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### **Authoritarian Discourse in García Márquez's *La mala hora* and Ruy Guerra's *O Veneno da Madrugada***

David Mongor-Lizarrabengoa  
 Department of Modern Languages and Literatures  
 The University of Western Ontario  
[dmongorl@uwo.ca](mailto:dmongorl@uwo.ca)

#### **Abstract**

This paper examines Bakhtin's concept of authoritarian discourse in Gabriel García Márquez's 1962 novel *La mala hora* and Ruy Guerra's 2005 film adaptation of the work, *O Veneno da Madrugada*. The hostile environment, depicted by García Márquez and Guerra, is the perfect setting to apply Bakhtin's ideas about authoritarian discourse. In his essay, "Discourse and the Novel", Bakhtin explains that "there is a struggle constantly being waged to overcome the official line with its tendency to distance itself from the zone of contact, a struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority" (345). In this paper, I will examine the ways in which the characters in the novel and film struggle against the figures of authority in the town: the mayor (the authority figure) and Father Ángel (the priest). Bakhtin affirms that in cases of authoritarian discourse, one must completely accept or reject it. I argue that through the rather grim depiction of Ángel and the church building coupled with the townspeople's refusal to listen to the mayor, it is clear that the protagonists do not align themselves with the authority figures. Furthermore, I explain that while the protagonists act as if they accept the authoritarian figures in public, they actually resist them in private.

**Keywords:** Latin American literature, Gabriel García Márquez, Mikhail Bakhtin, Authoritarian discourse

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In applying the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to Latin American literature and film, critics and scholars have primarily focused on the concept of the carnivalesque, which Robert Stam describes as "the decentralizing (centrifugal) forces that militate against official power and ideology" (122). This association is undoubtedly due to the significance of Carnival celebrations in countries like Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and other nations within the region. While the works of these scholars have provided valuable insights into how Bakhtin's ideas are useful in understanding the complexities of Carnival ceremonies, very little attention has been given to the relevance and applicability of some of Bakhtin's other ideas within Latin America. Many concepts proposed by Bakhtin are extremely relevant to the region and are useful when analyzing Latin American films and works of fiction. Given the prevalence of repressive military regimes in the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America, two of Bakhtin's most applicable concepts to the region are his ideas of authoritarian and internally persuasive discourses. In this paper, I will analyze how the two discourses are presented in Gabriel García Márquez's novel *La mala hora* (1962) and Ruy Guerra's 2004 adaptation, *O Veneno da Madrugada*. The text and film are set in an unnamed river town during Colombia's civil conflict known as *La Violencia* (1948-1960). This period of civil war between the liberal and conservative parties created a perfect environment for ruthless political leaders to assume power and establish authoritarian regimes. In the context of the novel and the film, I will argue that the mayor attempts to create a perfect authoritarian government in terms of Bakhtin's concept but ultimately fails to do so. In addition, my analysis will include ideas presented by James Wertsch, in response to Bakhtin, that suggest that people living in repressive societies, like the one in García Márquez's story, may pretend to accept the authoritarian discourse in public, but reject it within the private realm. This can be seen in both the film and text as the townspeople circulate prohibited clandestine literature.

Bakhtin describes the fundamental principles of authoritarian discourse in his 1935 essay "Discourse and the Novel". He writes:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it and make it our own, it binds itself to us regardless of the degree it internally persuades us; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is in the distanced zone, organically connected to the

hierarchical past. It is, so to speak, the word of our fathers...it demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore, authoritative discourse permits no play with the context of framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. (342-343).

Bakhtin continues by explaining that the discourse fuses with the authority of a person, institution, or political group. Together they can rise or fall. Due to the inflexibility of authoritarian discourse, "it refuses to accept the validity of any voice that does not coincide with the ideological positions defended by its own voice" (Wall 212). Over the course of world history, ruthless dictators have assumed power via military coups or by other violent or fraudulent means. Once they were in positions of authority, anyone who questioned their regulations or 'official' histories were considered enemies and had to pay a hefty price. This is especially relevant to the Soviets and Latin Americans under various dictators. Under Joseph Stalin, Bakhtin was arrested on January 7, 1929 on charges of being anti-Communist and corrupting the youth (Clark & Holquist 142). Similar situations occurred throughout Latin America. For example, when Augusto Pinochet overthrew president Salvador Allende, approximately 28,000 Chileans were tortured, approximately 3,500 were murdered or disappeared, and 200,000 went into exile (Rettig Report). Pinochet tried to eliminate all the Chileans who were deemed a threat to the nation and his authority due to their socialist or other radical views.

When analyzing authoritarian discourse within the context of a literary text and film, it is important to examine the relationships between the characters and the figure of authority. Freedman and Ball write, "Bakhtin explains that literary characters often struggle against 'various kinds and degrees of authority,' against the 'official line'...These struggles occur in what Bakhtin calls a 'contact zone'...where we struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority" (8). Beasley-Murray says, "This zone of contact is also the site of an opening up of the singularity of tradition into the democratic plurality of new meanings" (38). Within our society, everyone is an individual and there are times when we may challenge a particular authoritarian discourse which may lead to the creation of our own ideologies. This, however, is unacceptable for Bakhtin as he makes it clear that authoritarian discourse requires total acceptance or total rejection; one cannot be situated within these two extremes. Bakhtin writes, "One cannot divide it up –agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part" (343). Wertsch, in a 2002 study on collective remembering, suggests that people who live in a country with an extremely repressive government may opt for resistance. He indicates that "exerting too much pressure in the form of external rewards and threats may encourage individuals to resist fully internalizing--appropriating--a text" (122). As a result, citizens may publicly agree with the authoritarian discourse, but in their private lives, reject all or part of it. This forms an internally persuasive discourse, another idea addressed by Bakhtin. He explains, "It is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own world'" (345). Internally persuasive discourse is more or less the complete opposite of authoritarian discourse because it is "denied all privilege, backed by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society" (Bakhtin 342). Each human has unique thoughts and what is persuasive to one individual may not be persuasive to another; hence, there may not be consistency among internally persuasive discourses among any given population. This is very different from authoritarian words which apply to all members of society. As we interact with other people, new ideas are presented to us which can affect and change our own ideologies. Bakhtin clarifies that "a variety of alien discourses enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality)" (348).

Before applying Bakhtin's theories on authoritarian and internally persuasive discourses to *La mala hora* and *O Veneno da Madrugada*, it is helpful to briefly discuss the political situation that influenced García Márquez's novel. On April 9, 1948 Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a left-wing politician, was assassinated, initiating Colombia's civil conflict known as *La Violencia* (McMurray 79). From 1948-1960, estimates suggest that 250,000 people were killed during the bitter civil war between the liberal and conservative parties. Much of the violence resulted from the Conservative Party's attempts to take control of rural land used for agriculture after they had assumed power in 1946. LaRosa and Mejía argue that due to the inefficiency of the government in Bogotá, the poor had to take matters into their own hands. "They destroyed their enemies, their neighbors, through visceral, brutal violence, and it took years for the nation's decision makers to take note and to develop a plan of action to stop or at least diminish the violence" (86). Without a stable government, Colombia's rural communities, like the one presented by García Márquez and Guerra, were ravaged and consumed by chaos. Many people simply abandoned their homes and some even joined guerilla movements. In an interview with Ernesto Bermejo, García Márquez said, "That time of violence had so large an impact on those who weren't yet writers in Colombia--many of whom witnessed terrible dramas

of violence--that they felt they needed to talk about it" (9). Consequently, García Márquez and his contemporaries felt a moral obligation to write about the atrocities that occurred during this bloody period of Colombia's history.

García Márquez originally intended to name his novel *Este pueblo de mierda* because of the extreme bitterness and mistrust that nearly destroys the unnamed town. The town's mayor, a conservative, has recently come into power and seeks to gain complete control over the village since most of the liberals have fled the town in fear. The mayor's main enemies are the barber, the dentist, the Asís family, and Don Sabas as they have chosen to remain in the village despite the high probability that they will end up with a bullet in their backs. From the start of the novel and film, an anonymous person has been putting up lampoons on people's doors during the night. This has caused significant unrest in the town as the residents know that another town "was wiped out in seven days by lampoons" (IEH25). What makes the story more interesting is the fact that the lampoons do not reveal anything that the public does not already know; most of them state information about extramarital affairs or sly business deals. The mayor's attempts to catch the culprit or culprits consistently fail. To make matters worse, he is suffering from a terrible toothache and cannot seek relief from the dentist, as the two are enemies. Imposing a curfew, setting up armed patrols, and seeking the help of a psychic do not stop the pamphleteering plague. As the book ends, there is a serenade of lead and, despite the curfew, shootings, and extensive searches, lampoons were still being posted. Guerra's adaptation of the novel condenses the action into a single day. Although he makes some significant changes to the plot, he maintains most of the key elements and themes of the source text. Additionally, by creating a film with dark shadows and low-key lighting, reminiscent of classic *noir* films, he visually captures the hatred and uneasiness in the town.

Bakhtin's theories on authoritarian and internally persuasive discourses can be applied to the mayor and how the townspeople react to him; in doing so, readers and spectators can better understand the structures of power and authority in the text and film. While the mayor has his own agenda in trying to take over the town, many of his actions actually attempt to restore order and bring peace. Bollettino explains, "[El alcalde] lucha por la justicia y el bienestar de los habitantes. En cuanto a su carácter es hombre pacífico y compasivo frente al dolor humano" (83). When Guerra adapted the novel into his film, he changes the mayor's situation and his character becomes more merciless. According to Luchting, the mayor epitomizes governmental power and brutality, making the novel "eminently political" (95). In the film, Guerra changes the story so that the mayor believes that the wealthy Roberto Asís will seize control of the town and become the new mayor. The Asís family assumes the role of the traditional land owning class and exercise significant power in the town (Mouat 20). Since the mayor's power and authority are being challenged by a formidable foe, he is transformed into a monster that will stop at nothing to maintain his power. In one scene, the visual image suggests the mayor is a monster. This shot shows the mayor's shadow ascend a short staircase. The image is eerily reminiscent of the famous stairs shot from the 1922 classic film *Nosferatu*. Later in the film, when confessing to Father Ángel, the mayor calls himself the "terminator angel" and affirms that his destiny is to take revenge on the village that ousted his mother. Shepherd writes, "Authority in Bakhtin, by contrast is something altogether 'less benign', has more recognizable and often more sinister character" (136). Thus the demonic depiction of the mayor fits well with Bakhtin's theory on authority figures. In any case, when power and authority are challenged, dictators and their cruelty optimize authoritarian discourse, like the Soviet and Russian rulers Ivan the Terrible and Joseph Stalin.



*Nosferatu* screenshot



*O Veneno da Madrugada*. Screenshot of mayor ascending the stairs

At many points in the film, we see Bakhtin's observation that authoritarian discourse requires total acceptance or rejection through the mayor's orders. In one scene, the mayor walks in on Judge Arcadio making love to his mistress. As soon as Arcadio notices the mayor's presence, he stops what he is doing, revealing the mayor's authority over him. Arcadio is ordered to draft an arrest warrant for Don Sabas. When he asks what the charge is, the mayor replies "Could be anything. Burglary, subversion, moral outrage...In sum, whatever you want." The mayor also asks for him to write a form of transference of Nestor's lands with the beneficiary left blank. Since Arcadio wants to do the right thing, stating "I cannot go back on my word", he informs the mayor that Nestor's lands have already been transferred to the Asís family. With this sign of resistance, the mayor states, "I am not asking, I am commanding." Arcadio is threatened with a prison sentence if he fails to comply. Before departing, the mayor suggests to Arcadio that he remain silent on the matter "because silence is the elixir for eternal life." Clearly, this scene shows the dominance of the mayor's authority. This exemplifies Hirschkop's point on how Bakhtin views authority. "The authority of the authoritarian can be acknowledged or recognized, but cannot be something which one responds to or develops, and to acknowledge it means to accept it as something utterly unlike one's self" (87). Arcadio submits to the mayor's orders, even though he knows it is morally wrong, because authoritarian discourse, in this case, requires unconditional acceptance.

Not all of the characters in the text and film demonstrate total acceptance; in Guerra's film, Mr. Carmichael rejects the mayor's authority. After discovering Mr. Carmichael and the widow Asís making out, the mayor arrests Carmichael without any real justification. As the only black man in town and the bookkeeper for the Asís family, the mayor tries to manipulate him into blaming the lampoons on his employer. If Carmichael confesses to posting the lampoons in the widow Asís's name, he will be set free and receive a new pair of shoes. Unlike Judge Arcadio, Carmichael is an honorable man that refuses to submit to the mayor's authority. He proposes a counter offer, telling the mayor, "Shoot me." While the mayor is out having his tooth extracted, the guards shoot Carmichael claiming he was trying to escape. This is an example of a complete rejection of authoritarian discourse.



O Veneno da Madrugada. High-angle screenshot of dentist and Dr. Giraldo.

After finding Carmichael's body, the mayor once again demonstrates his authority over his troops and the residents of the town. He orders his men, "Bury the body in the courtyard and remember one thing for the rest of your life: Carmichael ran away." The men obediently remove the corpse and bury it; however, the mayor seems to forget that it is impossible to keep a secret in the town as witnessed through the lampoons. Doctor Giraldo and the dentist show up at the mayor's quarters to perform an autopsy. In the frame, the

mayor stands at the top of the stairs, only his legs are visible, while Giraldo and the dentist remain on the landing. The high-angle shot, combined with the mayor standing at a higher position, visually demonstrate his authority over the two townspeople. Armed with his rifle, which appears to be an extension of his phallus, the mayor threatens to shoot both of them if they move any closer. The doctor and dentist obey and leave so that they live to fight another day, but they resist the mayor's tyranny as Wertsch indicates is common in societies governed by oppressive regimes.

While authoritarian discourse is associated with the mayor and his voice, there is no such figure backing the internally persuasive discourses in *La mala hora* or *O Veneno da Madrugada* which can be seen through the distribution of clandestine literature throughout both works. A great example of this concept is the sign in the barbershop that states that talking about politics in the establishment is prohibited. Although the barber owns his shop, he really does not have any sort of authority to make or enforce rules because he is an ordinary citizen just like everyone else in town. When the mayor comes in for a shave he sees the sign and asks who authorized it. Immediately he rips it up and states that, "We are in a democracy and only the government can forbid." Since the sign represents the barber's internally persuasive discourse and is in no way authoritative, the mayor rips it to pieces. Later on in the film, Judge Arcadio also visits the barbershop. The barber gives him a clandestine newspaper and tells him to pass it along. Although Arcadio is technically a figure of authority, albeit in name only, he does not react violently to the prohibited literature. He just tells the barber that he is a brave man. Guerra never elaborates on what the judge does with the paper, but Arcadio does not have to accept what it says because those words are not from the mayor.

Unquestionably, the best example of internally persuasive discourse is the anonymous posting of the lampoons. They are described as being "a symptom of social decomposition" (108) and "a case of terrorism in the moral order" (115). Coover comments, "The mystery of the authorship of the lampoons is never solved; indeed, by the end of the novel with its brutal political realities and in spite of its final teasing ellipsis, it no longer seems important" (35). Most certainly, we know that the person behind the lampoons is not a figure of authority, but they do pose a specific hazard to authority. "The lampoons are not political in content, so they are threatening to the official language only in the sense that they can potentially destroy the social cohesion and unity of the town" (Williams 67). There are many different reactions to the lampoons as each individual in town is persuaded into believing what they say or dismiss them as pure gossip. The unique reactions are exactly what Bakhtin suggests occur when people are exposed to new discourses. *La mala hora* commences with the murder of Pastor by César Montero because César read a lampoon suggesting his wife was having an affair with Pastor. In the film, a lampoon claims Rebecca, the wife of Roberto Asís, is sleeping with many different men. Roberto is so distraught that he points a pistol at his sleeping wife. Then, he turns the gun on himself and plays Russian roulette but is unharmed. Rebecca reacts much differently, telling her husband that the rumors are false. These individual reactions reveal the power gossip / new discourses have on our internal thoughts. People will react in their own way as explained by Bakhtin. This concept is perfectly demonstrated by the various interpretations of the lampoons.

All of the internally persuasive discourses and the ruthlessness of a repressive regime can lead to resistance to the point where the authoritarian figures may lose power or it may become unclear who actually has power. Specifically examining the case of the Soviet Union and the government's desire to "exercise complete control over collective memory", Wertsch observes that, "an important force involved in the transition that had been unleashed stemmed from the alternative voices that had been silenced for decades and now had a kind of pent-up energy" (86). Thus, when the Soviets had the opportunity to transition from the repressive regime into a new one, all of the anger and suffering that they had endured was unleashed so that they could create a less restrictive society. Several moments from *La mala hora* and *O Veneno da Madrugada* perfectly illustrate this point. As soon as the mayor's toothache becomes unbearable, he finally goes to the dentist and threatens to shoot him if he does not extract the infected tooth. Guerra masterfully composes this shot using a low-angle shot. The dentist is in the position of power as he hovers over the cowering mayor with a sadistic smile on his face as he can finally extract some retribution. Upon hearing the mayor's request for anesthesia, the dentist says, "You kill without anesthesia." In addition in the short story "Un día de estos," in which García Márquez expands on this scene from *La mala hora*, the dentist says, "Now you'll pay for our twenty dead men" (116). Clearly, now that the power roles have been reversed, the dentist takes advantage of the situation and causes the mayor to feel some excruciating pain. The best example of repressed peoples unleashing pent-up energy is the final battle between the mayor's police force and the villagers. The mayor gives the townspeople rifles with blank cartridges, and organizes a patrol to catch the culprit behind the lampoons. A riot erupts leading to a massive search for clandestine fliers; shots are heard all night. By morning, the jails are full and many residents have fled town to join guerilla movements. Finally, the repressive regime became too much to handle and chaos ensued. In the case of

Guerra's film, the mayor is shot, bringing his reign of terror to an end. As Wertsch explained, the collective voices of the oppressed can become a powerful mechanism for change when they have the chance to revolt.

Overall, Bakhtin's theories on authoritarian and internally persuasive discourses are quite useful in analyzing the depictions of power, authority, and resistance in *La mala hora* and *O Veneno da Madrugada*. While the mayor represents a strong and vicious character, his attempts at controlling the unnamed river town fail as he seems to be conquered by it. Bakhtin's notion that authoritarian discourse must be completely accepted or rejected explains why Arcadio and some of the villagers are submissive and why others completely refuse to succumb to his demands. Instead, they resist and develop their own individually persuasive discourses that show their hatred towards the mayor. This animosity builds up and culminates with the violent revolt at the end of the book and film. Bakhtin's theories help to clarify the complex power structures in both works. In broader terms, his ideas on authoritarian and internally persuasive discourses are excellent theories to apply to Latin American literature and films produced from the second half of the twentieth century through the present as there has been a consistent focus on writing about the repressive military regimes that plagued Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. While Stam's writings on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque have proven to be useful in analyzing Latin American texts and cinema, more scholarship is needed on Bakhtin's other writings, like authoritarian and internally persuasive discourses, to further demonstrate his relevance to the region.

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