

“ES UNA PETICIÓN DE SOCORRO”: SHORT FICTION, FANTASTIC METAFICTION, SNAPSHOTS OF WAR AND PAIN

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Providing a scaffold for contemporary examples of the literary fantastic is an ever-evolving fascination with boundaries and their collapse. Explorations of this attraction are realized via a complex series of interrelations that challenge, dismantle, and reconstruct the parameters of fairy tales, myths, fables, and other examples of distinctly fantasist literature. As yet another means of signification, the presence of photography within the fantastic compounds the issue of artifice within the real and vice-versa, creating a self-referential narrative that questions its very own premises. Robert Alter sees “a consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention” (xi) in self-conscious prose and, according to Patricia Waugh, this effort takes place “in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). Yet, while the traditional literary fantastic of the Romantic period was characterized by the sensuous experiences of shock and disbelief afforded by the story itself, contemporary efforts at this writing, in contrast, serve to play with notions of both gender and genre, as well as of notions of the self, or individuality, in addition to undermining the stability of consensus “reality” on the level of discourse. Consequently, the focus of this essay will be a consideration of photography (in the case of Julio Cortázar) and the snapshot view (as evinced by Alfonso Sastre) as framed within selected works of fantastic short fiction. Most significant is this question: as documentaries, what does each example convey, both about human suffering and about the artifice of narrative self-reflection?

In and of itself, the either/or equation required by the literary fantastic, especially in contemporary examples of such writing, allude to (either explicitly or implicitly) the techniques and concerns of metafiction. Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of the fantastic situates this mode within the confines of a particular reading, which, at least on a preliminary level, requires a conscious recognition of its fictionality and construction. The narrative events are established within the context of a mimetically “real” world but then something completely unexplainable must rupture this normality. For Todorov, the gap between the irrational occurrence and a certain cognitive restructuring in order to integrate it within the narrative constitutes a fundamental aspect of the fantastic, and he insists that its key ingredient is the hesitation that this state of affairs inspires. He further explains that a choice, or a resolution, serves to recategorize the text, and place it within what he calls a “neighboring genre,” which is most often the uncanny or the marvelous (25). The hesitation is produced by a dissonance caused by a violation of the

laws of nature via the appearance of a supernatural event, and thus “the concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary” (25).

Equally elusive (and allusive) is the notion that “all that photography’s program of realism actually implies is the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled” (Sontag, *Photography* 120-21). A steady erosion of the distinction between public and intimate selves constitutes the act of photographic witness, and an open conflict between unequal power structures defines the relationship of the photographer to the subject, especially in the realm of documentary photography. This sense of conflict is also apparent in the more ideological underpinnings evident in contemporary fantastic short fiction, especially in the instance of an artist such as Alfonso Sastre. The result is a site of cultural archeology that lays bare attitudes toward boundaries both physical and psychological. In the context of dispute between what is “real” and what is “not,” photography holds the moral high ground since, at least in theory, what was photographed had to have been, at one time, present and tangible. Fantastic works of short fiction, on the other hand, represent nothing other than stories, narratives that are little more than the product of over-active imaginations. Or so it seems.

Julio Cortázar, in fact, took quite an interest in the analogy of the short story as comparable to the photograph. In the essay “Some Aspects of the Short Story,” he points out that photographers, such as Cartier-Bresson and Bressai, frame their art within the context of paradox insofar as the photograph cuts off a fragment of reality, thereby “giving it certain limits, but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens a more ample reality” (246). This statement can equally be applied to both examples of his work that will be considered here, “Las babas del diablo” and “Apocalipsis de Solentiname.” The “ample reality” that each entails a repetition of seduction, first of all, and it is one that is based on the desire to observe and to “find out” the truth, a truth, one that morphs based on the perspective from which it is viewed. These works also dissect the capacity for signification of print media (news photography) in the first, and fine art and documentary photography in the second, with both framed by the (mis)perceptions afforded by the fantastic’s uncertainty. The camera, in each story, is an instrument of voyeurism and the vehicle for an attempt to express the inexpressible.

“Las babas” offers exemplary evidence of both the aims of the fantastic and the expected parameters of a Cortázar story.¹ Primarily, these involve an interrogation of boundaries, including the exchange of one identity for another, and the erasure of limits separating not just text and implied reader, but also the separation between the individuals that people the narrative itself. The instability of identity as a primary theme appears in other well-known short stories such as “Axolotl,” “Lejana,” and “Casa tomada,” and, as is typical of Cortázar, this work does not portray time as a fluid continuum, but instead as the result of a binary dichotomy. There is an either/or (“real” or “not”) proposition intrinsic to both the strictures of the literary fantastic and to this narrative. Cortázar’s work here, as elsewhere, is

predicated upon a very strict division of “here” (the rational) or “there” (the supernatural), and in this text, the limits of both narrative discourse and photographic documentation are explored and exploded.

Photography revolves around, to a certain extent, personal vision, and Susan Sontag notes that, “as photographers describe it, picture-taking is both a limitless technique for appropriating the objective world and an unavoidably solipsistic expression of the singular self” (*Photography* 122). And here, the discourse of an unnamed narrator—later revealed to be the camera—recreates questions of truth and perspective (“Nunca se sabrá cómo hay que contar esto” 87), and self and other (“Mejor que sea yo que estoy muerto, que estoy menos comprometido que el resto” 87). These are indeterminate questions and will remain so; the unidentified narrator explains that “Va a ser difícil porque nadie sabe bien quién es el que verdaderamente está contando, si soy yo [...] si sencillamente cuento una verdad que es solamente mi verdad” (87). The implied reader can never be sure of the validity of these comments or, even, if the narrative events that follow these remarks reflect an accurate description of the existence of the photographer, Roberto Michel.

But what of the differences between photography and other means of capturing and depicting “reality?” Henri Cartier-Bresson, in fact, posed the rhetorical question “What actually *is* a photographic reportage, a picture story?” (23). His conclusion is that photographic narratives are the result of a cooperative effort consisting of “the brain, the eye, and the heart” and its primarily goal is the depiction of “the content of some event which is in the process of unfolding, and to communicate impressions” (24). This is not always the simplest proposition, he declares, for “sometimes a single event can be so rich in itself and its facets that it is necessary to move all around it in your search for the solution to the problem it poses—for the world is movement, and you cannot be stationary in your attitude toward something that is moving” (24). He states that no matter if it comes quickly or requires much patience, this moment requires that the photographer be fully engaged in the act of observing and recording the subject (24). This is an interesting attitude, because it raises the issue of a genuine relationship of the photographer to the subject rather than the perhaps tepid connection of a mere observer and (unrecorded) subject. According to Cartier-Bresson, “Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant” (27).

The blurring of the role of the narrator in “Las babas” underscores the blurring of the boundaries between self and other that often characterizes the work of Cortázar, contradicting the idea that photography may (or may not) “fix forever” any type of transitory occurrence. In fact, the narrative voice is never entirely stable. The story is delivered by, briefly, an omniscient third-person narrator who impersonally describes selected events, followed by a first-person singular perspective. Any truth or perception on the part of the photographer, however, is explicitly denied: “Michel sabía que el fotógrafo opera siempre como una permutación de su manera personal de ver el mundo por otra que la cámara le impone insidiosa” (88).

The subject of both text and image, in this case, is a woman and a young man who are observed by another man in a car. Michel (the camera?) initially watches and conjectures. Is this a couple? A young boy and his mother? Is it an aging temptress, bent on seduction? The picture unfolds as the camera (Michel?) conjures a life for the boy, his home, his family, his daily existence. The narrator acknowledges the strangeness of the scene and its disturbing resonance, concluding that “Pensé que eso lo ponía yo, y que mi foto, si la sacaba, restitiría las cosas a su tonta verdad” (92). His conjecture then takes a turn towards the salacious as he visualizes (recounts?) a scene of seduction. This idea is undermined, however, when the camera/narrator notes that “Michel es culpable de literatura, de fabricaciones irreales” (93). The picture is taken, the scene dissolves, and only later, when the photograph is blown up, does another, uglier “reality” (re)create itself. Yet, just as the seduction of the woman (the man?) is thwarted by the observer and his camera, so is the reader’s “desire to know” thwarted by the multiple levels of interpretation provided by the various methods of representation.

This begs the question, then: which aspect of this text is more aligned with a discussion of metafiction and its effects? According to Manuel Alvarado, “Work on the still image and, more specifically, on the single photograph has tended to leave out of account the question of narrativity” (148); further, he states that “lists of cultural artifacts that can carry narratives seldom include the photograph” (149). Critical discussion, including remarks made by Cartier-Bresson on the subject, seem to imply that “photographs are somehow less *constructed* than painting, writing, or films” (Alvarado 149). But in “Las babas” the photograph and its environment constitute a narrative of a narrative. And, further, in responding to Roland Barthes’s consideration of the denotative vs. the connotative value of photography, Alvarado sees that

two lines of analysis from the point of view of narrativity begin to emerge. The first would analyse the order of events implied by the photograph, whether ‘fictional’ or ‘documentary.’ [...] the second would question the actual history of the production, circulation and consumption of the photography within particular institutions and under the regulation of technological, economic, legal and discursive relations and practices. (151)

With a more open-ended analysis, consequently, the questions they raise “make it possible to challenge the authority of the photograph, its status as the record of *how it was*,” especially in terms of how such images reflect and interrogate trauma and pain for, as Alvarado points out, “*How it could have been* is politically a more interesting question” (152). Furthermore, in contemporary times, photography has become a mass art form, and one that is, among other things, “a defense against anxiety and a tool of power” (Sontag, *Photography* 8).

And thus it is not only a defense against but also an instrument of anxiety in this story. From the eye-level vantage of his typewriter, Michel sees that the woman will lure the boy for the benefit of the

man in the car. The story takes on Poe-like dimensions in the mind (in the reality? in the nightmare?) of Michel, and there is a carnivalesque inversion of order. The photograph becomes “real,” while the photographer is left “prisionero de otro tiempo” (98). He is unable to call out to the boy, “simplemente facilitarle otra vez el camino con una nueva foto” (98), and, frozen, as if in a nightmare, he screams terribly, or at least thinks that he does (210). The boy escapes again, though, and Michel then declares that “me tapé la cara y rompí a llorar como un idiota” (99). The narrative closes at this point with the peaceful meandering of the camera as it describes the calm after a storm, the occasional passing cloud, a bird or two. What predominates, here, is less the question of sexual abuse and violence. There is, instead, a greater focus on the capacity of photography to render “truth” and to dissect it through the multiple narratives provided by the fiction and metafiction provided by this story.

A second example of metafiction, neofantastic, and the use of photography embedded within a short story belongs also to Cortázar’s 1976 work “Apocalipsis a Solentiname.” This narrative is one that reflects a greater level of political awareness than the previous. It relates the voyage of the protagonist, “Julio Cortázar,” to the Arcadian community of Solentiname, his appropriation of the artwork via his act of photographing their paintings, and finally, ultimately, the horrifying and prophetic moment back in Paris, when his home viewing of the slides of the artworks demonstrates photographs of carnage, abuse, and war crimes. Alberto Moreiras, in “‘Apocalipsis at Solentiname’ as Heterological Production,” refers to “Las babas” as an “essay on metaphotography” in his remarks on this story (165), and this assessment can be applied equally to “Apocalipsis.” In addition, like “Las babas,” this story offers a series of the standard “here” and “there” that one expects from a Cortázar tale. Yet this particular work also calls attention to the reading of political violence and the capacity of art and photography against literary narrative prose to draw forth, express, and contest the effects of political repression, violence, and abuse, even as it constructs and deconstructs a “Julio Cortázar story” via its intrinsically self-conscious narrative processes.

There are three “types” of discourse here: that of prose, that of fine art, and that of photography, all of which force recognition of the artifice of the overall text itself. Most notably, the focus on narrative prose within the text relates to expectations of reader and reading public. The story is presented initially as if it were a testimonial, yet the subsequent events offer nothing more than the presentation and dismantling of selected and recognizable literary modes or depictive genres. These appear in concentric circles that nest within one another like Chinese boxes, with neofantastic prose as a framework flanked by documentary photography that eventually subsumes the evocative capacity of fine art.

Initially, the action is set in motion by references to an obsession with The Author. Carlos J. Alonso, in his introduction to *Julio Cortázar: New Readings*, discusses the fact that there is a definite “Julio

Cortázar” whose reading public has constructed a very particular critical discourse surrounding both him and his works (1-2), and the narrator of this story acknowledges this state of affairs right away:

para peor todo empezaba enseguida, conferencia de prensa con lo de siempre, ¿por qué no vivís en tu patria, qué pasó que *Blow-Up* era tan distinto de tu cuento, te parecen que el escritor tiene que estar comprometido? (283)

He notes, ironically, that these questions will follow him even beyond the grave, declaring that when he gets to the gates of heaven (unless he ends up at the antechambers of hell), the first celestial question will be: “¿a usted no le parece que allá abajo escribía demasiado hermético para el pueblo?” (283).

Locations also reveal a certain level of anticipation and a subsequent undermining of expectation. At “el hotel Europa” a hand tugs at the protagonist, and it is Ernesto Cardenal, the poet. Cortázar’s obsession with hands is well known, and this description constitutes a recognizable detail for those who are familiar with his works. The fictitious meeting of the two “real live authors” is represented as a happy reunion, yet there are more clues that something is (or will be) amiss. And next, the little “piper Aztec” plane carries the narrator back not to what he fears (“derecho a la pirámide del sacrificio” 284) but instead to Los Chiles and a convivial group of poets and writers, including the famous American expatriate to France, Gertrude Stein (284). Yet writing about this gathering is not quite enough; there must be “fotos de recuerdo con una cámara de esas que dejan salir ahí nomás un papelitos celeste que poco a poco y maravillosamente y polaroid se va llenando de imágenes paulatinas, primero ectoplasmas inquietantes y poco a poco una nariz, un pelo crespo ...” (284), and this description recalls, vaguely, the sky passing above the narrator of the previous story. And yet, is this fantastic, are these clues directing us towards a fantastic reading, or do they reference something other, maybe absolutely nothing other than a metafictional game?

Alter describes a self-conscious novel as one that “systematically flaunts its condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality” (x). Although the text in question here is a work of short fiction, allusions such as the one to the Polaroid shots not only presage what is to come, thereby providing intertextual recollections of the viewpoint and perspective of the camera in “Las babas,” but they also introduce other allusive hints. The nod to Napoleon (“qué pasaría si alguna vez después de una foto de familia el papelito celeste de la nada empezara a llenarse con Napoleón de caballo” 284) references the drunken ramblings of the protagonist of “Una flor amarilla.” The reader here (who is both an implied and a created reader) is well aware at every moment of being within the parameters of a Julio Cortázar (fictional?) world.

Or is it purely fantastic? Or is it something other? Julio Rodríguez-Luis, in an analysis of Cortázar’s fiction, discusses the detailed characterization as being one of the foundations of realism in the short stories. He points out that allegorical readings are possible, but declares that the “solid, life-like

reality surrounding” the fantastic element(s) makes it hard to abstract allegory from the texts in question (66). His focus also illuminates Cortázar’s “absorbing preoccupation with establishing a passage between two levels of consciousness, the quotidian, and the imaginary,” noting that “of course, all fantastic stories are about communication between two worlds, but Cortázar’s are directly involved with the enactment of that communication, with portraying how it takes place” (71). The connective device leading from one to the other side belongs to the pictures, both literal (the paintings and the photographs) and metaphorical (the “mental picture” of a “conventional” Julio Cortázar story).

Arriving at the island community of Solentiname, “Julio Cortázar” is quite taken by the paintings created by the peasants. This is fine art, and while it is primitive or bucolic, it is even yet more than a little surreal. The boundaries blur here between traditions in painting and narrative fiction, for although painting—and the portrait in particular—is “a study over time [...] the photograph suggests an instantaneous capturing” (Clarke 103). According to “Cortázar” in this story, the peasants’ artwork shows “una vez más la visión primera del mundo, la mirada limpia del que describe su entorno como un canto de alabanza: vaquitas enanas [...] el caballo de ojos verdes [...] una iglesia que no cree en la perspectiva [...] un pez enorme que ríe con labios de color turquesa” (285). In addition, a cloud hides at the corner of one, “saliéndose ya de la tela de puro miedo” (285). What is disturbing about these paintings is that they are not (at least as they are described) innocent country scenes. Instead, vis-à-vis their narrative replication, they sound like artwork related to the oneiric visions of magical realism as Franz Roh originally described this movement and, not only that, they also carry traces of motifs that can be recognized in Cortázar’s short fiction, especially in terms of the reference to the cloud.

Synchronicity assists “Cortázar” in the appropriation of these works. The number of pictures equals precisely the amount of photographs he has left in his roll of film (287); thus, the protagonist meticulously sets to capturing their images with his camera. Moreiras, in his analysis of this particular story, points out that “in the intersemiosis of translation from one into the other sign system, from paintings into photographs, for instance, the rupture of semiosis is unavoidable or consubstantial” (166). This is also an assertion of self and of power; Graham Clarke, in *The Photograph*, explains that photographs, in and of themselves, hold the idea that “the attempt to record and fix a permanent image was seen as almost magical in its effect and suggestiveness: an alchemical process of transformation akin to revelation” (11) in its earliest manifestations. This attitude has changed, though, and now, “the photograph not only signals a different relationship to and over nature, it speaks very much to a sense of power in the way we seek to order and construct the world around us” (Clarke 11). Further, he explains, the context of each picture changes its value, since “each change of context changes it as an object and alters its terms of reference and value, influencing our understanding of its ‘meaning’ and ‘status’” (Clarke 19). When is a picture art, utilitarian (a passport photo, for example, or evidence in a crime

scene); or witness? And does this artwork only become valuable as it is described and appropriated by the famous Argentine author?

“Cortázar” then returns to Paris “con una cansancio lleno de nostalgia” (286). Of course, Paris signifies two avenues for scripture: “on the one hand, a foundational writing, orphic, world-giving, an ontological and poetic writing, which is the one offered in the peasant paintings” that is opposed by “a kind of writing of expenditure and horror, nihilist, essentially destructive, which is the sort of writing that is carried out in the act of translation that Cortázar’s camera operates on the pictographic text” (Moreiras 163). Yet, according to Neil Larsen, in “Cortázar and Postmodernity: New Interpretive Possibilities” this story is a gesture of “self-criticism and rectification,” and its protagonist is akin to “the stereotypical ‘cultural’ tourist, filled with enthusiasm for popular causes in Latin America,” and it is he who collects “artifacts which, especially when made by peasants, effectively become the *fetishized* tokens of a hypothetical and abstract political commitment” (71). Marcy Schwartz also comments on the significance of space and how it is important for Latin American writers, noting that Paris is emblematic for Cortázar, in that his “fictional Paris simultaneously represents two ‘others,’ one sociopolitical and the other philosophical” (28).

The interplay between the value of the signifying practices of fine art, photography, and the prose rendering of them raises further questions. Sontag, for instance, points out that “ordinary language fixes the difference between hand-made images like Goya’s and photographs by the convention that artists ‘make’ drawings and paintings while photographers ‘take’ pictures;” further, pictures declare, as in Goya’s *Desastres de la guerra*, “things *like* this happened” while “in contrast, a single photograph or filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera’s lens” (*Regarding* 46-47). Yet war photography is not innocent and not as unscripted as we might think, or want to think, and the viewers’ perception of their relative authenticity invites Sontag’s comment that it is not strange that many of the iconic photographs of the Second World War later were revealed to have been posed; what is strange, she says, “is that we are surprised to learn that they were staged, and always disappointed” (*Regarding* 55). Finally, though, as the history of photography unfolds, Sontag explains that “many staged photographs turn back into historical evidence, albeit of an impure kind—like most historical evidence” (*Regarding* 57).

These iconographic signifying practices speak to each other, however, in an “anxiety of influence” that parallels the intertextuality of narrative. “Photography is tormented by the ghost of painting,” according to Barthes, but his assessment of the form’s true kinship is that it is closer to theater due to “the single intermediary [that is] Death” (31). According to the French theorist’s reading of the value of still pictures, “Photography is a kind of primitive theatre [sic], a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figure of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). Further, it is one that depicts the real, or what really happened, because, he declares, “In photography, I can never deny that *the thing has been there*” (76). And perhaps that is so in “real life,” but in “Cortázar’s” fictitious and fantastic world,

this is not true at all. “Cortázar” in Paris sets up his slide show and instead of the paintings (what had “been there” before his camera), the photographs show visions of horror and violence and death.

The contrast of how the peasants see their world, how the Author appropriates it, and how the Author then is compelled to acknowledge another vision, is one that he passes along to his readers, but it is also one that he holds back from his partner, Claire, in Paris. Our hero sets up his slide show while asking himself, “pero por qué los cuadritos primero, por qué la deformación profesional, el arte antes que la vida, y por qué no, le dijo el otro a éste en su eterno indesarmable diálogo fraterno y rencoroso, por qué no mirar primero las pinturas de Solentiname si también son la vida si todo es lo mismo” (287). But the pictures show not what he “really” saw originally, but instead a boy who falls forward after being shot, something akin to Robert Capa’s famous picture of the falling Spanish Civil war soldier; a woman being tortured with a cattle prod; massacres of innocents and soldiers killing and killing and killing in a never-ending loop of violence.

Currently, the boundaries of what is acceptable or not in terms of what sorts of photographs will be published includes questions of “good taste,” including “the rights of relatives” to be spared the sight of their desecrated and/or deceased family members, and the “powerful interdiction against showing the naked face” (Sontag, *Regarding* 68-70). Only foreign “others” are exempt, in that “the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying” (Sontag, *Regarding* 70). Moreiras states that this tale “is a disutopian writing that not only states the loss of the Orphic function of writing, but that is openly traumatized by it. As such, it is a writing of pain at a distance” (176). But whose pain is this? “Cortázar” and his reading public’s, or that of the victims he depicts in such vivid detail?

“Uno no sabe cómo ni por qué hace las cosas cuando ha cruzado un límite que tampoco sabe” (288), the narrator declares, at a loss to describe what it is that he (and we) are viewing. Claire, his partner, certainly does not see what he does, so he concludes the story by saying that “pensé vagamente en preguntarle una idiotez, preguntarle si en algún momento no había visto una foto de Napoleón a caballo. Pero no se lo pregunté, claro” (288). And the reader who is comfortably familiar with the full range of Cortázar’s short fiction will, at this moment, feel an uncomfortable sense of having skipped a page and jumped into “Una flor amarilla” with its hopeless and hapless drunkard and his ravings about Napoleon. And even the ending of the prose narrative is yet open at story’s close, and horrifyingly so, since “the story ended up being prophetic. If it had not been prophetic, if Somocista troops had not attacked Solentiname, Cortázar’s narration would still be available as a written text, but it would have markedly different reading effects” (Moreiras 161).

Cortázar’s authentic political commitment (or lack thereof) is a part of the récit that accompanies discussions of his life and work. In contrast the playwright, Alfonso Sastre, is known for his life-long commitment to justice, individual dignity, and social reform. The anthology *Las noches lúgubres* is

ostensibly a collection of fantastic, gothic, and uncanny tales.² The first section of the anthology is a vampire novella set in Madrid, while the second and third relate not only to the literary fantastic in an explicit vein (such as in the instance of, among others, “La bruja de la calle Fuencarral”) but also instances of psychological torture, guilt, shame, pain, and other effects of war. Waugh points out that “Metafictional writers all explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction” (2), and in the third section of the anthology (“Las células de horror”) Sastre uses the technique of “continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions” (Waugh 22) in that several sketches, including the two that this essay will consider (“Petición de socorro” and “Nagasaki”), do not “fit” within the expectation of an anthology of fantastic or even “postgothic” short fiction. These are, instead, brief and almost incongruent narratives, seemingly snapshots that are tucked within the pages and hidden, almost, between the longer stories that can be deemed predominately fantastic.

“Es una petición de socorro” is explicitly self-aware, considering that its title clearly states that this missive is a cry for help. However, intratextual details also require a series of questions, all related to the self-consciousness of the text itself. What, then, is most notably problematic about it? This is destined to be a “found document” (if its author is to be successful) but we don’t know where this document is truly to be “found,” for one thing. Where does it come from, and who was its author? Is this narrator mentally ill? Enough neurasthenic and lonely, verging on eccentric/slightly mad protagonists are housed within this collection of short stories and the narrator here could well be just one more. Is this, then, one the ravings of but another strange, lonely protagonist whose declarations cannot quite be trusted? We know absolutely nothing about its context, and the first paragraph of this snapshot is as follows: “Me dirijo a la Cruz Roja Internacional. He sido torturado hasta el punto de que me encuentro en peligro de muerte. Si sobrevivo, denunciaré estos hechos” (338).

How believable is this? Waugh notes that “Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds ‘framing’ as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. The first problem it poses, of course, is ‘what is a frame?’” (28), and, contained by the parameters of the larger anthology, this brief snapshot is problematic. What are its edges? Its boundaries? Are there any? And is the visual quality and the peculiarly moving sense of timing a result of the incongruity of this “scribbled missive” or is it, rather, a byproduct of Sastre’s experience as a playwright?

In reading these as snapshots, it is possible to turn to the practitioners of documentary photography for assessment of their own theories of production. There is, in the ideology of the profession, a conscious sense of wanting to make history with this genre of photographs. Mary Ellen Mark, interviewed by Ken Light, declares that “still photographs do something very different from television. Still photographs exist forever. If they are really exceptional, they can become icons” (Light 81). Another photographer, Eugene Richards, states “My job is to get my worldview out there, to get what I see published. I’m a photojournalist as opposed to what some might call an art photographer,

because I like to tell stories” (Light 92). The impact of the captions also adds to the “reading” and Sebastião Salgado notes, “If you read the captions, you read my story. If you read the pictures, you read the story” (Light 113). Peter Howe summarizes the link between photography and storytelling in comparison with news reporters:

I think a documentary photographer has to be a journalist, but a committed one. If you look at it in terms of text, you can get a reporter and you can get a writer. A reporter is someone who goes out and reports. A writer is somebody who gives his or her own personal style, his own personal viewpoint and twist and spin to that story. A documentary photographer is a writer rather than a reporter. Great documentary photographers craft with their own preconceptions, their own interests and ideas. They are not neutral observers. (Light 174-75)

The above described, of course, can also be applied to the politically committed project that constitutes Sastre’s career as a playwright. The second paragraph of this sketch then, equally terse, is as follows: “Hoy he sabido que van a someterme a una operación quirúrgica. He sabido también que el cirujano que va a operarme es uno de mis torturadores” (338).

Is this then art—a work of literary creativity—or is it an act of witness? What aesthetic principal, as a consequence, will guide the reading of it? Susan Meiselas, a well-known documentary photographer who has done considerable work in Latin America, and who published a book on Latin American political atrocities titled *Nicaragua* in 1981, was interviewed about her attitude toward precisely this question; the conversation and the article to which this refers, in fact, has some parallels in Cortázar’s story of Solentiname. The article with its printed account of the interview itself is preceded by a photocopy of a *New York Times* article, dated Thursday, October 23, 1986, and titled “6 Civilians Killed by Mine in Nicaragua” (Ritchin 32). The conversation between the photographer and Fred Ritchin, interestingly, reveals a parallel to the themes that Cortázar has more overtly interrogated and which are implied by a photographic reading of the Sastre vignettes: “Imagine,” Meiselas says in the opening lines of the article,

this very small room where there are no windows and it’s precisely the correct proportion so that when people enter they feel an intimacy. And, if there are eleven portraits on the walls of the Nicaraguans who had limbs amputated because of one land mine and they look back at the people who walk past and each hears the others’ voices, would it become merely fashionable art—a concept piece? (32)

Their conversation shows that consumption of the photographic document changes its meaning according to context. Ritchin comments that her “image-making was originally productive in Nicaragua because it brought something important to people’s attention, not just to satisfy their curiosity but in a

helpful, tactful, political way,” and points out that public appropriation of the images has changed their value because, as a result “soon you’ve lost control and even lost the ability to stay in the discussion because it’s been taken over” (33). Her response is rueful; she regrets that her pictures have taken on a message of their own, primarily. This is not for lack of desire, she explains, and “It’s not that there haven’t been images made, but the larger sense of an ‘image’ has been defined elsewhere—in Washington, and in the press, by the powers that be. I can’t, we can’t, somehow reframe it ...” (33).

Sastre’s own personal circumstances, the political events surrounding his creativity, production, and reception, and the resulting urge to use writing as a politically committed instrument builds a literary project that suffers the same effects as Meseilas’s photographs, and both artist recreate documents that follow the contours provided by Linda Hutcheon regarding historiographic metafiction. “In historiographic metafiction, these are often not simple verbal representations, for *ekphrases* (or verbal representations of visual representations) often have central representational functions,” writes Hutcheon (120). With nothing but the image of this hidden note, this snapshot is open to the mental picture that we, the readers, create upon “finding” it. And yet, as Hutcheon points out, “historiographic metafiction, like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their ‘facts’ and of the nature of their evidence” (122).

Political and wartime atrocities and their representation constitutes a site of complex interactions, including those responding to ideological, aesthetic, cultural, and anthropological perspectives, none the least of which is the question of authenticity: was this true? Did it *really* happen that way? Can we believe it? And once we know, what do we do then with this knowledge? The final line of the sketch leaves us, and its creator, hanging: “Si alguien encuentra este papel, hágalo llegar a su destino. ¡Es una petición de socorro!” (338) Next, and in the sparsest brushstrokes, Sastre’s protagonist describes himself and his circumstances in the snapshot image provided by “Nagasaki.” It is a narrative of only eight sentences. Here, Sastre does not consciously refer to the text from within the narrative, but its placement in the larger anthology calls attention to its fictional quality, as do the physical structure of it as it is printed on the page. Unlike Cortázar’s photographs, this snapshot is not explicitly named as such. The sketch, however, which is situated just after the previous within the larger framework, is tucked into the anthology of stories as though it were a hidden photograph, one that has been stuck between the leaves of a forgotten book.

The protagonist gives his name, his reason for being in Hiroshima, and a portrayal of loss all in the opening paragraph: “Me llamo Yanajido. Trabajo en Nagasaki y había venido a ver a mis padres en Hiroshima. Ahora ellos han muerto. Yo sufro mucho por esta pérdida y también por mis horribles quemaduras. Ya solo deseo volver a Nagaski con mi mujer y mis hijos” (338). But to whom is this cry for recognition directed? And what is the expected response? Taking into account Meiselas’s experience with the shifting value of documentary photography, this is a significant question. In addition, these questions

also ask one single and significant one: who are “we” the reading—or viewing—public? This question of course plagues (or inspires) critical theory directed toward literature, but it also comes strongly into play with regard to iconographic depictions of pain and suffering. In reading this as a picture, the relationship of text to consumer shifts and becomes that of image and its witness. But what, then, is the role of the witness, and how must he or she respond? Sontag, in this context, declares that “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (*Regarding* 7).

This image does not require much elaboration. Instead, its barest essence is sufficient. Yanajido is injured, he explains, and he is mourning the deaths of his family members. Now, all he wants is to go home, he says, and the second paragraph consists solely of these lines: “Dada la confusión de estos momentos no creo que pueda llegar a Nagasaki en seguida, como sería mi deseo; pero sea como sea, yo camino hacia allá” (338).

This image brings to mind the dreadful picture of the children in Vietnam, running away from the burning fumes of the bombs that have dropped down upon them, but Yanajido is not a child, and the sense is not that he is running, mouth open in a silent howl of grief and pain. Instead, there is a ghastly quietness to this picture: I am Yanajido, an individual with a name and a reason for being in the city; yes, this is Yanajido, look at me doggedly thinking that some how, some way, I will be able to limp home. The first paragraph counts five lines on the page; the second, only three. Even the script itself reflects the action of diminishing slowly and painfully.

Sontag notes that she argued, in her first of the six essays that comprise her collection *On Photography*, that repeated exposure to photographed atrocity makes the event seem less real, in that “photographs shrivel sympathy” and “our culture of spectatorship neutralizes the moral force of photographs of atrocities” (*Regarding* 105). Now though, she states, she does not know if this is what she still believes. Further, “to speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment [and] assumes that everyone is a spectator” (110). Again, that question of to whom does “we” refer? Who are “we” when are looking at these sorts of photographs in a Time-Life documentary book, or walking through a gallery, or clicking through the photojournals posted on CNN.COM (choosing, for the moment, to overlook the warning that “content is graphic: viewer discretion advised”)?

In asking this question, there is a return, once again, to the artifice of the historiographic metafiction that Hutcheon discusses due to the fact that, as she points out, “Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical facts and fiction” (93). Such a consideration, for its part, forces a reconsideration of the images provided by these vignettes, because this narrative tactic “refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are

discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity” (Hutcheon 93). The structure of the story itself does as well call attention to the fictitious construction. While the first sketch seemed a hastily scribbled note, this one resembles a poem, a slightly deformed haiku.

As “we” regard the pain of another, in this case a Japanese man from many years ago, another set of questions related to the vision provided by photography surfaces, and these pertain to the narrator. According to Max Kozloff, an educator in photography, images of grief tend to overlook the human being in question, given that “Subjects are treated as objects of compassion, but their deeper feelings about being photographed are hardly ever consulted, and their dignity is not at a premium under the circumstances” (164). As much as it is possible to view these narrators as images to a certain extent, it is also at least partially due to the fact that they are taking part in the construction of their narrative via the first-person discourse. And the numbness to pain, the lack of ability to genuinely share and experience the level of empathy that a true recognition of the subject would entail, is further diluted by the effects of television. In this regard, Kozloff notes that “As the flagrancy of the social abuse has increased, so has the stridency of the photographic act of witness. Still photographs cannot compete with network television in massiveness of audience, but they can be more concentrated in their revelations” (163). (And this, of course, is something to remember as “we” consider pictures of half-naked Thai nationals holding weeping children in the aftermath of the tsunami, or worse, the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib prison).

Who is Yanajido addressing? Sontag, again, criticizes the exploitation involved in “looking at other people’s pain in an art gallery” (*Regarding* 119), stating that as long as these types of photographs are hung on walls and observed while strolling along a venue of that sort in a public space, then art is what they become; the depiction of atrocities, instead, is a kind of photography that belongs in books, as “the weight and seriousness of such photographs survive better in a book, where one can look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking” (121). Yet, she says, “at some moment the book will be closed” (121). But does the memory remain, a trace, a lesson of some sort? For Barthes, the attraction looking at a photograph is a result of what he calls the *studium*, which is an active engagement in looking and considering a photograph, that allows him “to participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings [and] the actions” of observation of the photographic text (26). The second part of this exchange involves feeling, in that what Barthes calls the *punctum*, is a “sting, speck, cut, little hole,” and it is also “that [photographic] accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). These are the photographs that make one stop, and think, and go back again and again to ponder and abstract or impose meaning.

Here, the status of the subject is put into a stark relief by the act of narrating his own snapshot, his own misery, his own pain, and his own fear. It is possible to see, here, the invisible spaces of the

emotional interior. Cortázar, for his part, appropriates the victims within a framework largely contextualized by the symbolic frame of a “Julio Cortázar story,” and the overall trajectory and effect of the depictions of them are created not only by the self-conscious artifice of the narrative but also by reader expectation. Sastre, in contrast, partitions his snapshots within the uncanny and/fantastic “post-gothic” of the section in which these vignettes appear in a way that is quite anonymous in the first and dreadfully personal in the second. Both of these vignettes open up a very private grief at the same time that they insist upon their value as public documents: the reader “sees” and, as witness, recognizes their textuality and metacommentary on the text of war photograph even as he or she, in the words of Sontag, “does not ‘get it’” because, as Sontag insists, without being there, without actually experiencing these torments, do “we” really understand (*Regarding* 124)? “We” come close, maybe, if it is possible to read the photographs from many angles, and to parse their narrative as carefully as though they were written or verbal, in-person testimonials, but in the end she insists, no, “we” do not ever “understand” (*Regarding* 124-26).

These stories make the process of representation itself the primary focus. The questions that this raises most stringently are about the possibility of text to portray atrocities, while the function of the war photograph or snapshot specifically relates to the capacity to witness, or portray, grief and pain. The authority of Yanajido’s story resides directly in its distilled and poetic delivery; the dichotomy between such lacerated and stark agony and the depth of the grief beneath the haiku-like representation forces a contrast that wounds the viewer with a *punctum* that stays for a moment, burning. The exotic and faraway is near, in this picture, for who among us cannot recognize the validity of an urgent need to touch a beloved at the very deepest and most urgent moment of pain that is the recognition of one’s own immanent death?

The first paragraph of this sketch gave a name, a family affiliation, and a declaration that its narrator has been burned. In the second paragraph, there is a lessening of corporality; disembodied—his flesh most likely sloughing off him in strips, according to descriptions of atomic burn victims—there is only a declaration of desire, of pure willpower and determination. In the third, and final, paragraph, there is only the faintest wisp of hope left. It is prose narrative’s way of showing how a body disappears, how only the purest level of wishing is left, only two lines now. Is Yanajido on the road yet? Can he see? Is he moving still? Yanajido’s last words, finally, are: “No quisiera morir en el camino. ¡Ojalá llegue a tiempo de abrazarlos!” (338). The snapshot “we” are left with before turning the page does not say anything more, and Yanajido’s fate seems clear enough but is yet left unstated.

If the implication of photography is that a picture reproduces something that was once real and present, contemporary technology undercuts this notion, as do considerations of the ideology of the photographer and the story that he is she is determined to tell; evidently, a photograph requires a reading that admits to its possible lack of any sort of “truth” whatsoever. Photographs, consequently, speak of

their own fictionality with every viewing, with each replication of the photographic text itself, and with every new contextual framework surrounding the image or icon. The fantastic, similarly, requires a conscious reflection upon its very fictional construction because, as Todorov has so famously pointed out, “*the reader’s hesitation* is therefore the first condition of the fantastic” (31). The literary fantastic creates a reader that is constantly and consciously aware of its fictional construction. A reading of the fantastic insists upon attention directed the “how” of this erasure between the real and the irrational, and it foregrounds the process of creating and maintaining it. In other words, is the uncertainty within the text, hinging upon the fictional character’s perception? Does it generate from the implied author’s narrative strategy, placing the burden of proof on the reader’s interpretation? What are the implications of either possibility, or is it a combination of both strategies?

All four texts convey, both about human suffering and about the artifice of narrative self-reflection, nothing other than a lack of finality and a series of questions. How can one read a fictional version of reality? How is it possible to provide testimony of atrocities? Especially now that photographic witness is so readily available from a variety of sources that “we” become numbed and/or unmoved, what is the documentary value of these texts? Are they art now, or just evidence? Cortázar’s stories here rely on the hesitation that renders them a pure example of the literary (neo)fantastic. By integrating the narrative capacity of photography within these texts, the Argentine writer further intensifies the play of fiction and metafiction, one against the other like a set of funhouse mirrors. Sastre’s unnamed but self-declared torture victim’s narrative ends with uncertainty; Yanajido’s final words leave his story open too, thus calling attention to each vignette’s own artifice and incapacity to rely upon a center, upon a consensus reality, or even to find solace in a closure that is final. For more reasons than one, consequently, it is logical—somehow—that “we” never understand, even while gazing upon their snapshots, punctured, if only momentarily, before finally turning the page.

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Notes

¹ Jaime Alazraki offers the term "neofantastic" in order to make a distinction between Cortázar's signature short stories and their nineteenth-century predecessors (Alazraki and Ivask 7), and this denomination informs the analysis of them in *En busca del unicornio: Los cuentos de Julio Cortázar: Elementos para una poética de lo neofantástico* (1983).

² María Ángeles Encinas and Anthony Percival refer to Sastre's short fiction as "postgótico" in the introduction to their anthology of contemporary Spanish short fiction (31). This is an apt term, in that the term *neofantastic* refers to contemporary fantastic and how it has adjusted to the contours of modern anxieties, while Alfonso Sastre's brief narratives revolve not around gloomy castles and enclosed physical structures, for the most part. Instead, their focus is war, guilt, terror, and pain. They entail a level of emotional intensity that can be associated with gothic fiction, but it is one that is situated within distinctly urban and contemporary frameworks.