



Towards a theory of grotesque transparency: The case of Hugo Chávez

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to lay the foundations of a theory of grotesque transparency that looks into the aesthetics of ‘ocular politics’. Inspired by Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s definition of the *esperpento* – a grotesque representation of the hero – this interpretative schema uncovers the rhetorical, narrative and iconic mechanisms that constitute a form of political communication that creates the illusion of total affective disclosure. We tested the premises of this theory by studying a public performance of the now-deceased Venezuela President Hugo Chávez where discursive genres overlap (presidential speech, comic soundbites and preacher’s homily), dissolving the ‘truth’ in an ‘excess of transparency’, and also performing a function of social criticism through desecration of institutional formalities.

Keywords

aesthetics, Hugo Chávez, grotesque, political communication, political culture, transparency, Venezuela

The objective of this article is to lay the foundations of a theory about grotesque transparency and apply it to the analysis of a political performance that we consider representative of ‘deformative disclosure’. The main premise of this theory is that the grotesque is overly present in the public sphere thanks to the ability of institutions and public to easily diffuse and access all kind of images, including shocking or disruptive images. The beheading of hostages by radical groups, scenes of environmental disasters, the display of graphic representations of some diseases, or even the public portrayal of elected officials’ problematic

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behaviours are expressions of a growing ‘transparency of the horrible’. These cases share a common strategic focus, claiming that revealing the realistically grotesque is the more efficient and effective way to achieve a political or policy goal. With different levels of legitimacy, the ‘visual desecration’ performed by terrorists (Baines and O’Shaughnessy, 2014; Heath and Waymer, 2014) or the display of crude images of former tobacco smokers dying of lung cancer (Canadian Cancer Society, 2014) are both expressions of grotesque transparency.

A case study will serve to illustrate the validity of this theory. By focusing on Venezuela under the rule of Hugo Chávez we will demonstrate how the aesthetics of the grotesque contributes to a better understanding of the political performance as a social and cultural construct. Even though the Venezuelan case may be seen as exceptional, we argue that Chávez’s communication stratagems represent a trend where atavistic discourses – filled with mythical and religious references – are magnified through the web of media and digital networks that enhance the impression of ‘total disclosure’.

We will start by presenting the theoretical foundations of the analytical framework that looks at the theatrical features (Alexander et al., 2006) of grotesque transparency from the perspective of ‘ocular politics’, following Green’s (2010: 9) characterization of the ‘ocular model of popular empowerment’. Second, we will present our case study and its socio-political context to discern the old and new aspects of rhetoric that reproduces the common traits of Latin American populism. Third, we will analyse Chávez’s performance, describing both its oral and iconic manifestations. Fourth, we will discuss the results through the lens of the deformed representation to illustrate the validity of this model to study the aesthetics of grotesque transparency. Finally, we will present provisional conclusions and envision future research in the context of a larger programme that will study different expressions of grotesque transparency in public health and environmental activism.

Theoretical foundations

The grotesque as esperpentic performance

In the era of ‘ocular politics’ the locus has been displaced from the ‘voice’ – as discursive or rhetorical expression – to the ‘eye’ since most of the time people have access to politics by watching others who are engaged in different kinds of representations or, more precisely, in social performances (Alexander, 2004). The condition of spectatorship defines a role for the people that, according to Green (2010: 5), has undermined the ‘rationality of public discourse, thus further alienating everyday citizens from the sense that they are a party to genuine political decision making and the reasoning on which it is based’. A more nuanced perspective will argue that the politics of spectatorship is an alternate route to participation in the public sphere. Social performance understood as drama – according to Alexander (2014: 9–10) – ‘is fundamental to the search for meaning and solidarity in a post-ritual world [...]’. Without drama, collective and personal meanings could not be sustained, evil could not be identified, and justice would be impossible to obtain.’ In Goffman’s (1956) terms, both the performer of these political representations and the public for them accept the theatrical convention and agree that

they are immersed in the ‘real reality’, engaging in an institutionalized dynamics of seduction and deception (Cooper, 1993).

The focus on the ‘ocular’ emphasizes the importance of aesthetics in ‘spectacular politics’ (Green, 2010: 181), because projecting an image that fits with a certain canon of ‘beauty’, or even ‘good’, is essential in such dramas. As noted by Schill (2012: 122), visual images play many functions in political communication as a way to reinforce arguments, set agendas, dramatize policy, but also connect to societal symbols and even add ambiguity. Nevertheless, it is evident that via ‘ocular politics’ people can also look at the ugly, the grotesque or the kitschy side of politicians and politics because these too are categories of the aesthetics of institutions (Strati, 1996).

A theory of grotesque transparency will look into such political performances or dramas as representations of what is outside the norm. We follow here Bakhtin’s (1984: 19) definition of ‘grotesque realism’:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract: it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity [...]

The grotesque as an aesthetic category has been mainly studied as a disruptive manifestation of the arts and literature that is historically situated, and therefore evolves and changes according to taste and moral judgement (Eco, 2007). But the representations of the grotesque always convey a certain idea or impression of the ‘*deformed, fantastic, ugly*’ (Schevill, 2009 [1977]: 2, original italics) as ‘an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world’ (Kayser, 1966: 188).

We propose to approach the grotesque not only as a cultural manifestation but also as a social performance that corresponds to the *esperpento* according to the definition of Spanish writer Valle-Inclán (1981). In his play *Luces de bohemia* the characters Don Latino and Max discuss this concept:

- Don Latino* – The classical heroes reflected in the concave mirrors give the *Esperpento*. The tragic meaning of Spanish life only can be achieved through an aesthetics that is systematically deformed [...]
- Max* – Spain is a grotesque deformation of the European civilization [...]
The most beautiful images in a concave mirror are absurd [...]
- Max* – [...] The deformation is no longer so when it is the subject of a perfect mathematics. My current aesthetic, with the mathematics of the concave mirrors, transforms the classical norms [...] (Valle-Inclán, 1981: 106, our translation)

The *esperpento* is a theatrical genre that makes a clear contrast between the classical hero, that represents the norm of the beautiful and the truth, and its deformed representation that is accessible to the public through the ‘deformative illumination’ of concave mirrors. Valle-Inclán introduced his aesthetics of the grotesque by creating a tension between the ‘norm’ of the ‘civilized word’ and an ‘alternate’ norm – the one derived from the mathematics of the concave mirrors – where another kind of reflexivity or ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ (Lash 1999, 1995) is possible.

Excessive transparency

Transparency is often viewed and discussed as an ideal of institutional governance (Gupta and Mason, 2014), corporate communication (Oliver, 2004) or international relations (Lord, 2006). In that sense, transparency is defined as:

the possibility of knowing – in the name of the public’s right to information – about the structures, the functioning and the actions of any given institution, either public or private [...] (Balle, 2006: 449, our translation)

We will approach transparency as an impression that today is created mainly through the *esperpentic* mediation of digital networks (Meijer, 2009: 256). It will also be understood as an ideological construct (Libaert, 2003: 47) that serves institutional or corporate interests. Those engaged in ‘transparently grotesque’ performances affirm that they are proactively disclosing the ‘truth’ to the public (Oliver, 2004). Our theory is interested in a kind of performed transparency that emphasizes the ‘deformative’ representations that – according to the person or institution engaged in such performances – are a ‘truthful reflection’ of a given reality, in line with Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of ‘grotesque realism’. In other words, the declared intention of being ‘fully and disgustingly’ transparent by the communicator defines the object of this theory. The aim of ‘being real’ goes along with the aim of challenging established formalities. In that regard, *esperpentic* performed transparency is strategically viewed as a cost-effective way to achieve a goal (political or social) by placing emphasis on its ‘authenticity’ (Alexander, 2004).

By disrupting formalities of the norm or the beautiful, grotesque performances reveal all through an ‘excess of transparency’ – under the premise of ‘total disclosure’ – in an environment of exuberant communication that, paradoxically, could lead to opacity as a consequence of the ‘incredible irrationality of information overloads, misinformation, disinformation and out-of-control information’ (Lash, 2002: 2). We can assimilate this opacity of the exuberance with Tsoukas’ (1997) notion of the ‘tyranny of light’, used originally to describe the blinding effect of excessive data, that in our case is linked to the ocular or performative excesses of an aesthetic of provocation.

The focus on the ocular also highlights the role of the affects in the way the public ‘consumes’ politics (Citton, 2008; Latour and Lépinay, 2009; Martin-Juchat, 2014). These affects are even more powerful when the audience is under the impression that it is attending a performance that could be assimilated with the psychological notion of ‘emotional transparency’ or ‘this tendency to overestimate the extent to which others can read one’s internal states’ (Gilovich et al., 1998: 332).

The impression of authenticity of the *esperpento* is paradoxically strengthened by the ‘exaggeration or magnification of certain traits of a given reality’ as a way to convey a ‘critical realism’ (Oliva, 1978: 59, our translation). The *esperpento* shows a daily reality that becomes – by the effect of deformation – ‘strange’ and ‘unreal’: ‘the spectator suddenly finds himself in front of a familiar world that surprises and shocks him’ (Campanella, 1980: 43, our translation). Through the double effect of exaggeration and alienation, the *esperpento* achieves its function of social criticism because it defies conventions and formalities associated with the political performance. The ambiguity of grotesque transparency derives from the quality of the *esperpento* of being a ‘tragedy that is not tragedy’

(Valle-Inclán, 1981: 105), that easily navigates from one genre to another, from the drama to the comic and vice versa.

The aquarium metaphor

The theory of grotesque transparency could be well described with the metaphor of the aquarium. The spectators looking at the fish tank are under the impression that they are seeing the underwater world as ‘it is’. Nevertheless, the performed transparency is achieved through the mediation of the glass and the water, both having a ‘deformative’ effect on the representation and images that are accessible to the public. But most important, this transparency that discloses the underwater world to the audience is the result of a *mise-en-scène* of a well-arranged setting where rocks, plants and animals are part of a manufactured reality that pretends to be authentic. Summarizing, a theory of grotesque transparency looks into ‘ocular politics’ as a performance where politicians or political institutions pretend to convey the reality or the truth to the public through an act of ‘total disclosure’. By focusing on the aesthetics of deformity – disrupting the canons of acceptability/normality – this form of transparent performance emphasizes affection or passions as the drivers of political communication. Grotesque transparency puts the accent on a different kind of reflexivity that underlies the mimetic, the symbolic and the aesthetics as ways of participating in public deliberation.

The case study

Hugo Chávez’s discourse has been studied as a form of mythical rhetoric with epic connotations that aims to consolidate a political identity (Capriles, 2006; Nahón Serfaty, 2010; Torres, 2009). This discourse, characterized by a narrative of emancipation, is highly persuasive because it resonates with imaginaries that are engrained in the mindset of the Venezuelan society that embodies the syncretism of the European, Hispano-Catholic and aboriginal mentalities (Briceño Guerrero, 1997). Furthermore, Chávez’s discourse has strong ‘messianic’ connotations, where elements of the traditional Catholic theology merge with ‘unorthodox’ popular religiosity (Peraza, 2013). Our objective is to explore an alternative path to interpret this discourse as a political representation from the point of view of the ‘aesthetical reflexivity’ (Lash, 1995) through the analytical lenses of grotesque transparency. We argue that this performance corresponds more to the *esperpento* – as defined by Valle-Inclán (1981) – than to the mythical epic.

We are going to focus our attention on an exceptional moment in Chávez’s discursive continuum that conveys the *esperpentic* features of his performances. On Holy Thursday on 5 April 2012 Chávez gave a speech during the mass that was celebrated in his hometown of Sabaneta de Barinas. The event, broadcast on national TV and radio, was particularly dramatic because Chávez, who was suffering from a terminal cancer, used the occasion to plead for his health in a confessional tone.

Before going through the analysis of Chávez’s performance, we should present the context in which the now-deceased president conveyed his speech. The description will be guided by the following question: is there anything different in the so-called ‘Bolivarian revolution’ from the typical militaristic and *caudillo*-centric regimes that

have dominated Venezuelan republican history? We could be tempted to answer that there is nothing new in this context that repeats the well-known atavistic cult of Bolívar and the strongman with a mix of populist politics nourished by the petro-state's wealth (Coronil, 1997). The historian Carreras Damas (2011) has qualified *chavismo* as the most recent manifestation of the 'Bolívarianism-militarism' (*bolivarianismo-militarismo*) that he qualifies as an 'ideology of replacement' of the liberal and social-democratic political programmes.

Nevertheless, some authors have identified new characteristics in the *chavista* era. Pino Iturrieta (2013: 16–17) notes that the main difference with past socio-political processes resides in the capability of this regime – even after Chávez's passing – of changing people's 'routine' through a system that strongly 'influence[s] the private life and the collective attitudes'. Bisbal (2009, 2013: 49, our translation) has studied the consolidation of a 'communicational hegemony' in the last 15 years where the state becomes 'the space-mechanism of intervention in the life of society and, thus, ... an agent of *intervention* and *regulation* of different and diverse realities involved in society'.

This era has been defined by the invasive nature of Chávez's media performances via his weekly show *Aló Presidente* and the long national broadcasts known as '*cadena*s' that marked the political dynamics in Venezuela (Morales, 2013; Rosa Gualda, 2012). According to Cañizález (2012: 62), Chávez's 'media presidency' ('*presidencia mediática*') was not only a big and sophisticated propaganda machine, but literally a media-based government, where policy and decision making were performed live on TV. Culturally the *chavista* regime has also displaced the former 'elite' to create and consolidate institutions (museums, film production facilities and grants, publishing corporations, etc.) that serve the interests of the revolution, claiming to defend 'popular culture' (*cultura popular*) and the 'true' national identity (Kozak Rovero, 2013; Silva-Ferrer, 2013).

Besides the controversy regarding the theses of continuity versus rupture, the *chavista* regime clearly has built a new communicational and symbolic ecosystem that seems to survive the physical absence of its leader Hugo Chávez. What is new here is not the well-known and documented rhetoric of the 'good revolutionary' (*buen revolucionario*) (Rangel, 2005 [1976]), but the sophisticated and expansive network of media, discourses and images that shape people's subjectivity. It could be argued that this hegemonic aim is not new, since the propaganda apparatuses of communism and fascism played the same dominant role. As we will illustrate in our analysis, Chávez's case represents a powerful combination of atavistic imaginaries with the tools of a hyper-connected world.

The performance

On Thursday 5 April 2012 Hugo Chávez appeared on national TV in the context of the *Jueves Santo* mass that was celebrated in his hometown of Sabaneta de Barinas. The mass was dedicated to the health of the president, who was suffering from what – we now know – was terminal cancer. The entire ritual was broadcast, including a short homily by the priest who celebrated the mass. When the priest was about to close the ceremony asking the parishioners to 'leave in peace' ('*pueden ir en paz*'), Chávez interrupted him, moving to the front of the scene to say a 'few words'. His speech lasted around 45

minutes.¹ The president played the ‘homiletic role’ that is usually the preserve of the priest. Even if his words had a deeply personal and emotional connotation (his parents and siblings were present at the mass), he also made remarks that may be qualified as an ‘unorthodox theology’, as will be shown later in this article.

Our analytical method will focus on the president’s speech, the actors (Chávez, the members of his family, particularly his mother, the priest and the audience present at the mass) and the broadcast images, all of them being constitutive elements of Hugo Chávez’s performance in a televised *mise-en-scène*. Generally, Chávez’s presentations were both improvised (he rarely read his speeches) and well scripted at the same time. Analytically we will look into a ‘script’ that, according to Alexander (2006: 58), reveals the friction between ‘background representations’ (socio-cultural and even political collective representations) and the contingency of the televised live performance. We will then dissect this performance using the grotesque transparency framework putting the accent on its *esperpentic* character. Chávez is the centre of the paradigmatic performance of the dying hero – who becomes an expression of the exceptional, the extreme and the highly dramatic. We will also show how he disrupts the established formalities and meanings of symbols and rituals that correspond to the ‘background representations’.

Before moving forward with the analysis of our case study, it is important to place this particular performance in a long continuum of *esperpentic* representations where Chávez challenged the formalities of the republic, including, among many others, when he referred to a ruling of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice as a ‘piece of shit’ (*plasta* in Spanish) (July 2002),² the broadcasting on national TV of the opening of the sarcophagus containing the skeleton of the Liberator Simón Bolívar (July 2010),³ and his long ‘State of the Union’ speech in the National Assembly that lasted 10 hours, with no particular structure or coherence (January 2012).⁴ In his almost 15 years of tenure, the now-deceased Venezuelan president was consistently disruptive in his media presentations, acting as a provocateur who pushed the boundaries of political spectacle.

During the entire broadcast of that Holy Thursday, Chávez had behind him the image of *Jesús el Nazareno* – the representation of the suffering Christ carrying the cross and wearing a purple garment. Flowers surrounded the image of Jesus. In some parts of Chávez’s speech, the director of the televised broadcast made some zoom-out from the *Nazareno*’s face, which is bleeding because of the crown of thorns.⁵ The president was wearing a rosary around his neck.

Chávez’s performance was ‘emotionally transparent’. His initial remarks were about memories of his youth and references to his feelings while he was holding ‘the loving hand of my mother, the loving hand of my father’ (*la mano de mi madre amorosa, la mano amorosa de mi padre*). He justified his words that day because of his urgent need of opening-up in a confessional tone:

because sometimes one feels many things that usually [we] don’t say, but today I feel the need – Father [referring to the priest] – of saying what I’ve been feeling for almost a year, when I started to assume that I have inside of me a very malign disease, and as we know is a real menace that marks the end of the road for many people, the end of the physical road. This is the truth ...⁶

The ‘emotional transparency’ achieved its peak towards the end of the speech. A tearful Chávez implored to be cured of his cancer:

if all what one has lived hasn't been enough, is what I feel, and I tell God, if what one lived and has lived hasn't been enough, that I deserved this, I welcome it, but give me life, even if it's burning life, painful life, I don't care [...] [applause]. Give me your crown Christ! Give it to me because I am ready to bleed out! Give me your cross, a hundred of crosses because I am willing to carry them, but give me life because I still have things to do for this people and for this Fatherland [...] [applause]. Don't take me yet, give me your cross, give me your thorns, give me your blood, I am ready to carry them but with life, Christ my Lord. Amen [...]

Between the dramatic highs at the beginning and towards the end of his speech, Chávez made a few jokes about his family and himself – a common feature in his public presentations – that contributed to create the sensation of an ‘emotional rollercoaster’. He engaged in a dialogue with his mom (Elena) about the wooing stratagems of his father: ‘*President Chávez*: Where did my father woo you? In San Hipólito? Well! *Elena Frías de Chávez*: My dear, God bless you, protect you [...] *President Chávez*: Let's not talk about that, secret [...]’⁸

Later in the performance, after talking about the validity of Darwin's evolution theory (that according to Chávez was accepted by Pope John Paul II), he made the following remarks:

In truthfulness we come from the monkey. The genetic difference between a monkey and us is 0.2 percent, or even less, pay attention to the monkey. Recently I saw a monkey, he was dancing, and when he sees a girl he dances, dances, he is in love that monkey, Ah! [laughs] The monkey in love [...]

On a more serious and solemn note, Chávez also used some of his typical rhetorical ‘tricks’ drawing parallels in his narrative between Bolívar, Christ and some other revolutionary figures, including himself. Chávez presented the narrative of the ‘parallel lives’ of the heroes:

Since I was a kid already my life was not mine [...]. And it has been like this all these years. And I remembered Bolívar, Bolívar when he said in Angostura: ‘I've been only a simple toy dragged by the revolutionary hurricane [...]’, this life has been in truthfulness like this. And remembering Bolívar, and looking at the image of the Christ *Nazareno* with his Cross, with his crown of thorns, with his blood, in his Calvary, in his passion, I remembered that Bolívar also said, certainly when he actually met with Christ [...] [here Chávez lost track of the speech for a moment and diverted to another subject, to come back later to complete Bolívar remark about him, Christ and Don Quixote ‘the three great idiots – *majaderos* – in history’].¹⁰

The homiletic character of the performance became evident when Chávez entered the unorthodox path of his particular ‘revolutionary theology’. He compared, for example, Che Guevara with Christ: ‘Che Guevara, another Christ who lived and died as Christ; like Bolívar he lived and died “*crísticamente*”, not even “*cristianamente*”, “*crística-mente*”! The Che [...]’¹¹ He also reflected on the ‘socialist’ doctrine of Jesus, conveying an argument that is close to the one advanced by Liberation Theology (Gutiérrez, 1971):

I say that with Christ's ideas, the ideas of Jesus, we can develop the foundations of a socialist project. I said once that Christ was socialist. A Catholic bishop responded here: 'This is not possible, that it was like saying that Christ was an airplane pilot [...].' And not only Christ, all the great prophets of Christianity, Isaiah. Oh Isaiah! Isaiah was a whip ...¹²

Death is the underlying topic of this performance, even when is not being openly named. But at some point Chávez referred to death in a sort of superstitious invocation or counter-invocation:

One day he said to me [referring to his mentor General Pérez Arcaya]: 'I am listening to you, to your speeches, and you are talking too much about death. You shouldn't, because *abyssus abyssus invocat*.' He threw to me a *latinazo*: 'The abyss calls the abyss [...]' Thus one should feel and talk about life, love, hope [...] even in the difficult circumstances of life [...]¹³

This performance can be summarized as an *esperpentic* sequence of images, narratives and actors that convey an aim of emotional transparency from the speaker (the confessional and imploratory tone of the speech) through the deformative glass of superposed symbols, arguments and stories. It's a combination of climatic and anticlimactic moments mixed with personal drama and humour, with a note of theological criticism – disrupting traditional or orthodox rituals and dogmas – all of this encompassing an aesthetic of political communication that will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

The *esperpentic* feature of this particular performance renders well one of the premises of grotesque transparency: it makes visible a side of the hero that is normally hidden or minimized by the mythical narrative. In that sense, the performance corresponds to the notion of 'grotesque realism' (Bakhtin, 1984) that transitions from the ideal to the material, in this case represented by the sick body of the speaker. As Valle-Inclán (1981) said, the image of the classical hero becomes distorted through the mediation of the glass or the mirror (the medium), exhibiting the ugliness or weaknesses that are usually hidden by his extraordinary accomplishments. In this mass performance, Chávez – the heroic *Comandante* of the Bolivarian Revolution – disclosed his emotional frailty and fears before the terrible disease he was suffering. The hero becomes deformed by the 'concave mirrors' of the performance, losing his 'immaculate attributes'. But by doing so, strategically he is able to close the gap between 'claimed' and 'perceived' authenticity (Molleda and Jain, 2013), and reinforces the connection with his followers who are emotionally attached to the leader and his revolution (Lecumberri, 2012).

This kind of deformative transparency creates the illusion of total disclosure, particularly of a 'sentimental disclosure' where feelings are conveyed with the brutal honesty in such dramatic circumstances (Chávez facing a terminal disease). This performance shows the tensions between the aim of 'showing everything' and the opacity that surrounded the diagnosis, treatment, convalescence and, finally, the passing of the president.

Chávez's performance – including the use of religious images – also meets the 'critical realism' function of the *esperpento*. In this case the criticism manifests through the displacement of the sacred. Chávez visually displaced Christ from the centre of the mass

ritual, putting himself in front of the scene and placing the *Nazareno* carrying the cross in the back, and he did so in the context of the *Jueves Santo* (Holy Thursday) celebration. Additionally, through his homiletic exercise, Chávez ‘desecrated’ the ritual by introducing his particular theological arguments, such as the one that put Che Guevara and Jesus at the same level of ‘Christology’.

The narrative of the *Comandante* – not necessarily linear or well structured – is also *esperpentic* because flows easily from the personal drama to the banality of a silly joke. Rhetorically effective, this hybrid discourse moves from the supposedly sublime to the mundane, breaking the limits between genres (the presidential speech or the homily) and normative frameworks (the sequence of the ritual is broken). The sacred becomes fluid and comprehensive, missing its character of a separate realm that makes it ‘uniquely pure from an ethical point of view’ (Tessier and Prades, 1991: 21). Chávez’s irreverent narrative resonates with the Venezuelan religious syncretism, where the sacred and profane coexist in various manifestations of popular religiosity (Ascencio, 2012). More importantly, this ‘charismatic domination transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms’ (Weber, 1978: 1115), appealing to the ‘revolutionary imagery’ of the ‘charismatic community’ that in this case equates to the ‘people’.

The distinctiveness of this *esperpento* performance, and maybe its appeal, resides also in its similarities with other forms of entertainment close to ‘reality TV’ (Andacht, 2010) and the melodrama or the *telenovelas* that are linked to Venezuelan culture and politics (Acosta-Alzuru, 2011, 2014). We can apply here what Carroll (2004 [1990]) said about the appeal of horror films founded on the disclosing sequence of the plot that reveals, little by little, the monstrous to the audience. By the same mechanism of discovery, the deformative transparency of this performance evolves towards the revelation of the emotional/human ‘truth’ of the fragile/dying hero.

But the aesthetic value of such performance goes well beyond the pleasures of contemplation or its ‘entertaining’ effects. Being mainly political, the ‘merit’ of this representation resides in its capacity to mobilize the ‘passionate interests’ (Latour and Lépinay, 2009)¹⁴ that will define its truthfulness, its usefulness and its beauty, according to Gabriel Tarde’s conception of social value (Tarde, 2006 [1902]). The aesthetic in this case surpasses the domain of the arts or the entertainment to serve the goals of power. We are here in the presence of the ‘politics of affection’ (Debray, 1981: 187), where the leader symbolizes ‘*el pueblo*’ and becomes the vehicle of the people’s aspirations and hopes (Smilde, 2011), while he conveys his view of ‘*poder popular*’ as the power concentrated in and exerted vertically by the state in the name of the people (Reyna, 2013).

Chávez’s performance could be placed in the Latin American populist tradition that combines entertainment with propaganda. Jorge Luis Borges (2011 [1955]: 9, our translation) defined Peron’s regime in Argentina – a regime that shares many similarities with the Bolivarian revolution – as *l’illusion comique* ‘where the methods of commercial propaganda and literature for concierges were applied to the government of the republic’. Nevertheless, the originality of Chávez’s *esperpentic* performance comes from the communication ecosystem in which it took place. As part of a complex and invasive media/cultural apparatus intended to shape the subjectivity of the public – its values, tastes, ideas and opinions – this performance was aimed at revealing the emotional, personal truth of the leader of the revolution announcing a political transition.

The problem with deformative transparency is that the glasses and mirrors of the *esperpento* filter the 'truth', rendering it opaque through an effect of saturation, either by the quantitative excesses of very long televised presentations (Chirinos, 2013; Safar, 2013)¹⁵ or the qualitative excesses of provocation (as in the case of Bolívar's exhumation). The 'tyranny of transparency' could produce distortions linked to its own disclosure consequences:

The effects of transparency depend on what it reveals. That point seems obvious, but it is one frequently missed by a wide spectrum of scholars, analysts and politicians [...] transparency will not always illuminate positive information or encourage desirable behavior. (Lord, 2006: 117)

The pragmatics of grotesque transparency deals with the way people interpret and use the discourse and the images that have been conveyed. We cannot elaborate on the reactions to Chávez's performance based on our study, but it is clear that the overlapping of genres, images and narratives (political, religious, comical, dramatic) is the source of an overlapping or blurring of meanings. Or, in the words of Atlan (2010: 254, our translation, italics in the original): '[it] is the total *dissolution* of the truth in the fake, or of the sacred in its dogmatic caricatures'. It is through the display of a certain narrative and images that transparency is performed. But this transparency is 'deformative' or *esperpentic* because it disrupts established meanings (e.g. the powerful hero becomes weak), formalities (e.g. the 'homiletic joke' defies traditional ritual) and conventions (e.g. Che Guevara is equal to the Christ), making it an aesthetic of provocation.

Conclusions and future research

Testing the premises of this theory allowed us to identify six major traits that define grotesque transparency:

1. The performed transparency of the deformed or *esperpento* is an expression of 'ocular politics' that favours different forms of reflexivity (aesthetic reflexivity) as an alternate way of political deliberation. As in the aquarium metaphor, the public has access to the political performance first and foremost through an aesthetic experience of the emotionally transparent that influences their perception of authenticity.
2. The *esperpentic* performance creates the impression of sentimental or affective disclosure through a well-crafted *mise-en-scène* that, as in the case of the aquarium, is perceived through the magnifying and distorting glasses of a web of media and digital networks. In that regard, the multiplication of mediation instances (Valle-Inclán's 'concave mirrors') of grotesque transparency enriches its symbolic and pragmatic power.
3. Paradoxically, because of the overlapping of genres, its disruptive nature and the exuberance of the images conveyed, this transparent performance ends by creating the opacity of blurring meanings and ambiguity. In that sense, this representation is truly *esperpentic* because it transitions from drama to the comic, or even from the heroic to the anti-heroic thanks to its deformative malleability.

4. Being an aesthetic of provocation, grotesque transparency breaks with the formalities and norms of political rituals, even going so far as to desecrate canonical symbols and routines. But this is done through a double dynamic of sacralization and profanation, making visible what is usually hidden (e.g. the sick or dying body) and moving from the abstract or ideal to the concrete or material.
5. The grotesque performance appeals to affection with the strategic goal of achieving political objectives in the most cost-effective way to capture the public's attention, introducing criticism of a certain order and making what is usually familiar strange or unsettling.
6. The *esperpentic* performance raises questions about the limits of the visible and the legitimacy of such strategy in the context of spectacular politics, within the context of autocratic regimes or weakened democratic institutions where hegemonic representations try to dominate the public scene.

A theory of grotesque transparency can contribute to improve our understanding of different public communication and cultural manifestations as social performances. For example, this interpretative framework could be used to study the aesthetics of shocking public health campaigns (e.g. the display of disturbing images of lungs or lips with cancer on cigarette packets), to assess the *esperpentic* representations of environmental activism illustrating the apocalyptic consequences of climate change or, even better, to understand the strategies of terror propaganda. Future research could also clarify how digital networks, where images are produced, diffused and consumed in their millions, influence grotesque and *esperpentic* transparency strategies. We should also explore the ethical dimension of such provocative disclosure to better grasp the consequences of this disruptive tactic that displays the 'realistically' grotesque in the way the public understands social, cultural and political issues. Finally, in the same line, a sub-theory about the reception of the grotesque would enhance our understanding of the different possible readings and usages of representations of the deformed or the disruptive.

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Notes

1. For an edited version of Hugo Chávez's speech see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsCL11SNpnw>. The full transcript of the speech can be read at: <http://www.revolucionomuerte.org/index.php/discursos/discursos-comandante-hugo-chavez/96-lea-la-intervencion-integra-del-comandante-chavez-en-la-misa-de-jueves-santo-desde-sabaneta-de-barinas>
2. The eschatological reference can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyX8nhtbGwI>
3. The broadcast of the opening of Bolívar's sarcophagus can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HMq1FKxW68>
4. The 10-hour speech can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCZYU8Qz2Ac>
5. The zoom-back shot from the face of the *Nazareno* and other details of the staging of this performance can be seen in this shorter video that focused on the initial words of Chávez: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NGCctvUKV0

6. ‘...porque uno siente a veces muchas cosas que no las dice, pero yo hoy siento necesidad – padre – de decir lo que he venido sintiendo desde hace casi un año pues, cuando comencé a asumir que dentro de mí había una enfermedad muy maligna, y que como sabemos es una verdadera amenaza que le marca el fin del camino a mucha gente, el fin del camino físico. Es la verdad...’
7. ‘...si todo lo que uno ha vivido no ha sido suficiente es lo que siento, y le digo a Dios, si lo que uno vivió y ha vivido no ha sido suficiente, sino que me faltaba esto, bienvenido, pero dame vida, aunque sea vida llameante, vida dolorosa, no me importa (aplausos). ¡Dame tu corona Cristo, dámela, que yo sangro! Dame tu cruz, cien cruces que yo las llevo, pero dame vida porque todavía me quedan cosas por hacer por este pueblo y por esta Patria (aplausos). No me lleses todavía, dame tu cruz, dame tus espinas, dame tu sangre que yo estoy dispuesto a llevarlas pero con vida, Cristo mi Señor. Amén ...’
8. ‘Presidente Chávez: ...¿Dónde fue que te enamoró papá? En San Hipólito. Vaya. Elena Frías de Chávez: Mi amor, Dios te bendiga, te cuida y ... Presidente Chávez: De ese no hablemos, secreto ...’
9. ‘Nosotros en verdad venimos del mono. La diferencia genética entre un mono y nosotros es de 0,2 por ciento, o menos, póngale cuidado ustedes a un mono para que lo vean. Hace poco yo vi a un mono, estaba bailando, y él cuando ve muchachas baila, baila, es enamorado el mono. ¡Ahhh! [risa], enamorado el mono...’
10. ‘...de casi niño mi vida ya comenzó a ser no mía...Y así fue, así fue todos estos años.Y recordaba, recordaba a Bolívar, a Bolívar cuando dijo en Angostura: ‘No he sido más que un vil juguete, arrastrado por el huracán revolucionario ...’. Así en verdad ha sido esta vida. Y recordando a Bolívar y mirando la figura del Cristo Nazareno con su Cruz, con su corona de espina, con su sangre, en su calvario, en su pasión, recordaba que Bolívar también un día dijo, seguramente cuando se consiguió con Cristo de verdad ...’
11. ‘Che Guevara, otro cristo que vivió y murió cuál cristo; como Bolívar vivió y murió críticamente, ni siquiera cristianamente, ¡crísticamente! El Che.’
12. ‘...yo digo que con las ideas de Cristo, las ideas de Jesús perfectamente nosotros podemos elaborar las bases de un proyecto socialista. Que Cristo era socialista dije yo un día. Respondió un obispo católico aquí: ‘Que eso no puede ser, que eso es como decir que Cristo era piloto de avión...’ ... Y no sólo Cristo, los grandes profetas del cristianismo, Isaías. ¡Ay Isaías! Isaías era un látigo.’
13. ‘Un día me dijo: ‘Te oigo, te analizo tus discursos, y andas hablando mucho de la muerte. No deberías, porque abyssus abyssus invocate.’ Me lanzó un latinazo: ‘El abismo llama al abismo ...’. Entonces uno tiene que sentir y hablar de la vida, del amor, de la esperanza ... por más difíciles que sean las circunstancias de la vida’
14. A sample of the passions triggered by this *esperpentic* performance can be seen in the comments section of the YouTube posting: https://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=wsCL11SNpnw
15. Chávez’s message to the nation in 2011 lasted more than 10 hours. The message can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCZYU8Qz2Ac>

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