

Santa Evita:
 The pop version of Tomás Eloy
 Martínez on Argentine history

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Abstract

The relations between history and literature do not always suppose a reliable registry of facts; on the contrary, they invite to a process of interchange that well can end at the myth. In this text, we review the novel *Santa Evita* by Tomás Eloy Martínez under the gaze of pop culture. To such extent, the narration centered on Eva Perón, supposes a new way of recognizing idolatries in contemporaneity and of identifying its diverse manifestations that go through the way in which the feminine figure is constructed, the thematization of its body or the relation that it has with the massive means of communication.

Key Words: Eva Perón; Culture; History; Literature; Tomás Eloy Martínez.

In 1962 the artist Andy Warhol made his first individual exhibition: 32 canvases with the cans of Campbell soups. The semi-mechanized reproduction of the work, its production in series and its connection with the commercial world were key within the pop art that consolidated with it. That same year, the suicide of the actress Marilyn Monroe, Warhol began to work on serigraphs with color variations from a photo taken by Gene Korman for the film *Niagara*. Five years later Warhol unveiled more than 50 variations of his Marilyn through *The factory*.

There are many ways to understand pop art and this text does not intend to explore them. In very general terms it is an aesthetic expression based on popular culture (as opposed to “cultured culture” or elite) and within the popular fit film, advertising, the mass media and what is known as cultural industries.

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In some of these aspects of the popular thought the Mexican Carlos Monsiváis, when he referred to *Santa Evita*, the novel published by the Argentine Tomás Eloy Martínez in 1995, ten years after having edited his other historical book, *The novel by Perón*. When talking about these two works Monsiváis said: “in recent years the historical novel is a genre founded on nostalgia for what is unknown, intuited or lived fragmentarily (...) History, a popular discipline, returns as a genre pop” (Monsivais, 2000).

Santa Evita is pop in more ways than one. If Warhol reproduced the cans of soup and faces of Marilyn to build his work, Tomás Eloy did the same with Eva Duarte. “I will return and I will be millions” is a phrase that is attributed to Evita, although others say that it is from the indigenous leader Tupac Katari, who pronounced it in La Paz in the 18th century. It does not matter: the concept of an author is diluted in pop culture; what matters is what the masses create and Evita, like Marilyn, are millions: they are reproduced in movies, operas, posters, photos, prints, songs, poems. In the novel by Tomás Eloy the embalmer of Evita, the doctor Pedro Ara, creates at least three copies of the corpse of this holy-politics-whore-Virgin Mary-little mother-climber, in whose body begins to work minutes after his death by cancer, at 33 years old - the age of Christ- when it is still a warm body. The destinies of those Evitas, false and true, interchangeable like wax dolls or inflatable dolls, occupy a large part of the novel written by Tomás Eloy, sometimes in police code.

(As if the multiple copies of the corpse were not enough, at the end of the novel they appear on the balconies of Buenos Aires “Evitas sculpted in plaster, which had been dressed with Virgin Mary’s headdress” (p. 379)).

Is it true what Tomás Eloy Martínez narrates in *Santa Evita*? The question is irrelevant: the novel is credible. It uses a journalistic language, with data, testimonies and documentary sources to narrate extraordinary things such as the fluorescence of Evita’s recumbent body (although lying is an unstable condition in this peculiar dead person living in movement) or the chain of fatalities that, as a sinister spell, happen to every person who comes in contact with it. If Duchamp taught with *The Fountain* that art is what an artist says, then *Santa Evita* is a novel because its author says so. If Tomás Eloy had published the text in *La Nación* or *La Opinión*, newspapers in which he worked as a journalist, others would be the keys to read this work. But it is a novel in which the same author reflects in his pages about that condition: “In this novel populated by real characters, the only ones I did not know were Evita and the Colonel” (p. 55); “Was *Santa Evita* going to be a novel? I did not know and I did not care. The plots, the fixities of the points of view, the laws of space and time were slipping away from me”(p. 65); “Every story is, by definition, unfaithful” (p. 97); “The sources on which this novel is based are of dubious trust, but only in the sense in which reality and language are also: slips of memory and impure truths have infiltrated them” (p. 143), “In those papers there was a story. That is, the source of a myth: or rather an accident on the road where myth and history bifurcate and, in the middle, remains the indestructible and challenging realm of fiction” (p. 366) and “in the novels, what It is true, it is also a lie. The authors build the night with the same myths that they have destroyed in the morning” (p. 389).

Santa Evita is a rewriting of history. It is a historical novel in the way in which Pedro Gómez Valderrama understands it: “history incorporated into literature is not a simple literary resource: it is the creation of a new, different reality” (Gómez Valderrama, 1986). This vision coincides with that of the writer Fernando Cruz Kronfly:

In the historical novel, the risk is that the writer is not able to transcend the event to be placed in the perspective of the universals, resorting to the resources of the metaphor and the symbol, the presence of ideas and thought. But above all, making a basic bet in favor of aesthetics and the formal beauty of the story (Cruz-Kronfly, 2016).

In this sense, it can be applied to Tomás Eloy Martínez just as Carlos Rincón pointed out for García Márquez when talking about postmodernity and literature: “[...] there is a synonymous concept of postmodern fiction: metafiction. The fundamental contribution of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* began to be designated, as a basic strategy of postmodernism, as ‘re-narrativization’. Together with it, as the second major strategy, the ‘rewriting’ will be defined” (Rincón, 1995).

Tomás Eloy Martínez is allowed to play in *Santa Evita* with that diffuse relationship between history and fiction to rewrite Argentine history, with its myths, tragedies, fatalities, and military in the middle of the whole plot. The narrator has the same name as the author: Tomás Eloy appears with his own name, meeting with people “from real life” in a research exercise that is very similar to journalistic reporting.

But the pop keys of *Santa Evita* go further: its protagonist is Evita, one of the iconic myths of Argentine popular culture, next to Ché and Gardel. But unlike them, Evita is a woman and her story takes place in the first half of the twentieth century, in a highly masculinized political world.

Without being a feminist work, or written for that purpose, *Santa Evita* does allow reading of gender, insofar as it documents an era in which the rise of a woman to power was practically impossible. Evita was the second wife of Juan Domingo Perón, until her early death in 1952. Perón’s third wife, María Estela Martínez, became the first female president of a Latin American country in 1974, when she succeeded her passed away husband.

The novel is full of macho allusions. If *Santa Evita* is read as a biography, it is the life of a poor and ordinary woman who managed to become the most powerful in her country thanks to the help of many men: from the tango singer Agustín Magaldi, who she took out of Junín and took her to Buenos Aires when she was 15 years old; of the hairdresser Julio Alcaraz, who met her on a movie set when she was 23, blew her hair and combed it with that iconic ribbon that added age and class until the last day of her life; Perón, who doubled her age when they met and who on that first night she said “thank you for existing”; or from the Spanish doctor Pedro Ara, the embalmer, who protected her body from natural decay. At some point in the novel the hairdresser Alcaraz, Perón and Ara say, in their own way: “I made it”.

Reading *Santa Evita* in terms of gender also means referring to a body. The novel is the story of a corpse that moves, that seems alive, warm, that falls in love. There are numerous allusions to Evita’s body: her petite figure, her golden hair, her perfect alabaster skin,

which burned as a child. Her small breasts and pubis with dark hair. She is a saint dressed in a white robe who later appears naked, outraged, mutilated: to recognize the true dead woman of the other copies, a colonel cuts a phalanx and a piece of the earlobe. It is then a mutilated, tainted body, and this condition represents a continuity in the death of what was in life: Tomás Eloy Martínez describes in detail the hemorrhages that Evita suffers as a result of cancer of the uterus that costs her life but also narrates a clandestine abortion that was practiced before knowing Perón, and that forced her to remain absent from the radio for several months.

In a visit to Pope Pius XII, he tells her that he will pray that God will give her children. For the Pope, the body of Evita is a sterile, useless body. And for the women of the Charity Society, Evita's is an impure, unworthy body, because she has allowed herself the pleasure of sex with multiple men, without being united in marriage.

For the "fatties" (*grasitas*), the people of the town that idolizes her, Evita is above all a voice: the political voice that gives them hope and promises them justice (or gives them tickets, houses or boxes of teeth), but it is above all the familiar and warm voice that they know because they have accompanied them during years in the intimate space of their homes through the radio.

A success of Tomás Eloy is to understand the power of radio in the construction of the myth of Evita. Television arrived in Argentina in October 1951 and its first transmission was a public event in which Evita was to be proclaimed as a vice-presidential candidate. Cancer crossed her path in destiny. But, before television, radio was the vehicle that mobilized the masses not only in Latin America but also in Europe. Goebbels knew it well.

From the political point of view, Perón coincides with Gaitán in the time they lived, but also, in her populist speech, of the social court: the *justicialismo* has many common elements with *gaitanismo*. But in the construction of the myth, the bonds of Gaitán are with Evita, not with Perón. She is joined by two key elements: the use of radio and her early death. When referring to the death of Gaitán in 1948, Rigoberto Gil says that:

[...] the leadership took over the radio. Those voices that transmitted the tragedy, in their own way, disorientated, incited, inflamed the spirits through the use of an atavistic, ancestral language that recovers the permanent tensions between the norm, the grammar, the civil code and the political practice, rhetoric and precious, in a country of Greco-Romans and decadent romantics [...]. The radio is a modern instrument that attests to the morning events, as beyond transmitting official discourses, narrates with entertainment and special effects what happens in the world (Gil, 2009)

The cinema came via cans that allowed us to see the world, but local film production did not happen quickly throughout Latin America, and even today, there are countries or capital cities with weak film industries. It was the radio, with its radio plays, the medium that allowed local myths of national coverage to emerge throughout Latin America in the first half of the 20th century. As Jesus Martín Barbero says:

[...] to see in the culture of the masses a culture not only made for the masses but in which they found their music, narratives and imaginaries reassumed by art and miracle of those apparatuses that, for most of the left, were sources of cultural degradation and political alienation: the radio, films, comedy, soccer (Martín-Barbero, 2012).

Professor Kevin Garcia, in analyzing the construction of the myth in Santa Evita, refers to the role of radio:

Evita stars in the radio series about famous women and plays characters like Marie Antoinette, Empress Carlota and Aladame Dubarry, announced on the station Sintonía. Evita was illiterate, her diction was terrible, but already began to relate in the collective imaginary of the nation with heroism. Evita reached the ears of Argentines embodying the role of the great women of history (García, 2011).

In 1943 Radio Belgrano hired Evita to characterize 18 heroines of universal history. In that work she becomes another heroine and a few months later she marries Perón. Her life is at that time a radio play with a happy ending that closely followed millions of homes in the Argentine provinces. But that popularity is not absolute: “[...] for the good people who heard little radio, Evita was just a comic that entertained the colonels and the frigate captains” (p. 183).

There are numerous allusions to the cinema in Santa Evita and at least 40 to the radio: at the beginning of the novel, the death of Evita occurs and the narrator reports that the colonel who watched her all the time “followed the movements of the funeral procession by the descriptions of Radio”. Later Doña Juana, Evita’s mother, says that “the end of Evita was sad, like the radio soap operas of the 40s” (p. 40) and on another page the author writes that during her agony “Renzi broke down the apparatus of radio so that Evita would not hear the long and terrible crying of the crowds” (p. 123). It is alluded to the radio play of Radio Paris and Radio Belgrano, to the public speeches of Evita and her husband, who when he was overthrown in 1955 “did not speak on the radio to ask for help” (p. 185), and to the music that Magaldi listened to in the radio. Even Tomás Eloy says that, in order to get rid of the computer, he drives his car aimlessly on the routes of New Jersey “with the radio on. When I least expect it, Evita sings. I hear her come out of the scraped throat of the shaved Sinead O’Connor” (p. 203). Not in vain the author suggests that the coffin that hides one of the bodies of Evita, is recorded on a ship in the name of a radio amateur: “the box is pine, with the legend LV2 The Voice of Freedom” (p. 340). It is assumed that the box, instead of a dead corpse, transports radio equipment.

During almost 400 pages, the reader advances next to an outraged and hidden body that, if it falls into the hands of those who seek it, can unleash a bloody confrontation in the country. The same thing would happen if it was revealed the truth about what happened to that body that the military calls “Persona” and the harassment it has suffered. At the end of the novel it is said that Evita is Argentina. The reader has then traveled an embalmed country, which at any moment can be disrupted. That is what Tomás Eloy Martínez raises with his rewriting of this piece of Argentine history, which was published 43 years after the death of Evita and only 12 years after the end of the military dictatorship, which caused 30,000 missing and forced the

author to exile. After the dictatorship Argentina is Evita: a necrological country, an embalmed corpse, a living dead, a zombie, a box full of secrets.

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