

Why Was Manuel Vázquez Montalbán Sceptical About the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games?

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Abstract: The Catalan Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1939–2003) excelled in the so-called Spanish noir crime literature (Novela Negra), giving a broader account of the socio-political, historical and cultural context of the last 30 years of the 20th century. The method of our research is based on the co-examination of the literary and the historical notion of a text. The books that are mainly studied here refer to the process of transforming Barcelona from a meager harbor to a touristic metropolis in anticipation of the 1992 Olympic Games. The writer's most famous literary character in these novels, detective Pepe Carvalho, would later be portrayed in films, TV series and comic strips as well. The aim of this paper is to find out: a) if this critical attitude of Montalbán concerns the Games and their content b) if it is related to the personal “ghosts” of the author c) if his dissatisfaction points out the inadequacy of those who can be considered responsible for the changes through the first decades of parliamentary democracy in Spain; those people who took advantage of the Olympic Games for their own benefit and not in order to combat social poverty.

Key words: Montalbán, Barcelona, Olympic Games, Spanish literature

1. Introduction

To understand a society deeply, one must read its writers.

—Victor del Árbol

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1939–2003) was a prolific Spanish writer, journalist, novelist, poet, essayist, anthologist, prologist, humorist, critic and gastronome from Catalonia. He studied Philosophy at Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona and was also a member of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. Like his father, he was imprisoned for his beliefs by the Franco regime. He died in Bangkok, Thailand, while returning to his home country from a speaking tour of Australia. He also excelled -along with González Ledesma, Andreu Martín and García Pavón-, in the flush of the so-called Spanish noir (crime fiction), conveying more broadly the

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socio-political, historical and cultural chronicle of his time, with the “pretext” of individual crime. Every society — Spanish included — has its scars and unhealed wounds, and crime, whether individual or collective, is the symptom of its disease. Spanish writers are moved by the tragedy of life, compelled by the weight of history (the Spanish Civil War in particular), and concerned about political corruption and the effects of the appalling recent economic and social crisis (del Árbol, 2018).

The writer’s most famous literary character, detective Pepe Carvalho, who would later be portrayed in films, TV series and comic strips, made his first appearance in the novel “Yo maté a Kennedy” (1972). Through the literary series starring the idiosyncratic nihilist private investigator, both creator and creation became famous in Spain and translated into countless languages (Fava, 2012).

According to the famous Greek writer Petros Markaris, Montalbán is, along with Leonardo Sassa, one of the two founders of the “Mediterranean” crime novel genre; what is more, he is the author who transformed the classic structure of the genre, unchained it from the “killer hunt” and turned it into a social, political novel with a detective plot (Μάρκαρης, 2018).

2. Method

The basis of this article begins with a contradiction: in tourist guides, in the press and in literature in general, there is a dominant belief that the city still benefits from the 1992 Olympic Games (Garcia-Ramon, Albet, 2000). At the same time, Montalbán’s work sets a different opinion.

Despite the restrictions of using literature as a historical source (Larsen, 1998), it is common for historians to indicate that through literature texts one can gain insight into states of mind, conscious and unconscious assumptions, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, and emotions of people that lived in different times (Pasco, 2004); this approach can offer personal insights into historical events that more formal documents omit, such as people’s imagination, concerns of the working class of the era etc.

The method of the present work is based on the co-examination of the literariness and the historicity of a text: a literary work, even if it does not make any direct reference to historical events, has in all probability incorporated a sense of the reality of its time, a sense that can be detected in structure, language, content (Αποστολίδου, 2007); therefore, Montalbán’s works can be very well considered a secondary source for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. In order to do so, first of all we (pleasantly) read the writer’s work to obtain a direct, as objective as possible approach to our topic; then we proceeded with revising the related literature.

To make it clear and fair, the following should be emphasized: our work is merely an attempt and not an exhaustive study of the issue. In addition, we had to read Montalbán’s books in different languages besides English (Greek, Spanish and German) depending on the availability and accessibility every time. This means that we had to translate the non-English texts into English ourselves — and we are not literary artists, of course. What is more, in English editions the title is usually different than in the original language so sometimes we present multiple titles of the one and the same book.

3. Barcelona’s Pre-Olympic and Post-Olympic “Development” in Montalbán’s Texts

The Olympic Games celebrated in Barcelona in 1992 is an event that has been at the heart of the Carvalho series since the late 1980s along with the consequent process of the transformation of Barcelona from a poor sea port to a tourist metropolis in view of the changes that were expected and occurred due to the Games. In his essay

Barcelonas (1987), Montalbán presents us with a fantastic tour of the city illuminating its rich history and turbulent politics, art, gastronomy and football while strongly criticizing the values of the new “Olympic” Barcelona. We learn about Montalbán’s love for the Barcelona of his childhood, which gradually mutates into the spirit of the new times, the spirit that some called “postmodernism” and which Carvalho considered to be “a foolish age between two tragedies” (Van Tongeren, 2016).

In the prologue of the English edition of the book, Montalbán (1992b, pp. 3–4) refers mostly to the Olympic alterations in Barcelona:

“...a frantic desire for growth for growth’s sake, whatever the cost. Even if the cost turns out to be the destruction of the landscape. A measure of this conflict is contemporary Barcelona, a focus of international attention thanks to the 1992 Olympics which have determined the city’s latest development to a far greater extent than any rational consideration of its needs. ... not one but several cities are contained within its municipal boundaries, and ... nearly all of them have been radically changed under the impact of the Olympics. The dialectics between the old and the new ... has been resolved by the imposition of the inevitable”.

And he goes on:

“The Olympic city will do its best to make up for the backwardness that has disgraced Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain throughout the twentieth century. To host the games, cities have to bring themselves up to date ... providing everything that services the four-week circus. But what comes after? Debts and a set of buildings of dubious usefulness. Of course, this is true of all Olympics, but in Barcelona, after a forty-year state of emergency imposed by Franquism¹, the Games mean a lot more. The Barcelona Olympics provide the opportunity to catch up on the backlog and shake off the extended apathy inherited from the post-Civil War period, twenty years of poverty and twenty more of speculative abuse.

El laberinto griego (An Olympic death, 1992) is an unorthodox mystery novel set in Barcelona on the eve of 1992. As private investigator, Pepe Carvalho undertakes on behalf of a French couple (Georges Lebrun, producer of educational films on the Olympics and Clair Delmas) to locate Alekos Farandouri, the lady’s missing Greek husband. The timing may not be accidental: the Greece-France-Spain route reminds of the triptych Ancient Olympic Games — Pierre de Coubertin — Barcelona 1992. In order to find an “ambiguous” Greek,

He (Carvalho) was going to have to embark on a terrain that was unfamiliar to him — Olympic painters, Olympic wheeler-dealers, dealers in Olympic culture (Montalbán, 1992a).

He cruises the backstreets of Barcelona, finding dead bodies and broken socialist promises; he remembers an older, seedier town hidden behind the shiny new Olympic City. As they pass through the old industrial zones of the city, the author finds that they are changing dramatically for the worse in view of the upcoming Olympiad. Europe’s once most utopian city, Barcelona, he claims, “has become a market and everything is for sale” (Montalbán, 1992a).

The search for Alekos focuses on the old, working-class districts of Barcelona, and this is exactly where the political symbolism of the novel lies. The working-class residential areas were sacrificed to the Olympic Games; they were demolished in order to beautify the city. Montalbán launched a whole campaign to save them. He argued that the working-class districts were the soul of Barcelona, which the city was sacrificing for the sake of the Olympics (Μάρκαρης, 2018):

“He also considered those comrades of yesteryear who where now working on the preparations for the Olympics, and this provided him with an extensive list of possible contacts. In this city, you were either working for the Olympics, or you were dreading them-there was no middle ground. The ’92 Olympic Office, the pre-Olympic Office, the

¹ In *Los Mares del Sur* (1979), Montalbán sets a political novel about the housing “bubble” in the Franco era (Montalbán, 2018).

post-Olympic Office and the trans-Olympic Office, were now employing people who in normal circumstances would be the least Olympic of anybody. They had gone from Marxism Leninism to democratic progressivism, and now to an involvement in the preparation of all the various Olympic events which Spanish democracy would host in 1992.” (Montalbán, 1992a).

This same agony is also stressed in *Barcelonas*:

“The (Olympic) Village will transform the landscape of Barcelona’s industrial revolution, committing to the bulldozer both Catalonia’s Manchester, the concentration of nineteenth-century capital in the decrepit textile factories of Poble Nou, and its utopian socialist tradition, ironically preserved in the name of the village itself. The Village has been named Nova Icaria after Etienne Caber’s experimental, libertarian communities in the nascent United States of America which attracted considerable support among the working class on nineteenth-century Poble Nou.

Could it not be that, under the pretext of the Olympics, a city council with minimal economic resources, controlled by a left that was paralyzed by the challenge, has handed over management of this immense surge of urban growth to private initiative? Has it not turned what might have been a model of democratic urban expansion into a speculative frenzy, determined by ‘the city as a market’ model which posits urban development as a process tailor-made to benefit the wealthiest social classes?” (Montalbán, 1992b).

Finally, Alekos is found dead in the Pueblo Nuevo district, Barcelona’s most typical working-class neighborhood, which — as already said — was demolished to make way for the Olympic Village, a process the author never ceased to criticize:

“After a while, despite the darkness of the night, their eyes began to be assailed by the ambiguity of a landscape in which it was hard to tell where the destruction ended and where the construction began. Cranes, great piles of earth, bulldozers, leveled building plots, foundations for new flats, like the shoots of bulbs peeking out from beneath the membrane of the dead earth, a flat surface of hints as to what the Olympic village was going to look like after a year or eighteen months, between the bear ugly sea and the terrorized leftovers of what remained of Pueblo Nuevo, of that Pueblo which has been ‘Nuevo’ when the city’s bourgeoisie laid out their factories down by the sea” (Montalbán, 1992a).

Like his beloved city, Carvalho is forced to confront the sins of the past. Thanks to Montalbán, in the modern crime genre the city is not just the place where the novel unfolds, but it stars along with its heroes (Μάρκαρης, 2018).

Sabotaje olímpico (1993) is an “unorthodox” novel with a multi-layered plot that revolves around the 1992 Olympics. While the city lives to the rhythm of the Olympic Games, torchbearers mysteriously disappear, members of the International Olympic Committee are in danger, rumors of conspiracies flow around, political unrest and war conflict threats arise. The possibility of multiple sabotages spread panic and insecurity. Detective Pepe Carvalho, although he had initially decided to stay at home during the seventeen days of the Games, is hired by the International Olympic Committee to verify their suspicion that the Olympics are being sabotaged. He is suddenly in custody by an exorbitant team of soldiers, policemen, firefighters, boy scouts operating under the support of the Corcuera Law, a security measure that permitted disciplinary forces to enter into the domicile of persons that were suspected of threatening national security (Montalbán, 2016).

By constructing a multi-faceted investigation around these suspicions, the novel satirizes those Spanish politicians who are desperate about their country’s rally to modernity, fearing that this development might be delayed, or worse even, that it remains without completion. Minister of Interior José Luis Corcuera is a foremost representative of this sentiment in the novel. “In this way, with so much circumlocution, we will never enter modernity”, he fears. He continuously appears in order to apply the security measures that were created during his term of office, thereby attempting to protect the Games from any disturbances (Van Tongeren, 2016).

In the course of the novel, it is explained to Carvalho that the authorities decided to carry out the event in a virtual version after considering the risks of sabotage. The primary revolutionary threats were merely part of a harmless spectacle, created for the occasion by Walt Disney and by Mariscal, assisting the local city council in creating a cosmopolitan, fantastic image of Barcelona (Montalbán, 2016).

Javier Mariscal (1950), the Spanish artist who in 1988 won the competition and designed the 1992 Olympics mascot, is as well treated somewhat ironically in *El Premio* (1996):²

“Lázaro Conseal, owner of the hotel and a good part of those gathered there, had entrusted the design of Venice to the hard wing, Mariscal’s disciples, capable of superimposing on the politics of Mariscal’s Peter Pan dreams the systematic challenge to the functional rudeness of the object.

-You who are so encyclopedic, Marga, what style is this?

- Postmariscalism. Lázaro Conseal himself told me. Heavy postmariscalism.

-Catalan?

-Catalan-Valencian-Mycenaean-Balearic.”

The ultimate conspiracy in *Sabotaje olímpico*, as van Tongeren (2016) claims, is rather this alliance between politicians, designers and entrepreneurs who acted in order to secretly defend “the penultimate attempt of this millennium to destabilize the little, the very little that has stabilized”, illustrating the symbolic value of the Games as a signal of stability (Montalbán, 2016).

Carvalho’s narcissism — about his decision to stay at home during the Games — has to do with being an alternative to the generalized exhibitionism that he observes in his environment (Montalbán, 2016). However, there are several signs of irony pointing towards the problematic of this attitude. For instance, the detective imagines the negative effects his absence would probably cause amongst some of the spectators of the inaugural ceremony of the Games, such as King Juan Carlos and USA President George Bush. This illustrates that Carvalho is not entirely disinterested in the development of the spectacle or in the opinions of its participants. This early collapse of the private and public spheres foreshadows the broader conclusion on the ubiquity of media spectacles to which *Sabotaje olímpico* ultimately directs. What is more, it draws immediate attention to the limits of any attempt at resisting this wider development (Van Tongeren, 2016). While Montalbán rejected running and swimming as inauthentic (he claimed that originally people ran and swam to find food or escape from their enemies; thus the contemporary respective sports were a failure) (Montalbán, 2016), he was a dedicated supporter of the football team Barcelona. He also argues that if politicians exercised, they wouldn’t be in such a bad mood or make such violent decisions (Montalbán, 2016). The above indicate that Carvalho is not completely indifferent to the progress of the spectacle of the Olympic Games or to the opinions of its participants.

4. Conclusions

Spanish writers are moved by the tragedy of life, compelled by the weight of history (the Spanish Civil War

² In the novel (*El Premio*) the action takes place over the course of one night at “Venice”, a five-star hotel (Montalbán, 2018).

in particular), and concerned about political corruption and the effects of the appalling recent economic and social crisis. They provide literary x-rays of a country caught between the issues of modernity and the preservation of traditions immortalized by people like Lorca, Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno. Somewhere between the mythical Spanish fury and the desperate romanticism popularized by writers like Hemingway, Malraux, and Dos Passos lies the reality of Spain, a country in turmoil, searching for its identity in the 21st century (del Árbol, 2018).

In the novels mentioned here, we encounter some of the broader processes Vázquez Montalbán has insistently criticized during his entire career, such as the thermalization of politics during the Spanish transition (the years after Franco) and the vanishing of historical consciousness in a society ruled by simulations and media spectacles. These novels may be read as caricature sketches of the conducts of significant actors in Spanish society and politics. The writer develops a reactionary framework in order to pinpoint those who may be held responsible for crucial developments in the Spanish society during the first decades after the Franco dictatorship. From high society to ghetto underworlds, these novels sketch an intense cast of characters and scenarios that reflect the personal and collective conflicts of Spain during the years of la Transición.

Taking everything into consideration, some final remarks could be formulated:

a) The aforementioned critical attitude of Montalbán has probably little to do with the idea of the Olympic Games. On the contrary, Montalbán believed in world peace and internationalism — some of the same ideas that can be found in the so-called Olympic spirit (Osúa, 2020).

b) We believe that Montalbán's critical attitude relates to the author's personal "ghosts" and obsessions. Let's not forget that Montalbán was raised in the narrow alleys of the old city of Barcelona, the city of imprisonment, exile and civil war, with which he repeatedly declares he is in love with, while he is not at all happy that it is rapidly altering (Montalbán, 2018). He narrates "...so he looked for a taxi in the Paseo Marítimo, which had been suspended in time and space, waiting for the extension that would connect it to the Villa Olímpica, the Olympic Village. From a distance the houses demolished to build the city of athletes looked like a film set for the bombing of Dresden or any other sufficiently bombed city. That new city would hardly be his own, imprisoned in an elemental coordinate that no longer had any north but Tibidabo ...". (Montalbán, 2021)

c) His dissatisfaction aims at the inadequacy of those who can be held responsible for the transformations in the first decades of the transition from Franco's dictatorship to parliamentary democracy; it focuses on those who exploited the Olympics in every way for their own benefit and failed to use the economic prosperity of the 1992 Olympiad properly — that is to fight social poverty. In the "An Olympic Death" one can read:

"The challenge of the Olympics is quite terrifying. Nineteen ninety-two will be a decisive year for us. The whole world will be on Spain."

"The first time that's happened since the Civil War. I believe that was the last time they thought us worth of the front page of the New York Times".

"Nostalgia is a mistake, Pepe".

"And what about irony?"

"Empty sound". (Montalbán, 1992a)

In Barcelonas, Montalbán writes: "In Olympic Barcelona the critics of Franquist town planning have become the managers of Olympic urban development". Today's residents forced to abandon their homes to make way for

the developers. ...the result of a grand operation in which minimal social provision has been combined with maximum pomp and ceremony (Montalbán, 1992b).

d) Throughout his work Montalbán vividly outlines the journey of the Spanish society from Franco onwards: his human comedy consists of nouveau riche businessmen, corrupt politicians, the necessary artists, and the rapid rise of all of them in the first years of democracy, as well as “impedimenta” from a — not so distant — dark past (Montalbán, 2016). In the “An Olympic Death”, Carvahlo tells Lebrun “Our Arc de Triomphe is rather smaller than yours, but then so were our triumphs. For the best part of three hundred years, the only triumphs we Spaniards have enjoyed have been over ourselves” (Montalbán, 1992a).

In the novel *El delantero centro fue asesinado al atardecer* (1988) coexist in Barcelona “the strongest football club in the city, in Catalonia, in the whole world” and Centellas, a decadent neighborhood team. President of the big team is Basté de Linyola, a failed politician, a businessman with lots of money. President of Centellas is Juan Sánchez Zapico, a lower scale entrepreneur, who dreams of “catching the good one.” He has stepped into this position with the intention of disbanding the club and selling its stadium for land property. We are in Barcelona preparing for the Olympics, and every plot of land is worth its weight in gold: “...in the future the stadium of Centellas would end up being swallowed up by the radiant core of the Olympic village transformed into apartment complexes for the new post-Olympic petty bourgeoisie, in contrast to the neighboring indigenous population: some remaining Catalan proletarians and immigrants of various archaeological layers” (Montalbán, 2021).

e) The Olympic Games could not be excluded from the topics that Montalbán persistently criticized throughout his career, such as the dramatization of politics during the Spanish transition to parliamentary democracy and the disappearance of historical consciousness in a society dominated by simulations and media spectacles. Taking everything into consideration, however, we dare suppose that he seems not to have been against the Olympic idea itself but against the wild capitalism (*el capitalismo salvaje*) that surrounded the Games (Montalbán, 2016):

“Anyone who has not spent at least half an hour of their lives preparing for revolution will never know how you feel when, years later, you find yourself employed in preparing showcases for prize athletes from the worlds of sport, business and industry. From the clandestine crossing of frontiers to negotiations with representatives of the world’s drinking-chocolate manufacturers who are chasing the Olympic concession of cocoa”.

“Do you have any idea what you are asking? Do you know how many foreigners we have in the city at this moment, all trying to get a piece of the Olympic action? An Olympics needs everything from a thimble to an elephant” (Montalbán, 2016).

In conclusion, Montalbán’s skepticism emphasizes the radical difference between the Olympic, touristic representation of Barcelona and the harsh reality hidden behind the decorations -that is social poverty. This stark contrast between the sparkling image of the city that was exaggerated before and during the Games and the harsher financial reality that presented itself immediately afterwards is marvelously captured in the later comment Carvalho makes to his assistant: “Biscuter, until October 1992, this was Manhattan... or rather, a mixture of Manhattan and Hollywood. And suddenly the decorations were removed and they told us: You made a mistake, you are in Somalia” (Montalbán, 2016).

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