



The Cassez-Vallarta Case, a Crime Novel, official trailer, Netflix, 2022.

Antonio Mejía Guzmán*

Vicente Leñero, Precursor Of Non-fiction Netflix Series

The Genesis of Non-fiction Narrative

On October 6, 1978, writer Asunción Izquierdo and her husband, politician Gilberto Flores Muñoz, were brutally murdered in their Mexico City home. The couple's own grandson, Gilberto Flores Alavez, was blamed for the double homicide. The case rapidly gained notoriety in the Mexican press and in television news coverage. Public interest grew due to the macabre and lurid details. Despite keeping contemporary society on tenterhooks, the legal judgment was not impartial, since political implications hindered the investigations and in their haste to publicly identify the guilty party the authorities evaded their responsibility to uncover the truth of the matter.

Vicente Leñero included copious information on this crime in *Asesinato. El doble crimen de los Flores Muñoz* (Murder: The Double Crime of the Flores Muñoz).¹ The author defined his work as a non-fiction novel, introducing a genre

in Mexican literature and in the Latin American tradition of the documentary novel, which largely owes its emergence to the new journalism, after Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) had offered readers an innovative means of gaining an insider's perspective that they would not find in newspaper reports.

Nine years before Capote, Argentine writer Rodolfo Walsh, in *Operación masacre* (Operation Massacre) (1957),² evaded censure by developing a discursive cross between literature and journalism to denounce political abuses. As a result, socially committed writers had an ideal means of expression to examine areas of political life that were normally shielded from public scrutiny.

Using his own method, Leñero incorporated journalistic sources in his literary narrative, all with uncompromising documentary rigor. *Asesinato* presents only verified facts and denounces the multiple contradictory versions with actual testimony. His exercise has served as a model for a large number of journalists, narrators, documentarians,

* Antonio is a professor in the UNAM School of Higher Studies (FES) Acatlán campus; you can contact him at megaxunam@gmail.com.

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and in general producers of audiovisual content with the aim of proposing a revision of the great obsolete ideologies, questioning official or historical facts, or even searching for the truth of unsolved criminal cases.

When Reality Is Stranger than Fiction

In *Asesinato*, Vicente Leñero undertook to portray in fiction nothing more than reality, so, is reality more compelling than fiction? The question assumes that literature is distinguished from other means of communication by its purpose and by its subject matter; however, the non-fiction novel, as a hybrid genre, proposes a thin line between fact and fiction.

In his novel, Leñero adopts a structure in which he first presents a journalistic investigation and then a much more narrative and literary story, with the result that his text allows for a double reading. On the one hand, it satisfies the need for information of readers interested in learning the details, and, on the other, it offers a reconstruction of a narrative ordered like a classic crime novel.

In this novel, the narrator takes responsibility for revealing the truth of the matter by means of a documentary framework, although he knows from the outset that it may be a fruitless obsession. The main difference between the conventional crime novel and *Asesinato* is that in the former the reader is guaranteed to learn the solution to the mystery, whereas the latter, being based on real events, cannot provide a satisfactory dénouement. For that reason, the non-fiction novel, like documentary films, prefers open and inconclusive endings because the real life problem does not end simultaneously with the narration.

Leñero's reflection appears to keep its focus firmly on the truth hidden behind the Flores Muñoz double crime. He constantly reiterates the need to set himself apart from the police investigation conducted under duress and even constructed on false pretenses. The novel requires that the reader stay alert to decipher a series of narratives that

are at once interconnected and contradictory, but above all with an exceedingly vague distinction between truth and falsehood.

It cannot be otherwise, as the author reveals the inconsistencies in the legal process Gilberto Flores Alavez faced. By reproducing news articles, witness testimonies, and even photographs and cartoons, Leñero shows how a criminal profile was constructed on the basis of moral and social assumptions about crime. Thus, Gilberto serves as the target for multiple thematic labels associated with his social class, psychological profile, and religious beliefs, which permeated the deliberations on his sentencing.

The Corrupting Effect of Post-truth

The space for lies and obfuscation of truth contribute to the creation of a criminal profile that satisfies public opinion more than the legal process. With remarkable sensibility, Vicente Leñero noted a series of problems in his time in the transmission of information, like the proliferation of fake news, failure to corroborate sources, and the existence of multiple narrative versions. It is interesting to emphasize that non-fiction audiovisual productions also focus intensely on the effects of what today we refer to as post-truth.

In *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, Ralph Keyes describes a time in which dishonesty inspires the creation of euphemisms that then become lies. As a result, people grow accustomed to living in deceit, or what is worse still in a world where the difference between fact and fiction no longer exists, as a new category of political, literary, journalistic, mediatic, and academic reality is created, which is neither completely fact nor fiction.

The greatest danger of post-truth is that, in its most radical manifestation, each individual is the owner of a truth that stands up from their particular viewpoint, making the interpretation of the underlying facts all the more important. In a world dominated by the principle of might makes right, truth is under scrutiny, and we need to acknowledge that there is no single, valid version, but rather varying perspectives with equivalent weight.

Narrators confronting the post-truth world need to evaluate the sources of the information, assumptions, values, and even the story of the enunciator. For that rea-

son, after realizing that both reporters and witnesses have inserted contradictory and fictitious assertions in their statements, Leñero casts doubt on forensic examinations since, instead of providing greater certainty, for both the defense and the prosecution, they give rise to legal arguments and interpretations for or against Gilberto's innocence or guilt.

In the end, the problem of post-truth foreshadowed in *Asesinato* underscores the irony inherent in omissions by the authorities involved to reach a fabricated solution. Misconstruction of witness statements, torture by the police, and sensationalism in the media are only some of the factors that hindered an unimpeachable deliberation. These problems continue to plague Mexican society.

Impunity in the Age of Netflix

The repercussions of Vicente Leñero's work are evident both in contemporary Mexican writers and in made-for-television documentaries. In a time when audiovisual media were considered separate from print, Leñero explored a means of exposing the flaws in the Mexican justice system using literary and journalistic methods. Today, there is a surfeit of non-fiction series on issues of political and social import that embrace the same premise of exposing impunity in Mexico.

Although production of non-fiction audiovisual content has existed for some time, today, programs and series based on real events are broadcast on streaming platforms with great popular success and share with *Asesinato* the use of a language constructed using a combination of documentary segments with other, fictional segments, in varying proportions. Also, in both cases the topic remains the same: impunity. The structure of the non-fiction novel transposed onto a television format has served to examine issues of political and social import.

An illustrative case is the non-fiction text by Jorge Volpi *Una novela criminal* (A Crime Novel), which maintains an intertextual relationship with *Asesinato* and has been adapted as a documentary series: *El caso Cassez-Vallarta: una novela criminal* (The Cassez-Vallarta Case, a Crime novel), directed by Gerardo Naranjo and produced by Volpi. Shown on Netflix in 2022, it adheres faithfully to the written text: it consists primarily of archival material, interviews with all the central figures in the case, and

some dramatizations, in order to illustrate the most controversial points in the legal process faced by Florence Cassez and Israel Vallarta, all exposing the climate of corruption and the domestic and international political interventions that prevented them from receiving an impartial trial.

Based on the precedent of Volpi's book, the complexity of the case and the impossibility of reaching a reliable conclusion are products of a "corrupting effect," in other words a lack of reliability in the testimony of victims immersed in a milieu where the powerful lie not only as a matter of course, but also in such a way that their lies avoid inconveniencing anyone. To one lie another is added, usually by police authorities, making it impossible to admit any statement as evidence, something the author will explicitly identify as a post-truth.

Unfortunately, in Mexican history this has not been the only example of impunity, and Netflix has shown that there is a marked interest in ascertaining the truth of crimes and cases with political and social implications, since viewers have expressed a need to access this kind of audiovisual creations. This in turn has created a market for fictional products, and an opportunity to build a cultural industry based on crime and violence whose social and economic repercussions can be attributed to the disperse, chaotic, and fragmented way newsworthy events unfold in such a corrupt environment.

Ayotzinapa, el paso de la tortuga (Ayotzinapa, at the Tortoise's Pace) (2018), a documentary directed by Enrique García Meza, narrates how corruption officialized a so-called "historical truth," subsequently debunked by the discovery of the lies and euphemisms of the administration of the time.³ In this work the encroachment of post-truth is evident, given that the historical truth fulfills the need to publicly name a perpetrator without truly holding them accountable, due to political interventions in the

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case. Above all, it constitutes a half-truth because the key questions of where the forty-three missing students are and what really happened remain unanswered.

Red privada: ¿quién mató a Manuel Buendía? (Private Network: Who Killed Manuel Buendía?) (2021), a documentary by Manuel Alcalá, examines the practice of journalism in a context of political censure. The feature film is constructed with the same strategy of interview and archival material used by Buendía, taken from the column also entitled *Red privada* published under his byline for over thirty years. Buendía affirmed that his sources were nothing more than news reports that no one deemed worthy of attention. Thus, the protagonist gathers information on the relationship between politics and organized crime. Exposing it cost him his life in broad daylight, and the Netflix production examines the different hypotheses surrounding the case.

Like other non-fiction novels and documentary series produced by Netflix, the case of Manuel Buendía deals with the effect of post-truth. The question Alcalá's documentary seeks to answer does not yet have a conclusive answer, because the very process of investigation is unviable due to the political pressures and interests of the parties involved. Alcalá does not attempt to arrive at a single truth but rather strives to give voice to different perspectives and lines of enquiry surrounding the case. In summary, the creative work on this crime, like *Asesinato* and the other examples cited here, appeals to the expository function to expose the forms of self-preservation of impunity.

This sampling of non-fiction narratives is augmented by other significant examples available on Netflix, like *Historia de un crimen: la búsqueda* (History of a Murder: The Search) (2020), a dramatized series that recreates cases with social impact, like the murder of the child Paulette Gebara, a police mystery that has defied solution. Also, they include political cases like the assassination of 1994 official party (PRI) candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, who is also one of the

central subjects of the documentary series 1994: *Poder, rebeldía y crimen en México* (1994: Power, Rebellion, and Crime in Mexico), directed by Guillermo Osorno in 2019. A *plena luz: el caso Narvarte* (In Broad Daylight: The Narvarte Case) (2022), by Alberto Arnaut, reveals evidence of corruption and concealment in the investigation of the murders of five people in Mexico City. *Duda razonable: historia de dos secuestros* (Reasonable Doubt: The Story of Two Kidnappings) (2021), a film directed by Roberto Hernández, which is presented as a documentary that helped reveal the truth behind the deficient Mexican justice system, addresses the failure of the presumption of innocence and contradicting versions.

Conclusions

In the span of more than forty years separating the publication of *Asesinato* from the release of non-fiction series by Netflix, there is a recurring theme: narratives seeking to expose the lies and corruption come up against the blinding effect of post-truth. This phenomenon has created different verbal and audiovisual products that respond directly to the information needs of mass media and consumers.

Consequently, post-truth has triggered interest in non-fiction, in both novels and audiovisual productions, whether for market-related or purely creative reasons, since they present data exclusive to one medium on platforms that other discursive media cannot develop due to their formal qualities.

If we consider post-truth as a radical attitude born of the breakdown of absolutist thought to make way for the individual and their personal interpretation as the central arbiters of what is true and what is false, we can appreciate the true scale of the problem that arises from comparing multiple versions of the same event. Each individual version may be as valid as any other and would have equal probative value. Non-fiction novels and series bear witness to it. ■■■

Notes

1 See Vicente Leñero, *Asesinato. El doble crimen de los Flores Muñoz* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 1985) [Editor's Note].

2 First published in Buenos Aires by Ediciones Sigla [Editor's Note].



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