
📌 CURRENT ISSUE — Volume 9 Issue 1 -2015

Reynolds, Andrew - *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista, Temporality & Material Culture*, Bucknell University Press, pp. 200 ISBN-13: 978-1611484687, Kindle edition

Reviewed by Antonio Castillo - RMIT University, Australia

By and large, Latin America journalism has been intimately tied to literature. In the 19th century, Latin American writers began – in their quest for aesthetically engaging non-fiction story telling – to experiment with hybrid forms of narrative. Fundamental to this quest was the embracing of journalistic aestheticism and demands in the development of the Latin American *crónica*, a genre where – paraphrasing Cuban poet Alejo Carpentier – the ‘journalist and the novelist become the same person.’

It is in this hybrid form – the *crónica* – that Latin American *modernista* literature might be found, examined and understood. No wonder that one of the essential books of literature in Latin America began with the word *crónica* – Gabriel García Márquez’s *Chronicle of a foretold dead*. In the last decade or so there has been an almost complete agreement that the *crónica* is today one of the most exciting forms of journalism – and literature – in the region.

The growth of this journalistic genre came out of a powerful sense that there are things of the Latin American contemporary reality one can only communicate in a *crónica*. The exponents of the contemporary *crónica* – largely post-magic realism journalists and writers – are unambiguous about the stories they painfully research and write. These are stories of marginality and humiliation, discrimination and exploitation, forgetfulness and neglect. They are also about the unusual and the magical. All of these themes have two connective tissues: they read as fiction and they are deeply progressive in their ideology.

In the last few years there has been a revival of the journalistic *crónica* – a genre that is firmly grounded within the realm of Latin American modernity and indeed journalism. Quoted in the Colombian magazine *Cambio*, in 2009, Mario Jursich, Director of *El Malpensante* – a magazine of contemporary *crónica(s)* – said there was a new Latin American boom, but it was not experienced in the literary realm rather in the journalistic *crónica*.

Andrew Reynolds’s *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista, Temporality and Material Culture* (2012) is both an important and ambitious book insofar as it explores the *crónica* as a journalistic genre and also as a cultural and literary writing journey. Reynolds employs a material culture studies approach by reading the *crónica* through journalistic practices. His book is highly influenced by poststructuralist theorists such as Deleuze and Bourdieu.

And he is indeed deeply engaged with the work of the pioneers of the Latin American *crónica*. By resorting, for example, to the *crónica modernista* of Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, Reynolds examines the relationship between literature and journalism in the formation and the development of the region’s *modernista* movement.

Reynolds defines the *crónica* as a ‘short piece, published in a journalistic venue and produced in a polished literary style’ (115). The *crónica(s)* were found – as is also the case today – in a huge variety of publication platforms, in newspapers, magazines and books.

A historical, sociological and literary theoretical framework is closely assembled by Reynolds to produce a convincing argument and enlightening scholarly book, a book that aims to show that journalism is at the heart of the *crónica modernista*. The chapters also support the thesis that the *crónica* has been neglected by the scholars of literature and has been, until recently, a marginalized literary genre. It was despised and regarded as popular narrative practiced by novelists in order to meet their financial ends.

Chapter one, '*Journalism as Literary Practice during Modernismo*', shows the tension between Latin American literature and the journalistic form. In this tension the writer is both a reporter and an author aiming to reach a wider audience. In this process the author is subjected to the demands of the cultural industry market. One of these authors is Rubén Darío – one of the pioneers of the *crónica modernista* – who highlights the importance of newspapers in the process of a nation transition to modernity. For Darío – as is the case of the modern *cronistas* – the writer occupies a central position in the quest for a mass appeal *crónica*.

The theme of temporality and modernity is at the center of chapter two, titled '*Possession of the Infinite: Temporality and Difference in Modernismo*'. Reynolds examines the nature of journalism, concerned with the issues of the day, and the brief temporality of its product. The aesthetic of the *crónica* seems to be – as Reynolds suggests – an antidote to the speed of production and consumption of journalism. It is a dynamic that has a positive angle: it allows *cronistas* to produce faster and more often. In contrast to the sluggishness of fiction book production, the *cronistas*-writers were able to have a daily presence in the public sphere.

In chapter three, '*Circulation and Vitality: Editorial Influence, Visual Culture and the Crónica Modernista*', Reynolds steps into the commercial journalistic model established by the US tradition and Great Britain. It is a period where the *cronista(s)* has to deal with the financial demands of the publications of the day, demands that force them to engage with sensationalism and mass appeal themes and narratives. The role that advertising begun playing in the sustainability of the publications forces *cronistas* to produce easy reading stories – fast gratification. Consumerism, free market and the so-called journalistic political economy, shape and determine the new chapter of the Latin American *crónica*.

In chapter four, 'The House of Ideas', Reynolds explores the importance given to the book – as a cultural and commercial artefact – by *cronistas modernistas*. As Reynolds points out, there is a sense of a journalistic industry where the text, in book form, seeks to engage with a discerning and sophisticated audience. The book was, however, an artefact regarded as instigator of writers that appeal to the masses, less educated and easily satisfied with stories of sensationalism and deviance. And while this was a facet of the *crónica* and the *cronista(s)*, it is also true this shift from the elite to the non-elite helped the process of democratization of the Latin American cultural sphere. And this democratization was indeed a major impetus to the development of a local publishing industry.

Reynolds's book is an important contribution to the study of the *crónica* in Latin America. It is also an essential work to understand the emergence and the evolution of Latin American journalism. Reynolds aims to shed further light on the importance of the *crónica* and 'enrich the scholarship that in the past 20 years has only begun to situate *crónica* in a prominent place within *modernista* literary production' (356). Reynolds achieves his aim in a thoroughly researched, scholarly informed and beautifully written book.

About the reviewer

Dr. Antonio Castillo is a Latin American journalist and senior journalism academic at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He is a founding member of *Global Media Journal*, Australian edition, and his research and teaching includes literary journalism in Latin America.

Email: antonio.castillo@rmit.edu.au

Web: <http://www.rmit.edu.au> & <http://acreporter.info/>

Twitter: @ACReporter