; the many “respectable” figures who do not want to be publicly associated with the Baladros ensure that the case of Arcángela’s son will never go to trial. The narrator’s detailed account of Humberto’s assassination closes with the following comment:

No hay evidencia de que las autoridades hayan encontrado,  
en el México Lindo o en la casa de la calle de Los Bridones,  
pruebas de que Humberto Paredes Baladro se dedicara al  
tráfico de drogas. (80)

It was commonly known that Humberto was a drug dealer. However, after Humberto’s death it is more convenient for the authorities of the Estado del Plan de Abajo to suppress this fact to avoid possible investigations which could lead to compromising situations. As this closing comment illustrates, the narrator does not voice explicitly his criticism of the authorities’ legal double-standards but, instead, uses a neutral and distanced reporting style which contrasts sharply with the seriousness of the event. This is a general feature of the novel and worth elaborating on in some more detail. By and large, there is a near total absence of dramatic discourse in *Las muertas*. Instead, the narrative is marked by understatement and even the descriptions of the most outrageous events are free of lurid language. On the one hand, the matter-of-fact style parodies the creative nonfiction genre. As has been shown in the first section of this article, the narrator creates a façade of objectivity to present a supposedly factual testimony of past events. On the other hand, the unemotional language employed by Ibargüengoitia reduces the distance between the exotic and immoral world of the sisters’ brothels and the everyday reality of the people of the Estado del Plan de Abajo. The killing of a prostitute, for example, is narrated in the same downplayed and serene style as the more trivial happenings in the sisters’ neighbourhood which creates the sensation that both worlds are not only

interchangeable but also complicit. In this context, Trejo Fuentes notes that the novel's objective is "un severo y contundente enjuiciamiento moral, social, humano, a través de la contraposición de lo trágico y lo cómico" (85). Overall, *Las muertas* is as ironic as it is grotesque because of the sharp contrast between the drama and intensity of the plot and the narrator's distanced narrative style which is free of emotion but, instead, is overloaded with superfluous detail. In his attempts to fulfil the role of the impartial chronicler, the narrator never slips into a dramatic register which, ironically, turns even the most gruesome events into humorous episodes.

The case of Blanca, Arcángela's and Serafina's most glamorous employee, is a particularly poignant example. The episode of Blanca's death is inspired by real events. In "Memorias de novelas" Ibarguengoitia recalls that "La muerte de Blanca – y su nombre – está en las declaraciones [del expediente legal del juicio]" (1979: 34). After a botched abortion, Blanca is left paralysed, emaciated and mute. As no traditional cure can be found to restore Blanca's health and subsequent ability to work, La Calavera consults a *curandera* who gives the following advice: "aplicar las planchas bien calientes, en la manta humedecida, sobre el lado paralizado de la enferma, hasta que la manta adquiera un color café oscuro" (108). When Blanca loses consciousness during this horrifying treatment "las que la curaban trataron de hacerla volver en sí dándole un poco de CocaCola, pero no lograron hacérsela tragar" (109). The grotesqueness of this episode is enhanced by the narrator's short, precise and somewhat detached description. As noted by Domenella, the "datos escuetos y objetivos están comprimidos y yuxtapuestos para dar unidad y orden a un mundo que resulta absurdo, espantoso y cotidiano al mismo tiempo" (157). The matter-of-fact style of Ibarguengoitia's narrator does not differentiate between the extraordinary and the ordinary. His tenor remains the same when reporting either on murder or everyday activities, the rather eccentric Baladro sisters or the average citizen of the Estado del Plan de Abajo. As the narrator equates those purportedly opposite worlds, everyone appears guilty of the monstrous crimes committed in the brothels. Arguably, all the parties depicted are to blame as they have either contributed directly or indirectly to the events related in *Las muertas*.

In conclusion, the parodic imitation of some of the literary conventions of creative nonfiction serves to highlight the shortcomings and pitfalls of the genre which includes New Journalism and the documentary novel. Creative nonfiction gives the impression that facts are treated objectively and accurately. However, this

widespread perception is questioned through the less than successful efforts of the narrator/fictitious author of *Las muertas*. Furthermore, Ibargüengoitia's novel, seemingly transparent, allows for a humorous and entertaining read but, hidden behind a grotesque plot and an ironic narrative, *Las muertas* clearly condemns the often extreme bias of the Mexican press. Finally, the novel also targets the inconsistency of moral values and some of the authorities' more hypocritical actions with respect to the rise and fall of the Poquianchis sisters. Nevertheless, Ibargüengoitia's innovative fusion of investigative journalism and prose results in a captivating and multi-layered tale and is, perhaps, less fictional than the original press coverage of the scandalous Poquianchis case.

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