

## TEXTUAL EXPOSURES: PHOTOGRAPHY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPANISH AMERICAN NARRATIVE FICTION

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## UNCANNY VISIONS: RUBÉN DARÍO, JULIO CORTÁZAR, AND SALVADOR ELIZONDO

### Ruben Darío

The short story “Verónica,” by Rubén Darío, has been read mainly in the context of his fantastic short fiction. The text, in which a friar sets out to produce a photograph of Jesus Christ, can be interpreted as a product of its age—or rather, against it, insofar as the Nicaraguan writer makes a statement against the narrow scientific trends of his time. This section explores the literary strategies through which Darío makes use of the visual technologies of the late nineteenth century. Although critics recognize photography as a central motif in “Verónica,” few have examined in detail the role that this medium plays in the text.<sup>1</sup> By contextualizing “Verónica” in its cultural period and literary lineage, I show how issues central to Darío coalesce around photography: first, the representation of the divine in modern times; second, the cultural clash between religious faith and scientific knowledge; and third, the reassessment of the body and the contest between the senses, in particular between the visual and the tactile or haptic. My reading shows that Darío’s story draws a more complex figure than the common anti-positivistic and quasi-apologetic interpretation proposed by literary critics.<sup>2</sup>

Octavio Paz pointed out the indifference and even rejection that *modernismo* showed toward the machine.<sup>3</sup> It is no wonder that *modernista* poets, who saw in the aristocracy of taste, the cult of beauty, and the flights of the imagination their native land, considered with some disdain the wave of technological changes sweeping the Western world as well as Latin America during the second industrial revolution. However, there were exceptions to this attitude. Leopoldo Lugones, whom Darío met in 1893 and befriended during his stay in Buenos Aires, developed his own brand of science fiction in his 1906 collection of stories “Las fuerzas extrañas,” where imaginary machines and scientific speculations play a prominent role.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, “Verónica,” a text that predates those of Lugones, is testament to the use of technology as a *modernista* literary motif.<sup>5</sup>

The protagonist of the story, Fray Tomás de la Pasión, is “un espíritu perturbado por el demonio de la ciencia” (416) [a spirit possessed by the demon of science].<sup>6</sup> The friar is a man of faith, but he is under the powerful spell of curiosity, and his intense desire to know distracts him from the right path of prayer and monastic discipline. The story, told by a particularly biased narrator, raises the issue of the opposition not primarily between science and faith, but between the spirit of simplicity and the thirst for knowledge, or, according to the text, between “las almas de amor” [the souls of love], which, says the narrator, “son de modo mayor glorificadas que las almas de entendimiento” (416) [are glorified in higher degree than the souls of understanding]. Having learned about recent advances in visual technology, in particular the invention of the X-ray machine, Fray Tomás imagines the great service that this new device could provide to the cause of the faithful:

Si se fotografiaba ya lo interior de nuestro cuerpo, bien podía pronto el hombre llegar a descubrir visiblemente la naturaleza y origen del alma; y, aplicando la ciencia a las cosas divinas ¿por qué no? Aprisionar en las visiones de los éxtasis, y en las manifestaciones de los espíritus celestiales, sus formas exactas y verdaderas. ¡Si en Lourdes hubiese habido una instantánea durante el tiempo de las visiones de Bernadette! . . . ¡Oh, cómo se convencerían entonces los impíos! ¡Cómo triunfaría la religión! (418)

[If the interior of the body was already being photographed, pretty soon man would be able to discover the nature and origin of the soul by visual means; and, by applying science to divine things, he would be able (why not?) to capture their exact and truthful forms in the ecstatic visions and in the manifestation of the heavenly spirits. If only there would have been a photographic camera in Lourdes! How ungodly people would then be convinced! Religion would triumph!]

The devil, disguised as a fellow friar, pays Fray Tomás a visit and then provides him with one of the machines he craves. After testing it, the friar secretly carries out his most ardent desire, namely, to photograph (or rather, radiograph) the host that he has stolen from the altar. The next day, the provincial priest and the archbishop find the dead body of Fray Tomás in his cell, beside a photographic plate in which the effigy of a crucified Jesus Christ appears.

There are a number of loose ends and contradictions that invite us to read the text less as a successful fantastic story and more as a symptomatic work to which one could apply the same heuristic tools employed by its protagonist. The aim here would thus be to produce a textual radiography that reveals the fissures of the text as well as to uncover the assumptions of its cultural context. One example of these structural problems is the almost self-parodic anachronism of the friar's situation. Even if it is premeditated, it forces the reader to accept the implicit incongruity of Fray Tomás's contemporaneity, that is, the situation of a man secluded in a seemingly medieval monastery who, nonetheless, receives a newspaper through which he reads about recent scientific and technological advances. He even has a functioning laboratory.<sup>7</sup>

The narrator represents the voice of orthodoxy and implicitly censors the heretical attitude of Fray Tomás. Darío himself did not entirely share the seemingly strict Catholic interpretation that emanates from his text. Enrique Anderson Imbert aptly sums up Darío's intense but ambiguous attachment to Catholicism:

For a short time as an adolescent, he demonstrated anti-clerical attitudes, but almost immediately came back to the Church. At least, that is, he declared himself respectful

toward her mysteries and sacraments. He did not, however, take part in the rituals or the moral teachings of Catholicism. From 1890 on he professed a kind of religious syncretism that combined and confused bits of Catholic theology with oriental cosmogonies, the cabala with masonry, the theories of Pythagoras with mesmerism, and esoteric doctrines with the occult sciences.<sup>8</sup>

For Cathy Login Jade, Darío's syncretism was both a symptom and a solution to the spiritual crisis of the late nineteenth century, advancing a "faith in the fundamental unity of all religions [which] provided Darío with a framework in which he could reconcile catholic dogma" with other belief systems, even Paganism.<sup>9</sup> This is attested by many of his best known poems, such as the 1896 "Responso" in homage to Verlaine and "Yo soy aquel que ayer no más decía . . ." included in *Cantos de vida y esperanza* from 1905. If this drive toward a superior spiritual unity strives to encompass a variety of religious traditions and beliefs, nineteenth-century science, with its emphasis on a narrow understanding of matter and spiritual values, was an intellectual challenge to which "Verónica" can be read as an answer. The story draws a symbolic space where the ideological clash between religious beliefs and esoteric lore, on the one hand, and the emerging claims of modern science and technology, on the other, is performed. Jade points out that Darío showed in his writings a fundamental ambivalence between science and faith.<sup>10</sup> From the point of view of Fray Tomás, his is an attempt to reconcile religious faith with the scientific advances in visual technology.

Darío was one of many artists of his time concerned with the representation of Christ in the context of the modern crisis of religion. As Ziolkowski notes, "toward the end of the nineteenth century the theme of *Jesus redivivus* showed up all over Europe in a variety of forms."<sup>11</sup> Photographers also took up the subject. Contemporaneous to Spanish American *modernismo*, the photographic movement known as Pictorialism sought to claim for photography the artistic status enjoyed by the traditional visual arts.<sup>12</sup> The movement shares a number of characteristics with *modernismo*: both assert the pre-eminence of aesthetic values, as well as oppose a bourgeois society that imposes its mediocre taste and marginalizes or negates the artist. Among the American Pictorialists, Frederick Holland



**01 FIG 1:**  
“CRUCIFIXION WITH  
ROMAN SOLDIERS”  
(1898) BY FREDERIC  
HOLLAND DAY. FROM  
*SLAVE TO BEAUTY:*  
*THE ECCENTRIC LIFE*  
*AND CONTROVERSIAL*  
*CAREER OF F. HOLLAND*  
*DAY, PHOTOGRAPHER,*  
*PUBLISHER, AESTHETE.*  
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ESTELLE JUSSIM.

Day acquired notoriety for the scandal his photographic work created in the Philadelphia Salon of 1898. Day made pictures of Christ on the cross, in which he himself appeared as the model for the Saviour.

Estelle Jussim points out that

[Day’s] presentation of himself as the crucified Messiah was the outcome of mystical preoccupations that consumed artists and writers as disparate as Paul Gauguin, Puvis de Chavannes, James Ensor, Odilon Redon, Remy de Goncourt

and William Butler Yeats. Seeking the spiritual in an age that denied it, believing in suffering as redemption, viewing the artist as a priest of the imagination, many artists of the 1890s were members of arcane secret cults whose rituals demanded an identification with Christ's suffering and whose attraction was a synthesis of longings for transcendent experience.<sup>13</sup>

It is not difficult to recognize in this quote some of the spiritual traits present in Darío and other *modernistas*. Both Fray Tomás and Day, beyond their many differences, show what happens when one misunderstands the power and limitations of the medium one employs. In one important aspect, the aim Darío assigns to his character and the goal of Day are extreme opposites: while the friar intends to prove a spiritual reality through the production of an undisputed visual representation, the American photographer re-enacts (or rather, fakes) a historical scene imbued with religious meaning to produce an artistic effect. They share, however, a similar failure: both Fray Tomás and Day achieve an image of Christ that does not shed light on his divine nature. Instead, the very medium that is supposed to reveal it ends up negating it.

"Verónica" shows a number of intertextual links with an essay Darío wrote about the shrine of Lourdes entitled "Diorama de Lourdes," included in *Mundo adelante*, a collection of largely unknown miscellaneous texts published in the 1955 edition of his *Obras Completas*. While the date of the essay is not given in this edition, it was originally published in *La Nación* on 21 March 1894, with the title "Diorama de Lourdes. Bernadette. Impresiones. Zola y su nueva novela."<sup>14</sup> The occasion was Emile Zola's latest novel, *Lourdes*, a literary study of popular faith in modern times. Though Darío employs a first-person narrator, as if he were witness to the events, the account is fictional, as he himself had not visited the shrine.<sup>15</sup>

In the first section of "Diorama de Lourdes," Darío sets up a contrast between the sublime vision of a religious ideal and the crass materialism of modern life. After branding the nineteenth century as "el siglo de la dinamita" [the century of dynamite], he explains,

Esa visión de la pastora trajo a nuestra edad del progreso, de banalidad, de números, de infamias, un nuevo rayo del divino ideal. Los creyentes se fortalecieron; la Ciencia,

sorprendida y escéptica, puso su lente sobre esa celeste flor que se llama el milagro, y pudo advertir que no se riega con aguas de la tierra. (479)

[The shepherd's vision brought to our age of progress, of banality, of numbers, of infamies, a new ray of the divine ideal. Beliefs grew stronger; Science, astonished and skeptical, put its lens over that celestial flower called a miracle, and could notice that it does not grow with earthly waters.]

While religious vision rises above rational explanations, it is telling that science is understood as a misguided effort of visualization: science applies a lens—either a magnifying glass or a microscope, but also the lens of a photographic camera—to survey an object whose most important qualities go beyond its myopic scrutiny. As in “Verónica,” where the mystical visions of Bernadette are paired with the visual technologies of the day in Fray Tomás’s excited imagination, “Diorama” also brings together religious faith and modern technology, to the detriment of the latter. Moreover, the text explicitly refers to a photographer. In the third of its seven brief sections, we read about the masses of hopeful believers on their way to the shrine. In their midst, an American reporter appears. Two modes of social interaction clash in Darío’s brief vignette: one represented by the American photographer, a foreigner catering to the modern need for news and information; the other embodied by the pilgrims, whose collective hope and devotion are underpinned by a practice of traditional values:

He oído, al son de las campanas místicas, los coros de los peregrinos, claras, limpias voces de muchachas vírgenes, voces de enfermos viejos, himnos, ruegos, plegarias. Cuando el reportero yanqui tomaba con su diminuta máquina detective sus instantáneas, iba un cura anciano camino de la fuente, sirviendo de apoyo a una niña pálida. (480)

[I have heard, while the mystical bells tolled, the choirs of pilgrims, the clear and pure voices of young virgins, voices of sick old people, hymns, supplications, prayers. When the

American reporter took his snapshots with his tiny detective camera, an old priest was walking to the spring, providing support to a pale girl.]

The reference to the reporter is brief and matter-of-fact, and the text does not elaborate on his presence at Lourdes, but it is clear that he is an anomaly in the spiritual environment described by the narrator. It connotes the surreptitious and essentially detached practice of the photographer, who does not join the procession and seems to spy on the believers with his small portable camera, a device in wide circulation by the early 1880s.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the story, Fray Tomás's fate rehearses the Biblical theme of the temptation of Christ as well as the Faustian desire for ultimate knowledge as a present from the devil.<sup>17</sup> The notion of photography as a cursed gift seems pertinent as it represents the menacing advances of science and technology confronting a traditional religious worldview, even if by the end of the nineteenth century photography was already a well-established medium, with a sixty-year history of extensive use and experimentation. However, it was a technology that still provoked reactions of wonder, mystery, and fear, emotions that the film critic Tom Gunning associates with the occult and the supernatural, and which he describes in an essay about ghost photography with the concept of the uncanny, of future Freudian fame.<sup>18</sup> Photography was considered uncanny, as Gunning points out, due to its ability "to fashion a visual double."<sup>19</sup> In the realm of fantastic fiction, he adds, uncanny situations were produced when "initial supernatural associations" were restored, such as "photographs that seem to change in relation to their subjects," which is the case in Darío's story.<sup>20</sup>

Darío writes on the threshold of modernity's media revolution. By the end of the century, photography became a mass medium for the production and consumption of images, thanks to inventions such as the Kodak camera in 1888 by George Eastman.<sup>21</sup> The Kodak, or Brownie as it was nicknamed, was an easy-to-use, small-format camera that employed a film of several dozen exposures. When Fray Tomás mentions, in reference to the mystical experience of Bernadette at Lourdes, how useful it would have been to take a snapshot of her visions, he points toward a widespread cultural practice that authenticated the existence of a contested reality.<sup>22</sup> This practice was well established by the end of the century in Argentina's capital, along with a thriving market of photographic products.<sup>23</sup>

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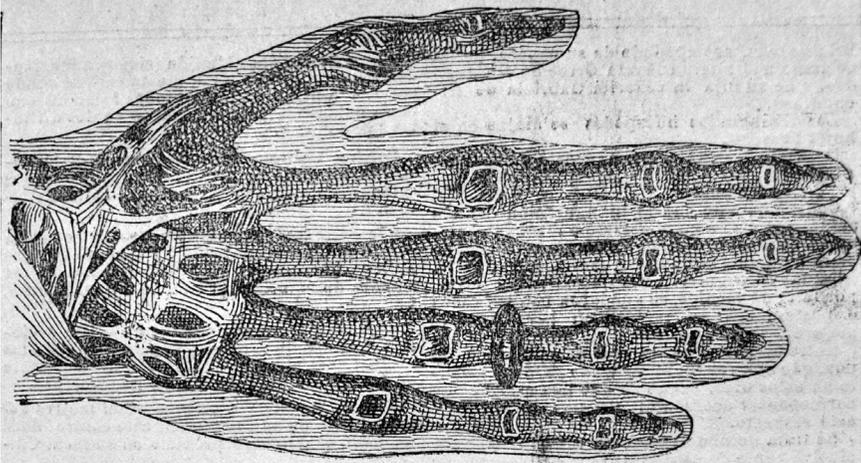
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01 FIG 2: ADVERTISEMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC EQUIPMENT IN *LA NACIÓN* (APRIL 16, 1895).

However, the machine that Fray Tomás receives from the devil is not actually a photographic camera. It is indeed a portable device, like a Kodak, but its technology is in fact that of the X-ray. While photography captures on film the light that impacts photosensitive material, X-rays emit a radiation beam onto solid objects whose different degrees of opacity are registered on a sensitive plate. It is worth noting here how Darío kept up to date on scientific news. It was most likely through *La Nación*, the newspaper where he used to publish chronicles and short fiction even before his arrival in Buenos Aires, in 1893, that he learned about the X-ray. Reading the press of the day clarifies how Darío's short story reflects the assumptions and expectations of an invention that was deemed one of the great scientific events of the time. The German physicist Wilhelm Roentgen published the results of his research in December 1895. The first news arrived in Buenos Aires in a brief cable dated 8 January 1896, barely two weeks after Roentgen's announcement. Entitled "Notable descubrimiento—fotografía nunca vista" [Remarkable discovery—a photograph never seen before], the note refers briefly to the invention as a new way of taking photographs without a camera. It ends in a hyperbolic tone: "Se espera prodigios de este nuevo invento" [Miracles are expected from this new invention]. This item was the first of a steady stream of news from Europe on the novel technique and its applications, mainly in medicine but also in industry and the military. At the beginning, the invention was not referred to as X-ray, but as a kind of photography, since the new visual and cultural paradigm it introduced was yet to be understood and established. A detailed explanation of the functioning of Roentgen's invention was offered in a piece entitled "Fotografía de lo invisible—Un gran invento (Con motivo de una reciente noticia telegráfica)" [Photography of the invisible—a great invention (on occasion of a recent telegraphic news)], dated 12 February 1896. Three days later, *La Nación* published yet another text about "la fotografía á través de los cuerpos opacos" [photography through opaque bodies]. It included a picture, a rare occurrence since *La Nación* had few illustrations. It is an engraving based on the famous photographic plate of Mrs. Bertha Roentgen's hand.

The first successful test of X-rays in Buenos Aires took place on 12 March 1896, in the Faculty of Exact Sciences of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, by a photographer called Witmer (or Widmer). The plates would be



## LA FOTOGRAFÍA A TRAVÉS DE LOS CUERPOS OPACOS

Damos hoy á nuestros lectores un grabado representando el primer experimento que hizo el profesor Röntgen, demostración del descubrimiento de los rayos luminosos que tienen la propiedad de pasar á través de los cuerpos opacos.

En la fotografía de la mano del ya célebre profesor de la universidad de Würzburg, se nota el maravilloso efecto que se obtiene al fijar en la placa fotográfica la imagen de un objeto penetrado por los rayos Röntgen. Diríase que el grabado que hoy reproducimos es el de una preparación anatómica; tan nitidamente se ven las articulaciones con todos los detalles de los ligamentos y las membranas sinoviales. A no observarse como una leve sombra el contorno de las partes blandas y sobre todo el anillo que hay en uno de los dedos, el observador no se daría cuenta que ese grabado reproduce la parte interna de una mano.

Esta es una prueba concluyente de los inmensos horizontes que á la medicina y á la cirugía acaba de abrir una de las aplicaciones del descubrimiento de Röntgen. ¡Cuán fácilmente y con cuánta seguridad se podrá descubrir en adelante la existencia de un cuerpo extraño ó de una lesión patológica! Las vacilaciones en ciertos diagnósticos, las cruentas operaciones, á veces inútiles, para explorar un herida, buscando el proyectil, desaparecerán como por encanto por el descubrimiento del sabio profesor cuyos trabajos han de salvar tantas vidas.

Y no creemos que la utilización del procedimiento se limite á permitir la exploración de los huesos; fácil será, á los que perfeccionen sus aplicaciones, disminuir el poder de esos rayos de tal modo que los tejidos blandos, músculos, arterias, venas, membranas, etc., queden fijados en la fotografía lo mismo que el sistema óseo.

Si apenas conocida la base del descubrimiento ya puede dar tan magníficos resultados, se puede esperar que, al perfeccionarlo la pléyade de sabios que lo estudian actualmente, será en manos de la ciencia práctica un elemento de tanto valor como los descubrimientos de Pasteur y de Lister.

01 FIG 3: NEWS ABOUT X-RAYS IN THE *LA NACIÓN* (FEBRUARY 12, 1896).

on display the following day at the photographer's shop. "Verónica" was published three days after that, on March 16.

While photography had enabled the nineteenth-century observer to discern details not visible to the naked eye, as Benjamin would point out, the discovery of the X-ray produced yet another challenge to natural vision: it was an indisputable picture of the invisible inner structures of an object. In its conceptual fusion between the well-known photographic

technique and the recent invention of radiography, “Verónica” explores the possibility of an expanded field in which visual representations not only register the invisible but also aim to certify the existence of a spiritual realm. As Fray Tomás puts it, “si . . . se fotografiaba ya lo interior de nuestro cuerpo, bien podía pronto el hombre llegar a descubrir visiblemente la naturaleza y origen del alma” (418) [if the interior of our bodies could now be photographed, very soon it would be possible for man to discover visibly the nature and origin of the soul].

Fray Tomás embodies, despite his alleged heresy, the age-old impulse to visualize the divine. The seemingly misguided use of photographic techniques applied to that goal springs nonetheless from a central tradition in Western culture. As Belting points out,

The desire to see the face of God was inherent in human nature and included the expectation of a personal encounter with the “Other.” Christianity offered the hope for a preliminary vision of God, for eternal life was understood as a permanent vision of God. In the “genuine image,” the earthly features of Jesus, which could be seen by human eyes, merged with the divine features of God, visible reality with an invisible mystery.<sup>24</sup>

Though the legend of Veronica—or *vera icona*, the true image—goes back to the first centuries of the Christian era, it became, as Belting explains, “the undisputed archetype of the sacred portrait” beginning in the thirteenth century.<sup>25</sup> With regard to the indexical nature of Veronica’s veil, Belting points out that the cloth not only showed an image but was also a relic; therefore, it was “more authentic than any work of art, in that it did not rely on artistic imitation. It was authentic as a photograph.”<sup>26</sup> This remark indicates that a photographic ideal is not entirely foreign to the desire to visualize the divine. One of the criteria in deciding that an image truly resembled Christ or the Virgin, and thus participated in their sanctity, was its acheiropoetic condition, that is, the assumption that the image was not hand-made, but rather was produced by a higher power.<sup>27</sup>

Darío is writing at the end of a century that produced such critics of religion as Dostoyevsky, Marx, Nietzsche, and Renan. It was also a critical moment in Catholicism with regard to the challenges posed by

modernism, understood in this context as the attempt to reconcile, from within the clerical institution, Catholic teaching and practice with science and a modern way of life—a trend that would be officially condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907.<sup>28</sup> While Darío's text signals back to the secular dispute between iconophilia and iconoclastia in Western culture, it also points forward to current cultural configurations. Much as the friar of the story wishes to prove the content of his faith by employing modern technology, passionate believers today may find such certitude in encounters of the effigy of Christ in damp patches or pieces of bread or fish. The historical logic that forbids the acceptance of factual photographs of Christ does not prevent legendary artifacts such as the veil of Veronica or the shroud of Turin from being considered as analogous or substitute photographs, due to their indexical nature.<sup>29</sup>

The cause of Fray Tomás's death is not made clear in the story. However, it is safe to see his demise as a divine punishment for transgressing the limits assigned to human knowledge.<sup>30</sup> The friar may have died because of the frightful impression produced by his own photographic creation, victim of a sort of "Medusa effect" that transfixes or paralyzes the beholder.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, his terror is compounded by the fact that the photograph captures a moment where Christ, beyond the nested representations in which his figure is embedded, unexpectedly shows signs of life. We read at the end of the story that, on the photographic plate retrieved from the floor by the archbishop, "se hallaba, con los brazos desclavados y una terrible mirada en los divinos ojos, la imagen de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo!" (419) [one could find, with his arms freed from the nails and a terrible look in his divine eyes, the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ]. In this respect, "Verónica" recreates the medieval tales in which images actually come alive, pointing to the iconographic tradition of the miraculous image and the enchanted portrait, staples of both popular imagination and fantastic literature.<sup>32</sup> While the X-rays, directed at the host, penetrate the sacred substance and show in its interior the effigy of Christ on the cross, the true miracle is not (only) the technical feat that produces in such conditions an image of Christ, but the fact that He has become physically animated and able to free himself from the cross.

The stern gaze of Christ, his "terrible mirada," (19) clearly chastises the friar's transgression.<sup>33</sup> The act of photographing the Saviour subverts the true understanding of religious practice, confusing the edification of



**01 FIG 4:** EFFIGY OF CHRIST ON A PIECE OF FISH. IAN MACALPINE / KINGSTON WHIG – STANDARD / QMI AGENCY.



*Torino - S.S. Sindone - ingrandimento Sacro Volto  
dal negativo originale*

**01 FIG 5:** REPRODUCTION OF THE HOLY SHROUD OF TURIN BY SECONDO PIA. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

the soul with mere visual evidence. Moreover, the photographic act is in itself transgressive: to take a photograph of the host in search of a revelation (both photographic and spiritual) opens an unbridgeable gap between viewer and object and negates the act of incorporation, literal and symbolic, that defines the Eucharist. In another context, the fact that Fray Tomás transforms the elements of a sacred ritual into a mechanical and scopophilic act also points to the new role of the observer and the heightened sense and power of visualization that critics of modernity such as Jonathan Crary have highlighted.<sup>34</sup> The friar has fallen into the trap of a modern inclination, namely, that rendering visible something hidden implies that a deep meaning has been uncovered.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond the contest of gazes at the end of the story, the reference to Christ's arms, though seemingly marginal, opens a number of productive interpretive paths. First of all, the freeing of the arms, and by implication the hands, has a direct relation to the scientific context of the story, and in particular to the X-ray as a means to penetrate invisible realms. The connection among visible representation, invisible reality, and the hand comes to the fore in one of the first radiographic plates, an image that, according to Michael Frizot, became the "definitive image of radiography": the plate of the hand of Dr. Roentgen's wife.<sup>36</sup> Fray Tomás learns about this X-rayed hand when he reads the newspaper (417), and before photographing the host, he produces a plate of his own hand (418). Pasveer points out that "the X-ray image of Mrs. Bertha Roentgen's hand in Roentgen's first publication on the rays surely encouraged a principal reading of the images similar to the reading of other photographs: as the visual evidence of the presence, the existence, out there, of the phenomena depicted."<sup>37</sup> Further, historian of photography Vicky Goldberg writes that "It was the photographs even more than the significance of the discovery that created the great public stir about X-rays. Without photographs, the announcement of a new kind of ray that could penetrate aluminum but not lead would have been greeted as just another astonishing discovery in the physical sciences that no one could understand."<sup>38</sup> This media convergence and its cultural reception explain the conflation of photography and radiography in Darío's story. The similitude is also structural. Mary Warner Marien calls attention to the fact that "X-ray photographs were shadowgraphs like those made by Henry Fox Talbot decades earlier, though not created by light."<sup>39</sup>

It is telling that the plate produced by Fray Tomás does not represent the face of Christ, as the title of the story would suggest, but rather a figure on a cross (a textual fact generally overlooked by critics). Perhaps Darío intended to call attention to the ultimate suffering and sacrifice of Christ, neglected by Fray Tomás's scientific curiosity. The crucifixion also highlights the absolute reality of the body. In this sense, the freeing of the arms on the photographic plate could be interpreted as a symbol of liberation from the bondage of the flesh: an emblem of transcendence or a spiritual ideal that, even if captured in the friar's photograph, points beyond representation.

Though the impact of the stereoscope—an optical device that created the impression of tridimensionality—was waning by the end of the century, the unnauling of the arms involves an implicit stereoscopic effect.<sup>40</sup> The stereoscope produces an optical illusion “which makes surfaces look solid,” in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes.<sup>41</sup> The effect is so heightened, states Holmes, “as to produce an appearance of reality which cheats the senses with its seeming truth.”<sup>42</sup> The stereoscope's “eerie paradox of tangibility, the illusion of an accessibility to touch, [and] the sense of the proximity of object to viewer” seems at work in the miraculous plate produced by the friar.<sup>43</sup> However, if the stereoscope, as Crary argues, “became a crucial indication of the remapping and subsumption of the tactile within the optical,”<sup>44</sup> Darío's story can be interpreted, on the contrary, as the persistence of the tactile beyond the visual. From the point of view of Fray Tomás, this prevalence can be read as a sign of repressed desire, in line with the environment of monastic seclusion and discipline in which the friar lives. The camera as a probing device, as well as the rhetoric of penetration that binds matter (tangible host) and spirit (transcendent divinity), points to a sublimated erotic dimension that Darío elides in the story. While, as noted before, the author's work integrates his own brand of Catholicism into a broader, inclusive worldview where the body and its sensual pleasures play a central role, Darío makes of Fray Tomás an exemplar of a narrow understanding of religious life. Not only does he lack religious values like the simplicity of spirit praised at the beginning of the story, but his overestimation of the act of visualization, detached from the other senses, leads him to death, the ultimate alienating experience.<sup>45</sup>

While the friar's drama revolves around the visual technology he misuses, the freed arms in the picture, and specifically the freed hands, seem

to call into question the predominance of the visual. The prodigious act that sets the arms free points toward the body's overcoming of its limitations through supernatural force. This act of liberation symbolizes the autonomy and ascendancy of the tactile, and the body in general, over the disembodied sense of sight. Thus, "Verónica" can be read as an allegory through which the sense of touch, beneath or beyond the probing power of visual technologies, gets its due. While the stereoscope was the predominant visual model that allowed an illusion of tactility, Darío's intuitive imagination explores a new model of visual power brought forth by the invention of the X-ray, one that enabled an in-depth look into things. The photograph of Christ ultimately becomes a means by which the sense of sight is subverted by the sense of touch.

W. J. T. Mitchell has written that "the tendency of artists to breach the supposed boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not a marginal or exceptional practice, but a fundamental impulse in both the theory and practice of the arts."<sup>46</sup> We can extend this idea of a semiotic and aesthetic transgression to understand the links between the different regimes of representation displayed in the story. In "Verónica," a modern visual device transcends the boundaries of the naked eye and penetrates the invisible in search of the divine. Within the marvelous image produced by the machine, an even higher power is shown to transcend the boundaries of the physical reality that holds the body in place. The death of Fray Tomás could have been caused by an uncanny impression: seeing how the image of Christ at once exceeds the limits of the fixed, bidimensional image offered to the eye and enters the realm of the moving, temporal, bodily space signalled by the unnailed arms. Fray Tomás has been touched not by the Holy Spirit, but by a vision connoting a physical contact that drives him out of his mind. The name of the friar, alluding to the incredulous disciple of Jesus in the Gospel of John who needs the evidence of touch to truly believe, acquires thus an ironic meaning.<sup>47</sup>

This analysis of "Verónica" reveals the rich underpinnings in Darío's use of modern visual technologies. Specifically, photography becomes a tool that both probes the reality of the divine and puts in motion a contest between the senses. The emphasis on visualization—a strategy at the core of modern science's claim to truth and evidence—becomes a powerful means that nonetheless falls short of accounting for the complex and ambivalent religious dimension of existence as understood by Darío.

It is worth pointing out that attempts to “photograph the divine” in Latin American literature surface well into the twentieth century. Beyond the ideological and spiritual crisis of religious faith in Darío’s time, Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar both employ a playful, ironic take on the issue. *Cien años de soledad* (García Márquez, 1967) opens with a blend of science and magic in the figure of the gypsy Melquiades, who brings to Macondo a number of marvelous inventions. José Arcadio Buendía, the family patriarch who is driven by a lively imagination as eccentric as his pursuit of scientific knowledge, falls under the spell of those inventions. After a plague of insomnia and an ensuing loss of memory threaten to devastate the town, Melquiades returns from the realm of the dead with a magical potion to restore memory to the people of Macondo. He also brings a camera and a laboratory, to make daguerreotypes, and photographs the Buendía family. As life goes on,

Melquiades terminó de plasmar en sus placas todo lo que era plasmable en Macondo, y abandonó el laboratorio de daguerrotipia a los delirios de José Arcadio Buendía, quien había resuelto utilizarlo para obtener la prueba científica de la existencia de Dios. Mediante un complicado proceso de exposiciones superpuestas tomadas en distintos lugares de la casa, estaba seguro de hacer tarde o temprano el daguerrotipo de Dios, si existía, o poner término de una vez por todas a la suposición de su existencia. (145)

[Melquiades had printed on his plates everything that was printable in Macondo, and he left the daguerreotype laboratory to the fantasies of José Arcadio Buendía, who had resolved to use it to obtain scientific proof of the existence of God. Through a complicated process of superimposed exposures taken in different parts of the house, he was sure that sooner or later he would get a daguerreotype of God, if He existed, or put an end once and for all to the supposition of His Existence. (53)]<sup>48</sup>

José Arcadio will eventually abandon his photographic pursuit. In a later chapter, priest Nicanor Reyna, famous for rising a few inches off the ground

when he drinks a cup of hot chocolate, tries to convince José Arcadio of the virtues of religious faith. However, only the daguerreotype of God will be accepted as proof of His existence by the head of the Buendías. The irony resides in trying to seize that most elusive of entities through a machine known for the uncanny precision of its representations.<sup>49</sup> Photography in García Márquez's novel becomes yet another tool in its arsenal of magical realist devices.

In *Ultimo round* (volume 1, 1969), an illustrated volume of miscellaneous texts, Julio Cortázar includes a piece entitled "En vista del éxito obtenido, o los piantados firmes como fierro" ("Given the success achieved, or the nutcases firm as steel"). It is a review of a book authored by a Francisco Fabricio Díaz, a deranged Cuban "writer" who proposes, among other outlandish projects, to photograph Jesus Christ. Cortázar, who in true Surrealist fashion was fascinated by madness as the point of entry to an alternative worldview, examines with benevolent irony the nonsensical writings of Díaz. Díaz has sent a letter to the Queen of England, letting her know about his sublime photographic project. At the end of Cortázar's essay, the reader finds a photograph of the Royal Family. It covers two pages and it is accompanied by this caption: "Enterada por su cuñado y por doña Margarita Rosa del telegrama de Francisco Fabricio Díaz, la madrecita reina se apresura a informar al padrecito consorte y a los infantitos, en cuyos rostros es fácil advertir el entusiasmo provocado por las místicas posibilidades de captación de la lente."<sup>50</sup> [Having heard about Francisco Fabricio Díaz's telegram from her brother-in-law and Mrs. Margaret Rose, the little Queen Mother hurries to tell the little Father and the little royal children, in whose faces it is easy to notice the enthusiasm sparked by the mystic possibilities of the lens's reception.]

The caption recontextualizes the image of the Royal Family in terms of Fabricio Díaz's impossible desires and expectations. Its reference to the "místicas posibilidades de captación de la lente," which points to a recurrent *topos* in the theory of photography about the magical aspects of the medium, establishes a productive link between Díaz and Cortázar himself. By commenting on the aim Díaz pursues through photography, that is, the impossible quest to capture an image that bridges the conventional bounds of space and time (which is similar to the aim of Fray Tomás in Darío's text), Cortázar is alluding to a fantastic strategy that he himself employed extensively in his short stories.



Enterada por su cuñado y por doña Margarita Rosa del telegrama de Francisco Fabrició Díaz, la madrecita reina se apresura a informar al padrecito consorte y a los infantitos, en cuyos rostros es fácil advertir el entusiasmo provocado por las místicas posibilidades de captación de la lente.

**01 FIG 06:** PORTRAIT OF THE BRITISH ROYAL FAMILY WITH CORTÁZAR'S WHIMSICAL CAPTION. PHOTO COURTESY OF SIGLO XXI EDITORES.

## Julio Cortázar

The issues raised about photographic representation in “Verónica,” however meaningful as foil to the aesthetics of *modernismo*, do not find a sustained development in Darío’s work. On the contrary, Julio Cortázar’s engagement with photography plays a productive role in many of his writings and spanned most of his literary career. As a practice of image

production, a metaphor, a principle of textual organization (and disruption), photography becomes a privileged site through which Cortázar articulates tensions in his work among literature, aesthetics, and politics.

The following section begins with an examination of Cortázar's appropriation of key ideas and practices of modern photography in "Las babas del diablo," in the context of his avant-garde aesthetics of heightened attention. It then highlights the way photography channels the "technological uncanny," in the short stories "Las babas del diablo" (1959) and "Apocalipsis de Solentiname" (1977).<sup>51</sup> In both stories, photography performs in fantastic fashion a traumatic event that calls for a cure or redemption, an outcome that is not achieved. My analysis situates photography at the centre of a number of antagonistic relations: first, between media devices; second, between verbal and visual representations, and finally, as mediating the contested relation, already apparent in Darío's story, between visual representations and tactile (and, more generally, bodily) perceptions.

Roberto Michel, protagonist of "Las babas del diablo," embodies the popular tradition of the amateur photographer.<sup>52</sup> In his approach to urban landscape, he also articulates a number of insights that closely follow the street photography developed in Paris from the 1930s to the 1950s by André Kertész, Brassai, and Robert Doisneau, among other photographers, who were interested in exploring the social landscape and the aesthetic dimensions of the modern city.<sup>53</sup> In the analogy that Cortázar draws between the short story and photography, he mentions the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Brassai.<sup>54</sup> As noted by Sugano, it is telling how Cortázar applies to his poetics Cartier-Bresson's ideas on photography.<sup>55</sup> In this context, it is also revealing to compare what Roberto Michel says about photography in "Las babas del diablo" with the ideas put forth by Cartier-Bresson. For both, photographic practice is an exercise in vision and the capturing on film and in print of a privileged spatial and temporal order, where composition and rhythm are the central artistic values. Michel strives to achieve "la expresión que todo lo resume, la vida que el movimiento acompaña pero que una imagen rígida destruye al seccionar el tiempo, si no elegimos la imperceptible fracción esencial" (219) [the revealing expression, one that would sum it all up, life that is rhythmized by movement but which a stiff image destroys, taking time in cross section, if we do not choose the essential imperceptible fraction of it (123)].<sup>56</sup>

Cartier-Bresson, in his own words, “craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes.”<sup>57</sup> Michel, giving expression to the central ethos of the street photographer, declares that “Cuando se anda con la cámara hay como el deber de estar atento” (216) “[when one is walking about with a camera, one has almost a duty to be attentive (121)]. For his part, Cartier-Bresson declares, “What I am looking for, above all else, is to be attentive to life.”<sup>58</sup> It is a matter of sublating everyday experience through the photographic medium into a superior synthesis, as Lincoln Kirstein, commenting on Cartier-Bresson, points out: “the commonplace exists eternally to be discovered, uncovered, recovered. Subject matter is rarely the exotic. It is the ordinary, the banal, the vulgar that by reassociation and selection assumes a strangeness, a magic which reorganizes the commonplace into splendor.”<sup>59</sup> Photography is closely related to the heightened sense of awareness that plays a central role in Cortázar’s avant-garde aesthetics.<sup>60</sup>

Photography aims to transcend fragmented vision and may seem at first, even in its production of a partial view, a redemptive tool. Sharing in the utopian quest of modernist photography, Roberto Michel’s effort goes beyond the contingencies of everyday perception through the composition of a picture underpinned by the necessity of its formal relations.<sup>61</sup> But this sublime moment of visual truth remains elusive, in part because even the perfected point of view of the photograph has to face the limitations of human vision. In a story about the extension, force, and drama of the gaze, Michel states that the act of looking is deeply implicated in falsity: “Creo que sé mirar, si es que algo sé, y que todo mirar rezuma falsedad, porque es lo que nos arroja más afuera de nosotros mismos.” (217) [I think that I know how to look, if it’s something I know, and also that every looking oozes with mendacity, because it’s that which expels us furthest outside ourselves. (119)] By implication, photography also becomes an unreliable medium, even if its prosthetic power seems to challenge the fateful condition in which the act of looking is embedded. This challenge to “natural” vision seems to provide the means to select and fix, from among a wide variety of points of view, what Michel calls “la imperceptible fracción esencial” (219), that is, the decisive moment where ultimate visual meaning is revealed. However, this is never accomplished. As the ambiguous end of the story indicates, no such image is produced, as if the clouds and birds

that pass by the window or the viewfinder's field of vision symbolize, in their empty recurrence, the ever-receding hope of a redemptive vision.<sup>62</sup>

Far from offering a resolution, the story displays a wide range of anxiogenic effects, produced by a constant overstepping of boundaries: transgressions of social and moral propriety, the fantastic nature of visual media, the fractured narrative discourse, and intimations of a menacing otherworldly reality. "Las babas del diablo" performs a drama about the limits of the representable. Disjunction is at the centre of both the narrative structure and the drama of the protagonist. The story poses an impossible point of view that develops simultaneously in at least two places: a fifth-floor apartment in the Latin Quarter and the tip of the Île Saint-Louis. To this spatial disjunction should be added, as Volek points out, a temporal one, since the endpoint of the story is already present at the beginning and its repercussions crisscross the narration (which evinces at least two narrative voices).<sup>63</sup> Michel himself is divided between nationalities, languages, the dead and the living, the real and the fantastic—even his last name implies ambiguity, since it can refer to both a given and a family name.<sup>64</sup>

The photographic medium is a crucial element of a convoluted plot in which a breakdown of communication is performed, in the most literal way: the breakdown disrupts the structure of the text itself through the events the protagonist aims to describe and interpret. The broken narrative echoes the psychological and existential catastrophe that overtakes the protagonist. The strategy is an example of Cortázar's exploration of the dark side of the human psyche. It is also part and parcel of the "most radical transgressive function of the fantastic," according to Jackson, namely, the attack upon unified character.<sup>65</sup> Photography itself—understood both as act and image—performs, by its very definition, a breakdown in the temporal flow and spatial continuity. Agrammatical and fragmentary, it is the visual model that structures (or rather, de-structures) the text itself. If photography conventionally aspires to "capturing" reality, the events narrated in "Las babas del diablo" (as well as in "Apocalipsis") are finally framed by a kind of hyperreality or, better yet, surreality. Cortázar's interest in photography as an articulation of desire and violence, as a medium of shocking effects, and as a device that probes the depth underneath comforting appearances, corresponds to his Surrealist leanings.<sup>66</sup>

Like Fray Tomás in Darío's "Verónica," Michel is a lonely man who strives to discipline sight by means of a mechanical device. He seems at

first to develop a power to see beyond appearances, but from a psychological perspective, he might also be projecting his own desires and fears, perhaps to better guard himself against them. In the end, he falls prey to the (unconscious or otherworldly) forces that he has unwittingly unleashed.<sup>67</sup> Rather than sublimating desire through an aesthetic operation, Roberto Michel—his motives inevitably suspicious, his fate ambiguous—invokes precisely what he dreads by the very act of photographing the seduction scene between the woman and the boy at the tip of the island.<sup>68</sup>

With regard to the media featured in “Las babas del diablo,” the text foregrounds two communication devices (the typewriter and the camera) engaged in an apparent duel. Metonymically, they represent the domains of the word and the image, articulated language and iconic representation. Their interaction shows the semiotic “tensions and resistances”—to use W. J. T. Mitchell’s phrase—that emerge when different regimes of communication, even if figuratively, clash with one another.<sup>69</sup> The story deals with the complex struggle between the will to communicate and represent, and the material channels that allow, but also hinder, the occurrence of the communicative event.<sup>70</sup>

Typewriter and photographic camera prove inadequate means through which Roberto Michel strives to tame the disintegrating force he encounters, be it the devil of the story’s title, a psychopathological condition, or unconscious desire. What has to be told is a void or a nothingness in the face of which the acts of picturing, describing, and narrating, even if extended by prosthetic means, remain powerless. By interfering with demonic forces while attempting to save an unsuspecting teenager, Michel has unwittingly trespassed the limits that set apart realms of existence.<sup>71</sup>

Beyond the theological dimension alluded to by the story’s title, it is worth asking how the nature of the media Michel employs conditions the events that befall him—in McLuhan’s terms, what the “message” of the story is in terms of the “media” it deploys, or, following Kittler, to what extent “the media determines the situation” of the protagonist.<sup>72</sup> While typewriter and photographic camera are anchored in a historical specificity—signalled in the text by the brand names Remington and Contax—they point to broader anxieties about our technological age and enduring myths about media, especially the overtaking of human capabilities by machines.<sup>73</sup> Not only are they vehicles that extend the power of the senses, but they become animate themselves. By acquiring a life of their own,

they resonate as examples of technological possession: they force upon their users their own representational limits and perceptual bounds.<sup>74</sup> Typewriter and camera resemble each other in several respects. They are individualized and (generally) portable devices meant to standardize the way representations are produced and reproduced. They form a communicative braid: the blindness imposed by the typewriter finds compensation in the visual insights provided by the speechless camera.<sup>75</sup> Both machines contain built-in features that imply a kind of semiotic violence: the strokes of the keyboard fix a text, and the pressing of a shutter fixes an image. The metaphor of weaponry has been applied to both.<sup>76</sup> Even though typewriter and camera could collaborate in explaining each other—since, as the text suggests, “a lo mejor puede ser que una máquina sepa más de otra máquina” (215) [it is possible that one machine may know more about another machine (115)]—the narrative structure of the text is marked by their interference.<sup>77</sup> They embody radically different forms of appropriating or copying the world: on the one hand, as Hillel Schwartz remarks, the typewriter operates as the typist goes along, “s/t/r/o/k/e/-/b/y/-/s/t/r/o/k/e, mechanically . . . [while] the photographer copies an ENTIRETY after the fact, implying the appropriation of a whole.”<sup>78</sup> The communicative breakdown is highlighted by the fact that the typewriter fails to recount the story in standardized, conventional fashion, as well as by the failure of the photograph to capture “the entire picture,” or by “fixing” it to a static moment.

The machines cannot escape their ambivalent nature: they are—or aspire to be—vehicles of semiotic redemption, mechanisms through which the protagonist tries to verbalize a broken equilibrium or to produce an image that would transcend the contingent condition of everyday perception. The typewriter, in a sort of mechanical cure, produces writing as catharsis, while the camera strives to fix a scene through a formally perfect composition. However, they enable the breakdown they are supposed to stave off. The flow of speech breaks down under the weight of the jolts of the typewriter, which literally falls to the ground when the characters pictured in the blown-up photograph begin to move. For its part, the photograph, by allowing Michel to leap from surface to spatial depth, opens up a haunted space in which his mental stability collapses.

From a narrative point of view, the plot proceeds as if assembled by a mechanical force, since no single, autonomous narrator seems to be in

control. The atmosphere of automatism that pervades “Las babas del diablo,” with its violent cuts and sudden changes of points of view, dramatizes the independent life of machines. At the beginning of the story, a narrator expresses this wish, as if a machine could have agency of its own: “si pudiera ir a beber un bock por ahí y que la máquina siguiera sola (porque escribo a máquina) sería la perfección” (214) [if one might go to drink a bock over there, and the typewriter continue by itself (because I use the machine), that would be perfection (114)]. By the end, once Michel has literally entered into the picture and confronted the man in black who first appeared when he took the picture of the couple, the point of view is the fixed perspective of the camera lens. The descriptions advance as if motion has been sliced into discrete parts, shattering the organic flow of “normal” vision. In this way the story highlights the lack of conscious control in a textual machine that “tells itself,” commingling inertness and expressiveness, automatism and animation.<sup>79</sup>

With their rigid specifications, the way machines interact with the characters allows a reading of the story as a dark fable of freedom and entrapment. The photographer/hunter ends up hunted; the hero, who was supposed to free the boy from the clutches of sexual abuse, finally finds himself caught in a tight net. The topic of photography as a practice that encroaches on one’s privacy, as the proverbial visual act that “captures” one’s essence or soul, is at the centre of the story.<sup>80</sup> If the protagonist feels enclosed in physical and discursive spaces that he is at pains to describe, the reader is also trapped in the textual labyrinth of loose ends, unreliable information, impossible points of view, and transgressed narrative frames. At some point, a voice in the third person even warns the reader about the unreliability of the first-person narrator: “Michel es culpable de literatura, de fabricaciones irreales” (220) [Michel is guilty of making literature, of indulging in fabricated unrealities (124)]. In this regard, the meaning of the story is held hostage, striving to emerge from the literary ploy in which it is nested. The characters are also trapped. The boy at the tip of the island is bound to be a prisoner of the couple’s intentions, while the woman and the boy themselves become prisoners within Michel’s photographic image. She is particularly upset about this action, as if she has fallen unawares into a trap.<sup>81</sup> After Michel defends his right to take pictures in the public space against the woman’s complaints, he leaves the scene, and the last thing he looks at—or thinks he sees—is her gesture: “el

clásico y absurdo gesto del acosado que busca la salida” (221) [the classical and absurd gesture of someone pursued looking for a way out (126)]. But roles switch dramatically once the photograph comes alive, and now it is Michel who finds himself trapped in the room where he is typing. He also becomes trapped in the very machine that was supposed to extend his powers of perception:

De pronto el orden se invertía, ellos estaban vivos, moviéndose, decidían y eran decididos, iban a su futuro; y yo desde este lado, prisionero de otro tiempo, de una habitación en un quinto piso, de no saber quiénes eran esa mujer y ese hombre y ese niño, de ser nada más que la lente de mi cámara, algo rígido, incapaz de intervención. (223)

[All at once the order was inverted, they were alive, moving, they were deciding and had decided, they were going to their future; and I on this side, prisoner of another time, in a room on the fifth floor, to not know who they were, that woman, that man, and that boy, to be only the lens of my camera, something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention. (129–30)]

At the end, the man in black exacts his revenge for Michel’s transgression. This happens, fittingly, through the power of his gaze, and his hollow eyes echo the constant allusions to nothingness made by the narrator.<sup>82</sup> As pointed out above, the scene has a powerful kinetic resonance, as if told from the point of view of a photographic camera shooting one frame after another. The description focuses on the jolted or fragmented movement of the camera as it captures, through successive shots, the elements that enter the viewfinder:

y entonces giré un poco, quiero decir que la cámara giró un poco, y sin perder de vista a la mujer empezó a acercarse al hombre que me miraba con los agujeros negros que tenía en el sitio de los ojos, entre sorprendido y rabioso miraba queriendo clavarme en el aire, y en ese instante alcancé a ver como

un gran pájaro fuera de foco que pasaba de un solo vuelo delante de la imagen. (224)

[I turned a bit, I mean that the camera turned a little, and without losing sight of the woman, I began to close in on the man who was looking at me with the black holes he had in place of eyes, surprised and angered both, he looked, wanting to nail me onto the air, and at that instant I happened to see something like a large bird outside the focus that was flying in a single swoop in front of the picture. (130)]

The man's anger is signalled by a passing but meaningful detail: he wants to pin the photographer in the air, immobilize and lock him like an insect on a board. It is telling that immediately after Michel sees his gaze, he spots through the viewfinder a bird flying, an ironic symbol of his own impending doom. In this sense, the story's intermittent mentions of clouds and birds seem, from the protagonist's point of view, to be nostalgic tokens of lost liberty. Both fly freely in the open space and suggest to the beholder the endless possibilities that sheer distance triggers in the imagination.<sup>83</sup>

The narrative perspective forced upon the protagonist, incapable at the end of changing his point of view, stands in opposition to the final images he is left to behold. The amateur photographer who freely explores the city looking for images is, at the end of the story, transformed into the purely fixed gaze of a photographic lens that looks up to the sky, pining for unattainable freedom.

"Las babas del diablo" describes the process through which a photographic image is produced. Going beyond the verbal rendering of a visual representation, the story contextualizes its ekphrasis by exploring the aesthetic values, the photographer's psychological state, and even the cultural background that makes the photographic representation possible. While the narrator describes the process that leads to the photographic shot, he informs the reader about the choreographed movements of body, hand, and eye that are a necessary condition for achieving a successful picture.<sup>84</sup>

Roberto Michel is at the same time the verbal and the visual producer. As such, his privileged position allows him to flesh out the conditions that make possible the "ekphrastic hope" articulated in the text, that is, the utopian possibility of making the reader see through language and endow

the photographed objects with a concrete existence.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, neither he nor any other narrative voice offers a detailed description of the actual photograph he has taken. Rather than describing its features, Michel only refers in general terms to the few elements he has included within the frame. He even theorizes about the conditions that make a good photograph. He thus allows our ekphrastic hope as readers to posit from the outset the “unseen” photograph as an artistic achievement.

Blowing up the negative into a poster-size picture signals the impending transformation from still to moving image, further transgressing the boundaries that will place the protagonist “within” the picture he has taken.<sup>86</sup> In this crucial moment, the protagonist is overcome with fear, and even panic. The description acquires a special weight, as if he (and the reader along with him) were drawn inside by the centripetal power of the image. By entering into the pictured world, the difference between sign and referent collapses. As noted above, the description from inside the picture is marked by a syncopated rhythm, as if the passage were a hastily edited assemblage of disjointed parts. The description of this broken visual field fits well, as a climactic ending, with the broken narrative of the story as a whole:

Creo que grité, que grité terriblemente, y que en ese mismo segundo supe que empezaba a acercarme, diez centímetros, un paso, otro paso, el árbol giraba cadenciosamente sus ramas en primer plano, una mancha del pretil salía del cuadro, la cara de la mujer, vuelta hacia mí como sorprendida iba creciendo, y entonces giré un poco, quiero decir que la cámara giró un poco. (223–24)

[I think I screamed terribly, I screamed terribly, and at that exact second I realized that I was beginning to move toward them, four inches, a step, another step, the tree swung its branch rhythmically in the foreground, a place where the railing was tarnished emerged from the frame, the woman’s face turned toward me as though surprised, was enlarging, and then I turned a bit, I mean that the camera turned a little. (130)].

Murray Krieger, W. J. T. Mitchell, and James Heffernan have pointed out the deep ambivalence triggered by ekphrasis, a figure that implies at the same time the desire and the dread that a verbal representation could make present the visual object it describes. In ekphrasis, Mitchell argues, language encounters its “semiotic other,” namely, the visual, graphic, or plastic arts, so ekphrasis also points toward the “overcoming of otherness.”<sup>87</sup> If ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with others, “Las babas del diablo” thoroughly exposes these anxieties, where the desire to merge is coupled with a strong resistance to doing so.<sup>88</sup>

As for the power of the moving image to draw the protagonist into its virtual domain, film critic Linda Williams has called attention to the concept of “attraction” as a way to explain “the basic, sensuous appeal of all moving pictures.”<sup>89</sup> Cortázar plays with the literary possibilities of this cinematic solicitation, which is “an attraction not just of the eyes, but of the flesh.”<sup>90</sup> In the story, this solicitation is two-fold, since the attraction of the moving image mirrors the previous seduction scene between the woman and the teenager. Cinematic attraction, according to Williams, “activates our entire sensorium in a synaesthetic manner with one bodily sense translating into another, and particularly, sight commuting to touch.”<sup>91</sup> The transition from fixed to moving image allows the protagonist to inhabit a space that was, by the essential delimitation of a photographic representation, out of bounds. As Vivian Sobchack puts it,

The photograph freezes and preserves the homogeneous and irreversible *momentum* of this temporal stream into the abstracted, atomized, and secured space of a *moment*. But at a cost. A moment cannot be inhabited. It cannot entertain in the abstraction of its visible space, its single and static *point* of view, the presence of a lived-body—and so it does not really invite the spectator into the scene (although it may invite contemplation *of* the scene.) In its conquest of time, the photographic constructs a space to hold and to look at, “thin” insubstantial space that keeps the lived-body out even as it may imaginatively catalyze—in the parallel but temporalized space of memory or desire—an animated drama.<sup>92</sup>

It is this “animated drama” that Cortázar both explores and explodes by positing an “unsuitable cleavage,” as Moran puts it,<sup>93</sup> between visual representations (first fixed and then moving) and the protagonist’s perceptual, psychological, and interpretive skills.

The links between sight and touch are highlighted at the beginning of the passage where the fixed image becomes animated. It is the movement of the woman’s hand, in itself meaningless, that trespasses an ontological threshold. It catches Michel’s attention and becomes the starting point of his debacle:

al fin y al cabo una ampliación de ochenta por sesenta se parece a una pantalla donde proyectan cine, donde en la punta de una isla una mujer habla con un chico y un árbol agita unas hojas secas sobre sus cabezas.

Pero las manos ya eran demasiado. Acababa de escribir: *Donc, la seconde clé réside dans la nature intrinsèque des difficultés que les sociétés*—y vi la mano de la mujer que empezaba a cerrarse despacio, dedo por dedo. De mí no quedó nada. (222)

[in the end an enlargement of 32 x 28 looks like a movie screen, where, on the tip of the island, a woman is speaking with a boy and a tree is shaking its dry leaves over their heads.

But her hands were just too much. I had just translated: “In that case, the second key resides in the intrinsic nature of difficulties which societies . . .”—when I saw the woman’s hand beginning to stir slowly, finger by finger. There was nothing left of me. (128)]

As in Darío’s story, sight and touch interact and clash in uncanny fashion. Not only Michel’s attention but his body is pulled into the virtual world of the photograph, as if the sense of sight is overcome by the sense of touch (and more generally, the sense of embodiment). The fact that the ensuing description develops from a hybrid perspective, merging a body in motion

with the point of view of a mechanic device, points both to the closeness and the impossibility of bridging the gap between senses and media.

The interaction of sight and touch is also at play in two references to the power of images to arouse a sexual response. In both cases, they can be interpreted as Roberto Michel's imaginary constructions about the life and fate of the teenager, as well as projections of his own anxieties regarding loneliness, desire, and sexual relations.<sup>94</sup>

While watching the couple at the tip of the island, Michel imagines the teenager's life in the alluring city. The young man, lonely and deprived of money but curious and free, enjoys his cheap food and cheap entertainment, which includes a "revista pornográfica doblada en cuatro." (218) [the pornographic magazine folded four ways (120)]. This *effet du réel* connotes adolescent desire and grounds the character in the social and psychological context of youth subculture. Promising illusory pleasures, the magazine stands in sharp contrast to the chance encounter with a real woman. Eventually, roles are reversed: the boy who gazes with desire at still images of women on the printed page ends up devoured by the hypnotizing gaze of the woman during their encounter. The fact that the magazine is folded in four sections points to the portability of printed material, an important feature of printed photographic images that contrasts with other visual arts and media. The folding of the magazine also suggests a need to conceal in the public space morally compromising images.<sup>95</sup>

A second reference to pornography appears once the magnified photograph has been set in motion. Michel arrives at the conclusion that the woman is just an accomplice, since the true master is the man in black waiting at a distance. As was the case when he first saw the couple, Michel essentially projects an imagined scene onto the blown-up image, the screen where the virtual events take place. He speculates that the boy is in danger of being abused. He then refers to what he fears, not by actually describing the scene of sexual violence, but by offering a succinct list of metonymic references to the alleged abuse. The reader has to fill in the blanks: "el resto sería tan simple, el auto, una casa cualquiera, las bebidas, las láminas excitantes, las lágrimas demasiado tarde, el despertar en el infierno." (223) [The rest of it would be so simple, the car, some house or another, drinks, stimulating engravings, tardy tears, the awakening in hell. (129)] The word "lámina" refers to an illustration, and more specifically to a glossy colour photograph, which is intended to enhance sexual arousal.

In the protagonist's mind, pornography is a crucial element of the trap set by the evil man to lure the boy.

If we consider the story through the "ekphrastic principle" proposed by Murray Krieger—according to which, "visual arts are metaphors for the shaping of language into formal patterns that 'still' the movement of linguistic temporality"<sup>96</sup>—Cortázar provides a distorted, expressionist twist to this literary strategy: the still photograph may seem to fix the movement embedded in language, but its "content" is put into motion. Photography, which for Roberto Michel is meant to capture life in a decisive moment, performs a fundamental breakdown, opening a crevice that undermines any effort to fix or control the proliferation of representations. In "Las babas del diablo," ekphrasis, rather than fixing images with words, is a means with which to weave an anxiogenic textual trap that both protagonist and reader strive to disentangle.

"Apocalipsis de Solentiname," published almost twenty years after "Las babas del diablo," intertwines a fantastic plot with a chronicle of an actual undercover visit that Cortázar made to the community of Solentiname, Nicaragua, in 1976.<sup>97</sup> After the trip, the story's protagonist-narrator finds that the photographs he shot, rather than showing the paintings of Solentiname's peasant artists, feature scenes of violence he had neither recorded nor witnessed. As in "Las babas del diablo," the main character suffers in solitude his uncanny fate, in line with a sustained pattern in the work of Cortázar, where a lonely hero strives hopelessly to overcome an obstacle, usually falling prey to forces beyond his powers.<sup>98</sup>

In both "Apocalipsis de Solentiname" and "Las babas del diablo," two technologies of representation are pitted against each other: in the latter, there is the duel between visual and verbal artifacts; in the former, a modern visual technology is opposed to the traditional, handmade craft of painting. This opposition is stressed by the alleged "primitive" originality of the painted works, as cultural products of a rural community.

As for the material support and photographic specifications mentioned in each story, the artistic outlook of Roberto Michel requires his skill as an amateur developer, while the protagonist of "Apocalipsis de Solentiname" relies on the services of a commercial laboratory (this mediation opens the door for the possibility of misplaced film rolls, which would explain the unexpected scenes of violence during the slide show). In both stories, the materiality of the medium determines to a great extent the outlook of

the pictures. The scenes to be photographed require the use of a particular kind of film, and reciprocally, each kind of film imposes its own specifications on the photographed object. In “Las babas del diablo,” the particular autumn light, the deserted streets, and the air of suspense calls for the evocative quality of black-and-white film. Stressing its artistic aspirations, and thus positing a hierarchy of cultural values, Roberto Michel purposefully works with this kind of material, the preferred medium of artistic photography throughout the twentieth century. In “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” the photographer chooses slides, a medium favored mostly by tourists and suited for family presentations. While projected slides establish a distance between image and viewer and lack the aesthetic prestige of prints, they are livelier in terms of colour and luminous display. In this context, the colours of the peasants’ paintings are not only highlighted in the ekphrastic rendering the narrator offers, but also enhanced by the bright light of midday in which they were taken. The protagonist remarks that they will be enhanced even further when projected in his living room: “me los llevo todos, allá los proyectaré en mi pantalla y serán más grandes y más brillantes que éstos.” (157) [I’m taking all of them, I’ll show them on my screen back there and they’ll be bigger and brighter than these. (123)]<sup>99</sup> The slides of the colourful paintings also correspond to the brightness and lushness of the tropics, recreated in the context of the protagonist’s all-too-civilized Parisian home. It should be said that the use of colour in Cortázar’s texts is an abiding literary motif which makes him a kind of painterly writer. Beyond the pervading allusions to, and writings on, the visual arts in his work, Cortázar constantly plays with an ekphrastic dimension that stresses the chromatic qualities of objects, settings, and even moods. Besides playing with the abstract and symbolic dimensions of chromatic values, colour also connotes a field of signification linked to avant-garde aesthetics and a progressive political ideology. As opposed to the dullness of gray tones, color points to a utopian aspiration.<sup>100</sup> In this sense, the description of the colourful paintings of Solentiname provides a link, through their visual impact, between the purported “primal vision” of the peasants and a project of individual and collective fulfillment.

Photography’s uncanny dimension is predicated on the infringement of the bounds of realist representation that helps advance the fantastic plot. In both stories the material channel through which a visual sign is produced betrays the intent of the photographer. In both texts a case of

illegitimate appropriation comes to haunt the private space of a beholder removed in the present from the scene of the alleged transgression. This takes place a significant time after the shots have been taken and the pictures developed, as in a delayed response before the onslaught of violence, recalling the deferred action that characterizes the structure of trauma according to Freud.<sup>101</sup>

“Apocalipsis de Solentiname” begins by acknowledging the differences between “Las babas del diablo” and Antonioni’s 1966 movie *Blow-Up*. Beyond the use of one of Cortázar’s common literary strategies, the nesting of representations,<sup>102</sup> the allusion introduces discrepancy or disjuncture as the framing device of the story:

Hacia uno de esos calores y para peor todo empezaba enseguida, conferencia de prensa con lo de siempre, ¿por qué no vivís en tu patria, que pasó que *Blow-Up* era tan distinto a tu cuento, te parece que el escritor tiene que estar comprometido? (155)

[It was one of those hot spells and to make things even worse it all got started right away, a press conference with the usual business, why don’t you live in your own country, why was *Blow-Up* so different from your short story, do you think a writer must be involved? (119)]

The narrative and psychological breakdown displayed in “Las babas del diablo” finds its match in “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” with its many instances of dissociation. Photography is again the vehicle through which disjuncture takes place. A first example appears as the author marvels at the possibility of taking a Polaroid picture and watching appear in the print, quite unphotographically, something ostensibly different than what was shot. The protagonist emphasizes the point at the end of the story by suggesting ironically to his companion Claudine, after she fails to see the same images that he was appalled to witness a few moments earlier, that perhaps she saw Napoleon riding on a horse. Not only this is a material impossibility but of course a historical one, insofar as Napoleon died before the invention of photography. In a second example, the story highlights the difference between the photographs taken in Solentiname

and those projected in Paris (which in turn implies a discrepancy between a specific place, Solentiname, and the projected images, which portray scenes of political violence across Latin America).

Cortázar foregrounds in the story the mechanical devices that make photographic representations possible: the Polaroid camera and the slide projector. The Polaroid was not a new invention in the mid-1970s, but the existence of one at the house of his host in Costa Rica attests to the availability of this photographic technology even in cultural spaces far from metropolitan centres.<sup>103</sup> Before embarking for Solentiname, the protagonist marvels at the instant camera and describes the natural wonder produced when looking at the gradual appearance of an image on the glossy white paper.<sup>104</sup> This photographic magic is echoed—and contradicted, in a sort of chiasmic reversal—by an odd phenomenon, which makes the viewer's attention sway between the actual picture and the slight but decisive differences in the perceived surroundings where that picture has just been taken. A Polaroid picture highlights the distinction between visual representation, on the one hand, and reality as immediately perceived and remembered, on the other—what Roberto Michel in “Las babas del diablo” calls “la operación comparativa y melancólica del recuerdo frente a la perdida realidad” (221) [that gloomy operation of comparing the memory with the gone reality (126)]. From the photographer's point of view, even the seamless operation of a Polaroid camera “proves” the reality of the moment just lived, while at the same time opening an insurmountable gap between the visual representation and the moment of its creation:

antes hubo fotos de recuerdo con una cámara de esas que dejan salir ahí nomás un papelito 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, la sonrisa de Ernesto con su vincha nazarena, doña María y don José recortándose contra la veranda. A todos les parecía muy normal eso porque desde luego estaban habituados a servirse de esa cámara pero yo no, a mí ver salir de la nada, del cuadro celeste de la nada esas caras y esas sonrisas de despedida me llenaba de asombro y se los dije, me acuerdo de haberle preguntado a Oscar qué pasaría si alguna vez después de una foto de familia el papelito celeste

de la nada empezara a llenarse con Napoleón a caballo, y la carcajada de don José Coronel que todo lo escuchaba como siempre, el yip, vámonos ya para el lago. (156)

[But first there were souvenir photographs with one of those cameras that let the little piece of sky-blue paper pop out right there and little by little and miraculously and Polaroid it fills up little by little images, first disturbing ectoplasms and little by little a nose, some curly hair, Ernesto's smile and his Nazarene headband, Doña María and Don José outlined against the porch. That seemed quite normal to all because, of course, they were accustomed to using that camera, but not to me, I was filled with amazement as I saw those faces and those good-bye smiles coming out of nothing and I told them so, I remember asking Oscar what would happen if sometime after a family snapshot the sky-blue paper started to fill up with Napoleon on horseback, and Don José Coronel's laugh, listening to everything as always, the Jeep, let's go to the lake now. (121)]

The description of the Polaroid picture echoes the odd spatial perspectives deployed in "Las babas del diablo." The "cuadrado celeste" recalls the play of nested visual frames featured in the 1959 story and, specifically, the ending with its vision of a sky framed by a square that could be a window, or a screen, or the viewfinder of a camera. As noted above, references to the void are prominent in "Las babas." Its open ending plays with nothingness, existential catastrophe, and anxiety, avoiding any kind of edifying closure.

The Polaroid picture also blends two cultural and political contexts: first, the (magical) realism of modern technologies of representation, and second, the modern history of American imperialist interventions in Latin America, displaced but clearly connoted by imagining, as the narrator does, the appearance of the French Emperor on a horse. This virtual photograph foreshadows the unexpected pictures of violence the narrator witnesses later, and it is also utilized to mark the difference between the apocalyptic vision of the protagonist<sup>105</sup> and the "normal" point of view of Claudine, which is closer to that of a naive tourist. Musing at the end of

the story about asking Claudine if she had seen a photograph of Napoleon on a horse—something impossible from a realist perspective—the protagonist points to the virtual nature of his own vision. While the irruption of the fantastic remains, as always, a possibility, what seems to happen is the irruption of “real” images in which horrific scenes of violence grip the viewer in a traumatic moment that, as in “Las babas del diablo,” calls for a cure.

The strategies of photographic composition in “Las babas del diablo” and “Apocalipsis” are almost opposite, yet they both aim toward a similar redemptive end through aesthetic means. Roberto Michel is equipped with the intuition of an amateur photographer indebted to the aesthetic values of high modernism; for his part, the protagonist of “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” employs his camera mainly to achieve an exact match, in terms of framing, of photographs to paintings (he has taken other photographs during his trip, but the text focuses mainly on his reproductions of the peasants’ pictures). Roberto Michel aims to construct a perfect image out of a chance encounter in an urban setting, whereas the protagonist of “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” has already found the object to be photographed, his aim being to technically reproduce the paintings as faithfully as possible. His main concern is not with creativity, but with centring the paintings in his viewfinder. The issue of an exact framing becomes crucial because his use of slides forbids any cropping. Indeed, both slides and Polaroids bypass the photographic negative and point to a similar “faithfulness,” a perfect match between exposed film and final image. This use of photography, which emphasizes spatial precision, is enhanced by the fact that the protagonist happens to have a roll of film with the same number of shots as the number of paintings he intends to photograph. This controlling, precisionist, or Procrustean approach serves as foil to the violent explosion of images that splatter the screen during the slide show. The show enacts in literal terms the violent aperture through which Cortázar defined photography in his essay “Algunos aspectos del cuento”—but this time, there is no redeeming value, no aesthetic or spiritual interpretation. Rather, the raw nature of the slide show points to an exploration of physicality and bodily response in the face of danger and stress. Photography, through its sheer mimetic power, is the medium through which the body is directly affected.<sup>106</sup>

Both in “Las babas del diablo” and “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” Cortázar elaborates the theme of a traveller—*flâneur*, committed intellectual, acute observer—who, at the end of his trip, gets more than he bargained for. In each case, the adventure is transformed from visual exploration into an unexpected descent into physical and psychic violence. In both stories, the literary exorcism championed by Cortázar dramatizes the impossibility of taming the ultimate power of images.<sup>107</sup> These images play the role of haunting, phantasmatic presences that call for a verbal cure. In “Las babas del diablo,” the story itself is presented as the urgent cure that Roberto Michel seeks through verbalization. In contrast, “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” ends with the retreat of the protagonist into silence. Rather than confronting his traumatic experience and contrasting it with Claudine’s, he remains in a pensive, even sarcastic mood. The story concludes:

Sentado en el suelo, sin mirarla, busqué mi vaso y lo bebí de un trago. No le iba a decir nada, qué le podía decir ahora, pero me acuerdo que pensé vagamente en preguntarle una idiotéz, preguntarle si en algún momento no había visto una foto de Napoleón a caballo. Pero no se lo pregunté, claro. (160)

[Sitting on the floor, not looking at her, I reached for my glass and drank it down in one swallow. I wasn’t going to tell her anything, what could I tell her now, but I do remember that I vaguely thought about asking her something idiotic, asking her if at some moment she’d seen a photograph of Napoleon on horseback. But I didn’t, of course. (127)]

This fatalistic silence implies a retreat into individual drama. The verbal cure of storytelling put in action in “Las babas del diablo,” albeit insufficient, is no longer deemed adequate to confront the onslaught of traumatic images that comes rushing from the realm of contemporary history. Ekphrastic fear is the dominant note. In both texts, words function as screens as well as shields: as devices that conjure up images while defending the viewer from their fearsome effects. Verbal representations are thus turned against themselves, exemplifying a paradoxical impulse that both anchors and strives to transcend the specificity of their effects.

## Salvador Elizondo

If the short stories by Darío and Cortázar bring to the fore the links between the extension of vision, the photograph as a haunted space, and the clash between the visual and the tactile, and embodiment in general, no other author in Latin America has explored these issues more thoroughly, and more poignantly, than Mexican Salvador Elizondo. This last section examines his novel *Farabeuf* (1965), arguably his best work of fiction. It begins by assessing photography's central role in Elizondo's poetics and then moves to interpret *Farabeuf* as an (oxymoronic) "photographic delirium." By examining key concepts in Elizondo's writing (fixity, violence, and memory) that are closely related to photography, my aim is to shed light on the way this visual medium is used in his work. I conclude by analyzing the way visual and verbal representations interact in the novel, as well as their links to tactile perception and the body.

Literature and photography are closely intertwined disciplines in Elizondo's artistic conception. In *Autobiografía precoz* (1966), written when he was thirty-two years old, he points out that as a writer he thinks of himself as a sort of photographer, not in the sense of practising this trade in addition to his literary endeavors, but as a means of understanding the task of writing and his own artistic ideals:

Al final de cuentas, como escritor, me he convertido en fotógrafo; impresiono ciertas placas con el aspecto de esa [mi] interioridad y las distribuyo entre los aficionados anónimos. Mi búsqueda se encamina, tal vez, a conseguir una impresión extremadamente fiel de ese recinto que a todos, por principio, está vedado. (29)

[In the final analysis, as a writer, I have become a photographer; I expose some plates with the features of my inner world, and I pass them around among anonymous *aficionados*. My search points, perhaps, towards achieving an extremely faithful exposure of that site which, as a matter of principle, is out of bounds to everyone else.]

By resorting to the metaphor of the mind as a sensitive plate where visual impressions are lodged,<sup>108</sup> photography articulates a wish to produce a picture of the unrepresentable space of consciousness and its operations, in line with the aesthetic goals of high modernism, a literary tradition with which Elizondo was well acquainted.

Visual arts and media are of central importance in Elizondo's work. Photography in particular becomes a paradigmatic practice: it is the medium that best manifests the essentially discrete, partial, or fragmentary condition of our modes of perception, intellection, and expression.<sup>109</sup> In photography, life is reduced to the representation of selected moments. From a formal point of view, perception and knowledge are always partial, a state of affairs that modernity has enhanced.<sup>110</sup> In Elizondo's worldview, the fragmented "photographic gaze" becomes a principle of perceptual organization and an artistic ideal. It is along the lines of his formalist aesthetics that we should understand his claim that "todo proferimiento creador tiene necesariamente pretensiones fotográficas."<sup>111</sup> Photography provides the model that articulates his reflections on the power of the image as a demonic or haunting sign.

The ostensible source of *Farabeuf* is a photograph depicting a Chinese torture and execution, the "Leng Tch'é" or "Death by a Thousand Cuts," which Elizondo drew from Bataille's *Les larmes d'Eros*.<sup>112</sup>

Inasmuch as this photograph depicts a most extreme case of sensory perception—extreme pain in the threshold between life and death—delirium is a useful concept through which to understand Elizondo's novel and overall literary endeavor. This concept recurs frequently in an early collection of essays entitled *Cuaderno de escritura* (1969). In "Teoría mínima del libro," delirium is closely linked to the workings of imagination. It is also used to articulate a phenomenological view of psychic violence and its depiction in the visual arts, as exemplified by the paintings of Mexican artist Alberto Gironella, whose works are for Elizondo "reflejos especulares de una obsesión o de un delirio" (420) [specular reflections of an obsession or a delirium]. Elizondo remarks that the painting entitled *El obrador de Francisco Lezcano* functions, in its "exacerbación barroca" (406) [baroque exacerbation], as a mirror that reflects "una metamorfosis delirante" (407) [a delirious metamorphosis]. Elizondo seems to be referring here not only to Gironella's painting but also to his own artistic leanings and literary strategies.<sup>113</sup>



01 FIG 7: LENG TCH'É, OR DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS (1905).

*Farabeuf* is a notoriously difficult novel to grasp, though it is precisely this difficulty that suggests a productive interpretive method. The text can be read as the hyperbolic transcription of a delirium, as if the author intended to show, rather than tell, the upheavals of a deranged mental functioning from up close. The novel, as Elizondo himself acknowledged, is meant to produce a shocking effect.<sup>114</sup> On the one hand, the text contains vividly rendered descriptions, as if the power of *enargeia*—a term of classical rhetoric closely linked to ekphrasis that refers to “the quality which appeals to the listener’s senses, principally that of sight”—seeks to reproduce the visual force of a detailed, sharply focused photograph.<sup>115</sup> *Nitidez*—sharpness or clarity—is an aesthetic value Elizondo pursues in his writing.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, these descriptions are framed in an incoherent narrative structure, a sort of photographic album assembled with no discernible order. The novel can profitably be read as a proliferating and obsessive array of perceptual and mnemonic acts whose overall

narrative framework remains elusive.<sup>117</sup> In this context, the text has been understood in terms of the psychological realism practiced by contemporary French writers of the *Nouveau Roman*, as a literal register of states of consciousness.<sup>118</sup> By shattering time and plot, and by fragmenting the narrative in a proliferating gallery of unidentified voices, the text hinders the possibility of achieving any stable interpretation. Elizondo himself has indicated that “*Farabeuf* no sigue otro esquema que el de la ilación irracional metódica,”<sup>119</sup> [*Farabeuf* does not follow any blueprint but a methodical irrational connection] and delirium is explicitly mentioned in the text as a possible “explanation” for the temporal, spatial, and characteriological dissociation that crisscrosses the novel.<sup>120</sup> It is hard to identify the subject of *Farabeuf*’s narrative madness, but there are enough clues to surmise that the novel portrays the frightful delirium of a woman under extreme pain.<sup>121</sup> She embodies a number of shifting identities—an Ouija player, a nurse working in China called Mélanie Desaignnes, a Parisian prostitute, even the tortured person pictured in the photograph.<sup>122</sup> As hinted in the last pages of the novel, the acts of recalling and looking that organize the fragments around which the plot revolves are “performed” upon a woman, in a sort of rape that points not only to sexual penetration but also to a perceptual and psychic assault, a gushing of images that overwhelms her mind.<sup>123</sup>

Photography provides a representational model where the key concepts of Elizondo’s artistic vision coalesce. These interrelated notions—which provide the general framework for his literary, psychological, and aesthetic exploration—are fixity (as both an artistic ideal and psychic wish), the picturing of violence, and the workings of memory and obsession. I analyze their interactions in the following section.

Effects of fixity, stasis, and frozen time traverse the syncopated narration of *Farabeuf*.<sup>124</sup> Photography, inextricably linked from its inception to the rhetoric of the fixed image, becomes the preferred medium through which to “wrestle” a static moment out of the flow of time.<sup>125</sup> However, the effects of photography go beyond this representational fiction. By creating the illusion of reversibility and by making available for inspection in the present what remains irretrievably in the past, photographs not merely aid memory but end up creating a new psychic dimension of engagement with past events mediated by visualization.<sup>126</sup> Vicky Goldberg notes that “still photography does preserve details better than most minds and most

memories of a rapidly moving event.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, the photographic medium fosters a thorough deepening of our capacity for retrieval, a premise that *Farabeuf* exploits to its furthest limits. Time, of course, never stops, but the slicing of the continuity of events by way of their iconic inscription creates the illusion and the desire that time itself *could* stand still. In this context, the epigraph by the Romanian-French philosopher E. M. Cioran that opens *Farabeuf* sums up the impossible project of reversing time, inextricably linking memory and violence: “Toute nostalgie est un dépassement du présent. . . . La vie n’a de contenu que dans la violation du temps. L’obsession de l’ailleurs, c’est l’impossibilité de l’instant; et cette impossibilité est la nostalgie même” (85) [“Every nostalgia is a transcendence of the present. . . . Life has a content only in the violation of time. The obsession of elsewhere is the impossibility of the moment; and this impossibility is nostalgia itself.”<sup>128</sup>].

The photographic act always entails a degree of violence: besides freezing time, it fragments space, flattens volume, and shrinks or expands size. For sitters, its practice can imply a burdensome standing still, and for the subjects photographed it can involve encroachment, surveillance, and threat.<sup>129</sup> A photograph that pictures an act of violence, such as the image of the Chinese execution, is a self-reflexive sign, an icon that poignantly exposes its own conditions of existence. This photograph recurs in Elizondo’s work, attesting to its enduring power. In his essays from the 1960s, it becomes a complex semiotic space around which the Mexican author explores the relations among time, memory, personal identity, violence, and visual representation. Somewhat hyperbolically, he considers it one of those visions “capaces de subvertir y trastocar cualquier concepción del mundo” [capable of subverting and inverting any worldview].<sup>130</sup>

Fixity, violence, and memory are linked to the work of Jorge Luis Borges, a major presence in the writing of Elizondo.<sup>131</sup> Of particular relevance is the short story “El milagro secreto,” included in *Ficciones* (1944).<sup>132</sup> The ultimate fate of the protagonist, Jaromir Hladík, is also the chronicle of an expanded, oneiric instant where the fixed image plays a crucial role. Among the similarities between *Farabeuf* and the short story by Borges, both Hladík and the tortured boxer are tied to a stake, as if they were living lightning rods through which a privileged vision is channelled up to the critical moment of their deaths. While putting them in the hands of their executioners, Elizondo and Borges use photography to reinforce the

idea of a violent capture, and in both cases, the threshold between life and death is mediated by a photographic act. Elizondo's novel is explicitly built around a photograph. In the case of "El milagro secreto," the protagonist ends up facing a firing squad as if he were posing for a photograph. Looking at the hesitant soldiers, the narrator says that Hladík "absurdamente, recordó las vacilaciones preliminares de los fotógrafos." ["Absurdly, Hladik was reminded of the preliminary shufflings-about of photographers."]<sup>133</sup> The reference is ironic, because the soldiers who are about to kill him will "immortalize" him in effigy, as photographers are meant to do; however, the reference is also prescient, because the metaphorical photographic act that shoots Hladík will become, thanks to the intervention of God, a secret miracle that freezes physical reality and saves him (at least for a year). Thus, it is the entire material universe that has been transformed into a photograph, a snapshot in God's omnipotent vision.<sup>134</sup>

Delirium is in *Farabeuf* a deconstructing move that shatters the conventions of realist prose. *Farabeuf* shares with the literature of the fantastic its subversive streak since, as Jackson explains, it threatens to disrupt or eat away at "the 'syntax' or *structure* by which order is made."<sup>135</sup> In this sense, Elizondo's strategy in the articulation of his literary delirium closely resembles the drama "Los enemigos," which Hladík had been composing before he was seized by the Nazi army. The drama represents the mental breakdown of his main protagonist, the forlorn Jaroslav Kubin. A kind of fictional delirium within the "real-life" delirium that Hladík faces before his upcoming execution, "Los enemigos" is the key to the author's redemption: the work that, he hopes, will justify his life.<sup>136</sup> This echoes the Chinese execution, where an ecstatic vision is supposed to redeem the boxer's life in a moment of absolute suffering. With regard to the literary texture of Hladík's drama and Elizondo's *Farabeuf*, they both deploy the minimalist precision of an array of concrete references within an ambiguous narrative framework. Both texts posit a kind of "psychic imperialism" where the events narrated and the confusing links between them are, on one side, the only things that happen and keep happening, in an endless circle; on the other, they are things that never truly happen, confirming the virtual nature of their mental—as well as literary—condition.

Elizondo points out in his *Autobiografía precoz* that the photograph of the execution became "una especie de zahir," (56) a notional entity that blends memory, fixity, and violence. By adopting Borges's fictional coin to

describe the effects of the photograph, Elizondo not only acknowledges the literary debt he owes to the Argentine writer; he also uses the term to bridge the gap between a fictional construction and a mental reality (as sometimes happens in Borges's own literary creations). The *zahir*, which gradually takes over the mind of a character called Borges, is described in the eponymous story as "una idea fija" [a fixed idea].<sup>137</sup> It is an image that colonizes mental functioning and its contents, becoming a burgeoning, intolerable presence whose intensity increases as time passes.<sup>138</sup> It also becomes a useful aesthetic model, given Elizondo's ideas about the links between art and mental disturbance, as sketched above. The Mexican author claims in his essay "El putridero óptico" that "la belleza es necesariamente obsesiva" (401) [beauty is necessarily obsessive], and *Farabeuf* is a perfect example of what he calls in the same text "reiteraciones empecinadas del espíritu" (401) [the mind's stubborn repetitions]. As if mimicking the psychic imperialism of the *zahir*, the overarching force of the photograph of the tortured man takes hold of the novel's characters, in particular the woman, who beholds it with a boundless, anxious attention (29 and 49). As for the reader, she is also lured to look at the photograph to partake in the "memorable image" that the characters obsessively pursue.

Fixity, violence, and memory are also linked to a discussion of traumatic childhood memories that Elizondo elaborates in his essay "Invocación y evocación de la infancia," included in *Cuaderno de escritura*. Elizondo points out the importance of the images that remain lodged in the mind for years, and which become points of reference for the creative work of the adult writer or artist.<sup>139</sup> In the essay, special attention is given to a children's book widely circulated in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century—*Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), by Heinrich Hoffmann—which Elizondo, who spent some of his childhood in Nazi Germany, got to know.<sup>140</sup> The volume, illustrated by Hoffmann himself, is intended to provide pedagogical advice on the upbringing of children. Texts and illustrations highlight a consistent moral message: bad behavior leads to extreme physical pain, which is thought to be a deterrent. Elizondo paraphrases a story about little Conrad, with an ironic twist that evinces the anxiety about the effect this children's tale had on him. Conrad, "The little suck-a-thumb," is a boy who cannot avoid sucking his thumbs despite the stern warnings of his mother, who tells him that the tailor will come with his big scissors and will cut off his fingers. Once the mother leaves, the first

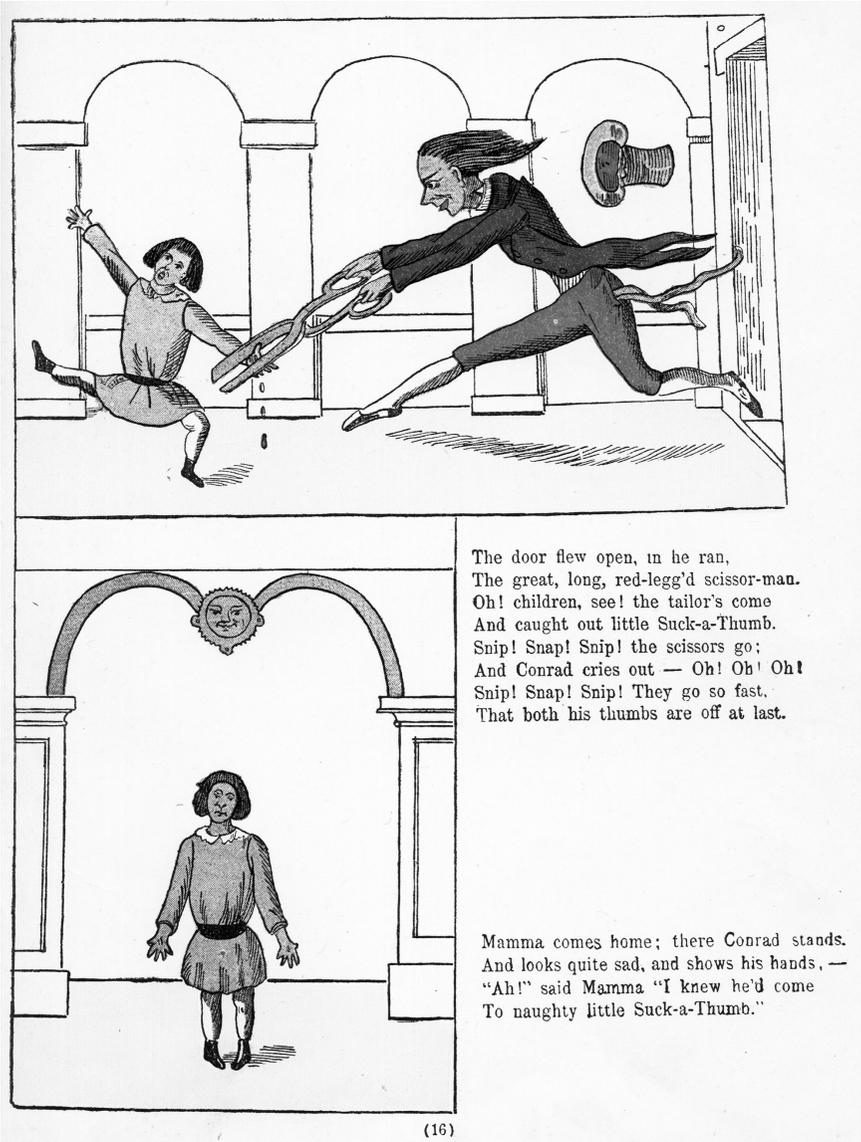
thing that Conrad does is suck his thumb. Suddenly the tailor appears out of nowhere and cuts off his two thumbs. The children's story ends with the image of Conrad crying hopelessly with his hands dripping blood.

Elizondo writes: "es indudable que todas las barbaridades contenidas en estas curiosas y alegres historietas no pueden dejar indiferente el alma de los niños que en un determinado momento las han leído con una fruición premonitoria" [It is clear that all the outrageous material contained in these interesting and merry children's stories cannot leave unimpressed the soul of the child who has read them, at one moment, with premonitory fruition].<sup>141</sup> The whole book, and particularly the story of "Little Suck-a-Thumb," has an important textual link with *Farabeuf*.<sup>142</sup> Both texts are about the imposition of actions upon a victim that strikes us as extreme and irrational. The child's punishment, as well as the Chinese execution around which the novel revolves, are actions that impose a ritual discipline defined by physical constraint and utter pain.<sup>143</sup> Both have a moralistic and didactic purpose: as Hoffmann's book aims to forcefully teach a lesson, the execution is a public performance intended to teach the people, through the display of utmost suffering, the consequences of criminal behaviour.

The persistence of childhood images in the mind of the adult writer can be seen in a reference in *Farabeuf* to the story of the mutilated child. In the presentation of *Farabeuf*'s confusing "Instantaneous Theater," an unidentified voice recalls the episode:

Tengo otros recuerdos de aquella velada: la Enfermera, además de los pequeños folletos del Doctor Farabeuf, ofrecía también otro libro de mayor tamaño y precio diciendo, ' . . . o este entretenido libro de imágenes para los niños'. Era un libro con pastas de cartón. La Enfermera lo mostraba abierto en las páginas centrales. No he podido olvidar una de aquellas imágenes. Representaba a un niño a quien le habían sido cortados los pulgares. Las manos le sangraban y a sus pies se formaban dos pequeños charcos de sangre. (169)

[I have other memories of that soirée: the Nurse, besides the small pamphlet by Doctor Farabeuf, was also selling another larger, more expensive publication, saying ". . . or this



The door flew open, in he ran,  
 The great, long, red-legg'd scissor-man.  
 Oh! children, see! the tailor's come  
 And caught out little Suck-a-Thumb.  
 Snip! Snap! Snip! the scissors go;  
 And Conrad cries out — Oh! Oh! Oh!  
 Snip! Snap! Snip! They go so fast.  
 That both his thumbs are off at last.

Mamma comes home; there Conrad stands.  
 And looks quite sad, and shows his hands, —  
 "Ah!" said Mamma "I knew he'd come  
 To naughty little Suck-a-Thumb."

(16)

01 FIG 8: ILLUSTRATION FOR "THE LITTLE SUCK-A-THUMB" IN *DER STRUWELPETER* BY HEINRICH HOFFMANN.

entertaining picture book for children.” It was a hardbound book, and the nurse held it open to the middle. I have never been able to forget one of those pictures. It showed a boy whose thumbs had been cut off. His hands were bleeding and two small pools of blood were forming at his feet. (83)]<sup>144</sup>

As in the deforming mirror of a nightmare, the passage deploys a version of the author’s traumatic memories. The novel, while elaborating childhood desires, fantasies, and fears, places in the foreground the disturbing power that those images possess. In this sense, the photograph of the Chinese torture becomes an uncanny found object that throws the author back to his early desires and fears, triggering a host of fantasies elaborated in literary form.<sup>145</sup> Both the memories the author keeps from *Der Struwwelpeter* and the way he uses the Chinese photograph point to a trauma not suffered in his own skin, but rather indirectly, by the relay of pictures. The intrinsic power that visual representations—and in particular, photographs—possess to upset the mind and shatter its stability is pointed out by Elizondo himself.<sup>146</sup> Writing about the photograph of the execution, he reverses the terms that define the links between reference and representation by making the image, and not the torture, the actual focal point of pain:

La experiencia del dolor creo que es más, muchísimo más intensa imaginada que experimentada; yo creo en los extremos del dolor físico que están representados en la fotografía del torturado chino en la que me basé para escribir *Farabeuf*, el dolor que expresa esa fotografía es muchísimo muy superior en términos de literatura, claro está, al dolor físico que experimenta el chino que está siendo torturado.<sup>147</sup>

[The experience of pain I believe is more, much more intense when imagined than experienced; I think that the extremes of physical pain represented in the photograph of the tortured Chinese on which I based *Farabeuf*, the pain expressed by that photograph is far more superior in terms of literature, of course, than the physical pain experienced by the Chinese man who is being tortured.]

Beyond its inconsistency, the statement should be understood considering the obsessive nature of images of pain as more permanent in the mind than the extreme, though limited, pain inflicted on the flesh. The photograph in question becomes less a specific testimony of human brutality than an emblematic image of suffering to which the author submits himself (and to which he submits the reader/viewer), in a movement that both stands up to violence and falls prey to its effects. The same interpretive/spectatorial move is performed in Sontag's *On Photography*, where she describes in these terms her reaction after looking at photographs of the Nazi death camps: "Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously . . . something went dead; something is still crying."<sup>148</sup> The traumatic element of photography is also present in the heuristic concept of *punctum* that Barthes employed in *Camera Lucida*: "*punctum* is . . . sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."<sup>149</sup>

Violence as a literary topic in Elizondo's work belongs to the French literary tradition of the Marquis de Sade, Baudelaire, and especially Bataille, in its quest to probe and transgress the limits of rationality, representation, and identity. In Elizondo, this quest is less philosophical than rhetorical and stylistic. Violence points to a dimension of experience that yields a set of sensations both fascinating and harrowing, posing a challenge to the writer's ability to describe and narrate it. Despite Elizondo's (not so successful) efforts to theorize in metaphysical or phenomenological terms the notion of violence, his aim might be better understood as opening up a field of literary and aesthetic exploration in the context of modern Mexican literature.<sup>150</sup> In this sense, and in the face of a dialectics of perception that swings from shock to familiarity to indifference, *Farabeuf* intends to elicit a constant rekindling of sensation, a state that keeps alive "the desirous act of looking."<sup>151</sup> Contrary to real trauma, an image perceived as traumatic can point to the morbid willingness by an author to be affected as well as affect the reader/viewer, in a quest to fulfill the abiding "wish to see something gruesome."<sup>152</sup>

Among the paraphernalia of sadistic instruments deployed in Elizondo's work, sharp tools are a constant source of interest and anxiety. The scissors with which the tailor cuts off the thumbs of little Conrad recall the detailed description of surgical tools with which *Farabeuf* begins, as

well as the blades of the executioners in the Chinese torture. Louis Herbert Farabeuf, the famed specialist on amputations, can be interpreted as a paternal figure that stands for the image of the cruel tailor in Hoffmann's book. Besides representing, in an overblown fashion, the threat of castration, which is closely associated to the Freudian uncanny, both doctor and tailor embody a consistent trope in Elizondo's work.<sup>153</sup> The tailor uses his tools not to make a whole out of disparate parts, but to cut into pieces what remains irretrievable in its fragmentation, very much as Farabeuf practices a type of medicine that cuts body parts beyond recuperation.<sup>154</sup> The predilection of the author for sharp tools and weapons also points to the action of cutting or cropping that is at play in photographic practice, itself a slicing of space and time.<sup>155</sup>

Beyond this feature, the photograph of the execution, in all its gruesomeness, emblemizes an ideal of photographic representation, namely, to glimpse an ecstatic vision in the click of a moment. Doctor Farabeuf states that "la fotografía . . . es una forma estática de la inmortalidad" (98) [Photography . . . is a static form of immortality (12)]. As if performing a savage allegory, the photograph of the execution mirrors the fixity and violence performed by the photographer in the act of taking a picture, as well as the fixity and violence to which the sitter is submitted. By the end of the novel, the situation of the immobilized woman about to be sacrificed recalls the procedures to which sitters were subjected during the early years of photography, when lengthy exposures required the use of mechanical aids to keep the sitters still.<sup>156</sup> The woman's subjection is part of a sadistic ritual whose objective is to produce "esa imagen memorable" (205 [that memorable image (119)]) in her mind. In the passage, the immobilized sitter is not about to be photographed in any conventional fashion; rather, it is her mind that becomes the sensitive plate where a horrific, sublime, "memorable" picture will be produced, an image that will be painfully inscribed with the quintessential photographic qualities of precision and permanence.

The inclusion in the novel of a reproduction of the photograph goes beyond the aim of illustrating the text: it is essential to the integrity of *Farabeuf* as a work of art.<sup>157</sup> Word and image cooperate in at least three ways in the construction of meaning and the production of aesthetic effects.

First, the novel can be read as an expanded ekphrasis of the photograph, as some critics have proposed.<sup>158</sup> The actual photograph is the ostensible source of the novel; that is, the text is the verbal unpacking of the image. This cooperative link between verbal and visual representations implies a kind of feedback loop between written text and photograph. The relation is articulated in such a way that the Chinese ideogram, the central written sign that structures the novel, and the photograph of the execution, can each be considered the model for the other: the photograph can be read, as it is in chapter 7, as the “dramatización de un ideograma” (173 [“the performance of an ideogram” (87)]) in turn, the ideogram is a diagram of the elements that constitute the photograph.

The second way word and photograph cooperate has to do with the enhanced sense of visuality that they both promote. The pervasive and effective resort to *enargeia* in Elizondo’s writing constantly puts “language at the service of vision,” and the inclusion of the photograph is a direct appeal to vision.<sup>159</sup>

Third, both word and photograph move toward the same aesthetic goals, namely, the performance of violence and its aftermath: physical and psychic disintegration.

However, while text and image cooperate in the construction of meaning, they are also in competition. The contest between representations is set up in terms of their unassimilable specificities as distinct media. With regard to their forms of reception, the detailed, slow, and often confusing development of the plot stands in sharp contrast to the immediacy through which we perceive the photograph. The disciplined reading required to decode the novel’s verbal maze is opposed to the fascinated (and horrified) gaze that appropriates the picture in one swift regard.<sup>160</sup> As text/image, *Farabeuf* repeatedly forces the reader/viewer to switch from one regime of reception to the other. In the face of its unstable verbal structure, the visual representation anchors the elusiveness of the referent, as if the only true certainty we have after reading the novel comes through the photographic image and its power to affect us.

Of the series of four photographs included in Bataille’s *Les larmes d’Eros*, Elizondo chose the most dramatic in terms of visual impact, the one that most clearly choreographs the climax of the execution. The glossy, unframed reproduction in the first edition of *Farabeuf* covers the whole page, in an implicit editorial gesture indicating that the image is

on a par—in terms both of size and meaning—with the text proper. The photographic paratext complicates the relation between an image evoked purely by literary means and the actual reproduction included in the book. Rather than letting the reader/viewer reconstruct in her imagination the image rendered through ekphrasis, thus enveloping in a cloak of mystery the source and features of the actual photograph, Elizondo chooses to present the picture up front, endowing it with the privileged status of a shocking icon, impossible to miss. As Linfield points out, there is a common belief that “photographs bring home to us the reality of physical suffering with a literalness and an irrefutability that neither literature nor painting can claim.”<sup>161</sup> The visual impact of the photograph is a crucial element in the aesthetics of effects that Elizondo, inspired by Poe and French symbolism, espouses.<sup>162</sup>

Chapter 7 of *Farabeuf* consists of a long ekphrastic passage that describes the photograph in detail. The inclusion of the reproduction in this chapter both reinforces and challenges its ekphrastic version. On the one hand, it lets the reader/viewer analyze closely the description provided by the author and compare it with the object described. The possibility of comparing “on-site” both verbal and visual representations yields a particular interpretive play: the verbal information allows the reader to deepen his understanding of the image, while the visual representation provides the inescapable evidence and the visceral impact lacking in the text. From another perspective, the reproduction is a challenge to its ekphrasis. It shows in all its obscenity the power of the image to affect the viewer beyond the means of verbal rendering. What ekphrasis loses in evocative power is gained by the visual shock produced by the photograph in its “immediate, viscerally emotional connection to the world.”<sup>163</sup>

By allowing the reader to look at the iconographic source of the novel, Elizondo brings to the fore an important strategy of his novelistic recontextualization, namely, the possibility of reading a host of meanings into an image that are only virtually present, making the reader gauge the depth and efficacy of the author’s elaboration—his attempts to gain, to use Heffernan’s phrase, “mastery over the image.”<sup>164</sup> The photograph also functions as a lure, a kind of provocation to the reader, echoing the effect the picture produces on the book’s characters. It is thus implicated in a series of mirroring effects, most notably when the woman scrutinizes her true identity (114), and where the reader/viewer can also find exposed her own

hypocritical attention, both fascinated and horrified.<sup>165</sup> After all, the text suggests that the execution of the Chinese boxer is a ritual that actively involves the reader/viewer by means of her gaze. As we read in a dialogue of two unnamed interlocutors who speak about watching the execution as a kind of religious ceremony, one of them states that “el rito es nada más que mirarlo” (176) [the ritual merely consists of watching him (91)].

At one point, the ekphrasis of the photograph strives to capture the threshold between life and death that seems to be revealed in the picture. This is one of Elizondo’s literary obsessions: the means by which writing can capture the “reality” of death, a topic in which photography has had a stake since its invention.<sup>166</sup> Farabeuf, a real doctor who is transformed into the author of a fictitious book about Chinese torture, is also fictionalized as the photographer of the execution (99). In this way, he visually probes that elusive moment where a living being passes away (99). Farabeuf’s photographic practice becomes less a scientific tool or anthropological inquiry than a mystical quest that would uncover a moment of sheer plenitude through pain. The photograph thus represents “la esencia mística de la tortura” [“the mystical essence of torture”]<sup>167</sup>: it points to an ideal of transcendence in the face of utter subjection, a sublime experience in the context of total annihilation.<sup>168</sup> This impossible quest leads to (literary) madness. It creates a representational space with no discernible order, a world unhinged where identities shift as in a nightmare or a delirium.

While the verbal and visual representations (the novel’s text and the photograph) are the poles of a relation that is both co-operative and conflictual, these two types of representation can also be subsumed within the same interpretive field, one determined by sight. In this sense, verbal (i.e., readable) and visual (i.e., iconic) representations could both be considered in opposition to sensations conveyed by the sense of touch. This category should be expanded to include not only what the fingers can touch and the hands handle, but the sensations conveyed by the skin and even the muscles, and more generally, the body’s overall sense of itself, or proprioception.<sup>169</sup> One hallmark of Elizondo’s writing is the desire to make the verbal sign incarnate, that is, to make it touchable, a paradoxical impulse insofar as the work of literary art aspires to achieve a physical presence denied by the very specificity of its medium.

The visually precise, finely honed prose of Elizondo in *Farabeuf* leads the reader to picture with vividness the array of objects described. It also

appeals directly to the sense of touch.<sup>170</sup> There are many *effets du réel* that point to a range of tactile sensations, from the tight, disquieting grasp of things (the paws of a tiger or a chimera gripping a metal sphere, the handling of a starfish) to the fleetingness of forms (the writing of the ideogram on a steamed window, a sandcastle destroyed by the tide). Touch is invested throughout the novel with the power to excite, threat, and haunt. The most sinister reference is of course to wounded flesh, be it from amputation, torture, or rape. The children's story that obsesses Elizondo also dramatizes the tensions between sight and touch. The sucking of the thumbs is a temptation that little Conrad cannot resist. In that story, sight becomes the uncanny medium of a superhuman surveillance—a kind of superego tailor-made for children—that catches the boy committing the forbidden act, resulting in a merciless punishment that banishes the tactile by cutting off the thumbs (and emphasizing this absence makes the tactile even more haunting).

In this context, literature and photography both aim to recreate the realm of tactile sensations, as if trying to make concrete what reading a text or looking at a photograph keeps hopelessly virtual, namely, to put the reader/viewer literally in contact with the objects represented. Here photography plays an important role as medium, in a most literal sense: as the material sign that better mediates between the purely imaginary realm, produced by the literary word, and the “actual” or “real” objects that literary writing aspires to make concrete. This mediating role enabled by its concreteness has been pointed out by theorists of photography: Benjamin remarked that photographic reproduction “enables the original to meet the beholder halfway” and Bazin theorized that photography has a stake in both the mimetic illusion of the visual sign and the materiality of the picture itself.<sup>171</sup> This material condition is what allows photographs to stand so easily as substitutes for objects or persons, since they are seen as more or less transparent traces, simulacra or “emanations” of the object itself.<sup>172</sup>

Through the material support that makes it possible, the photograph appeals to touch more directly than the word, since the verbal sign, even if printed, is closer to the abstract auditory sense and the logocentric ontology of the “inner voice.” Besides its intrinsic “analogical plenitude” on the plane of representation, a photograph included in a book is itself a thing. Photographs not only can be and are actually retouched, but are “manipulated” in a more literal sense: they have been part of cultural practices

and personal habits that essentially require handling. The malleability, reproducibility, and overall availability of the photographic sign depend on a material condition that makes photographs not only viewable but also touchable things.<sup>173</sup>

Photography becomes a paradigmatic sign through which vision impossibly aspires to embodiment. Applying to the fixed image what Linda Williams says about pornography in cinema, we do not touch the flesh that appears in the photograph, but “our senses ‘make sense’ of the vision of touch in our own flesh.”<sup>174</sup> The aim of bridging the gap between sight and touch is found in much of Elizondo’s work. His prose strives to push the limits of the flatness in which writing and reading take place toward a construction of space that evokes a sculptural or volumetric dimension. In this respect, Curley points out that “*si Farabeuf* desmiente la ilusión representativa y dramatiza la distancia infranqueable entre el signo y la realidad que representa, lo hace en busca de lo imposible, es decir, de regresar el signo a su literalidad original, al objeto o a la experiencia que intenta describir” [If *Farabeuf* contradicts the illusion of representation and dramatizes the unbridgeable distance between sign and the reality that it represents, it does so in a quest for the impossible, that is, to return the sign to its original literality, to the object or the experience that it strives to describe].<sup>175</sup> This literary strategy demonstrates a will to overcome the constraints of verbal representation in order to achieve the concreteness of the tactile through the use of intense sensory descriptions. Thus Elizondo’s technical interest in *enargeia* results in a sharp prose style (to the detriment of plot development or psychological exploration). As writing strives to evoke spatial depth, Elizondo refers to photographs also in these same terms. In “Teoría mínima del libro,” a Mallarméan reflection on the poetics of the book, Elizondo begins by listing some of the elements that are sources of the writer’s endeavor:

¡Y las fotografías! ¡Qué tenebrosos precipicios se abren ante nosotros a veces con la visión de ciertas fotografías! Los personajes jamás identificados, las miradas cristalizadas sobre la superficie fluctuante y prístina de esas imágenes que nunca sabemos si son de metal o de cristal, de espejo o de luz congelada. (349)

[And photographs! What gloomy precipices are opened to us sometimes while looking at photographs! The never-identified characters, the crystallized gazes on the fluctuating and pristine surfaces of those images which we cannot tell if they are metal or crystal, mirror or frozen light.]

The term “precipicios” [precipices], dramatized by the adjective “tenebrosos” [gloomy, dark, sinister], stands as fitting metaphor for the wish (and fear) of seeing pictures acquire depth and volume, that is, of bridging the gap between the bidimensional and the tridimensional, as was the case in the stories by Darío and Cortázar. In this sense, the photograph of the Chinese execution, while remaining a surface, points emphatically beyond the plane of the print. Echoing the cuts that pierce the victim in the picture (literally, the surface of his body), the photograph aims to wound the reader/viewer, to pierce the safety of his detached experience, a fitting gesture in a novel whose central topic is wounded flesh.

Given the pre-eminence of the sense of sight in Western culture, many critics have asserted that photography has become an especially important tool in extending the eye’s abilities to probe, focus on, and examine an object or event.<sup>176</sup> If sight is “conceived to be the most objective and objectivizing of the senses,” as Peter Brooks states, photography has in turn been considered the most objective and objectivizing of our visual technologies.<sup>177</sup> And if, as Brooks argues, “the visual inspection of reality, as the core component of the epistemophilic project, is doomed never to grasp its ‘real’ object, since that object is imaginary, impossible,” photography is the paramount means by which we strive to overcome both the intrinsic limitations of vision and the impossibility of grasping the desired object.<sup>178</sup> In this context we should understand Elizondo’s claim that visual representations can be as intense and powerful as the “real” objects or events they depict. His stance points to the abiding power photographic images exert over our mental life. Renowned photographers claim that photography can capture the “essence” of the photographed object.<sup>179</sup> Elizondo brings to its most extreme consequence this possibility of picturing through the photographic medium the “essence”—or its most faithful simulacrum—of a person, action, or event (in Elizondo’s case, the apex of physical suffering).

Finally, another important link between sight and touch is the photograph's role as an aphrodisiac for the woman, a condition that points to the connection between sight and the triggering of a bodily—and specifically, sexual—reaction. The photograph not only becomes the vehicle of excitation, but also a visual model that provides directions on how to perform the ambiguous ritual—murder, theater, lovemaking, rape—suggested throughout the novel. Having been aroused by the image, the woman calls on Farabeuf to offer her body in the erotic/sadistic sacrifice that the photograph both anticipates and choreographs (91). This effect highlights the perversely delirious quality of the novel's diegetic universe, since presumably a “normal” reader/viewer would not feel sexually aroused by the photograph, but instead disgusted or horrified.

To conclude, a comparison of *Farabeuf* and “Las babas del diablo” is instructive. Both texts privilege the sense of sight, extended and magnified by the visual technology of photography. At the same time, both appeal to touch and embodiment as the ultimate or true realization of the space promised by vision. However, the gap between sight and touch is never bridged, but rather marked by the violence of fragmentation and disconnectedness, a violence whose power to destabilize is made apparent in the discursive structure of both texts. “Las babas del diablo” and *Farabeuf* are antirealist, experimental texts that challenge the stability of time, plot, and narrative voice. Almost contemporaneous, both employ photography—as practice and image—to open up a demonic space whose destructive energy ruptures the narrative coherence of the text itself. In both, the pervading anxiety has no remission or redemption, leaving the reader guessing about the “true” nature of events, which are felt throughout as sinister.

Given the common assumption of our culture about photography as a medium of realist representation, a photograph of torture makes available to the viewer the actual suffering in a way that cannot be achieved by non-photographic representations. Far from challenging the realist assumption ingrained in photography, Elizondo takes it to its most haunting extreme in order to paradoxically advance an antirealist narrative. His work becomes the impossible project of bridging the gap between regimes of representations. In *Farabeuf*, this impossibility points to the ideal of a mystical revelation that never happens, enmeshed in a text that mimics the violent exasperation of mental confusion.

