

## The Perpetrator in Focus<sup>1</sup>

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REVIEW OF: Anacleto Ferrer and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, eds, *El infierno de los perpetradores: Imágenes, relatos y conceptos* (Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra, 2019). 337 pp. ISBN 978-8-4729-0915-1.

**H**ow may we contemplate the hell of perpetrators? In the first chapter of the book reviewed here, sociologist Gabriel Gatti imagines it ‘as a place full of murderers bearing witness, of guilty people ruminating about their guilt, of criminals thinking about their victims.’<sup>2</sup> This initial definition suggests that approaching this hell and thereby also the figure of the perpetrator of mass crimes constitutes a complex endeavour which requires a transdisciplinary and dispassionate focus. It is with the purpose of shedding light on this anti-auratic, sinister, and at times mysterious and cryptic figure – that of the ordinary criminal – that *El infierno de los perpetradores. Imágenes, relatos y conceptos* has been conceptualized by Anacleto Ferrer and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, who are both professors of the Universitat de València in Spain. The volume is the result of research developed over the course of four years within the framework of a research project titled ‘Representaciones contemporáneas del perpetrador de violencias en masa: conceptos, relatos e imágenes’ (HAR2017-83519-P), led by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca.

The book has to do with memory and the duty to remember.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, the volume falls in line with publications that make visible episodes from the recent past that question our present model of enlightened rationality as an obligation. This duty entails remembering and recognizing the unique suffering of certain communities and implementing memory politics that may serve to repair, at least symbolically, the damage caused, as well as shed light on contemporary

- 1 This review has been translated by Anthony Nuckols.
- 2 Gabriel Gatti, ‘Ni causas, ni razones, ni culpables. Las víctimas sin perpetradores (y otras paradojas de un mundo de víctimas)’, in *El infierno de los perpetradores: Imágenes, relatos y conceptos*, ed. by Anacleto Ferrer and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra, 2019), pp. 55–70 (p. 56).
- 3 On the concept of memory, its relation to history and public uses of the past see Enzo Traverso, *Le passé, mode d’emploi: Histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005). For a historical analysis of the expression ‘duty of memory’ see Sébastien Ledoux, *Le Devoir de mémoire: Un formule et son histoire* (Paris: CNRS, 2016).

*Journal of Perpetrator Research* 4.1 (2021), 264–272  
 DOI: 10.21039/jpr.4.1.104 © 2021 by the Author



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legacies of suffering. This is a discourse that has been marked until now – as can also be seen in the book in the number of texts that address this – by the debates and discourses surrounding the memory of the *Shoah*. Although modernity has been witness to many genocides, mass crimes, interethnic conflicts, and colonial and neo-colonial violence, it is undoubtedly the *Shoah* that constituted the critical paradigm from which other massacres and their representations have been addressed.

But how has the perpetrator gained such prominence? Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca approach this question in their extensive introduction, which serves as a theoretical framework for the twelve chapters that make up the book. There, the editors discuss the three major trials that served to hold those who participated in the Third Reich accountable: the Nuremberg trials (1946), where leaders, functionaries and collaborators of the Nazi regime were tried; the Jerusalem trial (1961), where Adolf Eichmann was tried for being in charge of the plan to exterminate Jews; and the Frankfurt trial (1963-1965), where twenty officers who had worked at Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Second World War were tried and sentenced to death. According to Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, what was new about the Frankfurt trial is that even ‘with its many restrictions and shortcomings, [...] it no longer centered its attention on the *planner*, as in Nuremberg, nor on the *administrator*, as in Jerusalem, but rather on the “bare criminal culpability” of the *direct perpetrator*’.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they state that

the instruments made available for these three key moments [...], open up the doors to the ambiguous field of perpetrator studies, foreshadowing the existence of three analytical perspectives referring to distinct levels of execution in the perpetration process: the *macro* level of the *architects*, who hold the highest responsibility in making decisions, the *meso* level of the *organizers*, who act in offices or in accordance with concrete orders and thus set the wheels in motion; and the *micro* level of the *executioners*, those who pull the trigger or drop the pellets into the gas chambers and complete the step from potential to criminal act.<sup>5</sup>

In this genealogy, Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca present the most prominent studies carried out in recent decades on the figure of the perpetrator: Gitta Sereny’s work on Treblinka commander Franz Stangl, detained in Brazil in 1967 and extradited to Germany to be tried;

4 Sánchez Biosca and Ferrer, ‘En una selva oscura. Introducción al estudio de los perpetradores’, in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 11-50 (p. 19)

5 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Raul Hilberg's work on the Third Reich's structure and how it led to the industrial extermination of human beings, or Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, a work of micro-history research where the conditions in which individuals considered normal killed and could kill again.<sup>6</sup>

These works, which have become paradigmatic studies of mass death and perpetrators, allow the editors to consider other phenomena, expanding the context of reflection as well as pointing to the research lines to which this paradigm cannot offer clear answers. As Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca assert:

The issue of situational factors and their pressure on the individuals force one to reconsider social dynamics, but also to proceed with a more meticulous classification of those segments of the population which become agents of genocide or massacres in cases other than the Holocaust, as new manifestations and cultural, ideological, military, or postcolonial contexts draw different human formations that cannot be absorbed or completely explained by the categories used to analyze the Jewish genocide.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, in their view, the interest in studying the perpetrator lies in:

The comparison of phenomena and experiences by virtue of what is permanent and what depends on local and regional contexts, what perpetrators gather together as an inheritance of their models and what they contribute as a 'creative' aspect in their ways of inflicting suffering on their victims. And the different forms of complicity, collaboration, identification with the aggressor, loss of self-esteem prove no less important.<sup>8</sup>

The book, however, goes even further, as it specifically dedicates a considerable part to questioning the representation of perpetrators and perpetration in cultural products in our contemporary societies.

With the objective of articulating such diverse perspectives, the volume is divided into three parts entitled: 'Pensar y Juzgar' ('Thinking and Judging'), 'Figuras y ficciones' ('Figures and Fictions'), and 'Miradas

6 Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage, 2011); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

7 Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, p. 35.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

y representaciones' ('Gazes and Representations'). The first part ('Pensar y Juzgar') consists of three chapters and has a clearly theoretical orientation. In the first chapter, 'Ni causa, ni razones, ni culpables: Las víctimas sin perpetradores (y otras paradojas de un mundo de víctimas),' Gabriel Gatti offers an empirical study that allows him to question the idea that there necessarily exists a perpetrator for every victim. Gatti gives examples which constitute exceptions to the supposed equation. Moreover, he develops four theoretical concepts on the basis of these examples: 'victim identity,' 'old and new space for victims' and 'citizen-victim'.

The second chapter, 'Formas de pensar lo impensable: Los perpetradores del mal extremo,' by Cristina García Pascual, offers a review of existing literature on the figure of the perpetrator, using the case of the *Shoah* as an example and posing the question of who the perpetrators were, and why they acted in the way they did. To answer the question, García Pascual divides the causal explanations into *structuralist* and *voluntarist* explanations. The first of these would find representatives in Christopher Browning (1997), for whom 'the perpetrator would be an "ordinary man," trapped in determined structures,<sup>9</sup> while the second would find representatives in Daniel J. Goldhagen (1997), for whom 'the perpetrator would be an "ordinary German," that is, someone who belonged to a highly antisemitic culture and who had made the dehumanization of Jews his own.'<sup>10</sup>

The section concludes with a chapter by Benno Herzog entitled 'Silenciamiento e invisibilización del desprecio: Una perspectiva bidireccional,' where he focuses on the relationship between disdain for the victim and the perpetrator. Through a conceptual exploration of the question, Herzog seeks to deploy a theoretical language that would make it possible to understand the suffering inflicted on another as disdain. He also shows how disdain for victims is reflected in the perpetrator and to present the different mechanisms of silencing or invisibilizing of social norms that impede aggression within a society. Ultimately the conclusion is that it is impossible to completely render the voice of suffering invisible.

The second part of the book ('Figuras y ficciones'), consists of four chapters. In the first, "'Por Dios, por la Patria y el Führer": Perpetradores nazis en la iglesia protestante,' Jesús Casquete analyzes the role the Protestant church played in giving moral and logistical support to National

9 Cristina García Pascual, 'Formas de pensar lo impensable: Los perpetradores del mal extremo,' in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 71-92 (p. 78).

10 *Ibid.*

Socialism from its party-movement phase. In particular, he refers to the group known as *Deutsche Christen* (DC), the German Christians, who ‘received the Nazi rise to power as a divine blessing.’<sup>11</sup> As Casquete asserts:

The DC made faith in God compatible with a program of national regeneration along racial lines and with the veneration and due obedience with the one charged with carrying out the process, that is, Hitler. They conceived of race, just as the Nazis did, as the fundamental principal of the social order.<sup>12</sup>

In ‘El verdugo en *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985): abismo al infierno,’ Arturo Lozano Aguilar analyzes the representations of perpetrators in Lanzmann’s well-known film, mainly those of Franz Suchomel, detained in 1963 and judged in a trial along with ten other guards from Treblinka.<sup>13</sup> With the aim of highlighting the film’s singular position regarding perpetrators, Lozano Aguilar contrasts Lanzmann’s representation of Suchomel with that offered by Gitta Sereny in *Into that Darkness*, to conclude that ‘the different focus of both works on the same person makes two antagonistic perspectives explicit in an exemplary way: Gitta Sereny’s intellectual attempt to access the perpetrators’ hearts through reason versus Claude Lanzmann’s moral rejection.’<sup>14</sup>

The section closes with two chapters on the figure of the perpetrator in the context of the Chilean dictatorship. The first of these is by Jaume Peris Blanes and is entitled ‘Figuras y ficciones de la colaboración en Chile: espacios de ambivalencia entre víctima y perpetrador.’ Peris Blanes analyzes the documentary *La flaca Alejandra*, which is about a young woman, Alejandra Merino, who, in the context of the Chilean dictatorship, goes from being a militant in the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* to a functionary of the DINA, the main organization responsible for the repression and torture centers in Chile during Pinochet’s dictatorship. The question underlying the documentary is whether Merino is a victim of State violence or implicated in the repression. According to Peris Blanes, cases such as these ‘account for an experience of violence that escapes the common outlines to

11 Jesús Casquete, “Por Dios, por la Patria y el Führer”: Perpetradores nazis en la iglesia protestante’, in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 113–134 (p.115).

12 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

13 In 1965, Suchomel was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment, of which he only served four.

14 Arturo Lozano Aguilar, ‘El verdugo en *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985): abismo al infierno,’ in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 135–154 (p. 135)

comprehend said violence, as it is situated in an intermediate space between the victim and perpetrator'.<sup>15</sup>

The following chapter, titled 'Rompiendo el pacto de silencio: representaciones culturales intergeneracionales en torno a perpetradores en la posdictadura chilena' and written by Daniela Jarra, explores the cultural representations of the dictatorship produced by the descendants of those who lived through the events, both as victims and perpetrators. Jara ponders the significance of learning and transmitting catastrophe after catastrophe, and poses the question of what challenges this new form of memorializing the past may bring. To answer these two questions, Jara analyzes two film productions of cultural memory by children of perpetrators: *El Pacto de Adriana* (2017) by Lissete Orozco and *El color del Camaleón* (2017) by Andrés Lübbert.<sup>16</sup> These documentaries, as Jara recognizes, allowed for the cultural memory of the perpetrator to irrupt into the public space as a problem that intersects with questions of intergenerational memory transmission.

The third and final section of the book ('Miradas y representaciones') comprises five chapters. There is an emphasis on images, which are understood as vestiges of the past. In 'Un ingenioso esmero: Ensayo sobre cuatro escenas de perpetración de la Shoah,' Anacleto Ferrer carries out a sort of archaeological work in order to bring to the surface the story of a photograph that 'lay buried under a blanket of snow'.<sup>17</sup> Among the collections he analyses are Rudolf Werner Breslauer's photographs, which show some of the daily activities in the Westerbork camp; the *Auschwitz Album*,<sup>18</sup> which documents the arrival to the camp of various trains with Hungarian Jews in spring and summer of 1944, the selection of the prisoners and the confiscation of their belongings; and the so-called Höcker album, a series of photographs which show the Auschwitz concentration camp personnel during their leisure time. In his chapter, Ferrer constructs a fiction in order to bring us closer to the truth. The images serve as memory aids or clues that, when placed

15 Jaume Peris Blanes, 'Figuras y ficciones de la colaboración en Chile: espacios de ambivalencia entre víctima y perpetrador,' in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 155-175 (p. 157).

16 *El Pacto de Adriana*, dir. by Lissete Orozco (Salmón Producciones, 2017); *El color del camaleón*, dir. by Andrés Lübbert (Blume Producciones, 2017).

17 Siegfried Kracauer, *La fotografía y otros ensayos* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2008), p. 24.

18 Also known as the *Lilly Jacob Album* in reference to the prisoner who found it in a locker at the Dora camp when it was liberated by the allies. The photographs were taken at Auschwitz, where Jacob and her family had been deported at the end of May 1944 from the Beregszász ghetto.

in dialogue with other sources, allow us to untangle what happened in the extermination camps.

The second chapter in this section, by Rafael R. Tranche and entitled 'Miradas más allá del límite de lo visible: El descubrimiento de Bergen-Belsen,' questions the visibility of what has traditionally been considered unrepresentable with respect to the memory of the Shoah and the insufficient capacity of images to do so. Tranche compares photographs and recordings, both visual and auditory, of British troops in Bergen-Belsen, images that connect with the idea of the pedagogy of horror in capturing the perpetrators as they toss corpses into mass graves while the local population is made to watch, with the recordings previously made by Soviet troops in the Polish camp Majdanek. Tranche arrives at the conclusion that the initial circulation of images of the German camps had an unwanted effect: namely, simplifying the Nazi concentration camp system and blurring the Jewish extermination plan.

In the next chapter, 'Manifestaciones encubridoras: testimonio escrito y testimonio audiovisual en el victimario,' Alberto Sucasas delves into the perpetrator's psyche to search for keys to better comprehend the driving forces behind perpetration. Sucasas contrasts revelations recorded in the form of letter or diaries of Nazi leaders like Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels and Alfred Rosenberg during the Third Reich with the autobiographies of Rudolph Höss and Adolf Eichmann, written and published afterward the war. In his analysis, Sucasas also differentiates between literary testimony and audiovisual testimony. He draws this distinction with the aim of defending the thesis that 'far from being a responsibility exclusive to direct perpetrators, the extermination of European Jews was enabled by the complicity of an entire people, the *Volk*, who supported and encouraged the criminal politics of National Socialism.'<sup>19</sup>

The subsequent chapter by Susanne C. Knittel, 'Ante los perpetradores: repetición, *reenactment*, representación' focuses on productions inspired by documentary theater that revisit the figure of the perpetrator, carrying out an affirmative critique of the past. Specifically, she analyzes two projects by the Franco-German filmmaker Romuald Karmakar, *Das Himmler-Projekt* (2000), where the actor Mandred Zapatka reads the manuscript of Heinrich Himmler's Posen speech, and *Die Hamburger Lektionen* (2006), where the same actor reads two sermons by Mohammed Fazazi, Imam of the Hamburg Mosque attended by three

<sup>19</sup> Alberto Sucasas, 'Manifestaciones encubridoras: testimonio escrito y testimonio audiovisual en el victimario,' in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 253–272 (p. 254).

of the terrorists involved in the September 11 attacks. These auditory recreations, where the speeches are reproduced without any other devices, contrast with stagings that reconstruct the context in detail. As an example of this type of work, Knittel discusses *Die letzten Tage der Ceausescus* (2009/2010) by Milo Rau, a documentary theater play that recreates the trial in which the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife were sentenced to death in 1989.

The book closes with a chapter by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'Elogio de la sonrisa. ¿Qué perpetrán las imágenes de perpetradores?', which seeks to give answers to the question posed in the essay's title. Sánchez-Biosca analyzes a series of paradigmatic cases belonging to different historical moments, formats and cultural contexts: the photographs of the Warsaw ghetto commissioned by Joseph Goebbels in 1942 and taken by a team of filmmakers with the purpose of constructing the sub-humanity of the Jewish community; the anthropometric photographs taken of prisoners before their death at the detention, torture and extermination center S-21 during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship (1975–1979) in Cambodia; and the photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003. Sánchez-Biosca posits that these images have as their purpose 'to perpetuate in time and to consume with repeated delight that which only occurred once and, therefore, to ensure an emotional surplus (pleasure?) within the executioners' circle',<sup>20</sup> ready to be shared with those who belong to the same community. The photographs, originally an aid to memory, thus become evidentiary documents when they move beyond the closed circle of consumers.

Throughout the volume, Theodor Adorno's voice resounds, in particular his 1966 speech *Education After Auschwitz*, in which he proposed 'to study the guilty of Auschwitz with all the methods available to science [...], in order, if possible, to discover how such a person develops'<sup>21</sup> to prevent something like the Holocaust from happening again. A process of understanding which, as Hannah Arendt argues in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1962), does not involve only or exclusively the pathologization of hate, but also researching into the 'ordinary man' a fundamental element of death ruled by an iron division of labor.<sup>22</sup>

20 Sánchez-Biosca, 'Elogio de la sonrisa. ¿Qué perpetrán las imágenes de perpetradores?', in *El infierno de los perpetradores*, ed. by Ferrer and Sánchez-Biosca, pp. 279–338 (pp. 301–2).

21 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 199.

22 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

The originality of the book lies in its attempt to integrate three different dimensions into the analysis: images, narratives and concepts, searching for possible connections and similarities between them. The different chapters that make up the volume allow the reader to link studies on images, literary studies, and cultural and artistic approaches. Finally, it is important to highlight the publication's intention of introducing a comparative perspective, which goes beyond the paradigm of analysis of the Shoah. This perspective does not intend to play down or to establish a hierarchy between different acts of mass violence but to understand the uniqueness of each case. In short, *El infierno de los perpetradores* lays a rich foundation for the development of future research, as the current research project of the group also showcases.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The project, titled 'New cultural representations of the perpetration of mass violence: narratives and images', is directed by Jaume Peris Blanes (University of Valencia) and Brigitte Jirku (University of Valencia). It aims to analyze the new, comparative paradigms of cultural representation of the perpetration of mass violence and the ways in which they are redefining the narrative, aesthetic and visual frameworks that characterized the classic paradigm of the perpetrator, as it has been defined in Perpetrator Studies. At the same time, the project engages, from the point of view of these new paradigms, in the analysis of previous representations of perpetration, allowing to discern new layers of significance.

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