

**HYPERBOLIC REALISM IN  
THOMAS PYNCHON'S AND ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S  
LATE MAXIMALIST NOVELS  
*AGAINST THE DAY & 2666***

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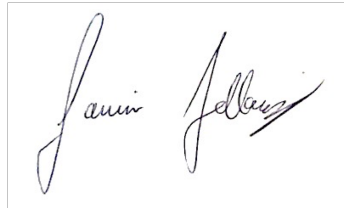
January 31, 2018

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## DECLARATION OF GOOD ACADEMIC CONDUCT

I, SAMIR SELLAMI, hereby certify that this dissertation, which is 99841 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. All sentences or passages quoted in this dissertation from other people's work (with or without trivial changes) have been placed within quotation marks, and specifically acknowledged by reference to author, work and page. I understand that plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of such passages – will be considered grounds for failure in this dissertation and in the degree program as a whole. I also affirm that, with the exception of the specific acknowledgements, the following dissertation is entirely my own work.

Berlin / Perpignan / Rio de Janeiro: January 31, 2018

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed in a thin black rectangular border. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Samir Sellami".

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To those and many more, I am grateful that they fueled the infrastructures that allowed me to write a 350-pages long self-help book disguised as a dissertation in comparative literature. Like any other self-help book, at the heart of this one lies a simple message that I've learned to sum up in one sentence to avoid long and tedious discussions about what this is all about: *deliver yourself (with ritual reluctance) to the inhumanism of language in order to find your agencies within open-ended and material practices.*

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## INDEX OF THE SHORT TITLES

Bolaño: 2666 = B

Pynchon: *Against the Day* = P

AF = Meillassoux: *Après la finitude*

AL = Borges: *El Aleph*

AR = Barad: *Agential Realism*

ARG = Nelson: *The Argonauts*

AQ = Levinas: *Autrement qu'être*

CR = Blumenberg: "Concept of Reality and Possibility of Novel"

ED = Bolaño: *Estrella Distante*

ER = Richir: *Ecart et Rien*

ES = Richir: *Esquisses*

GI = Wark: *General Intellects*

GP = McHale: "Genre-Poaching"

GR = Pynchon: *Gravity's Rainbow*

GS = Rosa: *Grande Sertão*

HO = Morton: *Hyperobjects*

HP = Waldenfels: *Hyperphänomene*

HY = Johnson: *Hyperboles*

LR = Horne: *Literaturas reales*

MA = Oswald de Andrade: *Manifesto antropófago*

MU = Barad: *Meeting the Universe*

PA = Lezama Lima: *Paradiso*

PL = Catren: "Pleromatica"

PR = Sedgwick: "Paranoid and Reparative Reading"

RA = Piglia: *Respiración artificial*

SMU = Serpell: *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*

TI = Levinas: *Totalité et Infini*

UW = DeLillo: *Underworld*

VI = Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l'invisible*

WE = Fisher: *The Weird and the Eerie*

WR = Joy: "Weird Reading,"

WSP = Spivak: "Why study the Past?"

## β) INTRODUCTION

*Nothing was too small for such converse,  
nothing was too great.*  
(V. Woolf)

Like literature itself, this dissertation tries to do several things at the same time.

At first glance, it is a contribution to the study of the contemporary maximalist novel. What is the (world-)literary status of the extremely long novel at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Why are such novels still written and read in times of ever shorter attention spans and the growing evidence of post-literacy?<sup>1</sup> What can long novels offer to aesthetic experience apart from merely being stories told in too many words? Are these "tales within tales within tales"<sup>2</sup> only hiding out in the shelter of a boundlessly receptive genre as yet another "[in]significant milestone in the [literary] history of inflation"<sup>3</sup> Are these mega-novels rather new phenomena or a continuation of their venerable genealogy both within and outside of the genre?

*Within* – as in the chivalric romances of the Middle Ages, in Cervantes' simultaneous de- and reconstruction of the former, in Rabelais' carnivalesque travelogue of giants, in Melville's monstrous navigation through

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<sup>1</sup> See Marshall McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*, Routledge & Paul, London, 1962; Bruce Powe: *The Solitary Outlaw*, Lester & Orpen Dennys, Toronto, 1987. For the predominance of TV and visual culture over literature and reading see David Foster Wallace: "E Unibus Pluram. Television and U.S. Fiction," in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2, Summer 1993, 151–194.

<sup>2</sup> John Barth: *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction*, Putnam & Sons, New York/NY, 1984, 222.

<sup>3</sup> See Donald Barthelme: *The Balloon*, in D. B.: *Sixty Stories*, Putnam & Sons, New York/NY, 1981, 53–58, 54.

the oceans and other abysses, in the modernist endgame epopees of Proust, Musil and Joyce – to name just a few.

*Outside* – as in the great epic poems from Homer to Camões, in d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in the desire to produce a *Gesamtwerk* or even a *Gesamtkunstwerk*? Does it matter if we call them "maximalist novels" (Ercolino), "mega novels" (Karl), "system novels" (LeClair), "encyclopedic novels" (Mendelson), "modern epics" (Moretti), "cartographies of the absolute" (Toscano & Kinkle), "geopolitical novels" (Irr), "alephs" (Hoyos), "discursos de la abundancia" (Ortega); "novelas supremas" (Padilla), "novelas totales" (Corral, Vargas Llosa); or, if we dismiss them as "too hard to read" (Franzen), as the "dull new global novel" (Parks) or as "hysterical realism" (Wood)?<sup>4</sup> What hermeneutic armor should we wear

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<sup>4</sup> Stefano Ercolino: *The Maximalist Novel. From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*, transl. Albert Sbragia, Bloomsbury, London i. a., 2014; Frederick R. Karl: *American Fictions 1980–2000. Whose America is it Anyway?*, Xlibris, Bloomington/IN, 2001; Tom LeClair: *The Art of Excess. Mastery in Contemporary Fiction*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago/IL i. a., 1989; Edward Mendelson: "Encyclopedic Narrative. From Dante to Pynchon," in *Modern Language Notes* 91, 1976, 1267–1275; Franco Moretti: *The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, transl. Quintin Hoare, London i. a., 1996; Alberto Toscano, Jeff Kinkle: *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Zero, Winchester i. a., 2015; Caren Irr: *Toward the Geopolitical Novel. U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, Columbia University Press, New York/NY, 2014; Héctor Hoyos: *Beyond Bolaño. The Global Latin American Novel*, Columbia University Press, New York/NY, 2015; Julio Ortega: *El discurso de la abundancia*, Monte Ávila, Caracas, 1992; Ignacio Padilla: "Septenario de bolsillo," in *Crack Instrucciones de uso*, Debolsillo, Barcelona, 2006, 214–218; Wilfrido H. Corral: "Novelistas sin timón: exceso y subjetividad en el concepto de la 'novela total,'" in *Modern Language Notes* 116:2, 2001, 315–349; Jonathan Franzen, "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books," in *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2002, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/30/mr-difficult> (accessed January 21, 2018); Tim Parks: "The Dull New Global Novel," in *New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/> (accessed January 27, 2018); James Wood, "Human, All too Inhuman," in *New Republic*, July 24, 2000, <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman> (accessed January 21, 2018). See also Lawrence Buell: *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2014; Tobias Haberkorn: *Das Problem des Zuviel in der Literatur / Le Problème du Trop en Littérature. Rabelais: Gargantua et Pantagruel, Montaigne: Les Essais*, dissertation, FU Berlin / EHESS Paris, 2016.

when wrestling with these textual giants? How can we avoid to reduce them all too hastily to domestic scales? And how can we distinguish between maximalist novels whose time and material effort comes from the logic of the matter, from merely inflationist novels that only fake their aesthetic radicality behind a hypertrophic spectacle?

Who still reads long novels and for what reasons in our highly competitive media ecology?

In this dissertation, I propose the two notions of HYPERBOLE and REALISM as a starting point and a framework to deal with the question of the very long novel in times of its "anxiety of obsolescence."<sup>5</sup> Unlike one might think, I don't consider realism and the hyperbolic as *opposite categories*, which are later bridged or merged in a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*. Against this definition of the novel as formal compromise, I consider realism and the hyperbolic as *distant modalities* within one aesthetic practice, sometimes conflicting, sometimes converging, and often not related at all.

Unsurprisingly, my concept of hyperbole derives from the tradition of rhetoric where it was first defined as a trope, but later seen in a wider context as a figure of speech. I try to push this tendency of hyperbole even further by considering it not only as a figure of speech, but as an aesthetic *figura*, a concept in part inspired by the works of Erich Auerbach and Julio Cortázar.<sup>6</sup> While hyperbole is rudimentarily defined as figurative amplification or attenuation that stands in a complicated relationship with truth and verisimilitude, I will also follow hyperbole's tracks beyond that definition to

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<sup>5</sup> See Kathleen Fitzpatrick: *The Anxiety of Obsolescence. The American Novel in the Age of Television*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville/TN, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> [See footnote 145]

places where our attempts to create categorical law & order reach their limits.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, my aim is not to provide a unifying definition of realism, an attempt whose futility has already been demonstrated by Roman Jakobson in his famous essay "On Realism in Art."<sup>8</sup> However, with the rise of a vast and varied array of *new realism(s)* across many cultural fields and practices over the last years, "realism" poses itself anew as a *problem* for critical and interpretative thinking (both in and outside of literary criticism). Despite their difference in method, purpose and scope, many contributions in theory, art and philosophy since the turn of the millennium appear in part as a reaction to the ecological and social crises of our time. This prompts my coinage of Anthropocenic thought, which I will discuss alongside positions and ideas from contemporary speculative philosophy, and a phenomenological tradition that I trace back to Merleau-Ponty's *Le visible et l'invisible*.<sup>9</sup> Towards the end of the chapter, I offer a short survey of newer projects in literary criticism that turn their attention back (or forward) to the problem of

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<sup>7</sup> On several occasions, Christopher Johnson, the most important living scholar of hyperboles, repeats that the hyperbolic is not completely opposed to the system in place but traverses it as a force that is both disturbing and energizing in order to "open its horizons for new possibilities" of practice and thought. Hyperbole rejects the monolithic solipsism of the absolute as much as it defies the ideas of monochrome nothingness and abstract infinity. As a figure that disturbs and revives instead of acting all alone, it does not have the first and the last words. As a mode that rejects both the absolute transcendence of religion and the localism of authentic human experience, it has strong affinities with negative theology: "Hyperbole is the *beta* and *psi* of the apophatic experience." (See Christopher D. Johnson: *Hyperboles. The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2010, 446. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title HY + page number.

<sup>8</sup> Roman Jakobson: "On Realism in Art," in: R. J.: *Language in Literature*, ed. Kristyna Pomorska, Stephen Rudy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 1987, 19–27.

<sup>9</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l'invisible, suivi de notes de travail*, ed. Claude Lefort, Gallimard, Paris, 1964. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title VI + page number.

realism after it had been rather absent from the field (at least within the study of contemporary literature).<sup>10</sup>

While this chapter's function is predominantly synoptic, I will nevertheless try to link the various projects across the alleged disciplinary boundaries. In that vein, I will find a rarely registered inhumanist motif in phenomenology, which is suspected to be inevitably bound to a description of the phenomenal world as it is given for a human subject or body; I discover that speculative thought is underpinned by a strong environmental motif; I will propose a way to combine some of these theoretical modalities without neutralizing some of their conflicting tendencies.

Chapter I.2 is a necessarily incomplete and provisional *prospect* for a theory of hyperboles, which is partly due to hyperbole's eccentricity as a figure that loves to dwell at the margins of orders and institutions. Starting from rhetoric and literary criticism, I will later in the chapter revisit my two theoretical main sources, (inhumanist) phenomenology and (Anthropocenic) speculative philosophy to broaden the scope of hyperbole.

From this vantage point, I will delve into my readings of Roberto Bolaño's *2666*<sup>11</sup> and Pynchon's *Against the Day*<sup>12</sup> in part II. Chapter II.1 starts from the most obvious feature of these novels, their extreme length and crammed novelistic universes. However, this chapter is not only interested in the proliferation of "tales within tales," but turns into a reflection about the intertextual dynamic of these novels. Chapter II.2 analyzes Pynchon's and Bolaño's phenomenology of light and darkness and speculates about its ramifications for some of the most delicate political and ethical aspects of their

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<sup>10</sup> For an account of both the persistence of realist writing and an attempt to redefine realism for the present see Martín Kohan: "Significación actual del realismo críptico," in *BOLETIN/12 del Centro de Estudios de Teoría y Crítica Literaria*, December 2005, 1–13.

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Bolaño: *2666*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2004. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title B + page number.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Pynchon: *Against the Day*, Penguin, London, 2006. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title P + page number.

texts. Chapter III.3 analyzes the novels' extravagant metaphors and places them in a wider dynamic shaped by hyperbolic proliferation and constant self-correction, but also punctured by moments of metonymic reticence. Chapter II.4 juxtaposes radical doubt, narrative suspense and the stubbornness of literary discourse to *speak it out* without abolishing the uncertainties in which all literary (and non-literary) discourse is ultimately grounded. And chapter II.5 tries to grasp how *2666* and *Against the Day* use the tradition of ekphrasis search for a sensual realm behind or rather beneath images and imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Part III serves as a long conclusion while also adding several new aspects that expand and contextualize the findings of part II. In chapter III.1, I propose to read the works of Pynchon and Bolaño within the tradition of the adventure novel, with a clear emphasis on minor adventures from inferior positions. Chapter III.2 serves as a short excursus about twisted temporalities and speculates about the possibility of a realism of the future. Finally, Chapter III.3 gives more nuance to the notion of *hyperbolic realism* that I will constantly use in my text<sup>14</sup> and demonstrates to what extent it provides a

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<sup>13</sup> In a way, all five chapters of the main part could be understood as variations on rhetoric figures. While ch. II.1 is an exploration of *copia* as a mode of literary uncertainty, chs. II.2 and II.5 explore the dark undercurrents of *evidentia*. Maybe even more than metaphor, the secret protagonists of ch. II.3 are the figures of *correctio* and *cataphresis*. And ch. II.4 reveals *anacoluthon*, the sudden interruption of discourse, as an agent of *desengaño*, the act of speaking out (the truth) after long moments of suspense. All five chapters are committed to a modality suggested by the underrated figure of the *chiasmus* – the mutual entanglement of metaphoric and metonymic elements. [See footnote 338]

<sup>14</sup> I hope I don't demand too much patience from my readers by withholding the final discussion of the central concept of this dissertation until the very end. My first reason for using the term *hyperbolic realism* as if it were already known is stylistic: on several occasions, it serves as a place holder that avoids tedious repetitions of names of novels and authors. However, there are also at least two more material reasons for postponing this moment of definition. First and foremost, I follow the neo-materialist conception underpinning this dissertation ("The *Labor of Figuration*") to define *hyperbolic realism* not as a genre with prototypically formal features, but as a mode or rather a bundle of various modalities. Premature categorical decisions would certainly lead to an impoverishment of nuances. The third dimension of my use of the term is



certain solution to the classical, but also very postmodern problem of (in)ef-fability. The epilogue, at last, tries to flesh out a few consequences of the spe-cific concept of reality that forms the (onto-phenomenological) basis of *hy-perbolic realism*, yet is also co-produced by their laborious adventures of figuration.

Some readers might criticize that narratological questions in the strict sense of the word are rather absent from this dissertation. Indeed, although much of my argumentation is shaped by narratological questions, I will not discuss these questions within a classically narratological framework. For reasons that should become clearer as we proceed, I've decided to read these novels with both a broader and a smaller scope. Sometimes I read them as if they were poems, very large poems where distant resonances are often more important than the immediate context. At other occasions, I follow the cen-trifugal tendency of hyperbole (gr. *hyperballein* = to throw beyond) to gain inspiration and nuance from seemingly unconnected sources for my under-standing of *hyperbolic realism*.

Hyperbolic doubt invites us to call every single element of a given text into question, as if all texts were pre-modern enigmas where nothing can be taken for granted and every single word deserves to be annotated. On the other hand, there is the danger of a hermeneutic of infinite comments that forgets that reading necessarily entails decisions and that decisions nec-essarily entail local reductions of complexity.

Every interpretation of literature beyond the homely activity of an *explication de texte* emits a throw of the dice. I should be satisfied if my gamble

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closely related to the former and invites the reader to add *ad libitum* other texts or art works following a similar mode of production. While my concept is constructed on the basis of an extremely minimal corpus, it is open for revision as each added item affects the initial concept. *Hyperbolic realism*, understood as a mode and not as a genre, is neither a closed categorical box nor an abstract infinite possibility, but a material and open-ended practice.

pays off as a few insights into the situation of literature at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the help of phenomenology, I will not only try to explore how meaning is organized in literary texts, but how meaning and 'sense' occur in the first place. And with the help of the latest debates around the elusive notion of "realism," I will try to challenge the often self-absorbed paradigms of critical theory without reverting to the naive reactions some of these debates have indisputably generated.

*A savage* hermeneutics – to apply one of Bolaño's favorite words – instead of a hermeneutics of suspicion. *A corrupted pilgrimage* – to use Pynchon's adorable formula – in search of some places well-known and others "not strictly on the map at all," as Pynchon writes himself in the blurb to his novel. Not as an escape from, but as a "plunge into reality."<sup>15</sup> Not to a place where redemption of all sins awaits us, but to places "where salvation does not yet exist." (P 566)

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<sup>15</sup> Flannery O'Connor: "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in F. O.: *Mystery and Manners. Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York/NY, 1970, 63–86, 78.

**PART I. REFLECTIONS ON  
REALISM AND HYPERBOLES**

## I.1 REALISM ON AN EXPANDED CANVAS

*Olha o gato. Olha o que o gato viu.  
Olha o que o gato pensou. Olha o que era.  
Enfim, enfim, não havia símbolo, a 'coisa' era!  
A coisa orgiaca.  
(C. Lispector)*

### *Why study the past?*

"Why study the past?" is Gayatri Spivak's simple question at the beginning of her eponymous essay from 2012. "The short answer," she immediately replies, "is because we must."<sup>16</sup> More (albeit still quite short) answers can be found in the rest of the essay which is one of many possible starting points for discussing the wide and furrowed field of contemporary realism. According to Spivak, studying the past has basically two functions: one protective, the other projective. On the one hand, the study of the past "protects us from the horror and randomness of planetarity." (WSP 1) Forging a narrative from seemingly distant events, bestowing a sense to the senseless is an "attempt to gain language and poise in the face of catastrophes, suffering, chaos and crisis."<sup>17</sup>

The second, projective function emphasizes the obligation to construct, first, personal and, later, public pasts in a way that makes the invention of a common future possible.<sup>18</sup> What sounds like a vacuous rallying cry,

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<sup>16</sup> Gayatri Spivak: "Why Study the Past," in *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:1, March 2012, 1–12, 1. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title WSP + page number.

<sup>17</sup> Hartmut Böhme: "Hilft das Lesen in der Not? Warum unsere Wissenschaftskrise eine Krise der Moderne ist," in *Die Zeit*, March 12, 2009, my translation.

<sup>18</sup> The task of inventing a future based on the understanding of the past (and a reconfiguration of the present) is a concern traditionally shared between fiction and theory. See e.g. Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams: *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Verso,

is Spivak's starting point for demanding a new theoretically productive alliance between historiography and activism. Introducing the pragmatic dimension of activism into theory, then, is a way to expand the understanding of history beyond *both* event and narrative. While the interpretative take on history emphasizes the ambiguity and complexity of historical reality, the understanding of history as a "task" (WSP 2) foregrounds the problem of decisions and commitments:

The field of work, the field of life, is best described by a double bind, contradictory instructions coming at once. You acknowledge that this description must be immediately converted into a single bind — strictly speaking an "erroneous" description — so that a choice can be made. You cannot not decide if you are actually in the field of social justice. (WSP 11)

Spivak moves on to a sophisticated criticism of Deleuze and Guattari's concept for a historiography that emerges from nomadic experiences and not from the "point de vue des sédentaires, et au nom d'un appareil unitaire d'État."<sup>19</sup> Figures and concepts such as the nomad, the rhizome or schizoanalysis are important theoretical tools for grasping the ambiguity of writing history and the ambivalence of history itself. Yet, as Spivak objects, these concepts are not sufficient when dealing with the problem of decisions "in the field of social justice." However, we might add that the problem of decisions is not only important in the field of social justice, but also in the

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London, 2015; and Cressida Leyshon: "This week in fiction: Ben Lerner," in *The New Yorker*, June 10, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-ben-lerner> (accessed January 17, 2018): "I'm probably making this sound too much like some kind of abstract, meta-fictional exercise when in fact I'm talking about something intensely lived: how each of us is constantly striving to reorganize mere chronology into some meaningful pattern, to narrate our pasts in a way that makes a future thinkable."

<sup>19</sup> Quoted after WSP 8. See Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Minuit, Paris, 1984, 34.

practice of writing itself. While aggregating always more perspective, doubt and uncertainty to its wandering text, schizoanalysis fails to articulate the reductions of complexity that social and political actions necessarily entail: "The schizo's 'and then...and then'," Spivak laconically concludes, "stands as a reminder of the double bind, but it's not agentially useful." (WSP 11)

To do justice to both dimensions – the complicating construction of double binds and the obligation to transform them into single binds in the realm of action, we need to adopt an attitude that Spivak calls "affirmative deconstruction," an attitude acknowledging that every practice is based on specific grounding errors. Ethics, then, becomes the task of prioritizing a set of grounding errors over others:

You can't just say for the practice of freedom that Kant shows us that the production of the discourse of freedom is always programmed by the lack of access to pure reason, so we say "ok, we wash our hands, just let's make mistakes." [...] Because just *any* grounding error is not O.K. You have to choose between structures of violence, structures of *violating* the double bind of life and work and thinking, and so on, you have to choose, and that's the democratic choice. (WSP 11)

Actions are 'erroneous descriptions' of the real, but this does not mean that all of them are equally acceptable. We can err in many different ways which makes grounding errors *more or less* wrong. Studying the past is a way to inform our collective negotiations of such grounding errors. With traditional institutions continually failing, the study of the past becomes more and more important as a compass in the search of new futures.

The state is thoroughly compromised into managing global capital. Multi-cultural democracy (a contradiction in terms) and international civil society

both applaud only the social productivity of capital, and all structural constraints are lifted as obstacles, and the needy are seen as individual occasions. (WSP 6)

Among these failing institutions is also the computer. If seeing the past as a rhizome has sparked dreams of inhabiting the structures of ambiguity as a horizontal and non-hierarchical community, the silicon chip lures us into the false impression that the past can be readily accessed. The past, however, is not given or manifest, it is a "relief map"<sup>20</sup> (WSP 3) and a "vanishing relationship." (WSP 1) Therefore, Spivak promotes a mode of analysis that seems to imply and complicate both close and distant readings. "Broad reading" is the name for this analytic practice that understands the past as "contemporaneous diachronies" (WSP 3) from the vantage point of a contested present.

### *History on an expanded canvas*

Spivak's essay is one of many possible entry points into current debates around *realism* spanning the planet and invading all sorts of cultural production. Starting with Spivak and not with a project properly positioned within the diverse *new realist* movement, reminds us that most of the issues and questions raised by new realisms are hotly debated across the whole field. If many are skeptical towards the proclaimed ontological turn, it seems to be an increasingly shared commitment among scholars and thinkers to study their phenomena (the past, politics, social existence, the arts etc.) "on an expanded canvas."

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<sup>20</sup> The metaphor of the past as a relief map comes close to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the world as a relief, "la surface d'une profondeur." (VI 177)

This is how Spivak's comrade-in-arms Dipesh Chakrabarty has put it in his Anthropocene lecture at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, in 2013. If my memory is correct, the lecture basically reformulated Chakrabarty's ideas from his notorious essay "The Climate of History. Four Theses." Taking the example of the trajectory of Giovanni Arrighi, a leading historian of capital, Chakrabarty points to a characteristic shift in the analytic mood in the last years – from the predominantly Euro-American reflection on globalization internal to capitalism<sup>21</sup> to the twenty-first century's planetary genealogies<sup>22</sup> "more concerned with the question of ecological limits to capitalism."<sup>23</sup>

[The] critique that sees humanity as an effect of power is valuable for all the hermeneutics of suspicion that it has taught postcolonial scholarship. It is an effective critical tool in dealing with national and global formations of domination. But I do not find it adequate in dealing with the crisis of global warming. [...] We may not experience ourselves as a geological agent, but we appear to have become one at the level of the species. And without that knowledge that defies historical understanding there is no making sense of the current crisis that affects us all. Climate change, refracted through global capital, will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital; some people will no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others. But the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Giovanni Arrighi: *The Long Twentieth Century. Money, Power, and the Origins of our Time* [1994], Verso, London, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Arrighi: *Adam Smith in Beijing. Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*, Verso, London, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty: "The Climate of History. Four Theses," in *Critical Inquiry* 35, Winter 2009, 197–222, 200.

<sup>24</sup> Chakrabarty, "Climate of History," 221.



Based on these observations, Chakrabarty goes on to present his four theses: (1) the persistent humanist distinction between natural history and human history has to be overcome; (2) the Anthropocenic event has fundamental consequences on how we conceptualize modernization and globalization; (3) the history of globalization has to be put in dialogue with the history of the human species; and (4) capitalism as seen from the history of the species and the planet has the capacity of probing the limits of capital itself.

Anthropocenic thought becomes a tool for thinking the limits of capitalism, but also a reminder that critiques of capitalism are not reducible to the history of capital only. As diverse and heterogeneous as ever before, many new theoretical and cultural figurations that appear on the expanded canvas of the Anthropocene share a common concern: Can we think an 'outside' of the status quo, that is, capitalism, the human, modernization etc., without downplaying or sidestepping the question of social inequality? Or, to put it more crudely: Can we think nature on its own terms without losing politics?

### *The advent of Anthropocenic thought*

A swift look at the landscape of theory across the humanities over, say, the last 15 years,<sup>25</sup> demonstrates that both perspectives or, rather, orientations are not easy to reconcile. They seem like two magnetic Norths of a

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<sup>25</sup> Fifteen years before this dissertation is written, Paul Crutzen proposed the term "Anthropocene" to a wider public to rename our geological present. See Paul J. Crutzen: "Geology of Mankind," in *Nature* 415, January 3, 2002, 23, 23: "For the past three centuries, the effects of humans on the global environment have escalated. Because of these anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, global climate may depart significantly from natural behavior for many millennia to come. It seems appropriate to assign the term 'Anthropocene' to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene — the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia." Two years before, the term had already been presented

weird compass that has been placed in our hands to navigate the increasingly rough terrain of the real.

While a plethora of popular and academic publications on global warming raises our awareness of the undisputable (yet still disputed) ecological crisis, the question remains if the vast majority of these contributions does not conceal the fact that the least responsible for the crisis are often the ones who are most severely affected by it. Invocations of green and sustainable economies perpetuate the deadlock of technocratic top-down "solutions" and reinforce the logic of modernization qua capitalization, while the call for local action risks fetishizing the small, the hand-made and the traditional and tends to rehearse the same old rituals of indignation against an untouchable cartel of governments, financial markets and international corporations. Anthropocenic thought is similarly caught between the reality of political ineffectiveness and the danger of betraying its most fundamental critical standards when trying to exert more influence on public opinion and policy making.

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to a more specialized audience in Paul J. Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer: "The Anthropocene," in *IGBP [International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme] Newsletter* 41, 2000, 17.

A major example for the "inquisitive renegotiation of human faculties"<sup>26</sup> prompted by the Anthropocenic event is the renegotiation of the human-animal divide. In the wake of yet another "blow to man's self love,"<sup>27</sup> the human place in the cosmos is again open for debating. In recent years, the animal has become a welcome guest in conference panels, round tables and art exhibitions – for obvious reasons, more often as a discursive object and not physically present. In good academic fashion, the *animal turn* has been proclaimed, entire research clusters dedicate themselves to the *animal question*,<sup>28</sup> and proper institutes or subdivisions of *animal studies*<sup>29</sup> have been founded. While most of these contributions remain more or less deliberately within the realm of the symbolic, a certain justification for the marketing cry of turning the animal question lies in the fact that animals become more and more seen as bearers of consciousness, intelligence, agency, and even sociality and not as a mere life form that is only interesting for the natural sciences.

The animal only seems to be the most popular example of a general interest in the nonhuman, the posthuman and even the inhuman that is often meant to provoke the liberal mainstream. Philosophers, political scientists

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<sup>26</sup> Reza Negarestani: "Drafting the Inhuman. Conjectures on Capitalism and the Organic Necrocracy," in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman (eds.): *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, re:press, Melbourne, 2011, 182–201, 182. Reza Negarestani is arguably one of the most brilliant, hermetic and idiosyncratic actors in the emerging field of speculative realism. He is not only the author of many influential essays and a forthcoming philosophy book (*Intelligence and Spirit*, Urbanomic, Falmouth, \*2018), but also of the speculative theory-novel *Cyclonopedia. Complicity with Semi-Anonymous Materials*, re:press, Melbourne, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud: *A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-analysis* [1917], in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, ed. James Strachey, Norton, London i. a., 2001, 3606–3615, 3614.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. the French project *Animots* (CNRS 2010-4) led by Anne Simon, <http://animots.hypotheses.org> (accessed January 17, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. University of Würzburg's *IFCEAS* (Interfaculty Forum for Cultural Environment and Animal Studies), <https://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/ifceas/startseite/> (accessed January 17, 2018); or NYU's institute for *Animal Studies*, <https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/departments/animalstudies.html> (accessed January 17, 2018).

and anthropologists are trying to fathom the life of plants,<sup>30</sup> the intelligence of forests,<sup>31</sup> or the adventures of mushrooms as models for life and survival in "capitalist ruins."<sup>32</sup> The case for "vital materialism"<sup>33</sup> tries to think matter not as a mere reservoir for human exploitation and inscription, but as a largely independent, autopoietic, intra-active force of producing matter and even meaning. Some foreground concrete materials against the catchy, but abstract concept of materiality,<sup>34</sup> others use the aesthetic immersion into the world of things to contest the binary between a phenomenological analysis of what things mean to us vs. the Marxist critique of commodification and fetishization under capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

Object-oriented ontology (OOO) is the name for a wide range of controversial attempts to (1) think objects independently from their cultural and subjective constitutions and to (2) consider the human as just one object among many others. "Flat ontologies"<sup>36</sup> and "assemblages"<sup>37</sup> are two of the

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<sup>30</sup> Emanuele Coccia: *La vie des plantes. Une métaphysique du mélange*, Rivages, Paris, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Eduardo Kohn: *How Forests Think. Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, University of California Press, Los Angeles/CA, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing: *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/NJ, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Jane Bennett: *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham/NC, 2010, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Tim Ingold: "Materials against Materiality," in *Archaeological Dialogues* 14:1, June 2007, 1–16.

<sup>35</sup> I am alluding to Bill Brown's thing theory – a project that tries to do words with things, thus epitomizing the complementary project to J. L. Austin's notorious theory of linguistic performance. (Bill Brown: "Thing Theory," in *Critical Inquiry* 28:1, Autumn 2001, 1–22). For a 'positive' account of fetishization and fetishisms see Bill Brown: *A Sense of Things. The Object Matter of American Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/IL, 2003, 25-30.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Manuel De Landa: *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Continuum, New York/NY, 2008, 41; Levi Bryant: *The Democracy of Objects*, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor/MI, 2011, 245-290.

<sup>37</sup> See Manuel De Landa: *Assemblage Theory. A New Philosophy of Society*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013. The notion of "assemblage" is one of the most explicit markers of OOO's tight connection with Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Other works try to think the assemblage outside of the object-oriented framework. See e.g. Karen Barad: "Agential Realism. How Material-Discu-

key concepts of OOO and related projects. Against hierarchical structures, flat ontologies assume that all the elements of an ontological set should be located on one and the same level and that none of them should be privileged in relation to the others. To illustrate this, some of these thinkers provide large enumerative lists<sup>38</sup> to point out that the real should rather be understood as the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials than as a successive chain of causal relations or as a hermeneutically coherent context. Assemblages reiterate the horizontal character of flat ontologies, but highlight the fact that nothing exists individually and isolated from larger and never fully accessible organizational environments. At least in principle, it seems that assemblages are more apt to accommodate complexity than flat ontologies

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sive Practices Matter," in K. B.: *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham/NC, 2007, 132–188 & 432–8 (in the following quoted directly in the text with the short title AR + page number. Quotes that refer to other passages of the book are indicated with the short title MU + page number); Judith Butler: *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2015.

<sup>38</sup> See Ian Bogost's half-serious, half-humorous notion of the *Latour litany*. Ian Bogost: *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/MI i. a., 2012, 49: "The Latour litany gathers disparate things together like a strong gravitational field," listing substantives from different existential categories (e.g. organic and inorganic) that are operative across various scales (e.g. bacteria and the Earth's atmosphere). By now, Latour litanies have become one of the most popular targets of scorn by OOO's critics. Their main allegation is that, by flattening the differences among all sorts of entities, Latour litanies produce a new hyper-relativism that makes any kind of epistemological, ethical and political intervention pointless. Literature may provide another line of critique, one which is directed against the grammatical poverty of these creative exercises in enumeration. One inevitably thinks of Borges' famous alternative taxonomy *Emporio celestial de conocimientos benévolos* in his essay *El idioma analítico de John Wilkins*, in: J. L. B.: *Otras inquisiciones*, Editorial Sur, Buenos Aires, 1952, 121–125, 123-4: "En sus remotas páginas está escrito que los animales se dividen en (a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, (l) etcétera, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas."

since they don't exclude the possibility of spontaneously emerging hierarchies within predominantly horizontal structures or systems.

Both phenomena, the renewed interest in ontology and the attention to forms of life, agency and awareness besides the human, do not come out of nowhere. Instead they can tap into various traditions that already look back to longer trajectories. Posthuman thought<sup>39</sup> is one of these traditions. Here, it is not only the divide between the human and other forms of life that is at stake, rather the divide is relocated within the human itself. Posthumanism urges us alternately to think the human as a modifiable category open to all kinds of machinic hybridizations and to think the real from the horizon of the eventual disappearance of mankind from the Earth's surface.<sup>40</sup> Crucially, what posthumanism adds to the sociology of assemblages is this horizon of imminent extinction<sup>41</sup> and the sense that technology and the digital

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<sup>39</sup> Some of the well-known classics are Donna Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York/NY, 1991; Katherine C. Hayles: *How we Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/IL, 1999; Rosi Braidotti: *The Posthuman*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013; and David Roden: *Posthuman Life. Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*, Routledge, London, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> This is, of course, nothing new. Structuralism's commitment to a critical abolition of humanism. The *locus classicus* is, of course, the last sentence of Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (Gallimard, Paris, 1966, 398): "Si ces dispositions venaient à disparaître comme elles sont apparues, si par quelque évènement dont nous pouvons tout au plus pressentir la possibilité, mais dont nous ne connaissons pour l'instant encore ni la forme ni la promesse, elles basculeraient, comme le fit au tournant du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle le sol de la pensée classique, – alors on peut bien parier que l'homme s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable." At the end of *Tristes tropiques* (PLON, Paris, 1955, 495), Claude Lévi-Strauss expresses the real possibility of human extinction in somewhat blunter terms: "Le monde a commencé sans l'homme et il s'achèvera sans lui."

<sup>41</sup> See Claire Colebrook: *Death of the PostHuman. Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 1, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor/MI, 2014; Ray Brassier: *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York/NY, 2007.

are not only "extensions of man"<sup>42</sup> or *second nature*. Instead, they have developed complex ecosystems interfering with the biological and geological conditions of life itself.

Despite the familiar proclamations of their novelty, it is hardly surprising that Anthropocenic thought, new materialist, new realist and new speculative projects do not come out of the blue. In a text that uses Freud's theorem of the death drive to theorize our limited navigation within (but also beyond) capitalism, Reza Negarestani claims that speculative thought should be considered as a late phenomenon in the history of decentering human subjectivity, a history which is not limited to, but dominated by critical theory:

With the burgeoning popularity of speculative thought, it is becoming more evident that what is labelled as 'speculative' is more an epiphenomenon of the inquisitive renegotiation of human faculties, their limits and vulnerabilities rather, than a counterintuitive foray into the abyssal vistas unlocked by contemporary science. Accordingly, in the more extreme forms of speculative thought, political intervention and political analysis have been curtailed or at least have been temporarily suspended. This is because [in] the horizon of agency (of emancipation or intervention), ontological privileges and conditions of experience are precisely those ingredients of political thought which are under the process of critical interrogation.<sup>43</sup>

Speculative and Anthropocenic thought does not recoil from gambling. It proposes a temporary *epoché* of explicitly political issues and refuses to set capitalism as the ultimate signifier under which everything must be subsumed. It revitalizes matter, the question of the environment and even

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<sup>42</sup> See Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York/NY, 1964.

<sup>43</sup> Negarestani, "Drafting the Inhuman," 182.

'nature,' by scrutinizing "the ontological privileges and conditions of experience." Together with the political it provocatively puts in brackets related dimensions such as class, race, gender, sexuality, ability etc. Yet, it emphasizes the impossibility of returning to the dangerous phantasy of a direct encounter with the real and is therefore profoundly anti-dogmatic in its intention. Its risky gamble is the attempt to revitalize philosophy, social theory and political struggles by attacking the presumably unexamined convictions of critical theory (and other dominant discourses in the field) and approaching the political in tangential and often remarkably oblique ways (if at all). Skepticism towards the all too often over-enthusiastic bravado of contemporary speculative thought is vital – but it should not fall behind the evidence that these projects deliberately bracket some of the most unquestioned dogmas at the heart of our critical practice.

### *One decade of (Anthropocenic) speculative thinking*

April 27, 2007, stands as a landmark date for the renewed interest in both ontology and speculative philosophy. On that day, the four philosophers Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux were gathered at Goldsmith University (London) by Alberto Toscano (curiously enough, one of the most influential Marxist thinkers of our time) for a one-day workshop entitled *Speculative Realism*.<sup>44</sup> Although later rejected by all four philosophers, the label speculative realism still serves well as a pragmatic category for a wide range of philosophical, intellectual and artistic endeavors from the last decade.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Their respective contributions and discussions are gathered in *Collapse III*, ed. Robin Mackay, Urbanomic, Falmouth, November 2007, 307–449.

<sup>45</sup> The importance of "speculative realism" as an umbrella term for the continuing differentiation of the field is summed up by Graham Harman already back in 2012: "Any discussion of



While Harman came to be known as the foremost advocate for Object-Oriented Ontology, Grant reanimates Schellingian Naturphilosophie on the materialist grounds of contemporary science. Brassier tries to revive the tradition of Rationalism (with a big-R) based on a metaphysical (not ethical) nihilism. Without a doubt, the most influential participant of Toscano's workshop today is Quentin Meillassoux. His arguments from *Après la finitude*,<sup>46</sup> a book praised by Alain Badiou as an opening of a new route for philosophy, have been endlessly repeated by supporters and detractors alike. Repeating a full-fledged reconstruction of Meillassoux's argument in *Après la finitude* is not my aim here. Nevertheless, I take Meillassoux's project as both a symptom and an explication of a bundle of Anthropocenic thought's most persistent concerns before saying a few words about which role phenomenology can play in all this, and, eventually, turning my attention towards the question of realism in contemporary literature and literary criticism.

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Speculative Realism needs to begin by avoiding the intermittent and pointless debate over whether Speculative Realism really exists. This question comes five years too late to be meaningful, and generally takes the form of a put-down rather than a bona fide question. Speculative Realism is now the topic of a thriving book series at a major university press, and the subject of at least one forthcoming monograph. It is embedded in the editorial policy of several philosophy journals. It has become a *terme d'art* in architecture, archaeology, geography, the visual arts, and even history. It has crossed national boundaries with ease, and is surely the central theme of discussion in the growing continental philosophy blogosphere. Speculative Realism is the topic of several postdoctoral fellowships offered in the United States this year. It has been the subject of semester-long classes at universities as well as graduate theses in Paris. Though there are still tough tests ahead concerning the breadth and durability of Speculative Realism, it has long since passed the 'existence' test to a far greater degree than most of its critics." (Graham Harman, "The Current State of Speculative Realism," in *Speculations Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism IV*, punctum, New York/NY, 2013, 22–28, 22.)

<sup>46</sup> Quentin Meillassoux: *Après la finitude. Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, Seuil, Paris, 2006. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title AF + page number.

What exactly is speculative philosophy, anyway? Alfred North Whitehead, one of the most frequently mentioned authorities<sup>47</sup> for speculative realism, provides a viable definition: "Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted."<sup>48</sup> Whitehead, considered by some as the last metaphysician in an Anglo-American philosophical environment that would soon collectively turn its attention away from ontological questions and towards the rephrasing of classical philosophical problems in the new idioms of language philosophy, mentions four constituents that Meillassoux indeed claims to account for. As an ensemble, *coherent, logical, necessary, and general ideas* sure have the potential to make any critical minded reader cringe, but it adequately describes Meillassoux's ambition who in *Après la finitude* attempts to provide a coherently logical description of the absolute – which turns out to be necessarily contingent (the absolute, not the description).

At the outset of such a seemingly scandalous project lies the critique of a shared belief in all post-Kantian, critical philosophy: correlationism. Correlationism describes the view that everything that exists, exists in relation to a knowing subject. Correlationism or rather anti-correlationism probably defines the most central node in the web of beliefs spun around contemporary speculative and realist philosophy. The real is in-itself and fundamentally independent from human perception, language and thought; it is neither merely a construction of the subject, society or even the unconscious (hermeneutics, phenomenology, critical philosophy, psychoanalysis

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<sup>47</sup> See Isabelle Stengers: *Penser avec Whitehead. 'Un libre et sauvage création de concepts,'* Seuil, Paris, 2002; Steven Shaviro: *Without Criteria. Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics,* MIT Press, Cambridge/MA, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead: *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology,* Free Press, New York/NY, 1978, 3.

etc.) nor does it exist in a realm radically inaccessible for human faculties (Kant's noumenon or *Ding an sich*).

Meillassoux's critique of correlationism is not directed against a specific modern philosophical argument or position or school; it attacks the whole paradigm of philosophy since the Kantian turn (with a few potential exceptions such as the famous, but limitedly influential Whitehead). It is directed against what Harman calls *philosophies of access* – the idea that reality is *over there* and needs to be accessed in various ways by the subject *over here*.

Instead of an access to reality, we should rather speak of a contact with the real, as formulated among others by Jocelyn Benoist: "[L']intentionnalité [...], loin de constituer la condition d'un 'accès' au réel – comme s'il y avait lieu pour un tel accès – suppose au contraire très fondamentalement, le contact avec lui."<sup>49</sup> Contact as a mode of relation is completely different from the mode of access; in fact, it is not really a relation at all, it is a form of embodiment. It points towards our ecological entanglement with our environments and the fact that the subjective autonomy achieved through organic and immunological processes can only be relative. The ecological dimension of "contact" vs. the instrumental vision implied in "access"<sup>50</sup> is also quite interestingly stated by the German phenomenologist Lambert Wiesing (interestingly, as phenomenology is one of the main targets of anti-correlationists' scorn): "Das Bild vom Zugang zur Welt ist eine unökologische Hybris: Menschen haben keinen Zugang zur Welt, sondern leben als ein Teil der Welt in der Welt – bis zum Abgang."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jocelyn Benoist: *Éléments de philosophie réaliste*, Vrin, Paris, 2011, 89.

<sup>50</sup> One can also see philosophies of access in the larger cultural framework as a sort of cognitive colonialism. In that way, philosophies of access pave the way for politics of extraction, excavation and exploitation – not only of the other that is 'nature,' but of other (and effectively naturalized) persons, societies, civilizations, continents and the whole Southern hemisphere.

<sup>51</sup> Lambert Wiesing: *Das Bild der Wahrnehmung. Eine Autopsie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 2009, 69. ("The image of our access to the world is an unecological hybris: Humans don't have access to the world, they live in the world as a part of the world – until they finally leave." The

The paradigm shift from access to contact suggests that things have long existed before and will persist after the apparition of humans in the world. So far, new realism has developed many ways of speaking about reality beyond its subjective appropriation or social construction. The Italian philosopher and author of the *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Maurizio Ferraris, speaks of the "in corrigibility"<sup>52</sup> of the real; Tristan Garcia, author of *Forme et Object*, of its "indifference."<sup>53</sup> Decades before, in 1977, Clément Rosset had already worked through the fundamental insignificance of untouched reality in his strangely overlooked essay *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie*:

Nous appellerons *insignifiance du réel* cette propriété inhérente à toute réalité d'être toujours indistinctement fortuite et déterminée, d'être toujours à la fois *anyhow* et *somehow* : d'une certaine façon, de toute façon.<sup>54</sup>

Now, realist projects do not merely claim that things-in-themselves exist, but that they can be known – at least anyhow and somehow. *Anyhow*, in the sense that it is not altogether clear what forms of experimentation and

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German pun which plays on the similarity of 'Zugang' und 'Abgang' cannot be reproduced in the English translation.)

<sup>52</sup> See Maurizio Ferraris: "Inemendabilità, Ontologia, Realtà Sociale," in *Rivista di estetica* 19:1, 2002, 160–199, who distinguishes the incorrigibility of the real from mere perceptual or logical invariance: "L'invarianza, come tale, potrebbe ancora essere un criterio dipendente dai tre principi superficiali [subjectivity, perspective, intersubjectivity]. Mentre l'inemendabilità fornisce un criterio certo. Le cose non mutano, nel profondo, perché non si correggono, cioè perché sono così e non altrimenti, e non possiamo farci niente." (167)

<sup>53</sup> See Tristan Garcia: "Réalisme épistémologique, libéralité ontologique," presentation at Colloque international *CHOSSES EN SOI: Métaphysique et Réalisme aujourd'hui*, Paris, November 16, 2016, <https://goo.gl/wNmgVU> (accessed January 17, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Clément Rosset: *Le Réel. Traité de l'idiotie*, Minuit, Paris, 1978, 13. Rosset repeatedly (idiotically) refers to Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (Penguin, London, 1975) where a constantly drunk American Consul errs through Mexico City on the *Día de los Muertos* not exactly knowing what is going on, but knowing that something always happens – somehow, anyhow. ("It seems he's been in America this time on a cattle ranch,' the Consul was saying rather gravely as somehow, anyhow, they moved on, but this time more slowly.", 65)

speculation we should deploy to turn unknowing into knowledge; *somehow*, in the sense that it is the very real itself that we deal with and not some subjective construction or mediatic simulacrum.

Following Whitehead's working definition, in Meillassoux it is not only the real, but the real in its most general form that is at stake – the real as absolute. Meillassoux's by now canonized term for a knowable reality that exists regardless of its relation to humans is the *arche-fossil*. An *arche-fossil* is any kind of evidence from a world before or without the human or even other forms of life – one of the most poignant examples being "zircon, the oldest rock in the world."<sup>55</sup> It is an event hidden in deep time before the beginning of our species-being (the arche-function), yet it is somehow preserved and describable in mathematizable terms (the fossil-function). Mathematics then (and neither the natural sciences nor logics) becomes the language for the absolute in Meillassoux.

*Ancestrality* is Meillassoux's second influential term, which names the temporal register in which the *arche-fossil* exists. Correlationism, no matter if strong or weak (AF 42), cannot make sense of an ancestral proposition, e.g. the claim that zircon is about 4.4 billion years old – not only for us, but regardless of us. Seen in the context of Anthropocenic thought, *ancestrality* and the *arche-fossil* partake in speculative philosophy's tendency of strategic dehistoricizing combined with an apocalyptic undertone that flirts with images of pristine wilderness<sup>56</sup> before and post-apocalyptic deserts after the human episode.

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<sup>55</sup> McKenzie Wark: *General Intellects. Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century*, Verso, London, 2017, 286. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title GI + page number.

<sup>56</sup> "Il se pourrait en effet que les modernes aient la sourde impression d'avoir irrémédiablement perdu le *Grand Dehors*, le *Dehors absolu* des penseurs précritiques : ce *Dehors* qui n'était pas relatif à nous, qui se donnait comme indifférent à sa donation pour être ce qu'il est, exis-

*Extinction* is indeed the twin sister of ancestry. It plays an important role in many projects across the field, e.g. in Ray Brassier's nihilist rationalism, in Claire Colebrook's ethics of extinction or in de Castro's and Danowski's philosophical cartography of the idea, which only seems paradoxical, that the world has already come to an end, although we still continue to dwell in it.

Ancestrality, extinction and imminence (the near future seen as an irreparable catastrophe that has already happened) are among the most frequent terms in the jargon of Anthropocenic speculative thought. If it is true that they run the risk of dehistoricizing and depoliticizing – the capital sin of theory and cultural inquiry according to Jameson<sup>57</sup> –, they can also be viewed as an expansion of the scope of history, a shifting away from the biosphere and political temporalities towards natural history and geological time, in which other scales and temporalities are contained, not merely canceled out as critics of speculative thought suspect. In that way, the attempts to face the challenge of "an ethics of extinction"<sup>58</sup> are not just gloomy invocations of the imminent apocalypse, but rather an accurate and realistic description of the slow and brutal decomposition. Human bodies do not just melt into air, but persist and suffer as remainders in toxic, but not yet fatal environments.

Many critics of Meillassoux and of projects with related concerns make it too easy for themselves when rehearsing the claim that speculative thought is oblivious of history, politics and power relations. The question is less whether contemporary metaphysics explicitly address these issues (which sometimes they do – some more than others), but more whether they

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tant tel qu'en lui-même, que nous le pensions ou non; ce Dehors que la pensée pouvait parcourir avec le sentiment justifié d'être en terre étrangère – d'être, cette fois, pleinement ailleurs." (AF 21-2)

<sup>57</sup> Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/NY, 1981, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Colebrook, *PostHuman*, 40.

can be addressed in a sufficient or perhaps even novel way within the general framework that metaphysics is supposed to deliver for more specific forms of inquiry.

As short-sighted as their political objections are the more epistemological critiques of Meillassoux & Co., which stress the fact that it is after all *us* humans who make ancestral claims using *our* constructions (language, mathematics, the natural sciences, the university, technology etc.) to make claims about supposedly absolute entities. The fact that the actual units of measurement, the names for molecules etc. are fruits of human activity is of course nothing Meillassoux will ever put into doubt. Yet, as he claims, there is something *in* the human act of measuring that transcends human in an absolute sense as real exteriority, not only as mental externality or psychic extimacy. And this "something" is anything that can be transformed into a mathematizable description.<sup>59</sup>

A more interesting criticism is offered by McKenzie Wark in his recent book *General Intellects* dedicated to thinkers he considers to be directive influences for the twenty-first century. Meillassoux is one of them. The chapter, entitled "The Spectacle of the Absolute," starts as a rapid, but careful reconstruction of Meillassoux's argument applauding his effort to break out of the "cloistered thought" (GI 291) of correlationism. Wark praises the fact that *Après la finitude* demonstrates the limits of the human and the necessity of facing the nonhuman, but he criticizes the fact that Meillassoux has nothing to say about the intermediate realm that makes human knowledge of the nonhuman (on its own terms and not just as a correlation) possible. Wark's

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<sup>59</sup> It is far beyond my knowledge, but it might be interesting to think about the question whether mathematization is or is not equivalent with quantification. I suspect it is not, which has far-reaching consequences for how we deal with the problem of the knowability of the absolute / the real. Since "real mathematics" (Zalamea) are much more complex than mere numerical or set theory scenarios, the range of mathematizable reality seems far bigger than what we usually understand as reality or facts based on the possibility of quantification.

term for this intermediate realm is *apparatus*, a concept reminiscent of Karen Barad's *agential realism*.<sup>60</sup>

It [the apparatus] is neither human nor nonhuman, and it exists in a liminal, undecidable inhuman space. The apparatus requires human labor, but it is not reducible to the intersubjective realm of scientific discourse.

The apparatus is the inhuman register used by humans to conceive what is nonhuman, but without a guarantee of knowing what is absolute (let alone in absolute certainty). Wark's project then shifts away from Meillassoux's obsession with the absolute and "toward the inhuman beyond phenomenology but falling short of the nonhuman and intimations of the absolute." (GI 296) Instead of the bad abstraction implied by the concept of the absolute, Wark is interested in very large finitudes and very long durations that are "even harder to think than the eternal." (GI 293) His example is of course global warming and, more specifically, the apparatus that makes it graspable for us: climate science.<sup>61</sup>

Climate science is our Napoleon at Jena, not the world spirit on horseback, but the biospheric totality via Comsat. If there is a short list of things calling us to a timely rather than a hesitant thought, then surely it is on that list. But philosophy has turned away from such things. It grew bored with the double binds of the subject, but rather than lift its gaze toward this world, it conjured up another—the world of the absolute object. This contemplative realism provides a window through which to observe the beauty of a world that actually is collapsing, and the solace of knowing that the world will go

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<sup>60</sup> Wark acknowledges Barad as a source, but, unfortunately, doesn't really discuss her project in detail. She is also not included into his anthology of important 21<sup>st</sup> century thinkers.

<sup>61</sup> "Vast machine" is another notion for Wark's and Morton's very large finitude. See Paul Edwards: *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data and the Politics of Global Warming*, MIT Press, Cambridge/MA, 2013.



on, even if the human does not. Philosophy has found a spectacle outside of history once again, while the sirens go off all around us, calling us to put out fires both conceptual and real. (GI 296-7)

Wark's eloquent critique is at the same time a model for the manner that Meillassoux's speculative philosophy can be productively challenged and an example of the talking at cross-purposes of speculative philosophy and Anthropocenic thought (and perhaps of philosophy and theory in general) which might be philosophically inspired, but is invested in the more specific and granular, albeit large-scaled problems of culture. If my own account in this dissertation is also more interested in very large finitudes, that is the hyperbolic instead of the absolute, I don't agree that Meillassoux's project automatically leads to a contemplative realism that aestheticizes the imminent collapse of the world. By reproaching Meillassoux that he turns the real into a "spectacle outside history," (GI 297) Wark falls in the same moralizing trap responsible for the weakness of relativism while repeating the ascetic phantasmagoria of the post-Situationist Left dreaming that the spell of the spectacle could eventually be broken.<sup>62</sup> After all, Meillassoux's metaphysics is rather ascetic itself, built on nothing but radical contingency, i.e. the Humean insight that there can be no metaphysical or logical guarantee that things will persist as they actually are.<sup>63</sup> His is not a spectacular, but a minimal metaphysics, metaphysics as a last resort of reason outside of culture directed against dogmatism, fanaticism and fideism:

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<sup>62</sup> Maximalist literature is not thinkable without at least a certain complicity with the spectacle. Its success as critical cultural practice depends on the way it problematizes the spectacle instead of reinforcing its status quo or vainly trying to dispense with it altogether.

<sup>63</sup> "La contingence absolue [...] désigne [...] un *pur possible* : un possible qui peut-être ne s'accomplira jamais. En effet ; nous ne pouvons pas prétendre savoir que notre monde, quoique contingent, s'effondrera effectivement un jour." (AF 84)

Contre le dogmatisme, il importe de maintenir le refus de tout absolu métaphysique ; mais contre la violence argumentée des fanatismes divers, il importe de retrouver en la pensée un peu d'absolu – suffisamment, en tout cas, pour contrer les prétentions de ceux qui s'en voudraient les dépositaires exclusifs, par le seul effet de quelque révélation. (AF 68, my emphasis)

### *Weirdness as rationalism*

The strange register of the apparatus, the *Inhuman*, that which is neither quite human nor nonhuman, the machinic, the camera-eye, the unembodied grin etc. provides perpetual fascination for many thinkers and practitioners within the contemporary speculative field. If ancestrality, extinction and imminence are associated with the new urgency of the ecological, the strange autonomy of the apparatus is tied to speculative thought's genealogical proximity to posthumanist concerns around artificial intelligence. What differentiates inhumanism<sup>64</sup> from adjacent practices such as transhumanism<sup>65</sup> and critical posthumanism<sup>66</sup> is, at first glance, a strange alliance, the alliance with rationalism (sometimes even as a continuation of the project of Enlightenment).

According to Wolfendale, inhumanism neither collapses (transhumanism) nor reinforces (critical posthumanism) the rift between the human

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<sup>64</sup> In the following characterization of contemporary inhumanism, I largely follow Peter Wolfendale's text "Rationalist Inhumanism," [https://lincolnphilosophyforum.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/rationalist\\_inhumanism\\_dictionary\\_entry.pdf](https://lincolnphilosophyforum.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/rationalist_inhumanism_dictionary_entry.pdf), n. p. (accessed January 17, 2018). If not otherwise indicated, the quotations in the following two paragraphs refer to this text.

<sup>65</sup> See Max More: "The Philosophy of Transhumanism," in Max More, Natasha Vita-More (eds.): *The Transhumanist Reader. Classical and Contemporary Essays on Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester i. a., 2013, 3-17.

<sup>66</sup> See Braidotti, *Posthuman*.

and the nonhuman, but tries to unbind rationality from its nostalgic attachment to the human mind. In that way, reason becomes an "abstract protocol" that is functionally implemented in differentiated, but interconnected systems and infrastructures (bodies, subjects, collectives, computers etc.). Inhumanism understood in a positive way (not as inhuman moral behavior towards others) is an "embrace of alienation as a positive force, transforming our progressive exile from a series of edenic harmonies – be they economic, sociological, or environmental – into an esoteric genealogy of freedom." It is not so much interested in the condition of shared animality nor in the construction of a posthuman *Übermensch*; rather, it locates the "alien vector *within* humanism," understood as an uncanny presence within humanity and as potentially liberating from human limitations at the same time.

Rationalist inhumanism is directed against the phantasies about having to become one with nature again as well as against attempts of sidestepping nature altogether. Instead, it is nature itself that is already invested with all sorts of artificial, inhuman and alienating elements. It comes as no surprise, then, that one of the most promising routes for inhumanism is its alliance with thought and practices from radical and marginalized angles: feminism, queer theory, black studies etc.

A particularly promising contribution born from this alliance of rationalism and inhumanism is the manifesto of Xenofeminism. It makes a case for the need of merging feminism with technoscience and modern rationality instead of sticking to "the limited effectiveness of local gestures, creation of autonomous zones, and sheer horizontalism."<sup>67</sup> The manifesto lays out the founding aporia of rationalist inhumanism – namely, that nature must be escaped from within nature – in two seemingly contradictory statements:

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<sup>67</sup> Laboria Cuboniks: *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*,

<http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/>, 2015, 1-10, 9 (accessed January 12, 2018), 1–10.

(1) To say that nothing is sacred, that nothing is transcendent or protected from the will to know, to tinker and to hack, is to say that nothing is supernatural.

(2) If nature is unjust, change nature!<sup>68</sup>

As a further hint to speculative realism's self-stylized peripherality, the two tendencies I have singled out can be associated with two branches of literary genre fiction: ancestry and extinction with science-fictional poetics, inhumanist rationalism with the horror genres. The coupling of fiction writer Thomas Ligotti with philosopher Ray Brassier makes this clear. As Brassier writes in the foreword to *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, Ligotti

sets out what is perhaps the most sustained challenge yet to the intellectual blackmail that would oblige us to be eternally grateful for a 'gift' we never invited. *Being alive is not all right*: this simple *not* encapsulates the temerity of thinking better than any platitude about the tragic nobility of a life characterized by a surfeit of suffering, frustration, and self-deceit.<sup>69</sup>

Horror fiction and philosophical inhumanism, to which Brassier's *Nihil Unbound* is an important contributor, become allies in the struggle against narratives of salvation (or tragic failure) and vitalist philosophies. Ligotti's genre fiction engages in a sort of higher realism, but even that can only be springboard for Ligotti's "exacting nihilism" that "knows full well, [that] if living is lying, then even telling the truth about life's lie will be a sublimated lie." Being liberated from "humanism's cringing deference towards social utility," Ligotti's genre fiction is not merely frightening or

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<sup>68</sup> Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, 7; 10.

<sup>69</sup> Ray Brassier, "Foreword," in Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race. A Contrivance of Horror*, Hippocampus, New York/NY, 2011.

entertaining, but allows him to play an (insufficiently acknowledged) role as a "pathologist of the human condition."

Speculative realism's interest for the philosophical and realist purport of horror and the somewhat larger frame to which it belongs, weird fiction, is inextricably linked to a well-known name: H. P. Lovecraft. The most obvious indication for this is Graham Harman's book *Weird Realism. Lovecraft and Philosophy*.<sup>70</sup> In his "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" from 1933<sup>71</sup> Lovecraft describes his intention as a search for a real "outsideness" or "cosmic alienage" that is not bound by the "galling limitations of time, space, and natural law." The risky gamble of weird fiction, then, lies in suspending the manifest image of the real in order to produce "a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal" (which might or might not entail the complementary impression of the strange unreality of that which is nevertheless real).

It can surely be contended that Lovecraft's clumsily written stories are indeed apt to produce the atmosphere<sup>72</sup> of "subtle suggestion" that weird fiction demands (or, if it is a promising starting point for philosophical reflection out of literature), but weirdness as a mode is a fitting category to understand what is at stake in some of speculative realism's most important concerns. Fisher's account of the weird as both "affect" and "mode" is apt insofar as it allows the concept to travel more swiftly between fiction and philosophy.

Following Lovecraft, Fisher stresses the weird's "fascination for the outside"<sup>73</sup> (again real exteriority, not only mental externality), but distin-

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<sup>70</sup> Zero Books, Winchester, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> 1933. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Notes\\_on\\_Writing\\_Weird\\_Fiction](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Notes_on_Writing_Weird_Fiction) (accessed January 17, 2018)

<sup>72</sup> Lovecraft: "Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction."

<sup>73</sup> Mark Fisher: *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater Books, London, 2017, 8. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title WE + page number.

guishes it more clearly than Lovecraft from the horror genre: while the characters in the fangs of Cthulhu are frequently horrified, Lovecraft's readers rarely are. As an avatar of the inhuman, the weird becomes a shamanic mediator of the "*interplay* [...] between this world and others" (WE 19). It leads to a "hypernaturalism – an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains" (WE 18), which resonates with speculative realism's constant effort of guiding our attention to nonhuman scales.

As an important narrative technique, Fisher discovers throughout Lovecraft's weird stories a three-phase dynamic that comes close to something I will describe in more detail in the main part of this dissertation (especially in chapter II.4, but also in II.5). In a first step, Lovecraft's narrator introduces the weirdness of a certain entity in stating that it is indescribable. Right after that skeptical statement, he sets out to describe the entity violating his own skeptical commitment.

But this sequence has a third moment. After (1) the declaration of indescribability, and (2) the description, comes (3) the unvisualisable. For all their detail, or perhaps because of it, Lovecraft's descriptions do not allow the reader to synthesise the logorrheic schizophony of adjectives into a mental image [...]. (WE 23)

Speculative realism's commitment to weirdness as an affect, a mode of being and a vehicle for philosophical rationality follows a similar dynamic: (1) the insistence on the rehabilitation of real exteriority, the wondrous realm beyond human cognition: the "Great Outdoors," (AF 21) indescribable as the content of a correlation; (2) the description of or the accounting for the unknown by other means (mathematics for Meillassoux, horror for Ligotti, feminist alienation for the collective author-machine Laboria Cuboniks); (3) the non-synthetic character of this description which in Meillassoux thins out into a minimal metaphysics that assumes the radical contingency of everything, even the most persistent laws of nature and logics.

In searching for novel ways of accounting for the weirdness of the real, speculative rationality not only tries to make sense of a weird reality, but becomes itself a weird practice of thinking, an inhuman apparatus placing their bet on productive acts of alienation – ongoing efforts of alienation from nature which are paradoxically embodied in human nature itself. Consequently, in Brassier's nihilist rationalism, realism stands as an effort to overcome the clear-cut distinction between concept and object<sup>74</sup> producing a weird continuity between the ontological and the epistemological without conflating both registers:

Thus the difference between thought and thing, thinking and being, is not a transcendent condition of access to things, as it is for the philosophy of representation, but is rather internal to things themselves.<sup>75</sup>

Contemporary inhumanism tries to reconcile rationality and weirdness, not in a comfortable compromise, but as a twisted, non-dialectic entanglement in an avant-garde space ruled by "weird geometries" (WE 25).

Ultimately, the alternative, expanded, or scandalous rationality of weirdness can be a productive impulse for literary criticism, as Eileen Joy demonstrates in her highly original essay "Weird Reading."<sup>76</sup> Weird reading presents itself as neither close nor distant, but as an experimental foray into approaches "outside of strictly human-centered, historicist frames of reference." (WR 29) While stories are on the one hand "deterministic, machinic systems in which characters, situations and other details are frozen," they

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<sup>74</sup> See Ray Brassier: "Concepts and Objects," in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman (eds.): *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, re:press, Melbourne, 2011, 47-65.

<sup>75</sup> Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 173.

<sup>76</sup> Eileen A. Joy: "Weird Reading," in *Speculations. A Journal of Speculative Realism* IV, punctum, New York/NY, 2013, 28–34. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title WR + page number.

"also contain discrete, disconnected instances of being and becoming that are always attempt to expand beyond or subvert the larger narrative system."

Reading is the activity by which these elements might spring to new life, and perhaps always do, when we consider that every reading is idiosyncratic in some way, always embedded in a unique set of relations and conditions (social, psychic, mechanic, etc.). (WR 29)

Weird reading aims to push both deconstruction's thrusts against semiotic self-containment and Pierre Menard's "técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas"<sup>77</sup> to the edges. It mobilizes the "in- or post-human tendencies of textual objects (WR 31)," i.e. their non-narrative potential as units which can be reconfigured in infinitely new contexts as part of a vast ocean of *potential literatures*.<sup>78</sup> Weird reading happily plunges into this vast ocean, not afraid of getting lost in its adventurous spirit which is also suggested by Michael Witmore who (unwittingly?) uses a Pynchonian metaphor to describe the literary text as a "vector through the meta-table of all possible worlds." (WR 31)

Far away from the gloomy darkness of the masculine versions of inhumanism (Lovecraft, Ligotti, Brassier, Fisher), Joy's essay ends enthusiastically with a plea for a pluralist refashioning of literary criticism where "uninhibited conceptual inventiveness" and even "certain forms of enchantment" can counter-balance the often all-too-serious effort of critical debunking without canceling out critical perspectives. At the end of chapter

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<sup>77</sup> Jorge Luis Borges: *Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote* [1939], in J. L. B.: *Cuentos completos*, Debolsillo, Barcelona, 2017, 108–117, 117.

<sup>78</sup> Joy (WR 33) refers to OULIPO'S second manifesto which claims that any text can be improved by the reader's intervention. The metaphor used by François Le Lionnais is fittingly that of an inhuman apparatus: "The whole world of literature ought to become the object of numerous and discerningly conceived protheses." (my emphasis)



II.1, we will find a similarly cheerful inhumanism in Bolaño's and Pynchon's weird and wild forays into the vast ocean of literary history.

*The solitude of ontology and a posthumanist exit route for phenomenology*

Meillassoux's minimal metaphysics, Brassier's rationalism on nihilist grounds, Ligotti's divestiture of vitalism as humanism's fundamental commitment – those and other positions within the rapidly evolving field of contemporary new realism point towards a common feature that we could describe as *the solitude of the real*. This is already suggested by Clément Rosset's characterization of his book about the real as *Traité de l'idiotie*. The real is stubborn and persistent, yet idiotic and insignificant – it is undeniably real, but the danger remains that there is not much to say about it beyond the fact of its existence.

Therefore, while many of the positions emerging in relation to the field of speculative realism stress the importance of a renewed interest in the real on its own terms (and, consequently, the philosophical field of ontology), they often hesitate to plunge into the full range of reality, proposing instead a rather deflationary approach to ontology as a remedy against supposedly esoteric or dogmatic versions that make positive claims about the concrete texture of our environments. If thinking about fruitful connections between new realist projects in theory, philosophy and literature, this poses a problem since literature is always fascinated with the surfaces, the spectacle, the illusions and phenomenal excesses even where their focus lies in debunking and disenchantment. This is all the more true for maximalist literature, which is the object of this study.

One of realism's main enemies in their fight against correlationism is, unsurprisingly, phenomenology. Suspected of being a philosophical praxis necessarily centered around human experience, phenomenology inevitably

becomes one of correlationism's (even strong correlationism's) strongholds. Notwithstanding phenomenology's famous commitment to see things as they are, they are always bound to see them as phenomena *for us*.

Two factors, nevertheless, motivate my decision to draw insight and inspiration from phenomenology in this study. First, the solitude of ontology needs to be complemented by another practice which is more granular (so to speak) and more invested in the concrete perceptual milieu in which the real-beyond(-and-beneath)-the-human manifests itself – in often vicarious, oblique, and distorted ways. And second, even if the phenomenological *tradition* is extremely anthropocentric and inexcusably oblivious of the nonhuman, the inhuman, technology, the outside-without-us etc., the *form and practice* of phenomenology, as I shall argue, comes much closer to the demands of an inhuman turn in theory and philosophy.

Hence, what I propose is not (only) a duel between phenomenology and ontology, but a new alliance between the two fields as well as its implied, though often unexploited potential of steering away from human-centered *situations of experience* towards a molecular, inhumanist focus on *modes of attention*.

Obviously, I am not alone in disputing the incompatibility of phenomenology with contemporary ontology and realism.<sup>79</sup> In his essay "The Horror of Darkness. Toward an Unhuman Phenomenology," Dylan Trigg writes:

Far from being the vehicle of a solely human voice, I believe that phenomenology can attend to the inhuman realm, and in this paper, I seek to defend a model of phenomenology that is not only capable of speaking on behalf of nonhuman realms, but is especially suited to this study of foreign

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<sup>79</sup> The absolute irreconcilability between phenomenology and speculative realism is the main argument of Tom Sparrow's monograph *The End of Phenomenology. Metaphysics and New Realism*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014.

entities. I will term phenomenology's specific mode of account for the non-human realm the unhuman.<sup>80</sup>

An unexpected familiarity emerges between realist inhumanism and the unhuman as a phenomenological mode. Trigg's role model for his unhuman phenomenology is, in yet another surprising twist, Emmanuel Levinas: "Far from the image of Levinas as a philosopher of the face, these early works reveal another side to his philosophy that is characterized less by the face-to-face encounter and more by the facelessness of appearances." (117)

In both early projects like *De l'existant à l'existence* (written in captivity) and later publications like *Le temps et l'autre* (1980), Levinas explores the horror of becoming unhuman, the spectrality of being and the "impersonal horizon of existence" (118) against which human experience appears. If it is quite a stretch to describe Levinas as a materialist (119), Trigg convincingly demonstrates how throughout his oeuvre Levinas pushes his thought towards an (ontological, metaphysical, or ethical) realm beyond human experience, the realm of sheer facticity, a metaphysical night<sup>81</sup> or twilight that exposes the human to the horror of non-existence. It is a space beyond time that makes time possible ("the otherness of duration", 117), a space beyond phenomenality that makes perception and experience possible in the first place – not the existence of this or that concrete thing, but the transcendental "fact that *there is (il y a)*."<sup>82</sup> The phenomenological realm then is haunted by a

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<sup>80</sup> Dylan Trigg: "'The Horror of Darkness.' Toward an Unhuman Phenomenology," in *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism IV*, punctum, New York/NY, 2013, 113–121, 116. In the following paragraphs, the page number in brackets is directly indicated behind the quoted passages.

<sup>81</sup> One may think about possible relations to some of the concerns typical to Blanchot's thinking – a trace that Trigg does not even evoke, let alone explore. See e.g. Maurice Blanchot: "Le Dehors, la Nuit," in M. B.: *L'Espace littéraire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1998, 213–224, 213.

<sup>82</sup> Emmanuel Levinas: *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh/PA, 2001, 8, quoted after Trigg, "Unhuman Phenomenology," 118.

certain paradoxical nothingness "masquerading as an appearance" (118), a "pervasive anonymity" (120) that interferes with the phenomenal realm which cannot remain self-contained. While popular accounts of Levinas often foreground his humanism as a thinker of the other, of alterity between humans, there is also a dimension stressing the internal alterity of experience to itself, the intra-alterity of matter which is never completely self-coherent.

If Levinas seems completely uninterested in the *apparatus*, which stands for the inhuman in the works by authors such as Wark, Barad etc., the resonances of some of Levinas' concerns with projects of weird realism and rationalist inhumanism are remarkable. In *Autrement qu'être*, the other-than-being pursued by Levinas, is just like Wark's inhuman neither understood in essential terms "ni non plus ne-pas-être."<sup>83</sup> It is not directly conceivable, but only vicariously present via the "traumatisme de la transcendance." (9) Subjectivity is not understood as a sovereign authority smoothly embedded in a continuous flux of experiences, but as a hostage to *autrui*, exposed and displaced – a position that similarly to weird rationalism (and lately xenofeminism) makes a case for productive alienation.

The last chapter of the book which emphasizes the importance of not only being-otherwise but also saying-it-differently (the title of the chapter being *Autrement Dit*) is fittingly entitled *Au dehors* (think of Meillassoux's *Grand Dehors*). Levinas' modernist, allusive style is shot through with explicit accusations against the ideology of the *chez-soi* of European metaphysics (AQ 273) which is predicated upon the occupation of territories, the exclusion of alterity and therefore indirectly complicit with the atrocities and barbarisms that the history of the West has caused not only after the rise of fascism.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Emmanuel Levinas: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* [1974], Livre de Poche, Paris, 2011, 13. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title AQ + page number.

<sup>84</sup> The dedication explicitly is not only addressed to the victims of the Nazi regime, but includes "des millions et des millions d'humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l'autre homme, du même antisémitisme." (AQ 5)

Against this, Levinas demands the subject's radical self-exposure to the "vent de l'altérité" (AQ 277) – an "exposition sans assumption; celle-ci serait déjà fermeture." (AQ 276) This radical exposure turns the impatient, faultless Western subject into a "soi comme fissibilité" (AQ 277).

By uncoupling subjectivity from being, it is not only his posterity, but Levinas himself who defines his project as post-phenomenological (AQ 281). His phenomenology in *Autrement qu'être* does not try to retrieve the psychic contents (or, in Husserl's terminology, the *noemata*) from the mental states of the subject (*acts of noesis*) as opposed to an object. It searches instead for the ethical grounds of language that can be said to be inhuman because they need to be thought of as lying *before* being and subjectivity. Levinas tries to rescue "la signification du Dire sans Dit" (AQ 282), driving philosophy and discursive language from petrified meanings to speculative hyperbole where discourses and practices such as science, religion and technology are made possible in the first place (but without fetishizing becoming over being): "La philosophie n'est peut-être que cette exaltation du langage où les mots – après coup – se trouvent une condition à laquelle les religions, les sciences et les techniques doivent leur équilibre de sens." (AQ 278)

It is of the greatest interest for my study that this "exaltation du langage," this intermittent appearance of an "écriture imprononçable" (AQ 284) is explicitly linked to the notion of hyperbole as the rhetoric agent of a traumatic transcendence that 'accuses' the subject in its self-sufficiency: "Ici l'humain s'accuse par la transcendance – ou l'hyperbole – c'est-à-dire le désintéressement de l'essence, hyperbole où elle éclate et *tombe vers le haut*, en l'humain." (AQ 281)

*Phenomenology and ontology in Merleau-Ponty's Le visible et l'invisible*

Between 1959 and 1961, Maurice Merleau-Ponty worked on what would become his unfinished legacy, brutally interrupted by his sudden death and published posthumously as *Le Visible et L'Invisible* by Claude Lefort. The posthumous publication is split into two parts: the first part consists of approximately 200 pages divided into four chapters and a shorter piece that serves as an *annexe*. According to the *notes de travail*, especially the remarks Merleau-Ponty left regarding structure and content of his project, these 200 pages are only parts of an introduction to a presumably large book whose changing working titles sound universal and maximalist in scope and purpose: *Être ou sens*, *La généalogie du vrai*, *Origine de la vérité*, *Histoire du sens* etc. The second part consists of approximately one hundred book pages of notes hand-written by Merleau-Ponty between 1959 and 1961.

If the unfinished character of *Le Visible et L'Invisible* makes it impossible to form a substantiated opinion on Merleau-Ponty's ultimate intentions, there can be no doubt that at the center of the project was the ambition of refounding phenomenology on new, ontological grounds.<sup>85</sup> His path is quite different from Levinas' in *Autrement qu'être*, but can also be viewed as post-phenomenological in the sense that it tries to wrestle away philosophy from the experience of transcendental subjectivity (which appears as the capital sin of philosophy's incurable idealism): "L'ontologie serait l'élaboration des notions qui doivent remplacer celle de subjectivité transcendente, celles de sujet, objet, sens." (VI 219)

Merleau-Ponty tried to make sense of the undeniable fact that before perception and logical thinking lies a pre-reflexive contact with and embodiment within nature. Perception remains an *overture* to the (life-)world, but

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<sup>85</sup> The programmatic task is formulated in the very first note from January 1959: "Nécessité d'un retour à l'ontologie – l'interrogation logique et ses ramifications." (217)

"le monde est déjà là, dans sa transcendance objective [...], déjà une nature dont je fais partie." (VI 224) Similar to critiques directed towards philosophies of access mentioned above (Harman, Wiesing etc.), philosophy is not seen as a construction of a world from a safe and neutral point of view, but it is a center of articulation (VI 218) within the world of which it is an inextricable part:

La philosophie ne décompose pas notre relation avec le monde en éléments réels [...], mais elle y discerne des articulations, elle y réveille des rapports réglés de prépossessions [...], d'enjambement, qui sont comme endormis dans notre paysage ontologique, qui n'y subsistent plus que sous forme de traces [...]. (VI 135)

Similar to Levinas, although in a much less hermetic language, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar claim that being / nature / the world is nothing that we find in front of us, but something which passes through our bodies without us having full control over it. The world and the phenomena become a riddle – that which is "à la fois irrécusable[...] et énigmatique[...]" (VI 170)

For many readers, the most important and innovative part of *Le Visible et l'Invisible* has turned out to be the fourth and the last chapter of the manuscript: *L'Entrelacs – Le Chiasme*. Here, Merleau-Ponty introduces a new notion of the phenomenon itself, which can be seen neither as pure givenness (in Husserl's sense) nor that which is fundamentally absent from existence and has to be uncovered by the analytics of *Dasein* (in Heidegger's sense). Merleau-Ponty's notion of the phenomenon is a non-trivial, radical compromise between Husserl's positivist and Heidegger's modernist concept of phenomenality, a nuanced, dynamic entity, a *clair-obscur*: "Ma chair et celle du monde comportent donc des zones claires, des jours autour desquels pivotent leurs zones opaques [...]." (VI 193)

The phenomena, then, are not merely given things, but a result of the dynamic *entrelacements* between body and world, between the phenomenal and the ontological realm, which are interdependent, yet fundamentally irreducible to each other.<sup>86</sup> As a topological project (VI 260), philosophy's task, then, becomes not so much the construction of a Euclidean space, but a multi-dimensional engagement with the drama of the visible and the invisible that tries to make sense of the world as it is, of its perception by subjects and bodies and, simultaneously, of the task of philosophy itself. This imbrication of philosophy with the world from which it emerges and the permanent contact with itself approaches philosophy to literature (or, more specifically, hyperbolic realism) that cannot rush over (Merleau-Ponty: "survoler") its objects, but must plunge into the dizzying milieu of the real while continuously questioning its own capability of expression.<sup>87</sup>

La philosophie n'est pas science, parce que la science croit pouvoir survoler son objet, tient pour acquise la corrélation du savoir et de l'être, alors que la philosophie est l'ensemble des questions où celui qui questionne est lui-même mis en cause par la question. (VI 46-7)

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<sup>86</sup> Although it can be speculated about the question whether Merleau-Ponty would have made a stronger point for the genesis of the phenomenal realm within nature if he had proceeded with his project towards what he described as the desideratum of overcoming the concept of nature in classical metaphysics which he describes as bearer of a naive ontology (VI 238).

<sup>87</sup> A further proximity between phenomenology and literature can be seen in the way Merleau-Ponty metaphorizes self-reflexivity: not as a face that sees itself in a mirror but as a hand that touches its other hand while that one touches something. This mode of self-reflexivity is radically different from the specular model and could thus be described as *tactile self-reflexivity*. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie*, 109: "Le corps se surprend lui-même de l'extérieur en train d'exercer une fonction de connaissance, il essaye de se toucher touchant, il ébauche 'une sorte de réflexion.'"



Finally, the last paragraph is again much in line with Levinas' final note in *Autrement qu'être*. Phenomenology's ultimate task consists in uncovering "une existence presque charnelle de l'idée" (VI 200), in rescuing the emergence of signification from already established meanings:

En un sens, comme dit Husserl, toute la philosophie consiste à restituer une puissance de signifier, une naissance du sens ou un sens sauvage, une expression de l'expérience par l'expérience qui éclaire notamment le domaine spécial du langage. (VI 201)

### *Marc Richir's quantum phenomenology*

Marc Richir's vast corpus, although largely unregistered beyond the borders of phenomenology, is considered by many as the most radical advancement in the field since Merleau-Ponty. For those familiar with his writings, discussing Richir in the context of new realism may seem completely senseless. In fact, as Florian Forestier argues, one can understand Richir's project as a "relance phénoménologique du questionnement transcendantal,"<sup>88</sup> the analysis of phenomenization starting from the phenomenon as "rien-que-phénomène,"<sup>89</sup> radically divested from any ontological presuppositions. Rather than a hyperbolic speculation beyond phenomenology's limits (Levinas) or a refoundation of its practice on ontological grounds (Merleau-Ponty), Richir's project offers a radicalization of phenomenology's strong correlationism with indispensable insights into the understanding of

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<sup>88</sup> Florian Forestier: *La phénoménologie génétique de Marc Richir*, Springer, Heidelberg i. a., 2015, 2.

<sup>89</sup> See e.g. Marc Richir: "Qu'est-ce qu'un phénomène?," in *Les Etudes Philosophiques* 4, 1998, 435-449.

the "naissance du sens [...] sauvage" (VI 201) and even, paradoxically, the opening of new alliances with contemporary metaphysics.

Florian Forestier organizes Richir's whole corpus according to two principles: systematically, along two axes of his phenomenological inquiry; historically, as three successive, yet intertwined phases of his thinking.

His first intervention strips off any idea of givenness from the concept of the phenomenon.<sup>90</sup> Instead, "tout donné doit être pensé comme *le produit d'une genèse*."<sup>91</sup> This is a further radicalization of Merleau-Ponty's development of the phenomenon as a compositional figure ("des zones claires autour desquels pivotent leurs zones opaques"); it becomes a wildly flickering, internally fractured, temporalized, entropic *être sauvage*, "surgissant de manière discontinue," "protéiforme, fugace, fluctuante et intermittente."<sup>92</sup> Phenomenality becomes a realm of its own with no guaranteed continuity to the spheres of logical categories or semantically fixed meaning; the plurality and contingency of experience cannot be domesticated nor fully synthesized by logical or semantic operations.

The second intervention tries to think the possibility of an *eidétique* on the anarchist grounds of the phenomenon as irregularly intermittent "clignotement." (ES 480) Obviously, this project has nothing to do with Husserl's program of "philosophy as a strict science,"<sup>93</sup> but follows Merleau-Ponty's

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<sup>90</sup> The notion of givenness is one of the most popular angles of attack against phenomenology. See e.g. Jacques Derrida: *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, P.U.F., Paris, 1967; Wilfrid Sellars: *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 1997; and, most recently, Meillassoux, *Finitude*.

<sup>91</sup> Forestier, *Phénoménologie génétique*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Marc Richir: *Phénoménologie en esquisses. Nouvelles fondations*, Millon, Grenoble, 2000, 312; 148. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title ES + page number.

<sup>93</sup> Edmund Husserl: *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, ed. Eduard Marbach, Meiner, Hamburg, 2009.

tracks as the search for a "proto-eidétique sauvage"<sup>94</sup> allowing for an open, heterogeneous and incomplete, yet structured account of existence.

In that sense, Richir's phenomenological intentions can be divided into two main lines of thought: one genetic, one architectonic. The genetic line asks: What are the concrete, yet structured processes at the heart of phenomenalization? What happens in the transposition of phenomena from one register (e.g. affectivity) to another (e.g. semantics)? And the architectonic vector tries to analyze how these transpositions or *schématismes* make sense in the larger process of the shaping of meaning-in-progress, or, what Richir calls the adventure of the *sens se faisant*.<sup>95</sup>

In his later works, Richir seems more and more interested in the architectonic organization of the layers of phenomenalization, especially those layers that from the perspective of daily experience (what Merleau-Ponty might have meant when speaking of *La foi perceptive*) seem extremely elusive and difficult to grasp. Re-reading Husserl's texts on the question of imagination, Richir sheds new light on an even more archaic phenomenological sphere where the phenomena are not yet cohered to images, let alone impregnated with fixed or even fluid significations. Richir's (and Husserl's) name for this presumably most archaic of the phenomenological registers (beneath the *symbolic institutions* of imagination and language) is *phantasia*. Other concepts seem to be located on the same architectonic level of phenomenality, concepts such as *affectivité originnaire* and *interfactivité transcendentale*.<sup>96</sup> In his many attempts to grasp the ungraspable character of *phantasia*, the phenomena emerging in that register seem to become more and more

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<sup>94</sup> Forestier, *Phénoménologie génétique*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> See Marc Richir: "Sens et paroles. Pour une approche phénoménologique du langage," in *Figures de la Rationalité. Etudes d'Anthropologie philosophique* 4, ed. Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, Louvain-La Neuve, 1991, 228-246, 240: "une irréductible *aventure* du sens qui ouvre, en fait, à ce qu'il faut concevoir comme une *multiplicité originnaire* et a priori *indéfinie des sens*."

<sup>96</sup> See Marc Richir: *Phantasia, affectivité, imagination*, Millon, Grenoble, 2004.

exemplars of the phenomenon itself: "la *phantasia* surgit et disparaît par éclairs (*blitzhaft*), de façon intermittente et discontinue, elle est protéiforme (*proteusartig*) et surtout non présente (*nicht gegenwärtig*)."<sup>97</sup>

Richir's phenomenology, then, becomes a search for the infinitesimal, the very-small, the phenomenal undercurrents of human experience and the biosphere. If much of speculative and Anthropocenic thinking invests a lot of energy into the cosmological dimension of reality (ancestrality, extinction, imminence, the Great Outdoors, the horror of the outside etc.), Richir's phenomenology plunges into the particle level of experience. Drawing from Richir, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, my specific interest in phenomenology is guided by this tendency to address the smaller-than-human sphere, the quantum level of experience, so to speak, against phenomenology's often criticized attachment to the mesosphere of human experience in the "life-world." Phenomenology not as humanist philosophy of human experience, but as a posthumanist (or even inhumanist) foray into modes of attention.

### *Realism as a problem in contemporary literary criticism*

In recent literary criticism, realism emerges as a hot candidate for what comes after the end of (literary) postmodernism. In fact, orthodox cultural postmodernism – the idea that reality is shattered into fragmentary spectacles of simulation (Baudrillard) and the corresponding idea that signs and texts are forever bound to a solipsist, self-referential play that bears no connection to external reality (Derrida) – could be considered to be the aesthetic equivalent of the ultra-strong correlationism criticized by many of the

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<sup>97</sup> Marc Richir: "Du rôle de la *phantasia* au théâtre et dans le roman," in *Littérature* 132, *Littérature et phénoménologie*, December 2003, 24–33, 26.

philosophical projects introduced above. While there is controversy regarding whether or not orthodox postmodernism has ever been seriously held by anyone, it is hard to deny that various forms of anti-realism have dominated the collective critical consciousness during the reign of *différance*, textualism, simulationism and paranoia. Postmodernism is a typically elusive category, nothing but a battle cry for some, a rather vague notion with an undeniable citational power for others. Yet, in the times of "1980s high theory, when realism, individualism, bourgeois culture, and capitalism were blithely conflated and condemned,"<sup>98</sup> a plea for the return to the real would have been tantamount to critical self-cancellation.

Hal Foster's influential book *The Return of the Real*<sup>99</sup> understands the 1990s as a certain end point of high postmodernism (established in the 1960s), which doesn't mean that postmodern modes of production (like modernist ones before) merely disappear. A similar dynamic, yet in a completely different register is described in Mark McGurl's book *The Program Era. Post-war Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*,<sup>100</sup> which argues that the creative writing programs' institutionalization of modernism (with the help of universities, their MFA programs, publishers and other institutions) has paved the way for a highly differentiated field of fiction production where postmodernism is only one tendency among a few others and by far not the most influential one.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Rita Felski: *The Uses of Literature*, Blackwell, Malden/MA i. a., 2008, 82.

<sup>99</sup> MIT Press, Cambridge/MA, 1996.

<sup>100</sup> Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Apart from genre fiction, which tangentially touches and time and again cuts into the field of 'serious' fiction, McGurl proposes three dominant tendencies in American Postwar literature: technomodernism (Barth, Pynchon etc.), high-cultural pluralism (Roth, Morriison etc.), lower-middle-class modernism (Oates, Carver etc.). See McGurl, *Program Era*, 409. If technomodernism somehow came to stand in for postmodernism as such, they can be Postmodern writers can be found in all three (or four) fields.

In the Latin American context, at least in the international reception, postwar fiction seems almost equivalent with the literature of the boom (1950s-1960s), which is itself further flattened into the now all-encompassing category of *realismo mágico*. Defined by one of its founding fathers, Arturo Uslar Pietri, as "una visión casi sobrenatural de una realidad casi irreal,"<sup>102</sup> *realismo mágico* seems today almost synonymous with the unique work of Gabriel García Márquez. The overwhelming success of *Cien años de soledad*, almost precisely fifty years ago, left behind an ambiguous legacy for Latin American fiction: either, new works and authors could somehow be marketed as part of magical realism, or, they became inevitably marginalized on the highly competitive field of world literature.

Consequently, 'realism' is at least one important ingredient of Latin America's most famous and most dubious literary gift to world literature although strong traditions of experimental writing always remained present and highly influential in the culture of Latin American writing. Working from various impulses such as Kafka, Borges, Bioy Casares, Joyce, Macedonio Fernández, the Nouveau Roman, feminism etc., both Boom and post-Boom writers who were clearly no magical realists (no matter how far we allow the category to stretch and despite the attempts to subsume them under the category for marketing reasons), managed to keep an experimental tradition alive and gain a certain notoriety in Latin America and abroad.

Nevertheless, contemporary Latin American fiction writers still find themselves in a difficult position. Although they can draw from the efforts of Cortázar, Lezama Lima, Vargas Llosa, Guimarães Rosa, Lispector, Piglia, Saer, Puig and many more, magical realism still seems to be the ridiculously exotic expectation of many potential readers (and publishers), if not at home, then at least abroad.

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<sup>102</sup> <http://www.biblioteca.org.ar/libros/131558.pdf> (accessed January 18).

In the year 1996, Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet and Colombian writer Santiago Gamboa, edited an anthology of texts by younger Latin American writers who implicitly or explicitly refused to be judged against the background of magical realism. The anthology is brilliantly named *McOndo* which is, of course, a sardonic pun on the famous fictitious town *Macondo* in *Cien años de soledad*. In their introduction<sup>103</sup> to the anthology, Fuguet and Gamboa tell the "true story" of a young Latin American writer who came to the US on a scholarship and struggled to be published there because his writing was judged as not Latin American enough.

*McOndo* is not the half mythical and naturally wondrous, half social-realist world that writers, agents and publishers had jointly concocted from the impulses of Uslar Pietri, Asturias, Rulfo and Carpentier, the genre-redefining act of *Cien años de soledad* and the commercial successes of Isabel Allende & Co., but a world of Macs, McDonald's and *condominios*. But far from a boring and one-dimensional reality stripped off its fantastic and magical elements, *McOndo* represents an urban and globalized world at least as surreal as its famous rural counterpart:

En nuestro *McOndo*, tal como en *Macondo*, todo puede pasar, claro que en el nuestro cuando la gente vuela es porque anda en avión o están muy drogados. Latinoamérica, y de alguna manera Hispanoamérica (España y todo el USA latino) nos parece tan realista mágico (surrealista, loco, contradictorio, alucinante) como el país imaginario donde la gente se eleva o predice el futuro y los hombres viven eternamente. Acá los dictadores mueren y los desaparecidos no retornan. El clima cambia, los ríos se salen, la tierra tiembla y don Francisco coloniza nuestros inconscientes.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Alberto Fuguet, Santiago Gamboa: "Presentación del país *McOndo*," in A. F., S. G. (eds.): *McOndo. Antología de la nueva literatura hispanoamericana*, Mondadori, Barcelona, 1996, 9–18.

<sup>104</sup> Fuguet, Gamboa, "*McOndo*," 15.

The terror of the colonizers is translated into the much more subtle violence of neoliberalism;<sup>105</sup> the cultural dominant is not "el gran misterio creador del mestizaje cultural" (Uslar Pietri) anymore, but a further globalizing, post-NAFTA "cultura bastarda"<sup>106</sup> where myth and magic are being replaced by digital culture,<sup>107</sup> leading to a heterogeneous list of presumably untypical items that suddenly become very typically Latin American (almost a Latour litany):

Latinoamérica es [...] MTV latina, aquel alucinante consenso, ese flujo que coloniza nuestra conciencia a través del cable. [...] Y seguimos: Latinoamérica es Televisa, es Miami, son las repúblicas bananeras y Borges y el Comandante Marcos y la CNN en español y el Nafta y el Mercosur y la deuda externa y, por supuesto, Vargas Llosa.<sup>108</sup>

McOndo, which is less of a unified or even diversified movement and more an attempt to pinpoint the situation and ambitions of a new generation of Latin American writers (post-Boom, post-dictatorship), is no exception to a rule that is almost universal in art and literature – that the emergence and the registering of a new formation of the real pushes artists and writers towards the conception of a new aesthetic. It is often difficult to distinguish between real content and mere rhetoric effect, but after all we are in the field of literature where things are never quite as they appear and both vagueness and rhetoric playfulness are among the main features of literary categories.

It can be said that the ambiguity of realism is specifically remarkable even within the usual vagueness of literary categories. Roman Jakobson's famous essay "On Realism in Art" demonstrates that realism can be framed

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<sup>105</sup> See Alberto Fuguet: "Magical Neoliberalism," in *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/17/magical-neoliberalism/> (accessed January 18, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> Fuguet, Gamboa, "McOndo," 17.

<sup>107</sup> Fuguet, Gamboa, "McOndo," 13: "Aquí no hay realismo mágico, hay realismo virtual."

<sup>108</sup> Fuguet, Gamboa, "McOndo," 16.



and defined in various and rather incompatible ways: "as [the text's] display of verisimilitude [...] true to life"<sup>109</sup> (type A); judged as verisimilar by readers (type B); as a historical term for an aesthetic school or movement, specifically applied to Western art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (type C). The common technique of inserting superfluous details, narrative *détours* etc. into the text, a technique crudely equivalent with Roland Barthes "effet de réel,"<sup>110</sup> designates another meaning / type (D) of realism.<sup>111</sup> As poetics and aesthetics move towards modernism where aesthetics increasingly becomes a reflectively embedded, implied dimension in the poetic text itself,<sup>112</sup> a fifth meaning of realism emerges (type E) – "*the requirement of consistent motivation and realization of poetic devices.*"

Jakobson's often commented essay not only shows that realism can be divided into different types, but that behind that we find different conceptions of both reality and realism. This point is made clear in Bertoni's magnum opus *Realismo e letteratura*. After gathering an illustrious group of writers, philosophers and literary critics (Friedrich Engels, George Eliot, Jakobson, Auerbach, Ian Watt, Lúkacs etc.) in an imaginary museum room where they present their diverging views on realism, Bertoni concludes:

Potremmo continuare a lungo, ma forse è il caso di fermarci e di limitarci a una provvisoria, minimale constatazione: non solo, come ricorda Thomas Pavel, esistono 'realismi di diversi tipi', dovuti ai differenti approcci con cui gli scrittori rappresentano il mondo, ma esistono anche diverse *concezioni* del realismo, storicamente, culturalmente e ideologicamente condizionate,

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<sup>109</sup> Jakobson, "Realism," 20.

<sup>110</sup> See Roland Barthes: "L'effet de réel," in *Communications* 11, 1968, 84–89.

<sup>111</sup> See Jakobson, "Realism," 25.

<sup>112</sup> See Wolfgang Iser (ed.): *Immanente Ästhetik, Ästhetische Reflexion. Lyrik als Paradigma der Moderne*, Fink, Munich, 1966.

visioni parziali e spesso vigorosamente idiosincratiche che si sono accumulate, strato su strato, nel corso degli anni, senza nessuna possibilità di confluire in un sistema univoco o almeno passabilmente omogeneo.<sup>113</sup>

This leaves us with basically three options: either we drop the question of realism altogether focusing instead on more granular and specific problems; or we historicize the question which has been done in different ways by authors such as Lukács,<sup>114</sup> Jameson<sup>115</sup> or Bertoni himself.<sup>116</sup> The third option (the one I intend to pursue in the present dissertation) takes realism as a problem – not as a clearly defined object of study, but as an enigmatic question that, although not sufficiently answerable in systematic and descriptive terms only, remains stubbornly on the horizon of our interpretative and theoretical discussions.<sup>117</sup>

Current critical and interpretative projects on the question of literary realism seem to be well aware of their built-in difficulties and vagaries. Many contributions start from the observation that a return to the real, a direct and

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<sup>113</sup> Federico Bertoni: *Realismo e letteratura. Una storia possibile*, Einaudi, Turin, 2007, 226-7.

<sup>114</sup> See Georg Lukács: "Realism in the Balance," in Ronald Taylor (ed.): *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, Verso, London, 1980, 28–59.

<sup>115</sup> Jameson's Marxist historicization is faithful to his famous commitment to "always historicize." See Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/NY, 1981, 9. See also his newest publication *The Antinomies of Realism*, Verso, London, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Although Bertoni moves between the modes of tackling the problem of realism stating that his book "non é una teoria generale né una storia sistematica del realismo, e tantomeno un manuale o un'enciclopedia." (Bertoni, *Realismo*, VII)

<sup>117</sup> The conception of theoretical problems as problems bears resemblance to how Franco Moretti frames the question of world literature in his essay "Conjectures on World Literature," in *New Left Review* 1, January-February 2000, 54–68, 55: "That's the point: world literature is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That's not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager—a hypothesis, to get started." Let us note that this approach that stresses the inevitability of "a leap, a wager" necessarily entails some kind of speculation, or, so to speak, hyperbolic spirit on the critic's part.

immediate encounter with reality, would mean an inexcusable backlash for cultural and literary studies. Instead of uncritical forms of what I would like to call rigid<sup>118</sup> realism, current literary criticism is interested in the possibilities and limits of various forms of a realism on a higher level or "realism 2.0;"<sup>119</sup> a realism that, inevitably, questions its own means of expression, but one that also faces the challenge of coming to terms with an already changed and still changing reality. This reality is marked with the new urgency of environmental and ecological concerns; with the evolving media and digital infrastructures and the persistence of their material grounds despite the dreams of digital dematerialization during the pioneer years of the digital revolution; with the geopolitical reconfigurations after the Cold War and after the presumed end of geopolitical blocks; with the simultaneous rise of a small, but considerable group of cosmopolitan citizens vs. the reactionary conjurations of nationalist and tribal affects – not to forget the global poor and dispossessed on whose backs this conflict is played out. New realist art must come to terms with such changes and, simultaneously, with the lurking possibility of art's obsolescence in a world regulated by finance, algorithms and legalistic acrobatics.

In a general manner, we could say that realism 2.0 is not only aware of the fundamental conflict between conservative and progressive variants of types A and B (traditional reality vs. emerging reality), but also wary of the possibility that realism alone might be the wrong choice for making sense

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<sup>118</sup> My use of "rigid" to describe the position of rigid realism, which is, by the way, rather an auxiliary construction than a position that has ever been seriously held by anyone, refers to Saul Kripke's concept of names as rigid designators. Kripke's main argument is that names are not descriptions of their name carriers, but are causally linked to them qua the act of baptism. Rigid realism, then, is not really realism, but more an extreme form of nominalism where any event or phenomenon can be linked to a single name. See Saul Kripke: *Naming and Necessity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1980.

<sup>119</sup> Mateusz Borowski, Malgorzata Sugiera: "Realismus 2.0. Eine Frage der Perspektive," in Magdalena Marszalek, Dieter Mersch (eds.): *Seien wir realistisch. Neue Realismen und Dokumentarismen in Philosophie und Kunst*, Diaphanes, Zürich i. a., 2016, 267–292.

of actual reality. The claim that realism is too much in thrall of the status quo of contemporary reality devastatingly naturalizes both reality and fiction is Mark Fisher's position in *Capitalist Realism*, which combines a Marxist historical and political analysis with a plea for avant-garde and disrupting aesthetic techniques from the margins of cultural production.<sup>120</sup> Despite the value of Fisher's deliberately biased take on realism, we should also consider Ricardo Piglia's reflection on contemporary literature as a late phenomenon – both after realism and the avant-gardes.

La vanguardia es una de las ideologías espontáneas de todo escritor. (La otra es el realismo.) Si ser de vanguardia quiere decir ser 'moderno', todos los escritores queremos ser de vanguardia. La modernidad es el gran mito de la literatura contemporánea. A la vez en esta época, por lo menos en la Argentina, la vanguardia se ha convertido en un género. Existe una manera cristalizada, tan llena de convenciones y de reglas que podría escribirse una novela de vanguardia con la misma facilidad con la que se puede escribir, por ejemplo, una novela policial.<sup>121</sup>

Avant-garde, realism and genre literature ("una novela policial") have by now all three condensed into conventional forms, which for contemporary ambitious literature become both sources of expression and reminders that they are not infinitely repeatable. The spirit of vanguardism, however, survives in the critics and readers, and avant-garde becomes more of a pragmatic than a structural question – a question of attitude, attention and poise: "Por todo esto habría que decir, en fin, que el problema no es tanto que una obra sea o no de vanguardia: lo fundamental para un escritor es que el público y la crítica sean de vanguardia."<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*, Zero, Winchester, 2009.

<sup>121</sup> Ricardo Piglia, "Noticias sobre literatura en un Diario," in: R. P.: *Formas breves*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2000, 81–101, 86–87.

<sup>122</sup> Piglia, "Noticias," 87.

The situation of literature as both late to realism *and* the avant-gardes, yet with the possibility of wrestling new aesthetic forms by an avant-garde-like reception of the tradition in line with an exploration of the emerging or newly visible constellations of reality make newly hybrid, eclectic and idiosyncratic approaches and projects more and more probable – projects that cross genre conventions within the respective practice (literature), but also the boundaries between artistic practices and even beyond.<sup>123</sup> The arguably new "exposition" of literature to its various environments (the publishing industry, the art market in general, the post-literate<sup>124</sup> digital environment, the sphere of social co-existence etc.) further challenges art's and literature's self-sufficiency. Projects that seem to insist on the value of literature by perpetuating the classical form of the novel, the concept of the author and the idea of art's autonomy, such as the texts I will analyze in this dissertation, can nevertheless be seen against such a backdrop representing the increasing possibility of the lateness or even obsolescence of autonomous art.

New realism in literature can entail both an expansion and a reduction of what counts as real. David Foster Wallace, one of the writers most readily mentioned in the context of postmodernism, e.g., argues that metafiction can easily be understood as realism 2.0: "Metafiction, for its time, was nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its theoretical foe, realism: if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself

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<sup>123</sup> See David Ruffel: "Une littérature contextuelle," in *Littérature* 160, 2010, 61–73.

<sup>124</sup> To emphasize the pathological dimension, Fisher does not only speak of post-literacy but of post-lexia. See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 25: "If, then, something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is a pathology of late capitalism – a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture. Similarly, what is called dyslexia may in many cases amount to a post-lexia. Teenagers process capital's image-dense data very effectively without any need to read – slogan-recognition is sufficient to navigate the net-mobile-magazine informational plane."

see it."<sup>125</sup> Metafiction is an expanded version of realism based on the combination of flesh-and-blood-reality plus reality-as-seen-on-screens (with a certain dematerializing effect of the latter on the former).

On the other hand, new realism can also be an ascetic exercise. This is somehow the outcome of Luz Horne's fundamental inquiries of what she calls not realist, but real literatures.<sup>126</sup> Starting from the observation of a "nueva configuración cultural"<sup>127</sup> – dominated by documentary cinema, the huge popularity of autobiographies, the presumed presence of the real in art exhibitions and performances, and the ubiquity of reality TV – Horne registers the waning of the symbolic function and the complementary triumph of the indexical function in literary texts from authors like Aira, Chejfec, Noll, Abreu et. al. Seen under the aegis of indexicality, Horne's *real literatures* are highly inventive texts that play with repetition, absurdity and non-verbal forms of expression such as photography (both as imaginary reservoir and with real images, see the works of Mario Bellatin) in order to show "algo del orden de lo real." (LR 14) However, as the main feature of contemporary reality seem to be those appealing, yet trivial statements such as *this is real* and *I am here*, the core of reality gets stripped down to an extremely poor and idiotic<sup>128</sup> form. This is the reason for the often criticized (or lauded) flatness

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<sup>125</sup> Foster Wallace, "Unibus," 161.

<sup>126</sup> Which bears some resemblance to Philippe Forest's concept of *réalisme*. See "Le Roman, Le Réel," in P.F.: *Le roman, le réel et autres essais*, Default, Nantes, 2007, 7–16.

<sup>127</sup> Luz Horne: *Literaturas reales. Transformaciones del realismo en la narrativa latinoamericana contemporánea*, Beatriz Viterbo, Buenos Aires, 2011. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title LR + page number.

<sup>128</sup> See Rosset, *Le réel*. See also Graciela Speranza: "Por un realismo idiota," in *Otra Parte. Revista de letras y artes* 8, October 2006, <http://www.revistaotraparte.com/nº-8-otoño-2006/por-un-realismo-idiota> (accessed January 19, 2018); Monika Rinck: "Risiko und Idiotie," in M. R.: *Risiko und Idiotie. Streitschriften*, kookbooks, Berlin, 2015, 11–34.

of characters, the absence or irregularity of plot, the melodramatic theatricality and triviality of the dramatic conflicts and the presumed bad writing<sup>129</sup> of some of these texts. The reductive techniques of Horne's *literaturas reales* give way to a "realismo despiadado" (a merciless realism) in which the conception of the real becomes nothing-but-pure-flesh, albeit coated with the simulacra of the media spectacle. Characters and language alike fall prey to various forms of dislocations and isolations despite the ubiquity of sensual stimulations and seemingly infinite possibilities of affordable consumption.<sup>130</sup>

As this short survey should have demonstrated, new realisms maintain complex relations with the aesthetic tradition. A strong sense of continuity arises from the fact that realism, even the social realism of 19th century novelists, has never been rigid and always been some sort of realism 2.0. On the other hand, projects as that of Luz Horne show that we can also register a decisive rupture with descriptive, mimetic and symbolic approaches to the depiction of reality. Many contributions, not reduced to, but often grounded in Marxism or critical theory, are skeptical about what can be gained from talking about new realisms and therefore either historicize or dismiss the question altogether. What remains operative in all those positions, however,

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<sup>129</sup> The *mise en scène* of bad writing is a popular technique which serves both as a reality effect and a creative act of irreverence against the establishment's demands of well-written, rule-consistent prose. See the beginning of João Gilberto Noll's *Berkeley em Bellagio* (Ed. Objetiva, Rio de Janeiro, 2002), where the narrator presumably loses his ability to speak his mother tongue and becomes exiled in his own language – a crisis of identity which nevertheless motivates the production of the poetic text that we are reading.

<sup>130</sup> In that context, Horne writes about the final scene of César Aira's *La prueba*, which is set in a supermarket, the simple, but plausible image of a reality that seems infinitely diverse, but nevertheless caught in a bad infinity, the never-ending repetition of the same, where experience and material reality is constantly devalued into commodified products: "Lo punk dice que el sujeto que consume – el sujeto en el supermercado – no es otra cosa que pura carne. Se señala, así, un espacio entre la vida y la muerte, entre lo subjetivo y lo objetivo, entre el lenguaje y lo no lingüístico en donde palabras sueltas, ('sin pies ni cabeza') refieren ostensivamente (despiadamente) a pies y a troncos; a cuerpos mutilados." (LR 166)

is the fact that literature is somehow associated to a sometimes vague, sometimes explicit concept of contemporary reality or, to say it with Horne, the "orden de lo real." (LR 14)

The relation of literature, more specifically the novel, to its underlying concept of reality is dealt with in a text that, as far as I see, has not yet gained currency in contemporary discussion about the real and realism in 21<sup>st</sup> century literature (or art, culture etc.). Hans Blumenberg's essay "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans" [The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel] from 1964 starts with a speculative claim (speculative in the sense of Whitehead as a general statement that organizes a vast field of experience within a coherent system): "Die Tradition unserer Dichtungstheorie seit der Antike läßt sich unter dem Gesamttitel einer Auseinandersetzung mit dem antiken Satz, daß die Dichter lügen, verstehen."<sup>131</sup>

The Plato-inspired claim immediately produces its antithesis, namely the possibility that the poets could or even should say the truth. According to Blumenberg, this situation produces two modes of relation between poetry and reality: first, it is presupposed that the reality to which poetry refers is pre-given in some sense or another; and second, that poetry itself produces a new and proper reality. (CR 30) The whole Western literary tradition, as Blumenberg speculates, could be read against this backdrop of a literature's relation *with* and production *of* reality.

In what follows, Blumenberg reconstructs four concepts of reality and demonstrates how singular works of literature maintain different and

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<sup>131</sup> Hans Blumenberg: "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans," in Hans-Robert Jauß (ed.): *Poetik und Hermeneutik I, Nachahmung und Illusion*, Fink, Munich, 1964, 9–27, 9. Engl. version: H. B.: "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel," in R. E. Amacher, V. Lange: *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/NJ, 2015, 29–48, 29: "The history of Western literary theory can be summed up as a continuous debate on the classical dictum that poets are liars." In the following quoted after the English version directly in the text with the short title CR + page number.



by no means deterministic or merely mimetic relations to them. The analysis focuses on the novel as the "most comprehensively 'realistic'" (CR 42) [das welthafte und welthaltigste] literary genre. The first concept is the Platonic conception of reality "instantaneous evidence" (CR 31), inaccessible for mere perception, but immediately accessible for the philosopher who has successfully analyzed the realm of ideas. The second conception is that of "guaranteed reality" (CR 31) where the relation between the subject and the world needs to be mediated by an absolute witness like god or a god-like instance. The third concept views reality as the "actualization of [internally coherent] context." (CR 32) Coherence, consistence and intersubjectivity are the criteria of this concept of reality, which can be associated with the transcendental paradigm and positivist science. The fourth and latest concept is that of modernity where reality appears as an "experience of resistance [...], *as that which cannot be mastered by the self [...]*" (CR 34)

Blumenberg's bold claim is that no matter how revolutionary and innovating (or backward-looking and conservative) a certain poetic project may seem, it inevitably relates in some way or another to the reigning concept of reality of its historical moment. The fact that the respective concept of reality is only rarely made explicit and potentially hidden from the historical actors themselves, while at the same time being of systemic importance for the whole discursive field, brings Blumenberg's concept of reality close to Foucault's historical apriori,<sup>132</sup> a discursive and imaginary force that seems to lie beneath the three cultural modes described by Raymond Williams as residual, dominant and emerging.<sup>133</sup>

In contrast to Blumenberg, of course, my dissertation does not analyze a historical corpus, but a near-contemporary one. While Blumenberg sweepingly synthesized roughly 2500 years of Western literary history, the

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<sup>132</sup> See Michel Foucault: *L'archéologie du savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, 166-9.

<sup>133</sup> See Raymond Williams: *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford i. a., 1977, 121-127.

publication dates of my texts reach only about 10 years back. In addition, Blumenberg's approach seems too wide and too speculative to serve as a critical or interpretative tool for the understanding of realism in the contemporary maximalist novel. Nevertheless, his stirring idea will be my silent companion until the very end of this dissertation where I will try to sum up Pynchon's and Bolaño's relation to their (our) contemporary concept of reality. For evident reasons, the dynamic dimension of this relation – the novel as a production of a new piece of reality instead of a mere reflection of reality as it is – will become even more important than under a historical perspective where the geological and archaeological layers of history have better sedimented and are thus easier to scrutinize. On the other hand, it will also turn out to be impossible to work without any pre-conceived ideas about reality, even in its most general outlines or vague and often misleading forms. Seen from that perspective, I hope to demonstrate that *Against the Day* and *2666* are not only passive witnesses of the contemporary reality's spectacle, but (co-)producers of a still emerging conception of the real that Anthropocenic thought and speculative philosophy are continuing to flesh out as we speak.

## I.2 PROSPECT FOR A THEORY OF HYPERBOLES

*Bigger and better. Good greater greates totally great.*

*Hyperbolic and hyperbolicker.*

(D. F. Wallace)

### *The risky truth of hyperbole (Quintilian)*

If it is true that all poets are liars, yet capable of speaking the truth – somehow, anyhow –, their affinity to hyperbole is hardly surprising. In what is one of its most classical moments of definition, Quintilian places the difficult relationship between truth and illusion at the heart of hyperbole, describing it concisely as an "appropriate exaggeration of the truth,"<sup>134</sup> both an "Amplification and Attenuation" of reality and experience. (68) In a playful, yet significant rhetorical move – in itself an instance of meaningful exaggeration – he saves the discussion of hyperbole for the very end (*summo loco*) of his chapter on tropes, which he had begun with metaphor, "the commonest and far the most beautiful of Tropes." (5) The decision to place it at the eccentric edge of the chapter resonates with hyperbole's peculiar ontology. It is itself both an amplification and attenuation of tropological logistics – either a master trope that defines figurative speech as such, or an auxiliary element that only makes sense when combined with other figures of speech (comparison, simile, metaphor etc.). Hyperboles can tend towards accumulation, which paves the way for one of the most important hyperbole-driven processes in the evolution of literary history – the outbidding of historical

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<sup>134</sup> Quintilian treats hyperbole at the end of his chapter about tropes. See Quintilian: *Institutio Oratoria*, VIII 6.68-76. Quoted after the English translation *The Orator's Education*, Books 6-8, ed. and transl. Donald A. Russell, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2001. Since all quotes refer to book VIII.6, I only indicate the line number in brackets directly behind the passage.

models. As Quintilian demonstrates at the example of a Pindar poem, hyperbole often appears as a rhetoric breakthrough after a long chain of failing acts of designation.

Due to the notorious difficulty of rhetorical adequacy (*decorum*), the question whether hyperbole is appropriate or goes too far cannot be abstractly answered, but only in relation to specific occurrences and contexts. In any case, hyperbolism is a risky venture. It is required to surpass both the conventions of quotidian reality and the reservoir of familiar poetic images, yet "a certain sense of proportion is necessary," for "there is no surer route to *cacozelia*"<sup>135</sup> than boundless exaggeration (*nec alia via magis in cacozelian itur*). (73)

Just like the poet who tries to step out of Plato's shadow while inevitably remaining caught in his claws, hyperbole is a liar, but does not lie to deceive. We must therefore consider how far it is appropriate to exaggerate a thing which is not believed... It is in ordinary use, too, among the uneducated and with country people, no doubt because everybody has a natural desire to exaggerate or minimize things, and no one is satisfied with the truth. It is pardoned, however, because we do not vouch for what we say.

Hyperbole only has positive value when the thing about which we have to speak transcends the ordinary limits of nature. We are then allowed to amplify, because the real size of the thing cannot be expressed, and it is better to go too far than not to go far enough. (75-6)

*It is better to go too far than not to go far enough.* Hyperbole is well aware of its possible failure, yet it prefers risking ridiculousness (*pervenit haec res frequentissime ad risum*, 74) instead of falling short of the obligation to make sense of a reality that "transcends the ordinary limits of nature."

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<sup>135</sup> A standard translation for *cacozelia* is "bad, faulty, awkward imitation."

Paraphrasing Spivak, we could ask the question: Why exaggerate? According to Quintilian, the answer should be clear: Because we must.

*The rarity of hyperboles in literary criticism (Arac, Johnson)*

Despite its notoriety in poetics and theory from Antiquity throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and up to its peak in Baroque poetry and thought, it is no exaggeration to say that hyperbole has not exactly been a main concern for modern literary criticism. In one of the few analytic projects with hyperbole at its center, Jonathan Arac claims that it is the concept's very unfamiliarity that qualifies it as a tool for exploring the textual in literature (in Arac's case: George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*):

My figure of hyperbole bears the same name as a geometrical figure defining a shape generated from dual foci but from no center, suggesting the complexity and instability I wish to emphasize. Furthermore, I find useful the arbitrary excess of such a geometrical metaphor for the "form" of a literary work; as a term it is so alien, falls so far short of our usual critical metaphors, that its tentativity and purely exploratory value remains always in view. Such an analogy is much less likely to mislead us into false consequences than the organic, architectural, or textile metaphors that are more common. The barrenness may be fruitful as fresh provocation.<sup>136</sup>

The fact that Arac sets the crucial word *form* into quotation marks intimates that hyperbole as a concept promises to analyze both the form of a literary work and the formal excess at its heart, without the obligation of fully harmonizing its results into an organic system with a clearly localizable

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<sup>136</sup> Jonathan Arac: "Rhetoric and Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Hyperbole in the *Mill on the Floss*," in *English Literary History* 46:4, Winter 1979, 673–692, 673.

center. Against the two dominant trends, which either bypass hyperbole or only use it as a rhetorical pejorative to dismiss inappropriate exaggeration, Arac mobilizes the forgotten rhetorical figure to demonstrate how Eliot's transitional novel (i.e. the transition between different types of realism or the transition from realism to something else) dramatizes the "clash between the hope of a fitting language and the recognition that language is never at one with reality, any more than the world is at one with itself."<sup>137</sup>

Contributions using hyperbole or related terms as a concept often emphasize processual features and often prioritize them over sedimented forms and more easily definable structures. The "wayward, hyperbolic energy" in Eliot's novel which "ensures that all the literary types that help to structure the book are different in their return"<sup>138</sup> testifies as much to this fact as does Spitzer's axiological discussion of Proust's sinuous syntax, distinguishing between a pretentious and unmotivated inflation of relatively simple situations and hyperbolic exuberance as a stylistic feature which presents itself as a quasi-necessary commitment to the aesthetic "vision" of the author.<sup>139</sup>

It is remarkable that those few authors with a rare interest in hyperbole often feel the urge to justify its existence. Arac defends his use of a non-organic concept, Spitzer's stresses the appropriateness of Proust's syntax as part of the artist's vision. Genette, in a text simply called "Hyperboles," claims that remote comparisons in poetry (both classical and modern) open up a hyperbolic space where conventional practices of thinking and conceiv-

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<sup>137</sup> Arac, "Hyperbole in *Mill*," 690.

<sup>138</sup> Arac, "Hyperbole in *Mill*," 689.

<sup>139</sup> See Leo Spitzer: "Zum Stile Marcel Proust's," in L. S.: *Stilstudien*, Vol. II. Stilsprachen, Munich, 1961, 365–497, 375: "Es handelt sich nicht etwa um eine Hypertrophie der Ausdrucksmittel für relativ Einfaches [...], sondern um eine innere Expansion des sehenden und darstellenden Künstlers."

ing are renegotiated, but he timidly formulates the necessity of an alternative, complementary reason as a cautious question.<sup>140</sup> Even positive uses of hyperbole in literary criticism seem to echo Quintilian's warning that too much of too much is too much and that hyperbole inevitably walks along the thin line between wit and folly.

This intricate situation of hyperbole today could be interpreted as a long-term aftermath effect of its debunking by Enlightenment rationalism as described by Christopher Johnson in his seminal *Hyperboles. The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought*. With the end of the seventeenth century, hyperbole's rhetorical predominance comes to an end too, as the confidence in hyperbole as a force of alternative reasoning loses more and more ground. Referring to Dominique Bouhours' *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* (1688), Johnson demonstrates that new and decidedly anti-Baroque criteria such as wit and taste (HY 478) threaten to replace hyperbole while Enlightenment's narrowing down of reason to logical and sober argumentation becomes the gold standard of reasoning. Hyperbole can only survive in the niches of this emerging culture, e.g. as "decorous hyperbole" (HY 480) where the audience's presumed familiarity with the hyperbolic image "sert comme de passeport à l'hyperbole."<sup>141</sup>

But it seems that a more effectual and less docile passport had to be found for hyperbole's survival than its softening (*remedio*) qua verisimilitude or familiarity. Johnson and the eighteenth century find such a figure in irony, which becomes at the same time a voucher for hyperbole's granted, albeit newly restricted mobility and a symptom of its slow but steady decline. The

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<sup>140</sup> See Gérard Genette: "Hyperboles," in G. G.: *Figures*, Vol. I, Seuil, Paris, 1966, 245–252, 252: "L'espace qui s'ouvre et se referme entre *amour* et *Numance*, entre *rosée* et *tête de chatte*, mesure en quelque sorte le pouvoir hyperbolique du langage, qui est d'*envoyer* (ou d'aller chercher) aussi loin que possible quelque chose qu'il faut bien appeler la pensée. Ce *mode hyperbolique* de l'esprit n'a-t-il pas ses raisons – que le bon sens ignore, et que la raison veut connaître ?"

<sup>141</sup> Bouhours, *Manière*, quoted after (HY 480).

triumph of irony accompanies the "important historical shift in hyperbole's reception (HY 481)."<sup>142</sup> at the beginning of the eighteenth century, which is not limited to, but comes to a certain climax in high postmodernism, also defined as "the age of irony."<sup>143</sup>

It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to give a full account of Johnson's "detailed, comparatist defense of the figure of hyperbole in the Baroque period," as the blurb fittingly promotes his book. Yet his study is in many ways an inspiring source for my own discussion of hyperbole and realism in Pynchon and Bolaño. In Johnson's idiosyncratic approach, hyperbole becomes a concrete tool for cross-fertilizing readings of poetry, poetics and philosophy. Johnson combines a broad comparatist scope (Antiquity, England, France, Spain and Latin America) with hyper-close readings of poetic texts and a risky preference for speculation beyond the Baroque. Methodically, he fuses discourse analysis with a more granular account for how things have been said poetically, rhetorically, figuratively. *Hyperboles* is neither merely historical nor merely epistemological nor merely formalist. Therefore, with the help of Anselm Haverkamp, it could be described as a history-of-being-

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<sup>142</sup> Laurent Perrin (*L'ironie mise en trope. Du sens des énoncés hyperboliques et ironiques*, Kimé, Paris, 1996, 52) goes even so far to claim that hyperbole and irony are exact opposites: "De fait, tout énoncé tropique non ironique est fondamentalement hyperbolique."

<sup>143</sup> See Jedediah Purdy: "Age of Irony," in *The American Prospect*, July-August 1998, <http://prospect.org/article/essay-age-irony> (accessed January 20, 2018); Susan Searls Giroux: "The Age of Irony?," in *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22:4, Fall 2002, 960–976. Purdy's essay is particularly interesting insofar as it shows that irony inevitably tends towards detachment and self-immunization, but that "rescuing irony from itself" and "enriching" it from within is in fact possible. From a hyperbolist point of view, however, Purdy's slightly elitist remedy based on moral fortification, civic solidarity and logical rationality ("an intelligent and resourceful irony") is important, yet insufficient. Against moralizing doctrines and *new sincerities*, hyperbole tries to cure irony by simultaneously pushing it into two opposite directions, demanding stronger commitments and riskier forms of detachment at the same time. / NB: Purdy, who had recently graduated when he wrote his 1998 essay and is now a professor of law at Duke University, fittingly wrote his last book about the necessary readjustments of political agencies in the Anthropocene: Jedediah Purdy: *After Nature. A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA. i. a., 2015.



said in contrast to the Heideggerian project of a history-of-being [Gesagtseinsgeschichte].<sup>144</sup>

### *Hyperbole as figura*

In understanding hyperbole both as a rhetoric trope and a figure of speech, but also a philosopheme and an ethical operator – a view that is historically informed and epistemologically justified –, hyperbole becomes a slippery, but versatile agent which moves in and out of discursive practices, affective constellations and moral attitudes, a figure whose inherent excess must be grounded again and again in concrete, yet theoretically oriented reading scenes. This prompts my decision to treat hyperbole neither as trope nor figure in the tradition of rhetoric, but as a poetic, aesthetic, conceptual and perceptual *figura*.<sup>145</sup> As such, it does not always appear in its most ex-

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<sup>144</sup> See Anselm Haverkamp: "Metaphora dis/continua. Allegorie als Vorgeschichte der Ästhetik," in A. H.: *Figura cryptica. Theorie der literarischen Latenz*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 2002, 73–88, 73; Anselm Haverkamp: "Unbegrifflichkeit: Die Aufgabe der Seinsgeschichte (Blumenberg und Heidegger)," in A. H.: *Latenzzeit. Wissen im Nachkrieg*, Kadmos, Berlin 2004, 73–82. Haverkamp's concept of *Gesagtseinsgeschichte* is developed out of a reading of Blumenberg's theory of nonconceptuality. See e.g. Hans Blumenberg: "Prospect for a Theory of Nonconceptuality," in H. B.: *Shipwreck with Spectator*, MIT Press, Cambridge/MA, 1996, 81–102.

<sup>145</sup> My understanding of *figura* bears obvious resemblance to Erich Auerbach's "Figura" (in *Archivum Romanicum* 22, 1938, 436–489), but is more directly inspired by Julio Cortázar (*Rayuela* [1963], Cátedra, Madrid, 2003) who uses the writer-character Morelli to develop his concept of *figura* in a memorable scene of *Rayuela*: "Acostumbrarse a emplear la expresión *figura* en vez de *imagen*, para evitar confusiones. Sí, todo coincide. Pero no se trata de una vuelta a la Edad Media ni cosa parecida. Error de postular un tiempo histórico absoluto: Hay tiempos diferentes *aunque* paralelos. En ese sentido, uno de los tiempos de la llamada Edad Media puede coincidir con uno de los tiempos de la llamada Edad Moderna. Y ese tiempo es el percibido y habitado por pintores y escritores que rehúsan apoyarse en la circunstancia, ser 'modernos' en el sentido en que lo entienden los contemporáneos, lo que no significa que opten por ser anacrónicos; sencillamente están al margen del tiempo superficial de su época,

PLICIT presence, but in changing masks and costumes. Seen against the background of hyperbole's waning reputation in the long aftermath of the Enlightenment, it is hardly surprising that in Pynchon's and Bolaño's novels the hyperbolic marks its influence not as a clearly visible trope, but as a latent, yet comprehensive

*totius voluntatis fictio*, als Figment einer durchgängigen Intention, [die] implizit eher denn explizit auftritt, und *apparens magis quam confessa* in Erscheinung tritt, ohne ihre Intention offen zu legen.<sup>146</sup>

*totius voluntatis fictio*, as the figment of a continuous intention, occurring implicitly rather than explicitly and *apparens magis quam confessa* without laying bare its intention.

Hyperbole as *figura* is not clearly definable in the way the rhetoric tradition classified its tropes and figures. It needs to be approached in a broader theoretical context. That is the reason why in the present study I draw from phenomenology and ontology to complement my formalist readings of literature.

The former helps to refine the status of hyperbole's presence/absence in the novel. Slightly different from Haverkamp's *latency*, I will regard the hyperbolic in Pynchon's and Bolaño's novels as an *intermittent* phenomenon, largely absent or only vicariously given, but intermittently breaking through the text's surface – in seemingly quotidian formulations,<sup>147</sup> in exaggerated

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y desde ese otro tiempo donde todo accede a la condición de figura, donde todo vale como signo y no como tema de descripción, intentan una obra que puede parecer ajena o antagónica a su tiempo y a su historia circundantes, y que sin embargo los incluye, los explica, y en último término los orienta hacia una trascendencia en cuyo término está esperando el hombre." (659)

<sup>146</sup> Haverkamp, "Metaphora dis/continua," 82.

<sup>147</sup> "El metro es la cosa más triste del mundo" (B 804); "los hombres más guapos del planeta" (B 234)

indications of quantity,<sup>148</sup> in intimations of weird and hyperbolic geometries,<sup>149</sup> and in the use of paradoxical, mystical language.<sup>150</sup> In the maximalist novel, the hyperbolic is to be found both on the surface and in the various undergrounds and underworlds these novels explore. The fictional universe, in Pynchon's and Bolaño's texts, is a relief map, just like the world in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology. (VI 177)

### *Phenomenology's hyperbole (Richir)*

Marc Richir is perhaps the most conscious thinker about hyperbole in the history of philosophy. In Richir's works, hyperbole has several functions and it is not altogether clear if he uses the concept in a coherent way. Tentatively, we can distinguish two main uses: one methodological, one meta-philosophical.

In the meta-philosophical sense, Richir argues that there can be no logically justified beginning for philosophy. Therefore, philosophy has to begin with a risky leap into the unknown: "toute acte véritable de philosophe commence par une hyperbole, un 'moment de folie'."<sup>151</sup>

Richir's preferred example for this moment of madness that inaugurates philosophy over and over again is Fichte's famous first axiom: *Ich = Ich*,

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<sup>148</sup> "se encontraban, rodeada o semirodeada por 106.200.000 kilómetros cuadrados de agua salada" (B 39)

<sup>149</sup> "the bright, flowerlike heart of the hyper-hyperboloid" (P 1085)

<sup>150</sup> "Como una fotografía que está trucada pero que no está trucada" (B 234); "Pensar sin pensar. O pensar con imágenes temblorosas." (B 463); "the blindness at the heart of a diamond." (P 109) For the relationship between blindness and hyperbole see Richard Klein: "The Blindness of Hyperboles. The Ellipses of Insight," in *Diacritics* 3:2, Summer 1973, 33–44.

<sup>151</sup> Marc Richir: *L'écart et le rien. Conversations avec Sacha Carlson*, Millon, Grenoble, 2015, 69. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title ER + page number.

I = I. The hyperbolic element lies precisely in the =-sign, in the act of identification itself, which demonstrates again the versatility of hyperbole that in Fichte's case does not produce alterity but inaugurates sameness. Richir elaborates further on his concept of hyperbole as meta-philosophical figure:

On sait que l'hyperbole est au départ une figure rhétorique de l'exagération ; mais je dirais, pour ma part, que c'est plus fondamentalement une *hybris*. Or le problème est que cette hyperbole implique le risque, en réalité fantasmagique, que si je la pousse trop loin, je deviens fou. (ER 69)

By sidestepping the rhetorical discussion whether hyperbole should be regarded as a trope or figure, Richir is able to define it as an affective state and an ethical attitude (*hybris*). Just like in the above-discussed rationalist projects interested in the inhuman, the weird and productive alienation, philosophy is grounded in a fundamental emptiness:

C'est d'ailleurs tout ce que j'ai vécu pendant toute ma vie de philosophe : il est très difficile de vivre en hyperbole, car on ne sait plus très bien de quoi on parle. Il s'agit donc d'un moment de folie tel que si on y reste, on devient réellement fou, comme Artaud l'a magnifiquement décrit. Il y a donc un vide fondamental dans la pensée, qui fait que je n'arrive pas à reprendre ce qui a été jeté par l'hyperbole, et donc à temporaliser en langage, en pensée. (ER 69)

It follows that hyperbole is vital for thinking, at least for thought's beginnings, but it is not possible to dwell in the hyperbolic for long.

Hyperbole's dangerous potential was already felt by Descartes who famously adopted an attitude of hyperbolic doubt at the outset of his philosophical adventure. The etymological leap from the empty into the unknown is clearly at work whenever Descartes emphasizes his effort of leaving behind the most evident realities and sensual impressions.

At the bottom of this doubt awaits a philosophical fiction – the *deus malignus*. Whenever Richir discusses the *deus malignus* in his texts,<sup>152</sup> a discussion of the hyperbolic is not far. Yet whereas Descartes abolishes the *deus malignus* with both the cogito (which is after all a hyperbolic act much like Fichte's symbolic tautology Ich = Ich) and the ontological proof for the existence of God as "garant de la vérité" (ER 154), modern philosophy cannot take recourse to these two fideistic and rationalist fictions.

God and the *deus malignus* (after all, God could be an invention in the head of the *deus malignus* and not the other way around) become interchangeable and the *deus malignus* becomes the source of our alienation that haunts our discourses and actions as a continuously latent (or intermittent for that matter) potential.

The identification of hyperbole's centrifugal force of alienation with Descartes' *deus malignus* is the moment where hyperbole slips from a metaphysical attitude to a concrete methodological tool and eventually to a real philosophical problem on its own terms. In Richir's work, this methodological and philosophical problem circles around the question of the *epoché hyperbolique*.

Here, hyperbole is not only a "moment de folie" which will later be overcome in language and thinking. It is a constant companion of the philosophical discourse, it is a tool for avoiding circularity and jumping outside of the symbolic order and even the perceptual givenness, which has been in one way or another the indispensable prerequisite in every phenomenological project. Against this, Richir claims that the phenomenon itself can entail illusionary elements, not as accidental façade, but as an integral part of its

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<sup>152</sup> Richir often uses the *deus malignus* as a certain starting point for his phenomenological inquiries. See e.g. Marc Richir: *De la négativité en phénoménologie*, Millon, Grenoble, 2014, 13–47.

characters. (Again, I conjecture that there is a deep proximity between inhumanist rationalism and Richir's quantum phenomenology at the heart of these problems.)

Unlike in the meta-philosophical context, for which Richir made clear that the hyperbolic moment needs to be overcome in order to advance with language and thought, in the hyperbolic epoché Richir tries to think hyperbole as such in the context of his *genetic phenomenology*.<sup>153</sup>

In chapter II.5, I will discuss in detail how hyperbole as a productive element within the register of *phantasia* can enrich our understanding of the symbolic order (imagination, language, memory etc.). At this point, I will only note that the *hyperbolic epoché* is the starting point from which Richir ventures into a new understanding of what a phenomenon is and entails. In its wildly flickering mode of existence that entails both givenness and illusion, both the symbolic shapes and its grounding energies (which are itself grounded in nothingness), phenomena are complex and dynamic quasi-entities which are impossible to entangle in a way that the rational elements can be clearly and once and for all separated from the 'bad', contaminated aspects. Just like the inhuman in Negarestani's speculative philosophy is inseparably tied to the human, the illusionary, phantasmagoric, exuberant and elusive can not be cancelled out from the heart of the phenomenon.

It is this *multiplicité originnaire* on the ground of a *vide fondamentale* that Richir calls the *rien-que-phénomène*:

Cela réclame un 'sens', le 'sens' phénoménologique, qui est sens de ce qui 'tremble', 'vibre' ou 'bouge' dans ce qui paraît seulement se donner, et sens de le *laisser* advenir ou s'évanouir, malgré les fixités de la langue philoso-

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<sup>153</sup> It seems to be a consensus by now that Richir's broader framework has two different, but complementary dimensions: a genetic dimension, and an architectonic one.

phique. Et c'est là, si l'on veut, qu'il y a un problème architectonique concernant Dieu et le Malin Génie : Dieu seul peut *assurer* l'institution symbolique. (ER 153-4)

Against the "structuralisme le plus stupide" (ER 161) in which everything is reduced to language (or even worse: the text), phenomenology seeks to express something beyond or, better, beneath language (the *institution symbolique* par excellence), about the non-linguistic (and proto-linguistic and post-linguistic) forces that traverse the field of experience. Against the grain of the vast majority of phenomenology, however, Richir does not seek the 'plenitude' of 'givenness,' the rich personal experience etc., but the granular, inhumanist, anonymous flickering of phenomenality and its *clignotement* with the maneuvers of our attention.<sup>154</sup>

### *Nonada and sertão (Rosa)*

Richir's notion of the *rien-que-phénomène* has a literary twin sibling. João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas*<sup>155</sup> famously begins with the neologism *nonada*, congenially translated in the announced new translation into English as *nonaught*.<sup>156</sup> The *nonada*, the nothing-at-all or the almost-nothing, is the starting point from which Riobaldo, his friends and adversaries,

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<sup>154</sup> (Mutual) *Clignotement* describes the always momentous synchrony of the rhythms of phenomenalisation and attention (or, to put it differently, the *phénomène-du-monde* and the *phénomène-du-langage*).

<sup>155</sup> To my knowledge, Richir does not mention Rosa's novel but it is clear from his remarks that he has a penchant for difficult and long novels with a strong sense for adventure: Proust's *Recherche*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*. See Marc Richir: "Au cœur des ténèbres," in *Esprit* 5, Mai 1984, 135–149; and his little monograph *Melville. Les assises du monde*, Hachette, Paris, 1996.

<sup>156</sup> See "Excerpt from Grande Sertão: Veredas (Bedeviled in the Backlands)," transl. Alison Entekin, July 2016, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/july-2016-brazil-beyond-rio->

his educated visitor<sup>157</sup> and his readers take off into the vastness of the *sertão*.<sup>158</sup>

Riobaldo literally embodies the radical uncertainty at the heart of the phenomenon ("será não? será?" GS 21). Although he has seen and experienced a lot during his adventures in the *sertão* ("Vi tanta cruz!" GS 30), he never tires of emphasizing how little he knows: "Eu quase que nada não sei."<sup>159</sup> (GS 25)

The novel dramatizes the clash of two hyperbolic orders: the almost-nothing of the *nonada* and the very large finitude<sup>160</sup> of the *sertão* ("O sertão está em toda parte." GS 19). The inhuman at the heart of humanity is prominently represented by the devil that haunts the novel in all its parts. Just like the labor of the inhuman, the devil in *Grande Sertão* is not a force from outside, which is rather God's role whose non-interference is euphemistically

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grande-sertao-veredas-joao-guimaraes-rosa (accessed January 24, 2018). I quote from the Brazilian edition *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, Nova Fronteira, Rio de Janeiro, 2015. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title GS + page number.

<sup>157</sup> The *senhor*, with his educated learnedness and his doctoral degree, embodies the symbolic institution: he knows a lot even beyond a specialist intellectual knowledge ("Se vê que o senhor sabe muito, em idéia firme, além de ter carta de doutor." GS 33), but there are at least two things that exceeds his grasp: the "dangerous stuff" that is life as a *jagunça* (wild bandit) in the *sertão*, and the radical uncertainty that punctuates Riobaldo's auto-didactic discourse.

<sup>158</sup> Which can be seen as the main protagonist of the novel – even before Riobaldo.

<sup>159</sup> Rosa's irresistible way of expressing it makes another dimension of the *rien-que-phénomène* visible. In a way of outdoing Socrates ("I know that I know nothing"), the *nonada* seems not only a little more than nothing but also a little less. The old English translations hardly grasps Riobaldo's discourse which often pushes beyond the edge of readability: "I know almost nothing – but I have my doubts about many things." (J. G. R: *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, transl. James Taylor & Harriet de Onís, Knopf, New York/NY, 1963, 10.) English readers will have to await the new translation announced for 2019 to see how Alison Entrekin will solve this and many other riddles.

<sup>160</sup> It is often claimed that the *sertão* stands for the infinite, which is not at least grounded in the fact that the novel's very last sign, fittingly a non-verbal sign, is a lying eight. However, what we see is not a geometrical sign in perfect symmetry, but a hand-drawing that can as much mean the sinuous wanderings and zigzagging adventures of the novel's characters and, more importantly, the *aventure du sens se faisant* of *Grande Sertão*.



termed as patience ("Deus é paciência." GS 27), but a radically immanent and parasitic potential: "Arre, ela está misturado em tudo." (GS 20)<sup>161</sup>

The *nonada* and the *sertão* are juxtaposed in a sharp contrast that is not bridged by any conciliatory compromise. Yet there is an element that connects the two hyperbolic poles of existence that radiates from another key word of the novel: *travessia*. In its sinuous and zigzagging adventures, which also includes a lot of boredom, waiting and inactivity, *Grande Sertão* traverses the whole space from the *quase nada* to the *quase infinito* ("Atravessei aquilo, vida toda" GR 29). As readers, we gaze into the abyss of nonsensical nothingness and, overwhelmed by the inventive language and the abundance of references, we feel the vertigo of infinity.

But *Grande Sertão* is neither interested in the absolute zero nor does it venture into abstract infinity. It is a verbal traversing through the radical immanence of a world where the devil is always at the flip side of the human: "O diabo não há [...] Existe é o homem humano." (GS 492). This is the penultimate sequence of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. It stands between *nonada*, which we've read just in the line before, and the last word of the novel: *Travessia*.

*Hyperphenomena, hyperobjects, and the hyperbolic fourfold (Waldenfels, Morton)*

Richir and Rosa are twins in the sense that they accept the challenge of the absolute of both nothingness and infinity. Yet they attenuate it to the

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<sup>161</sup> The parasitic nature of the devil is unmistakably made explicit throughout the novel. Here is the first occurrence of this line of thought: "Explico ao senhor: o diabo vive dentro do homem, os crespos do homem – ou é o homem arruinado, ou o homem dos avessos. Solto, por si, cidadão, é que não tem diabo nenhum." (GS 21)

almost-nothing and the very large finitude. Their attenuation is in fact a radicalization, as the shudder of abstract infinity is replaced by "the vertigo of hyperbole."<sup>162</sup>

The German phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels has dedicated a whole book to the exploration of hyperbolic experience just beneath the absolute and just above the *néant*. In *Hyperphänomene*, Waldenfels defines the hyperbolic very broadly "as something that appears as *more* and *differently* than it is."<sup>163</sup> In thirteen chapters, Waldenfels discusses the hyperbolic in relation to a vast array of phenomena and questions such as the infinite, religious experience, norms and laws, art, hospitality, trust etc. In all of these cases, the hyperbolic interrupts the self-contained order of a specific system without always abolishing (or even trying to abolish) that same order. Waldenfels' framework is then further refined by the etymological core of hyperbole ("to throw beyond"), which intimates that the hyperbolic reaches towards something that lies beyond its own immediate visibility:

Die Hyperbolik, die wir im Auge haben, steht für eine Bewegung des Über-Hinaus. Es handelt sich um ein altvertrautes Motiv, das unter verschiedenen Namen an den Rändern großer und kleiner Ordnungen oder auch in ihrer Mitte auftaucht. (HP 9-10)

The hyperbolic we have in mind is a movement of the beyond. It represents an old familiar element, which appears under different names on the edges of large and small orders or even at their heart.

To sum it up, the hyperbolic is a strangely familiar, yet inherently excessive phenomenon. It appears within a given system whose order it

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<sup>162</sup> See Charles Baudelaire: *De l'essence du rire*, in C. B. *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, 539.

<sup>163</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels: *Hyperphänomene. Modi hyperbolischer Erfahrung*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2012, 9. In the following quoted directly in the text with short title HP + page number.

threatens without really abolishing it. It appears rather suddenly and surprisingly, as shock, or traumatism, or witty turn, and not only at the margins, but also at the heart of these orders.

With regards to Pynchon and Bolaño, we would have to specify: above all at their heart. The difficult search for hyperbole's precise location (HP 10) is not only a technical intricacy, but a structural feature of its peculiar ontology. *Against the Day* and *2666* are not stingy with the explicitness of the spectacle, but the hyperbolic often emerges out of the most trivial and inconspicuous situations. Thus, the novels are not set in periods of real war, but in times of pre- and interwar;<sup>164</sup> the dominant mode of violence, omnipresent in both books, is more often indirect and sublimated than direct and physical; and the atmospheric madness of these novelistic universes is not only sheltered in psychiatric clinics,<sup>165</sup> but nourished by governing institutions such as the police, the military, corporations, the media and the university.

In *2666*, Bolaño's favorite term for the milieu in which the hyperbolic emerges is *abismo* (abyss). Despite Bolaño's predilection for peripheries and remote locales (the desert at the Northern edge of Latin America, a mental asylum in the Swiss Alps, the *casa de los escritores desaparecidos*), the clearly designated or suggested abysses in his fiction reliably crack open in the middle of the world: "dejaran de lado el abismo de la vida diaria," (829) "en medio de un lago de sal, vio un túnel" (697), "hasta que de pronto ya no podía seguir avanzando y se detenía al borde de un abismo." (611)

In Pynchon's *Against the Day*, characters and readers alike frequently encounter what they know from genre fiction (especially science fiction) as

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<sup>164</sup> World War I is the hidden referent in *Against the Day*; and the cruel effects of the drug war at the Mexican border with the USA are palpable despite its absence on the surface of the text.

<sup>165</sup> Although both novels take a visit to a mental asylum in memorable scenes (B 121-5; P 626)

gates or portals, hidden thresholds, real or imaginary,<sup>166</sup> that connect worlds often separated "by only the thinnest of membranes." (P 130)<sup>167</sup>

Not only do the abysses of underworlds and the portals into indefinitely other worlds prompt hyperbolic experience – they defy the possibility of experience altogether. In *Against the Day*, the metaphysics and mysticism of contemporary mathematics is used by characters and the narrator alike to make sense of a reality which, as a result of modernization and globalization, becomes ever more simultaneous. *Abismo* in Bolaño is often associated with the moment when the possibility of experience altogether halts ("inmenso abismo donde al precipitarse todo olvida," 541; "abismo insondable," 611), and with the Mexican video and movie expert Charly Cruz we can conjecture if there such a thing as "experiencia *abismal*" (397-8) is even possible. The abyss is also the real and imaginary chasm where the corpses are dumped, some of which reappear, but most of which are irretrievably lost.

In Waldenfels' phenomenology, which is bound to the analysis of "modes of hyperbolic experience," the human and her symbolic order necessarily remain the ultimate point of reference. In Pynchon's and Bolaño's novels – as well as in the inhumanist dimensions of post-WWII phenomenology and contemporary Anthropocenic speculative philosophy – it is not only experience, but the world and the real themselves that appear

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<sup>166</sup> Alcohol and drugs such as "aryq or hasheesh" can serve as "a facilitator of passage between the worlds." (P 433)

<sup>167</sup> In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's use of the membrane seems rather different. While *Against the Day* stresses the technical use of membranes as mediators between two different ontological orders, *Gravity's Rainbow* explores the membrane as a vibrant interface, an almost living skin, which becomes the lieu of action. See Thomas Pynchon: *Gravity's Rainbow*, Viking, New York/NY, 1973, 78-9: "Now that he [= Dog Vanya] has moved into 'equivalent' phase, the first of the transmarginal phases, a membrane, hardly noticeable, stretches between Dog Vanya and the outside. Inside and outside remain just as they were, but the *interface*—the cortex of Dog Vanya's brain—is changing, in any number of ways, and that is the really peculiar thing about these transmarginal events." In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title GR + page number.

as hyperbolic. It exerts its traumatic presence in the realm of the human, but it is only intermittently graspable. In that sense, the hyperbolic not only provides an experience of the limits of experience, but, to paraphrase Levinas, touches upon something utterly otherwise-than-experience. This non-experiential dimension that nevertheless points to something real cannot be accounted for within a humanist phenomenology (and some even dispute the possibility that a phenomenology that ventures into the posthuman, the nonhuman and even the inhuman, is capable of doing so).

The attempt to grasp the hyperbolic not only as experience, but also as reality beyond experience lies behind Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. (The book's post-apocalyptic title already suggests Morton's fearlessness in the face of paradox.) Hyperobjects are extreme, monstrous, complex, entangled chunks of reality, "things that are massively distributed in space and time,"<sup>168</sup> hyperbolic not only in relation to the human, but in relation to other things and objects.<sup>169</sup> Morton's major example for a hyperobject is global warming – a thing that is all-too real although it cannot be experienced directly. Although still denied, global warming undeniably exists – it can be measured in various ways (although never sufficiently), some of its consequences can be expressed in probabilities although it often seems that the real consequences will be much harsher than assumed even by pessimist forecasts. Hyperobjects cannot be contained by transcendental minds, they are autonomous or semi-autonomous<sup>170</sup> materials, much more powerful than the sovereignty of the human subject who is put in the situation of permanent delay: "Hyperobjects haunt my social

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<sup>168</sup> University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/MI i. a., 1. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title HO + page number.

<sup>169</sup> Just like Waldenfels (HP 12), Morton knows that one can only speak of the hyperbolic relatively, but this does not mean that the point of reference has to be the subject and human experience or perception.

<sup>170</sup> See Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*.

and psychic space with an always-already." (HO 29) Hyperobjects call for a complete reorientation of our thinking, our agencies, our art practices and our political organization. Hyperobjects ultimately end the fantasy of an outside of our world from which our thinking can take place, they

end the possibility of transcendental leaps 'outside' physical reality. Hyperobjects force us to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical. But this does not mean that we are 'embedded' in a 'lifeworld.' (HO 2)

Rather than newly embedded and in touch with a quaint nostalgia of nature, the Anthropocene confronts us with the fact that we are exiled into the toxic environments we ourselves created. This is one of the founding paradoxes of the Anthropocene – the fact that we were so successful in the creation of some hyperobjects that they now threaten to help eliminating our species. In such a situation, the most devastating and effectual realities "carry with them a trace of unreality." (HO 28) And a little further down Morton writes:

The threat of unreality is the very sign of reality itself. Like a nightmare that brings news of some real psychic intensity, the shadow of the hyperobject announces the existence of the hyperobject. (HO 32)

In bringing together the various reflections on hyperbole gathered so far, one realizes that (1) the hyperbolic refers not only to experiences, but can reach towards reality itself; (2) the transition from the phenomenological realm to the ontological realm is not smooth, but twisted; (3) the hyperbolic does not speak in transparent propositions, but is not completely destructive against ordinary and logical discourse; (4) it often appears under a different name or guise.

Waldenfels' short definition serves as a working hypothesis, but we can expand it from its role as a double (*different* and *excessive*) to a fourfold – something that is different than itself, a lot more, almost nothing and/or in

contradiction with itself. Alterity, excess, unemployed negativity and inconsistent fictionality, then, become the signatures of the hyperbolic, which flickers irregularly between the phenomenal and the ontological.

**PART II. HYPERBOLIC POETICS IN**  
*AGAINST THE DAY AND 2666*



## II.1 ABUNDANT DISCOURSES

*Que abundância, que consolação.*

(C. Lispector)

### *The maximalist novel: Lovers & Haters*

There is a lot of counting in John Barth's short text on long novels "It's A Long Story. Maximalism Reconsidered." The essay provides an inventory of very long novels whose quantity of pages is always mentioned, but whose form and content are only occasionally discussed. The text is brimming with ironies, but it would be misleading to brush them aside as a mere ornamental effect or yet another instance of self-indulgent playfulness by one of the most quintessential postmodern authors. Instead, Barth's ironies directly underscore his argument: that the quarrel between maximalism and minimalism cannot be settled once and for all, and that – even though minimalist writing is supposed to match better with the ever shorter attention spans of "our distracted century"<sup>171</sup> –, "the exhaustive but inexhaustible, exhilarating novel"<sup>172</sup> has neither lost its fascination nor can it be replaced by literary artifacts that ask for irreducibly different "metabolistic mode[s]."<sup>173</sup>

In one particularly ironic instant, Barth says about *The Recognitions* that he "once declined to review Gaddis's formidable novel on the minimalist pretense that anything worth saying in literature can be said in 806 pages,"<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> See the ultra-ironic beginning of the piece: "Much may be said for minimalism. In the realm of aesthetics, other things equal, less surely *is* more." John Barth: *It's a Long Story. Maximalism Reconsidered*, in J. B.: *Further Fridays. Essays, Lectures, and other Non-Fiction*, Little Brown, Boston i. a., 1995, 75-88, 74.

<sup>172</sup> Barth, "Long Story," 88.

<sup>173</sup> Barth, "Long Story," 78.

<sup>174</sup> Barth, "Long Story," 79.

which is precisely the page count of Barth's longest book *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Accordingly, the two novels at the center of this study, Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (1119 p.) and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (1085 p.), quite significantly exceed the barrier set by the Sot-Weed test. At the same time, they are much shorter than such novelistic monsters as Hugo's *Les Misérables* or Richardson's epistolary avalanche *Clarissa*, shorter than those life-devouring (and often unfinished) poetic efforts like *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, *À la Recherche du Temps perdu* and *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*,<sup>175</sup> shorter than the huge novelistic cycles or romans-fleuves by the likes of Balzac or Zola, shorter than some outsiders to the novel genre such as Burton (*Anatomy of Melancholy*) or culture-defining epics like *1001 Nights*.

If we take the Sot-Weed test a little more seriously than its inventor presumably did, it seems that we are left with two possible judgments on books that violate the 806-pages barrier: either we see them as failures, hopelessly overwritten, overcrowded, pretentious, redundant, and unnecessarily littered with material that should have been, at best, filtered out by the analytic grid of the editor; or we see them as heroic attempts by insubordinate writers to transcend the narrow confines of the genre defying the public's seasoned conventions, their conservative calls for transparency and easy readability, and, ultimately, the very notion of literature itself.

Since the early beginnings of literary criticism and throughout the centuries, many have opted for the first alternative. In the history of rhetoric,

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<sup>175</sup> Despite being novels written and finished by their authors during a shorter period, the works of Hugo and Richardson could also count as outcomes of lifelong efforts. Since what came right after his romantic beginnings, the social motif of *la misère* had been a life-defining topic for Hugo (see Victor Hugo: "Détruire la misère [1849]," in V. H.: *Œuvres poétiques 2*, Gallimard, Paris, 1967; and earlier: Victor Hugo: *Claude Gueux* [1834], Gallimard, Paris, 2017), whereas Richardson worked as a printer before publishing his first novel at the age of 50. After having mechanically reproduced so many foreign words, it seems as if he couldn't have stopped producing his own.

those discussions have turned around the central notion of *copia*. If the tradition teaches that it is apt (and even desirable) to use all kinds of rhetoric maneuvers to amplify, embellish and variegated one's discourse, there are frequent warnings that overdoing the use of *copia* can harm the orator's and poet's integrity. Within the more specific history of the modern mega-novel, contemporary reactions to one of its outstanding examples have set the tone for many skeptical voices of the future. Shortly after Melville's *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, most early commentators soon seemed to agree that Melville is failing wherever he diverges from the script that made his earlier books successful bestsellers. They complain about his wrong or "mad"<sup>176</sup> use of language, about the "dull and dreary"<sup>177</sup> effect of Ishmael's declamatory style and Ahab's ravings, and about the stilted learnedness of Melville's pseudo-scientific chapters. One early critic of *Moby-Dick* unmistakably concludes: "it repels the reader instead of attracting him."<sup>178</sup>

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the situation is different. Today, *Moby-Dick* is regarded as one of the finest texts of world literature, even though it took more than a century to establish this consensus.<sup>179</sup> Sprawling and challenging books are at the core of both Northern and Latin American canons. James Joyce is celebrated for having authored both the most ambitious (multi-)encyclopedic novel (*Ulysses*) and the ultimate defiance of readability (*Finnegans Wake*). Nevertheless, hostile voices in the vein

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<sup>176</sup> *Athenaeum* 1252, October 25, 1851, 1112–13, in Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (eds.): *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 1995, 356–357, 356.

<sup>177</sup> *Southern Quarterly Review* 5, January 1852, 262, in Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (eds.): *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 1995, 412–413, 412.

<sup>178</sup> *Spectator* 24, October 25, 1851, 1026–7, in Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (eds.): *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 1995, 359–60, 359.

<sup>179</sup> See Lawrence Buell: *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2014, 358.

of Melville's early critics persist. One particularly notorious skeptical perspective on the mega-novel of the twenty-first century is that of the English literary critic James Wood:

The big contemporary novel is a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence—as it were, a criminal running endless charity marathons. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs.<sup>180</sup>

Famously, Wood's scathing label for this trend to literary hyperactivity is *Hysterical Realism*. Originally a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, the critic includes some of the most respected postmodern writers in his blacklist, namely Rushdie, Pynchon, DeLillo and David Foster Wallace. According to Wood, Smith's (and by synecdoche her colleagues') primary flaw is her failure to create credible characters. Instead of depicting "life", she only gives us a "spectacle," her stories are inhuman (which is supposed to be an oxymoron since stories defined the essence of humanity), the quality of her writing "undulates," and her language is diagnosed as extremist. Similar to some of Melville's moderate critics, Wood acknowledges Smith's talent and lauds some of her creative inventions, but he complains that there is simply too much of everything: too many words, too much narrative, too many unbelievable inventions, too much global entanglement of stories and characters: "what above all makes these stories unconvincing is precisely their very profusion, their relatedness. One cult is convincing, three cults are not."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Wood, "Human, Inhuman." To avoid too many footnotes in the following paragraphs, I will only indicate this source where the point of reference is not already clear from the immediate context.

<sup>181</sup> Wood, "Human, Inhuman."

This reveals an important nuance that distinguishes the nineteenth from the twenty-first century: Where Melville was accused of getting lost in linguistic madness, hysterical realism is blamed to "descend into cartoonishness". Cartoonish silliness is also a frequent objection against Pynchon's *Against the Day*.<sup>182</sup>

There is another line of critique. Not only are these novels considered too long to be convincing. Some of them also happen to be too difficult to be captured by "ordinary" readers who are not grad students or otherwise making a living from literature. This position has found an even more famous spokesperson than the critique of the overlong, overstuffed novel. In a controversial text for the *New Yorker*, Jonathan Franzen sets out to rebel against a (postmodern) aesthetic of difficulty that he exemplifies with the work of William Gaddis.<sup>183</sup>

As a foundation for his argument, he opposes two radically different models of reader-writer relationships. Whereas the Contract model "entails a balancing of self-expression and communication," which demands from the author to respect the reader's desire for pleasure and entertainment, the Status model "is the tool of socially privileged readers and writers" who loathe the average reader's (and the market's) preferences in favor of sublime ideals such as great art, revolutionary novelty, art-historical importance and the literary genius' unbound license for self-expression.<sup>184</sup> The result of the Status model are texts that torture the reader with an "encyclopedia of phyness [sic]", a "literature of emergency" that pretends to react to an altered reality and to sacrifice itself to the highest ambitions of art while it's

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<sup>182</sup> See e.g. Adam Kirsch: Pynchon: "He Who Lives By the List, Dies by It," in *The New York Sun*, November 15, 2006, <http://www.nysun.com/arts/pynchon-he-who-lives-by-the-list-dies-by-it/43545/> (accessed January 21, 2018).

<sup>183</sup> Franzen, "Mr. Difficult." To avoid too many footnotes in the following paragraphs, I will only indicate this source where the point of reference is not already clear from the immediate context.

<sup>184</sup> Franzen calls this the "author's selfish artistic imperatives."

basically just "showing off." Franzen eventually subscribes to a moderate version of the Contract model, neither fully victim to the consumer ideology of the market nor completely oblivious of the presupposed desires of the average reader he wants to reach out to.

Towards the end, his argument turns out to be more ambitious when the Status model is criticized not only for being an arrogant vehicle of social privilege, but also for being based on a series of fallacies (although the term fallacy is not used in any consistent way):

Fiction is the most fundamental human art. Fiction is storytelling, and our reality arguably consists of the stories we tell about ourselves. Fiction is also conservative and conventional, because the structure of its market is relatively democratic (novelists make a living one book at a time, bringing pleasure to large audiences), and because a novel asks for ten or twenty hours of solitary attentiveness from each member of its audience. You can walk past a painting fifty times before you begin to appreciate it. You can drift in and out of a Bartok sonata until its structures dawn on you, but a difficult novel just sits there on your shelf unread — unless you happen to be a student, in which case you're obliged to turn the pages of Woolf and Beckett. This may make you a better reader. But to wrest the novel away from its original owner, the bourgeois reader, requires strenuous effort from theoreticians. And once literature and its criticism become co-dependent the fallacies set in.

According to Franzen, these fallacies are: the idea that the novel can "capture" reality in all its complexity; the claim that the novel's voices and motifs should overlap like symphonic waves; the reduction of aesthetic quality to technical innovations; and the prejudice of the "stupid reader" who somehow begs for being constantly provoked by difficult art that disappoints his narrow-minded expectations and subverts the quaint conventions of the genre.

It wouldn't be too difficult a task to lay out the inherent inconsistencies on which both Wood's and Franzen's critiques are built.<sup>185</sup> This is, however, not my primary aim here. Instead, I am interested in the implicit aesthetic values determining their conception of literature. Both emphatically rely on a version of aesthetic humanism that is particularly oblivious of its difficult history. Wood's unique criterion for accomplished literature seems to lie in a successful representation of character. To meet his criterion, a character must strive autonomously obtaining a "life of its own" beyond the intellectual constructions of the author or narrator. The outstanding example for the "unhostaged writer"<sup>186</sup> who allows his characters full bent even where they are "imprisoned," is Chekhov. Characters in Flaubert, on the other hand, are the "doomed" victims of their author's relentless construction.<sup>187</sup>

Franzen, in turn, seems to plagiarize Wood citing Flaubert as the prime example of the Status model and honoring Gaddis' *The Recognitions* with the following words: "The novel is like a huge landscape painting of modern New York, peopled with hundreds of doomed but energetic little figures, executed on wood panels by Brueghel or Bosch [...]."<sup>188</sup> Franzen's variant of an aesthetic humanism, however, does not emphasize character

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<sup>185</sup> The fundamental problem at the heart of both Wood's and Franzen's text seems to turn around the notion of "life." While both criticize the 'hysterical' vitalism of difficult, maximalist novels, they ground their counter-aesthetics on the (unquestioned) value of life (and its presumed equivalence with "stories"). For a critical response to Franzen see Ben Marcus: "Why experimental fiction threatens to destroy publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and life as we know it," in *Harpers*, October 2005, 39–52. For a critical analysis of Wood's questionable strategies as literary critic William Deresiewicz: "How Wood Works: The Riches and Limits of James Wood," in *The Nation*, November 19, 2008, <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-wood-works-riches-and-limits-james-wood/> (accessed January 21, 2018).

<sup>186</sup> Wood, "Human, Inhuman."

<sup>187</sup> See James Wood: "How Flaubert changed literature forever," in *New Republic*, December 12, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/120543/james-wood-flaubert-and-chekhovs-influence-style-and-literature> (accessed January 21, 2018).

<sup>188</sup> Franzen, "Mr. Difficult."

but the telling of a good and truthful story that creates an affective bond ("a sense of connectedness") between the writer and the reader. "Shorter, warmer books" seem to be more apt to create such a connection – although Franzen himself is not exactly known as a strong proponent of *brevitas*.

Wood and Franzen are gifted writers. Yet as both claim: style is not everything. Their critiques of hysterical realism, or, in Franzen's words, of the literature of emergency are sporadically provocative, eloquent and entertaining, but they eventually fall short of their task in at least two different ways.

The first problem is the moralization of their discourse. As we can infer from their use of metaphor, not only do these novels represent an aesthetic aberration – they are a moral and dietetic sin. They suffer from "binging in any kind of illusion" (Wood) and instead of providing a delicious "many-course meal," they are "more closely associated with the lower end of the digestive tract." (Franzen) Moreover, the stuff they are endlessly piling up is not only linguistic and fictional shit – it's shit with the wrong attitude. Franzen's and Wood's formulations become interchangeably moralizing when they bemoan the "false zaniness of hysterical realism" (Wood) or the already mentioned "encyclopedia of phyness" (Franzen) that is Gaddis' work.

The second problem is closely related to this moralization of aesthetic discourse. Both arguments force literature into a simplistically binary scenario where criticizing one side automatically leads to favoring the other. Not only their critique, but also the "positive" values they put forward against their targets have a much more moralistic sense than an aesthetic one, even where they hide behind aesthetic or, in Franzen's case, epistemological mockups (keyword: fallacies). The fragile fabric of this binary even-



tually collapses when they celebrate "life" (and the essential humanity of stories) as an absolute value while simultaneously criticizing the overzealous vitalism of the difficult maximalist novel.

Wood's and Franzen's provocations are indicators of the long and difficult novel's precarious situation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although some newer specimen of the species such as *Infinite Jest*, *Underworld* or *2666* have a huge fan base and are highly respected by critics and academics alike, their integrity is under high pressure from both the broader public and a certain caste of professional critics. It seems as though there is a permanent lurking suspicion in the background that the extreme length of these texts is not due to the logic of the matter, but stems from the dishonest attitude of its authors. The Status writer, then, is accused of being a con artist who only simulates complexity and urgency in a gesture of aesthetic radicalism that some more moderate and self-designated 'democratic' spirits find obnoxious. The allusion to Melville's contemporary critics illustrates that abundant writing has been facing this kind of general suspicion long before post-WWII maximalism. And the example of John Barth demonstrates that even writers who advocate experimental and maximalist poetics are aware of the risks and disappointments the writing and reading of long books can entail.

#### *Amalfitano's case for the long and difficult novel*

Amalfitano, Mexican, single parent of a young adult daughter, professor of philosophy in Santa Teresa and protagonist of the second part of *2666* has a completely different take on the maximalist novel than his Anglo-American counterparts Franzen, Wood & Co. In a conversation between Amalfitano and Marco Antonio Guerra, the university president's son,

Guerra suddenly reveals his love for poetry. When the name Georg Trakl is mentioned, Amalfitano's mind starts to digress:

La mención de Trakl hizo pensar a Amalfitano, mientras dictaba una clase de forma totalmente automática, en una farmacia que quedaba cerca de su casa en Barcelona y a la que solía ir cuando necesitaba una medicina para Rosa. Uno de los empleados era un farmacéutico casi adolescente, extremadamente delgado y de grandes gafas, que por las noches, cuando la farmacia estaba de turno, siempre leía un libro. Una noche Amalfitano le preguntó, por decir algo mientras el joven buscaba en las estanterías, qué libros le gustaban y qué libro era aquel que en ese momento estaba leyendo. El farmacéutico le contestó, sin volverse, que le gustaban los libros del tipo de *La metamorfosis*, *Bartleby*, *Un corazón simple*, *Un cuento de Navidad*. Y luego le dijo que estaba leyendo *Desayuno en Tiffanys*, de Capote. Dejando de lado que *Un corazón simple* y *Un cuento de Navidad* eran, como el nombre de este último indicaba, cuentos y no libros, resultaba revelador el gusto de este joven farmacéutico ilustrado, que tal vez en otra vida fue Trakl o que tal vez en ésta aún le estaba deparado escribir poemas tan desesperados como su lejano colega austriaco, que prefería claramente, sin discusión, la obra menor a la obra mayor. Escogía *La metamorfosis* en lugar de *El proceso*, escogía *Bartleby* en lugar de *Moby Dick*, escogía *Un corazón simple* en lugar de *Bouvard y Pécuchet*, y *Un cuento de Navidad* en lugar de *Historia de dos ciudades* o de *El Club Pickwick*. Qué triste paradoja, pensó Amalfitano. Ya ni los farmacéuticos ilustrados se atreven con las grandes obras, imperfectas, torrenciales, las que abren camino en lo desconocido. Escogen los ejercicios perfectos de los grandes maestros. O lo que es lo mismo: quieren ver a los grandes maestros en sesiones de esgrima de entrenamiento, pero no quieren saber nada de los combates de verdad, en donde los grandes maestros luchan contra aquello, ese aquello que nos atemoriza a todos, ese aquello que acoquina y encacha, y hay sangre y heridas mortales y fetidez. (B 289-90)

This scene is often cited as the ultimate self-description Bolaño provides of his own maximalist masterpiece. However, Amalfitano's panegyric on the "obra mayor" remains character speech and shouldn't thus be projected too hastily on the poetics of *2666*. The question of Amalfitano's reliability is further complicated by the fact that at the end of the second part his mental health state already seems severely shattered.

On the other hand, Amalfitano can be understood as one of Bolaño's hyperbolizing agents who, like Renzi in Ricardo Piglia's works or Thomas Bernhard's intradiegetic narrators, dare to pronounce bold statements about art, literature, society etc. that would threaten the author's credibility if mentioned outside of the text.

Amalfitano's admiration for the maximalist works that "abren camino en lo desconocido" resonates with his first appearance when, back in part I, he meets the three literary critics who came to Mexico to follow the traces of Archimboldi. Amalfitano tells them that they can't trust what a particular Mexican intellectual has told them because, as he cryptically explains, "es el típico intelectual mexicano preocupado básicamente en sobrevivir" (B 160) On the following pages, Amalfitano draws a devastating portrait of Mexican and other Latin American intellectuals as opportunist functionaries of the State – a polemic reminiscent of the vendetta against the literary establishment rehearsed by Bolaño in many texts, most prominently in *Los Detectives Salvajes*.

Amalfitano's tirade oscillates between self-doubting reluctance and a style of hyperbolic accusation where sentences like "En realidad no sé cómo explicarlo" are juxtaposed with sentences like "La literatura en México es como un jardín de infancia, una guardería, un kindergarten, un parvulario." (B 161)

In his public appearances, Bolaño tends to use bold metaphors and little narratives when talking about literature instead of describing critically or analytically. Outdoing this tendency, Amalfitano's portrait of the Mexican

State intellectual leads to a long speech delivered in a hyperbolic, wildly errant, discontinuous style that borders on madness while simultaneously providing a counter-statement against the cautious neoclassicism of his adversaries<sup>189</sup> and a symptom for his own intellectual marginality. After having enigmatically stated that for various reasons as an intellectual in Mexico you inevitably lose your own shadow, Amalfitano leads his listeners to a metaphorical proscenium where the Mexican intellectuals gather to "translate or interpret or sing reality:"

El escenario propiamente dicho es un proscenio y al fondo del proscenio hay un tubo enorme, algo así como una mina o la entrada a una mina de proporciones gigantescas. Digamos que es una caverna. Pero también podemos decir que es una mina. De la boca de la mina salen ruidos ininteligibles. Onomatopeyas, fonemas furibundos o seductores o seductoramente furibundos o bien puede que sólo murmullos y susurros y gemidos. Lo cierto es que nadie ve, lo que se dice ver, la entrada de la mina. Una máquina, un juego de luces y de sombras, una manipulación en el tiempo, hurta el verdadero contorno de la boca a la mirada de los espectadores. En realidad, sólo los espectadores que están más cercanos al proscenio, pegados al foso de la orquesta, pueden ver, tras la tupida red de camuflaje, el contorno de algo, no el verdadero contorno, pero sí, al menos, el contorno de algo. Los otros espectadores no ven nada más allá del proscenio y se podría decir que tampoco les interesa ver nada. Por su parte, los intelectuales sin sombra están siempre *de espaldas* y, por lo tanto, a menos que tuvieran ojos en la nuca, les es imposible ver nada. Ellos sólo escuchan los ruidos que salen del fondo de la mina. Y los traducen o reinterpretan o recrean. Su trabajo, cae por su peso decirlo, es pobrísimo. Emplean la retórica allí donde se intuye un huracán, tratan de ser elocuentes allí donde intuyen la furia desatada, procuran ceñirse a la disciplina de la métrica allí donde sólo queda un silencio ensordecedor e inútil. Dicen pío pío, guau guau, miau miau, porque son incapaces

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<sup>189</sup> Their favorite author is the patron saint of Neoclassicism: Paul Valéry. (B 162)

de imaginar un animal de proporciones colosales o la ausencia de ese animal. (B 162-3)

Amalfitano's speech and its admission of failure foregrounds the risk of hyperbolic discourse, which is always in danger of failing its task of communicating successfully. It entails, however, a critique against the Mexican intellectuals who are sidestepping the risk of failure for safety reasons. Faced with a phenomenal realm that exceeds their acquired methods, they lay down their symbolic arms. They are not capable of reacting appropriately to the wild cacophony radiating from the abyss, proto-symbolic fragments of reality that have not yet formed into fixed shapes. They refuse to account for the murmuring and whispering and moaning which they perceive from the cavernous underworld without translating them in their symbolic, communicable registers. They apply rhetoric, eloquence and metric order where reality awaits them as a hurricane, as fury and uncanny silence. Their cultural labor is "extremely poor" since it fails to engage with the nonhuman otherness ("animal"), with monstrosity ("colosal"), with absence and irreality ("ausencia") and with those elements beyond or beneath the threshold of symbolic communicability ("un silencio ensordecedor e inútil"). And yet their biographies are success stories as they are institutionally anchored and have the support of the state (and, which is rather new in the Latin American context, that of TV and the creative industries) – a contradiction that seems even sadder than the lamented fact that "the bookish pharmacists are afraid to take on the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown."<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Roberto Bolaño: 2666, transl. Natasha Wimmer, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York/NY, 2008, 227.

Unlike in Plato's allegory of the cave, whose unmistakable echoes are heard in the scene, the point is not to lead the cave's prisoners from the world of shadows to light where they encounter the archetypes of ideal being. By contrast, the task is to do justice to the phenomenal reality in its very un(re)presentability<sup>191</sup> and untranslatability into human language – to do justice to the "juego de luces y de sombras," the *clairobscur* in Merleau-Ponty's words.

The intellectuals' unwillingness to face the metaphorical abyss of reality ("están siempre *de espaldas*") is an eerie foreshadowing of their complicity with the system that collectively denies the structural conditions of the *feminicidios* of part IV. Turning their back on the abyss of the real, they not only refuse to see empirically, but are also incapable of seeing in a more poetic fashion since they don't seem to have eyes in their neck. They are neither cold observers in the vein of the reporter Sergio González Rodríguez (both the real<sup>192</sup> and the fictionalized variant), nor neo-surrealist visionaries who go "hasta el fondo, con los ojos abiertos" (B 797) as Hans Reiter / Archimboldi allegedly does in his literature. By contrast, empirical reportage and neo-surrealist imagery are two poetic strategies employed and fused by Bolaño in the fourth part.

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<sup>191</sup> Despite its unidiomatic sound, 'unpresentable' is more accurate than 'unrepresentable' since the impossibility of representation reiterates the myth of the ineffable while the former term only claims that no representation can fully bring to presence the respective phenomenon. See Merleau-Ponty (VI 277): "Un certain rapport du visible et de l'invisible, où l'invisible n'est pas seulement non-visible (ce qui a été ou sera vu et ne l'est pas, ou ce qui est vu par autre que moi, non par moi), mais où son absence compte au monde (il est 'derrière' le visible, visibilité imminente ou éminente, il est *Urpräsentiert* justement comme *Nichturpräsentierbar*, comme autre dimension) où la lacune qui marque sa place est un des points de passage du 'monde'."

<sup>192</sup> See Bolaño's most important source for part IV, Sergio González Rodríguez: *Huesos en el desierto*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2006.

Finally, in sync with Bolaño's beloved temporality of gradual vanishing, the dimensions of their stage grow smaller and smaller until they disappear altogether with the uninterested, sick or dying spectators. Some of the intellectuals resign from their theater practice and find a job in TV, others sit down in a park to read their favorite writer Paul Valéry. Almost inevitably, the scene ends with a puzzled Liz Norton ("No entiendo nada de lo que has dicho") and the rhetoric withdrawal of Amalfitano ("En realidad sólo he dicho tonterías") (B 164).

Amalfitano's speech provides an impressive counter-example to the comfortable existence of his adversaries. It is directed against miniaturization, against the small and polished, against intellectual labor on behalf of the State, against looking away. It opens a highly speculative scene at the edge of comprehensibility, hermetic even for hermeneutic experts like Liz Norton. Despite being satisfied with rhetorical eloquence, he invites the hyperbolic into his discourse, which is always in danger of slipping into the pathetic, the ridiculous or the incommunicable. But his hyperbolism is not triumphalist insofar as it does not pretend to exhaust the *informe*, to use Bataille's words.<sup>193</sup> On the other hand, he refuses to mystify the formless and overwhelming real with a discourse that does nothing more than reaffirming its ineffability.<sup>194</sup>

His hyperbolism is thus reminiscent of Agamben's criterion for expressive originality – a form of speech aiming towards a movement of thought that doesn't conceal what is hidden and unsaid in its expression,

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<sup>193</sup> See Georges Bataille: "Informe," *Documents 1*, Paris, 1929, 382.

<sup>194</sup> A very recent attack on the dogma of ineffability is provided by Namwali Serpell: *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA i. a., 2014. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title SMU + page number.

periodically reflecting back on its intrinsic blind spots and particular condition.<sup>195</sup> Amalfitano's speech is replete with concessive formulae, signals that modulate his eccentric imagery. If the fact that Amalfitano is clearly not Bolaño means that his speech shouldn't be read as a direct metafictional explanation of *2666*, the way hyperbolic pretension and the poetics of abundance are surrounded by uncertainty, radical doubt, the fury of contingencies and linguistic noise is exemplary for both *2666* and *Against the Day*. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty's and Richir's new concept of the phenomenon as flickering entities between the visible and the invisible, *êtres sauvages* which are "protéiforme[s], fugace[s], fluctuante[s] et intermittente[s]" (ES 148)," Amalfitano's speech locates the incomprehensible at the heart of recognition.

### *Against the Day and 2666 in the context of modern maximalism*

Let's jump back for a moment to the first part of this chapter. A recent contribution to the understanding of the maximalist novel, David Letzler's *The Cruft of Fiction*, registers a similar hostility between lovers and haters of "Big Books."<sup>196</sup> The "agony and ecstasy"<sup>197</sup> of reading maximalist novels stems from the fact that there is simply too much of everything: too many characters, too much information, too many objects and references, too many pages, above all. While this is a punishment for some, to use Franzen's

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<sup>195</sup> See Giorgio Agamben: *Signatura rerum. Sur la méthode*, trans. Joël Gayraud, Vrin, Paris, 2009, 8. "Du reste, toute recherche en sciences humaines – et donc aussi la présente réflexion sur la méthode – devrait impliquer une prudence archéologique, consistant à reculer dans son propre parcours jusqu'au point où quelque chose est resté obscur et non thématifié. Seule une pensée qui ne cache pas son propre non-dit, mais ne cesse de le reprendre et de le développer, peut éventuellement prétendre à l'originalité."

<sup>196</sup> David Letzler: *The Cruft of Fiction. Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln/NE, 2017, 1.

<sup>197</sup> Letzler, *Cruft*, 1.



words,<sup>198</sup> for others it is an invitation to embark on a long reading adventure hoping for infinite pleasures, as the title of David Foster Wallace's mega-novel suggests.

The encyclopedic character of maximalist novels can be the kick-off of a fanatic search for buried meanings, an activity that often creates a cultish aura around those texts as if their readers would become part of a secret society whose sacred task is to uncover every single reference to historical reality, the history of art and literature, the other works of their beloved author, or the cross-connections within the vast book they are reading. The "PynchonWiki"<sup>199</sup> is visible evidence for the "hermeneutic fury"<sup>200</sup> of a digital community that invests a lot of energy into the reverse tracking of Pynchon's excessively researched and densely allusive novels to share their discoveries and speculations in a collaborative, non-theoretic, non-synthesized manner. In that way, they turn Pynchon's encyclopedic potential into a continually expanding online encyclopedia exempt from the pressures of theoretically undergirded and hermeneutically consistent readings.

Letzler's approach in *The Craft of Fiction* offers an interesting alternative to the binary between rejection and endorsement of the maximalist novel. He departs from the seemingly banal observation that much of the information implied in maximalist novels is simply "pointless."<sup>201</sup>

Instead of feeling thralldom, then, to every nonstandard usage, gratuitous datum, fleeting impression, broad parody, wandering subplot, and enigmatic symbol that a mega-novel contains, we ought to investigate how our minds manage an overwhelming amount of text with ambiguous function,

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<sup>198</sup> Franzen, "Mr. Difficult."

<sup>199</sup> See <https://pynchonwiki.com>.

<sup>200</sup> See Jochen Hörisch: *Die Wut des Verstehens. Zur Kritik der Hermeneutik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1998.

<sup>201</sup> Letzler, *Craft*, 3.

how they work through material that is often pointless and boring, and how they adjudicate the intelligent use of stupid text.<sup>202</sup>

What Letzler demands is a further step towards the emancipation of the reader – not as the functionary of a text's completeness, but as an independent mind (or, as we could put it in a materialist turn: a specific body) that engages in a certain reading experience precisely because she is *not* reading everything.<sup>203</sup> The diligent critic who tries to read everything in and of the maximalist novel, or even several times, is precisely not the emancipated reader actively collaborating with the text's creation of meaning. Instead, Letzler asks for a participatory reader reminiscent of Morelli's definition in Cortázar's *Rayuela*.<sup>204</sup>

The full expressive range of maximalist novels, then, can never be exhausted by close readings. This doesn't mean that there is no place for close readings within maximalism, just that the efforts of detailed interpretation are even more obviously dependent from the "vagaries of taste and the contingencies of reception"<sup>205</sup> of the reader and from the way she makes use of the "science of paying attention." Not everything in the maximalist

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<sup>202</sup> Letzler, *Cruft*, 29.

<sup>203</sup> To adopt Spivak's tone from "Why study the past?": Reading fiction and especially maximalist fiction demands constant decisions by the reader – not only the recognition of ambiguities and double binds, but also the production of single binds.

<sup>204</sup> In that vein, Cortázar mocked the critics who were showing off with the fact that they had read *Rayuela* two times just as Cortázar seemed to demand. Yet Cortázar claims that he had only proposed two ways of reading the novel and would have never been so vain to demand from his readers that they read the same novel twice. See Julio Cortázar: "Para llegar a Lezama Lima," in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, Siglo XXI, México City i.a., 1967, 135-155, 138: "En *Rayuela* definí y ataqué al lector-hembra, al incapaz de la verdadera batalla amorosa con una obra que sea como el ángel para Jacob. Si se dudara de la legitimidad de mi ofensiva, baste entender el doble sistema posible de lectura de la novela, y de ahí pasaron al *pollice verso* después de asegurar patéticamente que la habían leído 'de las dos maneras que indica el autor,' cuando lo que proponía el pobre autor era una opción y jamás hubiera tenido la vanidad de pretender que en nuestros tiempos se leyera dos veces un mismo libro."

<sup>205</sup> See Toscano, Kinkle, *Cartographies*, 21.

novel is equally pointless, some information might be extremely important for a certain reader's attentive agency while utterly uninteresting for another. But no one can read it all.

*Cruft* is the term Letzler adopts from the jargon of computer programming to designate the high amounts of pointless information in maximalist novels. The dictionary defines it as "Excess; superfluous junk; used esp. of redundant or superseded code; Poorly built, possibly over-complex."<sup>206</sup> *Cruft* is the part that could be eliminated from a computer program to make it more elegant. Considering that *cruft* is inevitable, the question arises: Why do some novelists purportedly add more *cruft* to their texts, which, according to some critical voices, makes them unnecessarily bulky and destroys their narrative economy? Why punish the reader with so many excessive, apparently superfluous stuff? Why pollute the already thin air of the literary market with linguistic fumes?

One thing the maximalist novel adds to the experience of wading through its deliberate use of *cruft* is precisely the defiance of a conception that defines literature as *craft*. The idea of literature as craft has a long and complex history, but its emblematic moment for modernity is arguably Flaubert's debunking of the idea that literature is the result of a receptive genius hit by the kiss of inspiration. Against inspiration, Flaubert's Protestant vision emphatically redefines literature as hard and sweaty labor which must prove its ground day by day and – word by word.

In the North American context, the idea of literature as craft is most prominently associated with the name of Henry James.<sup>207</sup> James' famous dictum *show, don't tell* privileges technique over expression, sophistication over

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<sup>206</sup> David Letzler: "Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: 'Infinite Jest's Endnotes,'" in *Studies in the Novel* 44:3, Fall 2012, 304–324, 308.

<sup>207</sup> John Barth also mentions Henry James as an important source for *show don't tell* in a text that can be viewed as a complementary counterpart to the essay on maximalism quoted above. Fittingly, the same ironic confrontation of long and short is at play. See John Barth, "A

spontaneity. As narrative economy is one of the main pillars of such an aesthetics of craft, fiction that shows more than it tells must be naturally suspicious of the exuberant vastness of maximalist novels.

In the aftermath of modernism, as Mark McGurl demonstrates in *The Program Era*, the triumph of craft is ensured by the institutionalization of creative writing programs that originated in the Iowa Writers Program. Today, the powerful alliance of the modernist fetishization of style and its institutionalization via creative writing exert an always stronger influence on the "vagaries of taste" in many places in and outside of the US: in lecture halls, at the writer's desk, in editorial rooms and publishing houses. It is almost impossible to overhear the echo of the "Iowa doctrine" in Franzen's and Wood's complaints about how the wide majority of talkative and hyper-active novels are showing off instead of showing.

Already at first glance, *Against the Day* and *2666* seem to occupy an interesting position in the field of fiction that makes deliberate use of excessive information and craft in the way Letzler describes it. Both novels constantly play with the dimension of the too-much<sup>208</sup> in at least two ways – first, in the sense that they themselves are abundant, excessive discourses and second, that the real (and/or the imaginary) addressed in these texts is not contained within their textual boundaries, but gestures beyond them, no matter how wide they might seem.

This constellation – the massive accumulation of words and sentences, the difficult-to-control quantity of scenes, the plethora of not always

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Few Words about Minimalism," in J. B.: *Further Fridays. Essays, Lectures, and other Non-Fiction*, Little Brown, Boston i. a., 1995, 64–74, 67: "Show, don't tell, said Henry James in effect and at length in his prefaces to the 1908 New York edition of his novels." For another Barth essay on the short form see "It's a short story," in J. B.: *Further Fridays. Essays, Lectures, and other Non-Fiction*, Little Brown, Boston i. a., 1995, 89–103.

<sup>208</sup> For an analysis of the problem of the too-much in literature see Haberkorn: *Das Problem des Zuviel*.

connected characters, the "sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted"<sup>209</sup> and yet, the impossibility of re-creating history and social reality within the novelistic space – turns these novels into paradigms of imperfection. Wood's dismissive, yet also descriptive category "hysterical" adds the dizzying velocity, the rapid changes of direction and focus to the list. His critique assumes that velocity for velocity's sake is tantamount to the uncritical celebration of an unrooted, cosmopolitan, nomadic existence. It also leads to a mere imitation of the frenzy of data circulation in the digital era and is thus in danger of becoming nothing more than the opportunist affirmation of the zeitgeist.

Yet, even if, for the sake of argument, we momentarily cast aside the misogynist undertones of Wood's label, taking it as a descriptive category, "hysterical" only superficially resonates with the reading experience of these two particular novels. And Letzler's similarly psychopathological rendering of *texts with ADHD* also does not fully apply to the considerable slowness that characterizes *2666* and *Against the Day*.

Pynchon's elaborate journeys unfold with that "ominous slowness" (P 146) mentioned by the narrator, as if they were imitating the sedate speed of the historical time treated in the novel. Pynchon's characters use airships, trains and steamboats, but their favored means of transportation is their own feet. The recurrent definition of their wanderings as *pilgrimage* – pilgrimages, however, with rather undefined destinations – bears witness to this. The *Inconvenience*, the airship of the Chums of Chance, somehow epitomizes the rise of modernity, but their leisureliness has nothing to do with the 'hysterical' acceleration that we know from some exemplary works of high modernism such as *Manhattan Transfer*. The Chums' encounters with other vessels are respectful, comradely and undramatic – an uneventfulness untypical for

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<sup>209</sup> Don DeLillo: *Underworld*, Scribner, New York/NY, 1997, 60. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title UW + page number.

the genre if we think of the dramatic encounters mastered by the *Pequod*<sup>210</sup> or Wolf Larsen's crew.

In Bolaño's *2666*, suddenness plays an important role, but similarly to hyperbolic images and metaphors, sudden events are rather insulated in comparison to the larger context. Over and over again, Bolaño's characters stumble into unpredictable situations – abysses that open in the middle of the 'desert of boredom,' punctuating epiphanies within an otherwise slow and steady narrative flow. In part III, the Afro-American journalist Oscar Fate gets deeper and deeper into the vortex of Santa Teresa at night, a seductive and dangerous mixture of sex, mezcal, spicy food and abrupt outbursts of violence.

The excessive repetition of the same, however, leads to the impression of a certain temporal standstill where shifts and act as rather subliminal threats or, in Fate's case, physical reactions to the overuse of the digestive (and attentive) tract. Bolaño's mode of composition is reliably that of many repetitions and tiny, but steady differences. No scene is clearly the same, no literary congress is exactly like the one before (although these are arguably the events that come closest to a realization of absolute sameness), no new corpse appears to which not at least a tiny bit of individuality is restituted.<sup>211</sup> Especially in regards to part IV, Bolaño's narrative iteration poses a certain ethical challenge to the reader – it suggests that even the tiniest details matter and it forces the reader to consider every new case anew. At the same time, it leaves us with a sense of melancholy, which is the result of our powerlessness in the face of the eternal recurrence of the same.

If *Against the Day* and *2666* are in fact abundant discourses whose entirety is difficult to master in one reading, they are a lot less hyperactive than,

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<sup>210</sup> Although Melville provides acute descriptions of the seemingly endless boredom between the action-driven scenes of whale hunting.

<sup>211</sup> I will say more about this below in chapter II.2.

say, *Infinite Jest* which seems to transfer the grotesquely encyclopedic intention of Joyce's *Ulysses* to the digital era. On the other hand, they are less synthesized and consistent than maximalist works like DeLillo's *Underworld* or Pynchon's own *Mason & Dixon*, which maintain a focus on a few characters, even though *Underworld* distorts the chronology, orchestrates multiple perspectives and makes material objects to agents equal to human characters, and even though *Mason & Dixon* uses a much more decisively historicized, half-researched and half-invented idiom.

In contrast to Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*, to introduce yet another example, these novels don't seem to convey an underlying vision or scheme as a hyper-intellectual *Bildungsroman*, focusing on Lezama's *alter ego* José Cemí and his two friends Foción and Fronesis.<sup>212</sup> They don't seem to neatly fit into the tradition of *Ulysses* (and in a longer line into that of *Moby-Dick*), which constantly adds new styles and seems to reinvent its own discourse chapter by chapter. Most clearly, they have nothing to do with the relentless experimentalism of *Finnegans Wake*, a 'book' that constantly presses readability further towards the edge.

They come a little closer to the roman-fleuve although they are not cycles of novels.<sup>213</sup> They pick certain characters from the larger cast and insist on their destinies, they foreground certain storylines and thematic arcs, while abandoning others without resolution. They seem less 'composed' than Proust's *Recherche*, and it is impossible to define a single thematic obsession (such as time or remembrance) that could serve to hold their disparate parts together.

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<sup>212</sup> José Lezama Lima: *Paradiso* [1966], Alianza/Era, Madrid i. a., 2011. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title PA + page number.

<sup>213</sup> Despite the fact that Bolaño, when facing his imminent death, played with the idea to publish *2666* as a sequence of five separate novels to earn more money with it for his family. This idea shows that Bolaño did well to opt for the *oficio* of the writer and not for that of the publisher.

In *2666*, the five parts are juxtaposed in an almost completely unconnected manner, at least in the sense of narrative continuity. Their mode of connection is rather contiguity, since motifs, metaphors, thematic concerns resonate and build complexes of association. Unlike the *Recherche* or *The Man without Qualities*, they do not focus on a single subject from the inside (Proust) or the outside (Musil) that holds together the disparate events. Instead, they disseminate their attentive energy more broadly. Essayistic passages are not as explicit as in Musil's (but also Proust's) novel, they are inserted into the narrative and often pronounced via characters.

Unlike Cortázar's *Rayuela*, for instance, *Against the Day* and *2666* less explicitly involve the reader into a literary game that openly demands her kinesthetic labor. Their structure invites us to jump around, to flip pages, to jump forward and backward, even when they don't explicitly recommend that this be what we actually need to do to get the whole aesthetic experience or at least one version of it.<sup>214</sup>

As we saw in the example of Amalfitano, *2666* and *Against the Day* too (although by other means), are aware of their discursive uncertainties, but they don't celebrate the unwritability of the novel as ostentatiously as e.g. Macedonio Fernández' *Museu de la Novela eterna*, a novel in parts composed of several unfinished beginnings, or Mario Levrero's *Novela Luminosa*, in large part the fictionalized diary of Levrero's experience as the recipient of a Guggenheim scholarship revolving around the homonymous *experiencias luminosas*, which are, after all, unnarratable.

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<sup>214</sup> This might be one explanation for my personal experience from conversations with some readers of *2666* who get stuck in the fourth act, being either bored or shocked or both, but at the same time hesitant to skip or even skim through the longest and most tedious part of the novel. We could argue that the repulsive effect of part IV is in fact an integral part of its aesthetic program. Maybe the reader who skips this part after having faced the ethical questionability of her decision is a more faithful reader than the one who boasts having read through every single forensic detail about the murdered women.



Despite the high amount of characters and scenes and reflections broken by their perspective, *Against the Day* and *2666* don't really appear as an orchestration of voices. The relation of these novels to earlier works by their authors is of great interest in that context. In its long middle part, *Los Detectives Salvajes* is the quintessential example of the orchestration of the (mostly minor) characters' voices. It brings together heterogeneous and irreconcilable *testimonios* about the visceral realists Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, which unfurl, *en passant*, an encyclopedia of Latin American dialects and jargons. *Gravity's Rainbow* switches perspectives, if we can even speak of perspectives in that novel, from one paragraph to the next, and often it is not altogether clear where the center of focalization lies and what exact kind of status the narrator has.

In Pynchon's and Bolaño's later novels, the language itself seems less in crisis or at stake, objects and shapes do not automatically dissolve into perceptual fragments, and it seems as if those novels were narrated by a continuous anonymous instance that only rarely interferes with the narrative flux.

Everything said so far causes us to understand these novels as late phenomena, where many formal gestures, thematic aspects and philosophical concerns of earlier maximalist novels (from *Moby-Dick* to *Infinite Jest* at least) are reused, even though they remain often less explicit, less ostentatiously experimental and with less ambition to stylistic novelty. Part IV of *2666* deviates the most from the currently prevailing conventions of the genre and introduces an installative<sup>215</sup> dimension into the narrative. As a

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<sup>215</sup> Bolaño seemed aware of the fact that some of his texts are reminiscent of an aesthetics of installation. In an interview for the Santiago International Book Fair in 1999, Bolaño says the following about his price-winning short story: "Sensini, más que un cuento propiamente dicho, es una instalación. Sensini si no gana el premio que ganó era impublicable. La apuesta literaria no se cumplía al 100% en la escritura de la obra; la apuesta literaria se cumplía ganando un premio, que era darle la vuelta total a lo que en la obra se estaba contando, pero

whole, however, *Against the Day* and *2666* are less stylized as formal and narrative experiments than their predecessors. Consequently, metafictional moments (of which there are many) are not explicitly marked as prefaces (*Rayuela*), footnotes (*Infinite Jest*) or long essayistic passages (*Man Without Qualities*, *Paradiso*), but ventriloquized by the novels' perspectives and focalizations.

*Against the Day's* and *2666's* craft is equally less ostentatious than in more openly accumulative works, and they do not contain useless catalogues in the Rabelaisian tradition. In a way, they are just-so-readable novels, very long, but still comprehensible in a linear way, yet sheltering and recycling gestures from the experimentalist and metafictional repertoire of maximalism, without merely repeating these gestures.

It seems as if these texts propose an interesting gamble that is in part due to their characterization as late phenomena after the end of modernism, postmodernism *and* maximalism. This gamble consists in the following: presuming that their readers are used to anticipating *craft*, metafictionality and non-narrativity (even in its most complex form), they propose very long, but (at first glance) linearly readable novels. Yet they count on the possibility that their readers will adopt more active and experimental reading strategies, which they have learned by engaging with earlier representatives of the genre – partly written by the same authors.

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ganar un premio real." See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4opmK0SO-J8> (accessed January 22, 2018) For the story see Roberto Bolaño: *Sensini*, in R. B.: *Cuentos*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2010, 17–33.

## *Abundant Intertextuality*

A good example of *hyperbolic realism's* flirting with *craft* is both authors' way of dealing with intertextuality. In a canonical contribution to the problem of intertextuality, Michel Riffaterre offers the following definition: "Intertextuality is a linguistic network connecting the existing text with other preexisting or future, potential texts. It guides reading."<sup>216</sup> As a core dynamic of intertextuality, Riffaterre does not emphasize the pluralization of meanings and the dialogism with other texts, but rather its function of limiting the context which "guides reading." The opening of a text towards the unmanageable abundance of literary history or, even more radically, the totality of writing is instead designated by the term hypertextuality – by now a familiar, perhaps even outdated category, but still controversially discussed in 1994 when Riffaterre's essay was written.

For Riffaterre, hypertextuality is not just a special case of intertextuality, but a totally different mode. His definition of the former resonates with Letzler's problem of *craft*:

Here lies, I think, the first principle differentiating intertextuality from hypertextuality: the latter collects every available datum, but this exhaustive inclusion exposes the reader to a wealth of irrelevant material. Intertextuality, by contrast, excludes irrelevant data.<sup>217</sup>

Riffaterre's essay, then, becomes a strong plea for intertextuality and against hypertextuality. While acknowledging the (subjective) creativity of

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<sup>216</sup> Michel Riffaterre: "Intertextuality vs. Hypertextuality," in *New Literary History* 25:4, 1994, 779–788, 786.

<sup>217</sup> Riffaterre, "Intertextuality," 786.

the latter, only the intertextual mode can enrich the text in an objective manner: "[Intertextuality] provides clues that are not historical and subjective in nature, but grammatical or lexical, and objective."<sup>218</sup>

The excessive openness of hypertextuality and the danger of an inflation of information and data are by now familiar accusations against digital cultural practices. Such accusations entail the fear that the sheer amount of potential references inevitably leads to disorientation (both cognitive and ethical) and the confusion of the sensibility for relevance. Intertextuality, on the other hand, can ground interpretation as it "provides clues"

But this is, of course, not the only way to see things. Letzler's positive account of *cruft* argues that, as data excess more and more becomes the natural environment of our existence, overflowing hypertextuality can train the reader precisely in those sensibilities that conservative critics see endangered. As readers are invited to filter out and creatively reorganize the masses of text in front of them, they learn to orientate themselves in hypertextual environments and to adapt their methods of tackling the problem of relevance to the new digital realities.

Such an account proves wrong Gérard Genette's claim in his seminal book *Palimpsestes*, which, defining itself as a monograph on hypertextuality, helped to canonize the concept as a key term for literary analysis: "The less massive and explicit the hypertextuality of a given work, the more does its analysis depend on constitutive judgment: that is, on the reader's interpretive decision."<sup>219</sup> In *cruffy* fiction, instead, it is precisely the massiveness and (not necessarily, but often) the explicitness of hypertextual moves and signals, which activate the reader and call for her interpretive decisions.

Genette's underestimation of massiveness is also visible in his otherwise useful definition of hypertextuality at the outset of *Palimpsestes*:

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<sup>218</sup> Riffaterre, "Intertextuality," 785.

<sup>219</sup> Gérard Genette: *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Seuil, Paris, 1982, 9.

By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.<sup>220</sup>

Riffaterre and Genette both stress the fact that hypertextuality can break up the illusion of the text's self-containment. For Riffaterre, hypertextuality's deterritorialization inevitably goes too far and threatens the objective ground on which structuralist analysis can interpret or perhaps even decipher the text. Genette adopts a more neutral approach. For him hypertextuality is a special case of intertextuality (or transtextuality) – a relation from text A to text B "that is not that of commentary." This last remark, as we will see in the following paragraphs, is crucial for the functioning of intertextuality in Bolaño's and Pynchon's maximalist novels (and for the textual logic of many other maximalist texts). However, Genette's definition is bound to a textualist conception where hypertextual relations run from one text to another in a manner that leaves linear conceptions of temporality untouched.

Against this textualist approach, I want to follow Letzler's impulse to shift the problem of intertextuality from the discussion of contexts towards the broader (media) ecology in which intertextuality takes place. In both *2666* and *Against the Day*, we encounter massive intertextual signals on a large spectrum ranging from implicitness to explicitness. Following them can be rewarding and enrich the text's meaning in ways familiar from intertextual hermeneutics. Yet, seen from the perspective of *cruft* and the sheer abundance and variety of intertextual signals, the dominant transtextual mode in Pynchon's and Bolaño's novels is not intertextual allusion, nor can it be adequately described by one of Genette's two main hypertextual modes, namely

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<sup>220</sup> Genette, *Palimpsestes*, 5.

"transformation"<sup>221</sup> (e.g. Joyce's transposition of the *Odyssey* into early twentieth-century Dublin) or "imitation"<sup>222</sup> (e.g. Proust's pastiches).

Instead, Bolaño and Pynchon seem to evoke (in different manners but comparable attitudes) the utopian totality of literature, "ce monstre insatiable"<sup>223</sup> – not as a set of meaningful structures (i.e. hypotexts) open for revision and reinterpretation, but as a vital source of energy which is constantly pumping life into the poetic endeavors of our authors. Georges Perec, an author who has been described as someone who has read everything,<sup>224</sup> has spoken of the "auteurs qui m'entourent, qui m'ont nourri."<sup>225</sup> Writing is born out of reading, whereas reading is not merely understood as a cerebral process, but as creative reading that is constructive and often deliberately misleading, a physical activity tied to the body and its metabolic processes. Bolaño and Pynchon do not merely dialogue with their hypotexts, but virtually (and sometimes quite literally) devour them. The mode of relation that comes from such a conception, then, is not dialogism, but digestion. In Pynchon's *Against the Day*, intertextual digestion is organized around the concept of *genre*. In Bolaño's *2666*, the incorporated object is the writer's (or more specifically the poet's) life and his *obra total*.

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<sup>221</sup> Genette, *Palimpsestes*, 5.

<sup>222</sup> Genette, *Palimpsestes*, 7.

<sup>223</sup> Gérard Genette: "L'utopie littéraire," in Gérard Genette, *Figures I*, Seuil, Paris, 1966, 123–132, 128.

<sup>224</sup> "On va se rendre bientôt compte que Georges Perec a tout lu." Quoted after Bernard Magné: "Pour une pragmatique de l'intertextualité perecquienne," in Eric Le Calvez, Marie-Claude Canova-Green (eds.): *Texte(s) et Intertexte(s)*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1997, 71–95, 71.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Jean Royer: "La vie est un livre," *Le Devoir*, June 2, 1979.

*Pynchon's reparative genre-poaching in Against the Day*

Since 1963, the year Pynchon's first novel *V.* was published, his readers know to expect books replete with intertextual signals and references. According to Simon Malpas and Andrew Taylor, in *V.*, intertextuality is not only "a background to the plot, but it rather *is* the novel itself, its milieu, medium, style, and the source of its search for the central, titular enigmatic figure, *V.* herself."<sup>226</sup> Only a few lines above on the same page, the authors note: "Allusion and intertextuality are not sub-textual structures that the narrative seeks to hide, but are rather explicitly presented on the surface of the text."

More than forty years later, viewing intertextuality not as a substructure, but as the milieu from which Pynchon's novels emerge is still an adequate description, although in *Against the Day* intertextual allusions are less ostentatious than in *V.* or *Crying of Lot 49* and the postmodern topos of the quest for a character or place as if they were textual elements become less important. As Brian McHale argues, an important advancement already occurs with *Gravity's Rainbow* where the main feature of Pynchon's intertextual milieu shifts from texts and authors to whole literary genres.<sup>227</sup>

In *Against the Day*, "the technique of synchronizing the popular genres being pastiched or appropriated with the era of the novel's storyworld" (GP 20) is pushed to its limits. The novel's first words "Now single up all

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<sup>226</sup> Simon Malpas, Andrew Taylor: *Thomas Pynchon*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013, 88.

<sup>227</sup> Brian McHale: "History as Genre. Pynchon's Genre-Poaching," in Christopher Leise, Jeffrey Severs (eds.): *Pynchon's Against the Day. A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, University of Delaware Press, Newark/NJ, 2011, 15–28, 21: "Gravity's Rainbow, a novel about the 1940s, is cast in the form of a movie from the forties—or rather, it mingles several different genres of forties movies, including the war movie, the musical comedy, the romance, the horror movie, even the animated cartoon." In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title GP + page number.

lines!" (P 3) not only signals the beginning of the Chums of Chance's next adventure, but is the kickoff for a festival of historical popular genres unleashed and remodeled by the novel.

If McHale's essay is an acute analysis of the novel's intertextual strategy, John Clute's review provides the most comprehensive list of the plethora of genres starring in *Against the Day*.<sup>228</sup> Clute heuristically discerns four generic clusters: the Airship Boys cluster, the Western Revenge cluster, the Geek Eccentric cluster and the Flaneur Spy Adventuress cluster. Interspersed with these large blocks of genre are many other genres, both historical and anachronistic. Most of them are decisively "minor" and popular genres (Vernean journey, steampunk), some are not genres in the proper sense, but rather transhistorical writing modes (utopias), some are hyperspecific spin-offs (Shangri-La thriller, Symmesian Hollow Earth tale, gaslight romance) while others seem original coinages of the reviewer himself (mildly sadomasochistic soft porn tale).

Apart from delightfully listing all these genres, Clute leaves a few crucial remarks about Pynchon's genre poetics. Most importantly, the clusters don't appear as clearly distinguishable parts. As the novel proceeds, they mingle and merge, they disappear and reappear in "occluded waves of unfolding" before they vanish altogether. Additionally, the respective genres are not narrated in unambiguously assigned tones and modalities, but "in an amalgam of styles" and idioms. Similar to the characters' flickering intermittence, the different generic clusters never seem fully present nor completely absent, but eerily half-distant and difficult to grasp. Reading *Against the Day*, we constantly hear echos of genre literature, but there is a remarkable consistency in the narrator's tone that makes it impossible to read Pynchon's genre poetics as a mere series of pastiches. Consequently, regardless of the sprawling of genres and wild osmosis of modes and tonalities, Clute defines

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<sup>228</sup> John Clute: "Aubade, Poor Dad," in *New York Review of Science Fiction* 222, January 2007.



a unifying thread that runs through the whole novel: "The intervening filter is, of course, the literatures of the fantastic as they actually exist."<sup>229</sup>

While being less comprehensive than Clute, McHale adds more nuances to the understanding of Pynchon's narrative strategies. Complementary to Clute who defines *Against the Day* as a "pure science fiction novel," McHale identifies another filter that guides the technique of genre-poaching – that of historical reality seen through the genres of the historical epoch. Pynchon not only provides "a massive anthology of popular genres, a virtual library of entertainment fiction (GP 18)," but "appropriates the conventions and materials of genres that flourished at the historical moments during which the events of his story occur (GP 19)." Seen from this perspective, *Against the Day* can be read not only as a maximalist anthology of fantastic literature, but also as an expansion of the historical novel's means of expression.

The "logic of *synchronization*" leads to the description of the novel as "*mediated historiography*—the writing of an era's history through the medium of its popular genres (GP 25)." Literature, especially postmodern literature, has done this before, but Pynchon's "sampling from the whole range of a whole era's popular genres" seems unprecedented, producing "if not genuinely exhaustive coverage, then at least a compelling illusion of exhaustiveness (GP 25)."

According to the logic of hyperbole, the novel not only repeats, samples and merges historical genres. In uncovering the "repressed content of the genre itself" (GP 23) and restoring its "unspoken realities," (GP 28) Pynchon exaggerates the genre's limited potential while simultaneously making his intervening position explicit. McHale provides a great example of this with the gay character "Cyprian Latewood, a flaming queen who uses his sexuality as a tool of the espionage trade." Following the hyperbolic dynamic

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<sup>229</sup> Clute, "Poor Dad."

of outdoing, Pynchon does not simply insert a homosexual character into a straight genre, but "seizes the genre's intense homosociality and amplifies it into outright homosexuality." (GP 24)

Although they seem to contradict each other, McHale's and Clute's descriptions are both accurate. *Against the Day* is a pure science fiction novel and mediated historiography – at the same time. Imitating some of its characters' talent for being at different places at the same time, Pynchon's novel provides a dizzying example for generic bilocation.<sup>230</sup> Reflecting on his own positionality, the narrator basically introduces two historical vectors into the timeless fantastic genre: historical time and historical materialism.

Towards the end of the novel, the Chums of Chance start to do what their genre wouldn't usually allow them to do: they grow older. But most popular genres not only prohibit their heroes from aging, they are also oblivious of (and silent about) the larger political environment in which their adventures unfold. Pynchon's revisionist strategies correct the popular genre's political aphasia. Over the course of the novel, it becomes more and more clear that the Chums are not as innocent as they pretend to be – if they seem to be well-intentioned, not actively supporting the dark forces of history, they are quite aware of the fact they "capture our innocence, and take it away with them into futurity." (P 416)

Besides their inventive exuberance, the comic-like adventures in the sky and under earth foreshadow the emerging modern colonization of these realms beyond (and beneath) the earth's surface. No matter how remote the Chums' fantastic destinations are, the stooges of Capital have already been there. It comes as no surprise, then, that there are souvenir shops in Arctic

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<sup>230</sup> "Bilocation" is the title of *Against the Day*'s third part and one of the major 'themes' of the novel. More details about *bilocation* in the chapters II.2 and II.3.

Iceland bearing witness to the ongoing commodification of the global economy and the miniaturization of the untouched wilderness (P 66, 188). And when the cheerful boy group travels under sand to another impossible underworld, they bump into a couple of explorers that is searching for oil. (P 441)

Pynchon's revisionist strategy strips off the popular genres' implied innocence. The colonial logic of occupation and the Capital logic of extractivism invades the most seemingly fantastic and remote locales. On the other hand, Pynchon's revisionism has a positive and political counter-tendency. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal essay against (or, rather, besides) paranoia, we could say that Pynchon redeems the popular genres' potential.<sup>231</sup> His genre-poaching, then, becomes visible as a productive, reparative reading of the genres he metabolizes. Pynchon does not merely merge the high and the low, which has by now become a classical move in 'serious' fiction. Moreover, the continually digested popular genres are revamped as a time machine for the understanding of a historical period, its importance for its immediate aftermath and its *longue durée* effects until today.

Sedgwick presents reparative readings as a powerful alternative to both "the hermeneutic of suspicion" (PR 4) and "the state of complacent adequacy that Jonathan Culler calls 'literary competence' (PR 3)." Pynchon's "queering" (GP 26) of popular genre fiction, in line with Sedgwick's position and those of other positions in *Novel Gazing*, seeks "a much more speculative, superstitious, and methodologically adventurous state" (PR 4), where forms of political resistance against the State (anarchism and union labor struggles, not Communism), alternative belief systems against the official monotheistic

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<sup>231</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You," in E. K. S. (ed.): *Novel Gazing. Queer Readings in Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham/NC i. a., 1997, 1–40. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title PR + page number

religions,<sup>232</sup> and alternative epistemologies beyond the narrow boundaries of Enlightenment rationalism<sup>233</sup> are redeemed together with the popular genres. The ostentatious, deliberately melodramatic and not merely ironic, operetta-like tone, with which these alternative practices are narrated, demonstrates the "seemingly perpetual digestion of Pynchon's telling"<sup>234</sup> instead of economic showing and brings the aesthetics of *Against the Day* close to what Gregory Woods has called "high camp."<sup>235</sup>

Reparative modes are often suspected of favoring uncritical and depoliticizing understandings of history because they do not indulge as readily in negative affect theory as paranoid modes do. Seen from the perspective of politicization, however, (a point of view perhaps a little downplayed by both Clute and McHale), it becomes clear that this is a harsh misunderstanding. Pynchon's genre-poaching arguably offers a more critical and politicizing view than any paranoid conjuration of global interconnectedness can deliver. As readers, we are not only confronted with the neglected undercurrents of Western history, but we also gain glimpses into the marginalized histories of Western peripheries, the 'East' and the Global South. Sites and historical events such as the Mexican revolution, the pre-War confusion in

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<sup>232</sup> See Christopher K. Coffman: "Bogomilism, Orphism, Shamanism: The Spiritual and Spatial Grounds of Pynchon's Ecological Ethic," in Christopher Leise, Jeffrey Severs (eds.): *Pynchon's Against the Day. A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, 91–114.

<sup>233</sup> Which is in fact a running theme in Pynchon's fiction, most explicitly in his only novel that takes place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Mason & Dixon*. See Victor Strandberg: "Dimming the Enlightenment: Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*," in Brooke Horvath, Irving Malin (eds.): *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*, University of Delaware Press, Newark/NJ, 2000, 100–111.

<sup>234</sup> Clute, "Poor Dad."

<sup>235</sup> Gregory Woods: "High Culture and High Camp: The Case of Marcel Proust," in David Bergman (ed.): *Camp Grounds. Style and Homosexuality*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst/MA, 1993, 121–133.

the Balkans and imperial power struggles in Central Asia come to the fore from their usual picturesque backgrounds.<sup>236</sup>

This doesn't mean that Pynchon's reparative move offers a nostalgic plea for superstition. His redeeming of fantastic genres and subaltern modes of existence comes without any hope of salvation. No one in Pynchon's revisionist and reparative politicization of popular adventurism remains completely innocent – not even the dead.<sup>237</sup>

### *Bolaño's intertextual name-dropping*

In Bolaño, too, and not only in *2666*, excessive intertextuality is the milieu from which his texts emerge, by constantly drawing energy from the "inmenso océano"<sup>238</sup> of literary history. Much of Bolaño's writing seems to be the result of imaginative acts of creative reading, an activity that is also adopted by many of Bolaño's characters. One of his most dazzling inventions are the *Barbaric Writers*, a fictional working class avant-garde movement from the rebellious 60s in Paris. They figure most prominently in *Estrella distante*, but they also appear in *Los detectives salvajes* as well as in the posthumous novel *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, which is in parts an earlier version of what would later become Bolaño's magnum opus, *2666*.

Founded by the concierge Raoul Delorme in 1968, the *Barbaric Writers* are driven by avant-garde ideals of crushing tradition and building a new

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<sup>236</sup> However, the West remains the center of Pynchon's historical vision (and his generic competence), which is probably the most powerful reminder that, pace John Clute, his genre-poaching, as excessive as it might be, cannot and does not claim to be exhaustive.

<sup>237</sup> "These dead, these white riders of the borderline, nervelessly at work already as agents on behalf of invisible forces over there, could still, like children, keep an innocence all their own—the innocence of the early afterlife, of tenderfeet needing protection from the insults of that unmarked otherworld trail so unforgiving." (P 362)

<sup>238</sup> Roberto Bolaño: *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2011, 21.

(life) art from its ruins: "El aprendizaje consistía en dos pasos aparentemente sencillos. El encierro y la lectura."<sup>239</sup> Their practice consists of conspirational meetings with the sole objective of desecrating precious editions of French classics,

defecando sobre las páginas de Stendhal, sonándose los mocos con las páginas de Victor Hugo, masturbándose y desparramando el semen sobre las páginas de Gautier o Banville, vomitando sobre las páginas de Daudet, orinándose sobre las páginas de Lamartine, haciéndose cortes con hojas de afeitar y salpicando de sangre las páginas de Balzac, sometiendo, en fin, a los libros a un proceso de degradación que Delorme llamaba humanización. (ED 139)

The motif of the *Barbaric Writers* belongs to a recurring pattern in Bolaño's oeuvre – the narrativization of avant-garde art, predominantly literature. Leaving his own vanguard past as a co-founder and member of the infrarealist movement<sup>240</sup> in the 70s in Mexico City behind, Bolaño nevertheless rescues a part of the radical energy of his youthful endeavors and revives it in his novels and stories.

Keeping in mind that Bolaño's narrative works are clearly post-vanguard, we can nevertheless draw some parallels between the *Barbaric Writers* and Bolaño's own poetic obsessions. Their practice is clearly a particularly visceral exaggeration of the familiar avant-garde conception of literature as anti-literature. This is spelled out by yet another fictional writer in *Estrella distante* who is close to the group:

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<sup>239</sup> Roberto Bolaño: *Estrella distante*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1996, 139. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title ED + page number.

<sup>240</sup> See Roberto Bolaño: "'Déjenlo todo, nuevamente.' Primero manifiesto del infrarrealismo," in Montserrat Madariaga Caro: *Bolaño infra 1975-7. Los años que inspirarion* Los detectives salvajes, RIL, Santiago de Chile, 2010, 143–152.

La revolución pendiente de la literatura, venía a decir Defoe, será de alguna manera su abolición. Cuando la Poesía la hagan los no-poetas y la lean los no-lectores. (ED 143)

Throughout his whole oeuvre, Bolaño pays frequent tribute to the horizon of the abolition of literature and the understanding of poetry as *antipoesia*. In the Latin American context, *antipoesia* is inseparably associated with Chilean poet Nicanor Parra whom Bolaño has called the "más grande poeta vivo de la lengua española."<sup>241</sup> Parra didn't want to abolish poetry, but struggled to get rid of its false solemnity: "Ha llegado la hora de modernizar esta ceremonia."<sup>242</sup>

One of Parra's most famous poems, cited by Bolaño at various occasions, is a hilariously condensed summary of Chile's complete history of poetry: "Los cuatro grandes poetas de Chile/ Son tres/ Alonso de Ercilla y Rubén Darío."<sup>243</sup> It comes as no surprise that Bolaño was very fond of such epigraphic, metaliterary finger exercises that defy logic coherence, good taste and the enshrinement of a poet's work as a monument for the nation.<sup>244</sup>

This speculative relation not to a single work, but to the whole of literature is the dominant mode of Bolaño's intertextuality. It is not a totalizing view from above, though, but a visceral contact from below, a "literatura del albañal (ED 129)," produced by an artistic Lumpenproletariat repeatedly evoked and celebrated in Bolaño's texts.<sup>245</sup> The *Barbaric Writer's* intention to

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<sup>241</sup> Roberto Bolaño: "Una tarde con Huidobro y Parra," in R. B.: *Entre paréntesis Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2004, 133–4, 134.

<sup>242</sup> Nicanor Parra: *Obra gruesa. Texto completo*, Andres Bello, Santiago de Chile, 1983, 28.

<sup>243</sup> See Bolaño's homage to Parra "Ocho segundos con Nicanor Parra," in R. B.: *Entre paréntesis Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2004, 91–93.

<sup>244</sup> Neither of the two poets left was a Chilean citizen: Alonso de Ercilla was a Spanish aristocrat during the *siglo de oro*, Ruben Darío a Creole poet from Nicaragua, known as an outstanding figure of *modernismo* in Latin America.

<sup>245</sup> Bolaño frequently uses the term *lumpen* as a descriptive and often positively connoted category. It describes an aesthetics emerging from socially inferior spheres and directed

"fundirse con las obras maestras" (ED 139) is not a direct metaliterary reflection of Bolaño's poetics, but it bears strong resemblance to his irreverent use of world literature. Its mode is not the single, interpretative relation, but the cannibalistic incorporation of world literature as a whole. In making deliberate, often visceral and reductionist use of world literature, Bolaño pursues "una necesaria desacralización de la literatura, una desacralización que, no obstante, dio lugar a una escritura tremendamente original y política, no humanista"<sup>246</sup> – a desecralization that fits not an act of humanization (which is the self-described program of the *Barbaric Writers*), but of politicization.

Translating his avant-garde obsessions into narrative scenes and structures, Bolaño's novels are less concerned with the actual liberation of literature into new *Schreibszenen*<sup>247</sup> (writing scenes) that transcend the literary, but rather with gaining complex poetic perspectives from novel and creative reading scenes.<sup>248</sup> This is what Sandro Zanetti writes about the *Schreibszene*:

[Die] vielfältige [Schreib]Kultur erschöpft sich nicht in der Herstellung von Texten, auch nicht in der Orientierung auf Interpretierbarkeit oder Anwend-

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against the middle-class fetishization of politeness and decency. See Bolaño's last published novel before his death *Una novelita lumpen* (Mondadori, Barcelona, 2002). See also the description of Archimboldi (B 1051): "Era esencialmente un lumpen, un bárbaro germánico, un artista en permanente incandescencia."

<sup>246</sup> Raúl Rodríguez Freire: "Bolaño, Chile y desacralización de la literatura," in *Guaragua* 44, 2013, 63–74, 67.

<sup>247</sup> See Rüdiger Campe: "Die Schreibszene, Schreiben," in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer (eds.): *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche. Situationen Offener Epistemologie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1991, 759–772.

<sup>248</sup> A conception that resonates with Ricardo Piglia's position in *Formas Breves* that after the avant-garde (and after realism) it is the critic and the reader, not the writer who has to adopt an avant-garde attitude. [See footnote 122]



barkeit. Sie umreißt vielmehr ein Feld, auf dem Körperbewegungen, Schriftspuren und Gedankengänge immer wieder in ganz unerwartete Konstellationen treten können.<sup>249</sup>

The diverse writing culture is not exhausted in the production of texts, not even in the orientation to interpretability or applicability. Rather, it outlines a field on which body movements, traces of writing and trains of thought can repeatedly enter into completely unexpected constellations.

This applies analogously to Bolaño's favored reading scene which is celebrated in its grotesquely exaggerated form by the *Barbaric Writers*. Reading, then, is not the bodiless, hermeneutic transformation of signs into meanings, but it is reading with a body in a concrete environment, a complicated and adventurous activity, a way of being in the world. Bolaño's characters are always reading somewhere and somehow (anyhow).

One of the most pointed examples illustrating the rule of embodied reading occurs in *Los Detectives salvajes* where Ulises Lima reads books under the shower of his shabby apartment, risking their physical destruction, but weirdly pledging allegiance to literature, or, to be more precise, to the book.<sup>250</sup>

Books (not texts) have an almost talismanic quality in Bolaño's fiction. When preparing for his fateful reunion with Carlos Wieder, the fascist Chilean poet, the first-person narrator of *Estrella distante* is not reading a text, but tries to read *in the obra completa* of Polish modernist Bruno Schulz.

Desde los ventanales del bar se veía el mar y el cielo muy azul y unas pocas barcas de pescadores faenando cerca de la costa. Pedí un café con leche e

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<sup>249</sup> Sandro Zanetti: "Logiken und Praktiken der Schreibkultur. Zum analytischen Potential der Literatur," in Uwe Wirth (ed.): *Logiken und Praktiken der Kulturforschung*, Kadmos, Berlin, 2009, 75–88, 85.

<sup>250</sup> See Roberto Bolaño: *Los detectives salvajes*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1998, 237.

intenté serenarme: el corazón parecía que se me iba a salir del pecho. El bar estaba casi vacío. Una mujer leía una revista sentada en una mesa y dos hombres hablaban o discutían con el que atendía la barra. Abrí el libro, la *Obra completa* de Bruno Schulz traducida por Juan Carlos Vidal, e intenté leer. (ED 151)

The modal shift is crucial: *I tried to read*. This time without success:

Al cabo de varias páginas me di cuenta que no entendía nada. Leía pero las palabras pasaban como escarabajos incomprensibles, atareados en un mundo enigmático.

But there is a reparative tendency in Bolaño as well – the failure of a reading scene feeds into the writing scene of the text we have in front of us: *Estrella distante*.<sup>251</sup>

Bolaño's excessive transtextuality oscillates between the attention to *obras completas*, to books as physical objects open for creative use and reuse, to the whole of literature and, on the other side, nothing but names by authors, books and poetic movements. At the extreme, Bolaño's intertextual allusions bear almost no trace of the content or form of their objects. The listing and cataloguing of proper names, then, becomes the nominalist noise from which Bolaño's hyperbolically realist fiction emerges. Think of the beginning of *Los Sinsabores del verdadero policía* which presents, at the same time, a queering of literary history, its fury of categorization and the iconoclast reduction to mere names – signatures without content:

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<sup>251</sup> More importantly, philological close readings have helped to track down Carlos Wieder in Spain. Working together with a private detective, the first-person narrator infers Wieder's present location from browsing through extremely peripheral and obscure literary magazines. In making his way through lots of *cruff*, philological investigation ultimately plays a role in the quest for justice – poetic justice, at least.

Para Padilla, recordaba Amalfitano, existía literatura heterosexual, homosexual y bisexual. Las novelas, generalmente, eran heterosexuales. La poesía, en cambio, era absolutamente homosexual. Dentro del inmenso océano de ésta distinguía varias corrientes: maricones, maricas, mariquitas, locas, bujarrones, mariposas, ninfos y filenos.<sup>252</sup>

Such creative, irreverent acts of categorization, reminiscent of Borges' fantastic encyclopedias and impossible libraries, disrupt the smoothness of canon building and introduce a performative element into the act of reading which becomes a technique for "doing things with books"<sup>253</sup> (things among which we find, again, books).

In part II of *2666*, Amalfitano sadly reenacts a ready made whose outline Duchamp had written on a post card to his sister. Duchamp's imaginary ready made consists of fixing a geometry book with a cord and letting it hang out of your window – and wait for what is going to happen. Amalfitano finds an obscure book on geometry by the Galician poet Rafael Dieste and fixes it on the clothesline in his backyard to let the wind "hojear el libro, escoger los problemas, pasar las páginas y arrancarlas." (B 246)

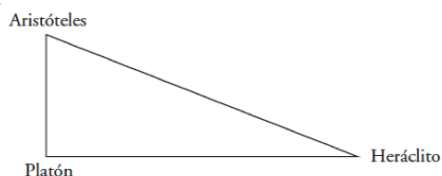
The constellation between geometry's rigidity, the vagaries of nature and the contingencies of reception form the sad background to Amalfitano's gradual drifting into madness. Shortly after exposing the book to the "embates de esta naturaleza desértica" (B 246), Amalfitano starts to draw strange diagrams with names of writers, critics and philosophers (B 247):

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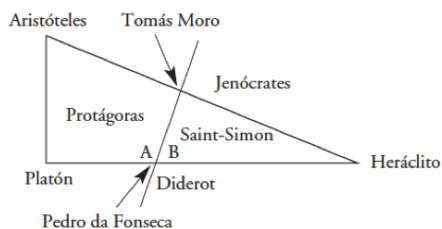
<sup>252</sup> Bolaño, *Sinsabores*, 21.

<sup>253</sup> For an insightful account of how readers can do and have done things with books see Leah Price: *How to do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/NJ i. a., 2012.

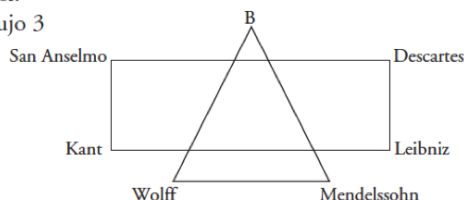
dibujo 1



O así:  
dibujo 2



O así:  
dibujo 3



We can understand these diagrams as explicit examples of an overall diagrammatic tendency of Bolaño's take on intertextuality. Again, mere name-dropping is more important than any speculation about the meaning of the relation between the mentioned authors and their works or philosophies. Hence it makes sense that the writing scene, the concrete moment of authoring remains in the dark:

Al día siguiente, mientras sus alumnos escribían, o mientras él mismo hablaba, Amalfitano empezó a dibujar figuras geométricas muy simples, un triángulo, un rectángulo, y en cada vértice escribió el nombre, digamos, dictado por el azar o la dejadez o el aburrimiento inmenso que sus alumnos y las clases y el calor que imperaba por aquellos días en la ciudad le producía. (B 247)

Amalfitano is both the author, the reader and the critic of these diagrams although his authorship is not the result of a conscious decision, but

the outcome of a complex interplay of his readings, his emotional state, his social surroundings, the climate and pure chance. He is haunted by his own creations as he reveals himself retrospectively as their author, which is expressed by the narrator in a few laconic words: "Amalfitano encontró en la mesa de su estudio tres dibujos más. Sin duda, el autor era él." (B 248)

If in Bolaño's intertextual scenarios the excesses of names are always more important than the meaningful relations among them, this doesn't mean that his readers are not rewarded when they try to make sense of some of the intertextual traces beyond their role as a constant narrative fuel. Let's take Archimboldi as an example. When working as a domestic servant for an aristocrat before World War II, he gets to read his first book that is not *Algunos animales y plantas del litoral europeo* (B 820). At this point, Archimboldi is still called Hans Reiter, who is utterly uneducated and reads with a loud voice. It is again pure chance or – what turns out to be more or less the same – fate that guides his decision: "El azar o el demonio quiso que el libro que Hans Reiter escogió para leer fuera el *Parsifal*, de Wolfram von Eschenbach." (B 822)

But in what follows, we get a summary of Wolfram's poetic vision and social status as a writer that is not without resemblance to the image we can glimpse from the information on Archimboldi's aesthetic scattered throughout the book. Reiter-Archimboldi is fascinated with Wolfram's anti-establishment stance, his self-cultivation as a writer who "does not possess the arts" and violates the etiquettes of the courtly society. His pretended dyslexia and inability to speak ("Those who want me to continue this story, must not take it as a learned book. I myself can't neither read nor write.")<sup>254</sup> is quite real in Reiter's case: "Hans Reiter dijo que no sabía cuál era la diferencia entre un buen libro ditivo (divulgativo) y un buen libro liario (literario)." (B 820)

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<sup>254</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach: *Parzival*, Vol. 1, ed. Eberhard Nelmann, transl. Dieter Kühn, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, Frankfurt/M., 2006, 115: 25-27. (All following quotes are my translations.)

The fact that, according to his editor, Archimboldi will later turn out to be one of the few writers who profoundly changes the German language, refers to Bolaño's assumption that it is bravery, not correctness that drives poetic innovation.<sup>255</sup> Wolfram's claim that he does not own any land or house resonates with Archimboldi's errant and nomadic life style, which in turn translates into his errant and nomadic writing style.<sup>256</sup> He admires Wolfram's "halo de misterio vertiginoso, de indiferencia atroz (B 822)," his poetic adventurism and his proximity to madness:

Y lo que más le gustó, lo que lo hizo llorar y retorcerse de risa, tirado sobre la hierba, fue que Parsifal en ocasiones cabalgaba (*mi estilo es la profesión del escudo*) llevando bajo su armadura su vestimenta de loco. (B 823)

Spurred by such intertextual possibilities, some readers might feel invited to see Wolfram's *Parsifal* not only as a fateful encounter that awakens Archimboldi's literary interests, but also as a prompter for Bolaño's maximalist ambition. Trying to derive more information on Archimboldi via Wolfram, we are reminded how strongly the metaliterary remarks in the me-

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<sup>255</sup> See Roberto Bolaño: "Discurso de Caracas," in R. B.: *Entre paréntesis Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2004, 31–39, 34, where Bolaño complains about identitarianism in Latin American literature and beyond by enumerating cases of transnational hybridization. He finally conjectures that "bajo mi dislexia acaso se bajo mi dislexia acaso se esconda un método, un método semiótico bastardo o grafológico o metasintáctico o fonemático o simplemente un método poético, y que la verdad de la verdad es que Caracas es la capital de Colombia así como Bogotá es la capital de Venezuela [...]."

<sup>256</sup> On the parallelism between being and erring see (B 761): "Estar y errar es [...] una actitud tan congruente como agazaparse y esperar."

dieval novel's opening resonate with the poetic adventurism of 2666. Looking for Archimboldi we find, in part at least, Bolaño,<sup>257</sup> the "friend of inconsistency"<sup>258</sup> who flees from the reader in a zigzag like Wolfram's black and white spotted magpie.<sup>259</sup>

Bolaño's constant intertextual excesses, then, invite us to play the game ourselves, but without letting us forget that the construction of intertextual resemblances and meanings is always surrounded with the *craft* of uncountable names whose constellations are ultimately guided by nothing but pure chance (or fate). Similarly, much can be and has been speculated about the relation between Arcimboldo, the Italian Baroque painter, and Archimboldi, the post-War German novelist. But the scene in which Reiter becomes Archimboldi makes it clear once more that before anything else the name's origin is due to coincidence and momentum:

Al día siguiente volvió y le mostró el dinero, pero entonces el viejo sacó una libreta de un escritorio y quiso saber su nombre. Reiter dijo lo primero que se le pasó por la cabeza.

– Me llamo Benno von Archimboldi.

El viejo entonces lo miró a los ojos y le dijo que no se pasara de listo, que cuál era su nombre verdadero.

– Mi nombre es Benno von Archimboldi, señor – dijo Reiter –, y si usted cree que estoy bromeando lo mejor será que me vaya. (B 979-80; my emphasis)

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<sup>257</sup> The whole novel has a similar structure of finding something that you weren't looking for. Lured to Mexico by their obsessive goal to find the reclusive writer Benno von Archimboldi, the literary critics 'discover' on behalf of the reader the sad phenomenon of the *feminicidios*. They don't find what they were looking for, but they find something else, something infinitely more important (before the novel, in the fifth part, ultimately finds their writer when his critics have long disappeared from the scene.)

<sup>258</sup> Wolfram, *Parzival*, 1: 10.

<sup>259</sup> Wolfram, *Parzival*, 1: 15-19.

## *Metabolic Intertextuality and Anthropophagic Form*

Adopted from the language of computer programming, Letzler's notion of *cruft* suggests that the rise of the digital profoundly changes the writing and reading of books, especially that of very long books with too much data to process. In this respect, the maximalist text which most obviously stages the digital dissemination of *cruft* is arguably David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* with its rapid changes of direction, its permanent interruptions, its extensive footnotes, its nerdy digressions and its grotesquely apocalyptic vision of digital consumerism.

In *Against the Day* and *2666*, in contrast, digitality becomes only rarely explicit as a thematic concern. As usual, Pynchon invests a lot of energy into the narrativization of technological invention, scientific discovery and imaginative reflection on the historical means of communication, yet his treatment of "technomodernism"<sup>260</sup> in *Against the Day* has a tint of nostalgia which is arguably a result of his mimicry of historical genre fiction.<sup>261</sup> Bolaño often adopts a somewhat ascetic approach when it comes to technology, seemingly favoring slightly outdated media like phone calls, type writers and video tapes.

On the surface, then, the language of *2666* and *Against the Day* seems much less imitative of the frenzy of data circulation than *Infinite Jest*; the pace

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<sup>260</sup> I adopt the term "technomodernism" from McGurl, *Program Era*. [See footnote 101]

<sup>261</sup> Walter Benjamin suggested that popular genre fiction often embodies both scientific curiosity and cultural nostalgia, as we can see in a passage where he deals with the difference between Jules Verne and Paul Scheerbart: "Von ihm [Scheerbart] gibt es Romane, die von weitem wie ein Jules Verne aussehen, aber sehr zum Unterschied von Verne, bei dem in den tollsten Vehikeln doch immer nur kleine französische oder englische Rentner im Weltraum herumsausen, hat Scheerbart sich für die Frage interessiert, was unsere Teleskope, unsere Flugzeuge und Luftraketen aus den ehemaligen Menschen für gänzlich neue sehens- und lebenswerte Geschöpfe machen." Walter Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," in W.B.: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1980, 213–219, 216.



of their slow adventures being much steadier and calmer than the "textual zaniness"<sup>262</sup> of their own precursors such as *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Los Detectives Salvajes*.<sup>263</sup> Nevertheless, as the example of intertextuality has shown, hyperbolic realism demonstrates an awareness of our contemporary "media ecology"<sup>264</sup> which finds its way into these texts in remarkably oblique ways.

Pynchon's genre-poaching and Bolaño's name-dropping are best described as forms of metabolic intertextuality where literary and other influences are digested in a visceral contact that defies classical hermeneutic approaches to intertextuality. By way of conclusion, I want to draw inspiration from two seemingly unconnected positions to gain further insight in the stakes of metabolic intertextuality: on the one hand, media theorist Shane Denson's concept of metabolic images; on the other, Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade's concept of cultural cannibalism.

In his text "Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect," Denson argues that with

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<sup>262</sup> Daniel Grausam: *On Endings. American Postwar Fiction and the Cold War*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville/VA, 2011, 44.

<sup>263</sup> An intermediate phenomenon is Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, which, in its spectacular epilogue *Das Kapital*, performs the transition from analogous reciprocity to digital interconnect-edness: "There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyper-linked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password-world without end, amen." (UW 825)

<sup>264</sup> The concept "media ecology" has been coined by Neil Postman: "The reformed English curriculum," in A. C. Eurich (ed.): *High school 1980. The shape of the future in American secondary education*, Pitman Publishing Corporation, New York/NY, 1970, 160–168.

the shift to a digital and more broadly post-cinematic media environment, moving images have undergone what I term their 'discorrelation' from human embodied subjectivities and (phenomenological, narrative, and visual) perspectives.<sup>265</sup>

As human sensory organs are more and more substituted by cameras and sensors, the standard perceptual situation is not the interactivity between subjects and images-as-objects anymore. Instead, the interpassivity<sup>266</sup> between images-as-flows, organisms and environments becomes the perceptual norm. In our contemporary media ecology, perception (like pleasure) is more and more delegated from human subjects to post-cinematic machines. The recorded film material by far exceeds the material which can actually be seen by human subjects; and with the rise of big data mining and recognition software the idea that it is the video recorder that sees on our behalf is slowly shifting from metaphor to reality.<sup>267</sup> In this understanding, media are mediators of "new forms of life by modulating the metabolic processes through which organisms [...] are structurally coupled with [...] ecospheres."<sup>268</sup>

An early version of Denson's sophisticated understanding of our digital age is also behind Riffaterre's fear that hypertextuality ultimately leaves

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<sup>265</sup> Shane Denson: "Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect," in Shane Denson, Julia Leyda (eds.): *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film*, Reframe Books, Falmer, 2016, 193–233, 193.

<sup>266</sup> See Robert Pfaller: *Interpassivity. The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2017.

<sup>267</sup> See Pfaller, *Interpassivity*, 18-9: "For example, the way some people use their video recorders: they programme these machines with great care when leaving the house in the evening, in spite of the fact that interesting movies are being shown on TV. Back home, the video freaks anxiously check to see if the recording has taken place, and then, with a certain relief, they put the tape on a shelf – without ever watching it. But they have already experienced a deep satisfaction the moment the tape with the recorded movie was taken out of the machine: it was as if the video recorder had watched the movie in their place."

<sup>268</sup> Denson, "Crazy Cameras," 216.

the reader without orientation in the radical openness of cyberspace. Denson, unsurprisingly, has a much more positive view of the discorrelation of images from human faculties. In his view, images become discorrelated from meaning, perception, human experience, narrative and memory – but not with agency, life and responsibility. Similar to Letzler, he considers metabolic images and their flickering appearance on the surface as a challenge to readapt our aesthetic, ethical and political instruments to the various nohu-man scales that are at play both on micro and macro levels:

Finally, these techno-organic processes point us beyond our individual experiences, towards the larger ecologies and imbalances of the Anthropocene. Ultimately, we might speculate, what post-cinema demands of us by means of its discorrelated images is that we learn to take responsibility for our own affective discorrelations— that we develop an ethical and radically post-individual sensibility for the networked dividualities through which computational, endocrinological, socio-political, meteorological, subatomic, and economic agencies are all enmeshed with one another in the metabolic processing and mediation of life today.<sup>269</sup>

If Denson's take on metabolism circles around the main dynamic of discorrelation, Oswald de Andrade, almost a century earlier, provides a metabolic concept based on radical unification: "Só a antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente."<sup>270</sup> Ironically adopting the perspective of the predator, not the prey, cultural anthropophagy in Oswald's sense is a symbolic counter-reaction to European settler colonialism which exploits and appropriates the foreigner while the cannibalist seeks to become one with her prey in an act of metonymic-metaphoric incorporation:

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<sup>269</sup> Denson, "Crazy Cameras," 216.

<sup>270</sup> Oswald de Andrade: *Manifesto Antropófago*, in Oswald de Andrade: *Obras completas*, Vol. 6. *Do Pau-Brasil à antropofagia e às utopias*, Editora Civilização Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, 1978, 11–20, 13. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title MA + page number.

Perguntei a um homem o que era o Direito. Ele me respondeu que era a garantia do exercício da possibilidade. Esse homem chamava-se Galli Mathias. Comi-o. (MA 16)

If colonial appropriation aims to accumulate possessions, cannibalistic incorporation seeks a physical and spiritual unity with the other, "uma consciência participante" (MA 14) only interested in "o que não é meu." (MA 13) It respects the radical difference of its prey while at the same time contesting the impermeable "roupa [...] entre o mundo interior e o mundo exterior." (MA 14) If appropriation is predicated upon disguised competition and sublimated violence, incorporation is imagined as a much more directly face-to-face encounter where both parts are transformed during the metabolic process. Oswald's values are magic, subsistence, the carnival, ancestral communion etc. His propagated mode of social relation is kinship instead of rivalry.

In good company with fellow avant-gardists, his manifesto is, among many things, an attack to the concept of *memoria*: "Contra a memoria fonte do costume." (MA 18) However, this does not mean that Oswald dismisses history completely. But instead of being officially commemorated as part of a monumentalized history of the victors, the past is transformed into a carnivalesque travesty on behalf of a radical politics defined as the science of distribution (MA 17) and directed against all authoritarian institutions: "Nunca fomos catequizados. Fizemos foi Carnaval. O índio vestido de senador do Império." (MA 16)

Seen as techniques of intertextual anthropophagy, Pynchon's and Bolaño's strategies become readable not as practices of arrogant appropriations

in the spirit of cognitive colonialism nor as mere acts of disconnection (Denson). Instead, they appear as acts of self-delivery, exposing themselves to intertextual contamination from the "inmenso océano"<sup>271</sup> of literary history.

In that way, they overcome the anxiety of influence and replace the "horror of contamination"<sup>272</sup> with an "ecstasy of influence[s]."<sup>273</sup> As we have seen above, Pynchon's genre-poaching (and, as we might add, his continuously animist effort of flattening the "bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality"<sup>274</sup>) can be read as a decisively reparative strategy. And in Bolaño's aesthetic imagination, the only poetic project deserving survival is one that lets itself fall into "el pozo de los grandes poetas, en donde solo se escucha su voz que poco a poco se va confundiendo con las voces de otro."<sup>275</sup>

Therefore, while implicitly acknowledging the background outlined by Denson, their aesthetic strategy is closer to Oswald's fantasies of amalgamation. In another text about the problem of metabolism in the media ecology, Shane Denson writes:

As a 'unidirectional change that leaves no memory of its passing' (5), metabolism 'does not honor the thresholds that protect the identity of neighboring domains. Instead, it destroys all distance and difference between them as it turns the one into the other' (6). The industrial revolution, as a metabolic

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<sup>271</sup> See Bolaño, *Sinsabores*, 21.

<sup>272</sup> Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford University Press, New York/NY, 1997, xxiv.

<sup>273</sup> Jonathan Lethem: "The Ecstasy of Influence. A Plagiarism," in *Harper's Magazine*, February, 2007, 59–71.

<sup>274</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead: *The Concept of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964, 30. Quoted after Isabelle Stengers: *Thinking with Whitehead. A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, transl. Michael Chase, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/M. i. a., 2011, 38.

<sup>275</sup> Roberto Bolaño: "Fragmentos de un regreso a un país natal," in R. B.: *Entre paréntesis Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 59–70, 70. The mystical motif of getting lost in order to find something else is a recurring theme in Bolaño's fiction. Think about the *savage detectives* Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano who have to get lost in order to find the already lost poem of Surrealist poet Cesárea Tinajero.

transformation, 'eroded distinctions between animals and human beings and between living beings and inanimate things' (9), thus outstripping the discursive or 'metaphorical' categories by which humans position themselves in the world.<sup>276</sup>

As we have seen, Oswald too, "does not honor the thresholds that protect the identity of neighboring domains," but his metabolic logic does not efface all "memory of its passing." While it is true that metabolic processes outstrip metaphorical interpretations in *2666* and *Against the Day*, they do not completely abandon the metaphoric and even the mimetic project. They are not directed against representation, but they are fueling mimesis with metabolic energy and pushing it into the fourth dimension.<sup>277</sup> This, not the faithfulness to the laws of physics (which at least Pynchon frequently violates) circumscribes the profound realist tendency of these literary projects.

Pynchon and Bolaño stick to the anachronistic concept of literature in post-literate times much more than, say, David Foster Wallace, rescuing the novel as a shelter for what is becoming obsolete in Denson's post-cinematic, post-perceptual account. Their aim is not to directly mimic the metabolic conditions in the novel, but to demonstrate the persistence of the analogous, the metaphoric, the anachronistic within the new metabolic media regime.

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<sup>276</sup> Shane Denson: "Of Steam Engines, Revolutions, and the (Un)natural History of Matter: A Techno-Scientific Interlude," in S. D.: *Postnaturalism. Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2014, 205–278, 258. Denson's quotations refer to Bernd Jäger: "The Historical Background of van den Berg's Two Laws." in J. H. van den Berg: *The Two Principal Laws of Thermodynamics: A Cultural and Historical Exploration*, trans. Bernd Jäger, David Jäger, and Dreyer Kruger, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh/PA, 2004, 1–31.

<sup>277</sup> See Inger H. Daalsgard: "Readers and Trespassers: Time Travel, Orthogonal Time, and Alternative Figurations of Time in *Against the Day*," in Christopher Leise, Jeffrey Severs (eds.): *Pynchon's Against the Day. A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, University of Delaware Press, Newark/NJ, 2011, 115–138. I adopt the fitting metaphor of mimesis in the fourth gear from Rinck: "Risiko," 13.

## II.2 THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

*a noite era uma possibilidade excepcional*

(C. Lispector)

### *Flickering lights in perfect darkness*

Besides the plurality of plot lines, sprawling characters, the description and fabulous invention of minutiae, the endless name-dropping, the enumerative memorial for the victims of the *feminicidios* in Santa Teresa, the exuberance of specialized knowledge, the allusive making of worlds, under-worlds and counter-worlds, in short: the abundance of signs and things – hyperbolic realism is no less fascinated with darkness, absence, the gaps of perception and knowledge, nothingness and negativity. Darkness in a very literal sense – as atmospheric element and lighting effect of these novels and only in a second step as metaphor. A large part of the action in *2666*<sup>278</sup> take place by night; and a digital word search would possibly lead to the result that "dark" is one of the most frequently recurrent adjectives in Pynchon's *Against the Day*. In both texts, light and darkness, or more generally the visible and the invisible are organized within a remarkably similar dramaturgy.

Yet, while darkness in both novels seems frequently tied to secrecy, barbarism, violence and death, it is difficult to reconstruct a coherent semantics or symbolic system of light, shadow and darkness. Bolaño's obsession with disappearance obliquely alludes to the history of *desaparecidos*, the

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<sup>278</sup> Another example for the night as preferred setting in Bolaños fiction is of course *Nocturno de Chile*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2000; night or darkening as a metaphor is evoked by Bolaño's story *Últimos atardeceres en la tierra*, in R. B.: *Cuentos*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2010, 239–264.

widespread and brutal Latin American tradition of often politically motivated and structurally facilitated<sup>279</sup> kidnapping, torturing and killing –, whereby the significant traces are often erased or the perpetrators are not held responsible for their crimes. Elsewhere, however, disappearing (as the existential mode of entering the dark) seems to be the only available exit strategy, a source of survival and temporary happiness, and sometimes even a potential for political resistance (although resistance in Bolaño's work is often tied to melancholy and the fear of eventual defeat).

In *Against the Day*, Pynchon's epigraph and title already gesture towards a semantically complicated status of light and darkness. The epigraph is a quote from a note that jazz pianist Thelonious Monk made for his band members: *It's always night or we wouldn't need light*. No matter how we relate this epigraph to the rest of the novel, it foreshadows how most of reality takes place in the dark, the almost invisible and the manifold places and underworlds beyond, beneath and *besides* the one we take to be our daily life-world. Yet, if light seems to be the non-natural, emergent and artificial element, this doesn't have to mean that it is less important and originary. The role light plays in new technologies such as photography, not only as a technological factor, but also as a mystical element points to the equal importance of light with darkness, while electricity, which in the novel is represented by one of its most illustrious inventors, Nicolas Tesla (a character in the novel), is constant light made available through technology.

The title's range of meaning is even more ambiguous. At first glance, it provides a clear image – against the day and in favor of night. But "against" in Pynchon's novel has not only the meaning of an antithesis. It has a less oppositional nuance where it means only resistance, not contrast or contrary.

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<sup>279</sup> 'To make people disappear' used to be a strategy of military dictatorships but as the disappearance of forty-three students in Iguala, Mexico, in 2014 sadly demonstrated, new forces seem to make use of this dirty tactics as well.



In a less common use today, it can have a future-facing, almost hopeful connotation where it means "towards." One might even see the element of repetition, "again" hiding out in "against."

The full formula "against the day" occurs only twice in the novel. In the first occurrence refers to the ambivalence of sun light which is on the one hand a condition of perception, but can also produce its dazzling distortion, such as when photographing against the sun:

He tried to make out, against the daylight flowing in off the plain, what he could of her face veiled in its own penumbra, afraid somehow of misreading it, the brow smoothed by the uncertain light to the clarity of a girl's, the eyes beneath free to claim as little acquaintance with the unchaste, he guessed, as she might need. (P 205)

The second occurrence is associated with the ecological climax of the novel, the Tunguska event. The Tunguska event hovers like a bad omen over its time, prophetically alluding to the geopolitical and world historical shifts and changes at the beginning of the twentieth century which would soon be discharged in the events of the First World War:

As nights went on and nothing happened and the phenomenon slowly faded to the accustomed deeper violets again, most had difficulty remembering the earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility, and went back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day. (P 805)

The vector flips around: not against, but towards something. Here, the night does not appear as exceptional time which promises a "sense of overture and possibility", but as a sort of interruption of time which has to

be survived with the help of sexual debauchery, mental aberration or a paralyzing of the body (stupor, sleep), but which is also a reservoir to gain force for the survival of the next day.<sup>280</sup>

This fundamental ambiguity on a symbolic level suggests that we should adopt an alternative perspective to trace the dramaturgy of light in both novels. A phenomenological mode of analysis is more apt to reconstruct such a complex dramaturgy of the visible and the invisible, and better protected against the danger of translating this dramaturg into a semantics or a well-defined moral vision. A more classically hermeneutic approach would probably state that both sides (light and darkness, the visible and the invisible, appearance and disappearance, respectively) are each inherently, symmetrically ambiguous – and proceed to the conclusion that these novels celebrate the instability of signs and symbols, which in turn affirms the profound uncertainty of knowledge and perception.

In sync with the hyperbolic mood (which is simultaneously more modest and more pretentious than hermeneutics), I will try to do both less and more in this chapter. More modestly than hermeneutic interpretation, I will follow the qualities and forms, the temporalities and rhythms according to which the visible and invisible are organized in these texts. Only on the basis of such a *material* effort and the help of *phenomenological* nuances, I will provide a few *speculative* conjectures on the *realist* sense of the flickering lighting conditions in *Against the Day* and *2666*.

Let us start with a short list compiled from Bolaño's *2666*:

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<sup>280</sup> Fiction's tendency to flip around the usual connotations of night as dangerous, but seductive and day as quotidian, but safe is often an indicator of a certain state of exception. This can be seen most clearly in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [1932], Gallimard, Paris, 2000, where a pitiable group of soldiers needs the wait for the night to move along the front lines. The sharp contrast of day and night vs. the more nuanced clairobscur of Bolaño's and Pynchon's novels, however, marks a strong difference between Céline's 'edgy' modernism and *hyperbolic realism*.

"En la semioscuridad distinguí tres sombras en un ángulo de la habitación."

(B 217)

"Hacían el amor, por expreso deseo de ella, en una semipenumbra." (B 531)

"El italiano y el inglés estaban ahora rodeados de penumbra." (B 124)

"Fate intentó mirarlos, pero la iluminación, focalizada en el centro, dejaba aquella zona a oscuras." (B 390)

"A su alrededor por lo menos diez ángeles con formas femeninas surgían volando de la oscuridad, como mariposas convocadas por los ruegos del penitente. Todo lo demás era oscuridad y formas vagas." (B 348)

"las dos farolas que iluminaban la fachada del motel, las sombras que los fogonazos de luz de los coches abrían, semejantes a colas de cometas, en los alrededores oscuros." (B 429) (my emphasis)

[...]

This short cross section reveals some of the central traits of the conditions of light in 2666. Darkness and shadows are everywhere, but even where they dominate the scenes to the extreme, "vague forms" and weakly flickering lights persist. Darkness is not clearly opposed to brightness, but surrounds the visible like a halo, which suggests that there is always more than what we can see. At the same time, it is only through surrounding invisibility that the visible is made visible in the first place. Phenomena are like "tails of a comet," they appear abruptly and ephemerally, before they disappear again or get replaced by newly visible phenomena.

The sheer frequency of words like "semioscuridad," "semipenumbra" in 2666 indicates that neither presence nor absence of light, but the twilight is the preferred mode of illumination in 2666. The novel does provide epiphanic moments, moments of extreme, punctual and time-freezing *evidentia*, e.g. the description of Oscar Fate's experience during a jazz concert in Santa Teresa (390). Yet, these moments are greatly outdone by the excessive darkness that surrounds the epiphanic moment.

Another list, this time generated from Pynchon's *Against the Day* (my emphasis):

A boy with the face of an angel in an old painting under a baggy cap with its bill turned sidewise had appeared with a telephone set whose cord trailed out the door into the scarcely lit darkness. (P 107)

[in Bruges:] At the cusp of the twilight, lamps were lit up and down the streets, against a hovering shadow of beleaguerment by forces semi-visible... (P 529)

In the bright light of day, the figures still looked sinister (P 329)

As, no longer named, one by one the islets vanished from the nautical charts, and one day from the lighted world as well, to rejoin the Invisible. (P 107)

[Lew] His office and field skills weren't the worst in the shop, but he knew that what distinguished him was a keen sympathy for the invisible. (P 43)

[Merle] 'photography' and 'alchemy' were just two ways of getting at the same thing – redeeming light from the inertia of precious metals. (P 80)

Hunter argued that this was why so many people had come to love Venice, because of its 'chiaroscuro.' (P 582)

[Lindsay] To tell the truth, he'd been growing doubtful about starlight in any practical way, having lately been studying historic world battles, attempting to learn what lighting conditions might have been like during the action, even coming to suspect that light might be a *secret determinant of history* (P 431)

Whatever it was, it was invisible. (P 142)

[...]

In accordance with the epigraph inspired by Thelonious Monk, in *Against the Day* night and darkness are the rule to which light is the exception.

As always with Pynchon, his narrators adapt to the setting and atmosphere they describe to a certain extent much more than Bolaño's narrator

does. But no matter if we are in Venice where the atmosphere is foggy and mysterious, in Mexico where constant sounds from invisible parts of the cities allude to revolutionary underground activities, or in the spectacularly electrified Chicago during the World's Columbian Exhibition in 1893 – *Against the Day's* lighting conditions constantly reveal the same "sympathy for the invisible" (P 43) that Lew Basnight, a British private detective working for the infamous Pinkertons, needs for his profession.

Besides Lew, many other characters are intimately linked to light. In many cases, they prefer invisibility to the visible: As an assistant of Nicolas Tesla, Kit Traverse develops a fascination for the invisible forces behind electricity; Merle Rideout compares photography to alchemy, although he is aware that the production of seemingly dematerialized images depends on the use of "precious metals" (P 80); the painter Hunter Penhallow describes Venice itself as *chiaroscuro*, derived from a painting which exaggerates darkness in order to achieve spectacular lighting effects.

In *Against the Day*, things, characters, or even whole cities and islands disappear, first from the map and then from the world itself – only to "emerge[...] [again] from invisibility" (P 62), unintentionally at times, or to "re-join the Invisible" (P 107) until further notice. This happens to a character fittingly named Blinky who disappears right at the time the scientists Michelson and Morley run their famous experiments proving that light doesn't need an extra substance or medium to radiate.<sup>281</sup>

From a cosmological point of view, the Michelson-Morley experiment means the end of the idea of the Aether as the assumed medium of physical processes ("The Aether was doomed", P 62). After the death of the Aether, there is nothing but light, no substance behind, no additional me-

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<sup>281</sup> The Michelson-Morley experiment is a landmark in the transitioning process from classical to modern physics.

dium, which does not seem to be the outcome of a projected desire. However, as the penultimate quote from my list suggests, old beliefs and the search for the transcendent, the secret, the magical and the mystical qualities of light stubbornly persist and motivate the actions and desires of the characters.

The last quote in my list is reminiscent of a certain "whateverness," the fact that something is *somehow, anyhow* (Rosset, Lowry), although it's not quite clear how exactly *it* is. Of course, the presence of an invisible and unspecified thing is also reminiscent of some of Pynchon's poached genres, especially the emerging horror genre. Whateverness, then, becomes a source of reality in its extremes: both the extremely transcendent and the utterly trivial poles.

Pynchon's and Bolaño's vision of light and darkness could be described as stereoscopic: enigmatic and mystical elements with a huge metaphoric potential are juxtaposed with extremely casual, banal and utterly trivial occurrences. A great example of this is Bolaño's bathetic description of a sexual encounter: *Hacían el amor, por expreso deseo de ella, en una semi-penumbra.*" (B 531)

Another common feature is the way light flickers between the phenomenal and the ontological realm. For both authors, it seems, the discontinuities of the visible allude to a profound discontinuity in the realm of matter and existence. In *Against the Day*, the transition from the phenomenological to the ontological, from perception to being, is most clearly performed between the second and the third part where the novel moves from the doubling of perception (*Iceland Spar*), and towards the gift (or curse) of being in two places at the same time (*Bilocation*).

*The visible and the invisible with Merleau-Ponty and Richir*

Philosophy and theory often seem to be caught in a mutually exclusive conceptualization of presence and absence or, at best, in some (positively or negatively) dialectical solution. Merleau-Ponty, in his last and unfinished opus *Le visible et l'invisible*, interrupted by his sudden death in 1961, provides a much more nuanced description. Working through the four written chapters and the working notes (*notes de travail*), we encounter many remarks resonating with the literary lighting conditions we've found in 2666 and *Against the Day*.

In *L'entrelacs – le chiasme*, for many the most important chapter of Merleau-Ponty's final project, he observes that both our body and the world "comportent donc des zones claires, des jours autour desquels pivotent leurs zones opaques." (VI 192) Just like in the novels' phenomenology of light then, the visible phenomena are surrounded not by general darkness, but by *their* specific<sup>282</sup> invisibility –both exceeding the visible and rendering it possible in the first place. "Le visible n'est pas [...] un positif seulement absent," (VI 300) – not just the negation of a presence, but an independent force, yet related or relatable to the perceived phenomena. What is now invisible can become visible in the next moment (VI 305) – but not without producing its own new invisible environment. No act of vision can abolish invisibility, but there is also nothing invisible (or indiscernible) in principle.

Hence, what we are dealing with is

non pas [...] un invisible de fait, comme un objet derrière un autre, et non pas un invisible absolu qui n'aurait rien à faire avec le visible, mais l'invisible *de ce monde*, celui qui l'habite, le soutient et le rend visible. (VI 196)

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<sup>282</sup> See (VI 287): "des vides spécifiés"

Neither merely empirical nor absolute or infinite – such a figure of the invisible comes close to my conception of the hyperbolic. It is excessive in relation to the visible ("le visible est prégnant de l'invisible", VI 265), but surrounds and conditions it. It covers a wide range of experience, existence and even, according to Merleau-Ponty's ontological turn, captures something of the structure of the world itself.

If the invisible gestures beyond language, it does not gesture towards an abstract realm of existentialist nothingness, but rather to a concrete pre-linguistic (or rather: proto-linguistic) space from which articulation radiates, a space where the "naissance du sens ou un sens sauvage" (VI 201) occur, a space clearly reminiscent of fiction as the milieu of figuration:

La littérature, la musique, les passions, mais aussi l'expérience du monde visible, sont non moins que la science de Lavoisier et d'Ampère l'exploration d'un invisible et, aussi bien qu'elle, dévoilement d'un univers d'idées. (VI 193-4)

Art, desire, science and concrete experience on one and the same level, and closely related to the invisible *and* the intellectual – Pynchon would be pleased. Besides that, the quote also shows that Merleau-Ponty's take on invisibility does not fetishize darkness as irrationality, but claims that ideas within affective and literary experience "cannot be detached from sensible appearances and be erected into a second positivity."<sup>283</sup> We must understand experience from the standpoint of experience proper which implies "our own obscurity" and the "opacity of my life" (VI\* 39; 56)

However, as stated before, this should not be conflated with the suicidal abstraction of existentialism. Sartre's *néant* (as the epitome of being) is

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<sup>283</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evans/IL, 1968, 149.



a recurring adversary<sup>284</sup> in Merleau-Ponty's last project, and his name appears right next to this cryptic note from the *notes de travail*: "décentration, non anéantissement." (VI 244) We could take this note as a cue for how the visible and the invisible unfold in Merleau-Ponty's conception: in non-dialectical sequences of decentering moments – displacements, dislocations, distortions – without ever falling into complete and empty nothingness.

Strictly speaking, in order to perform a transition from, say, a dialectics of the visible and the invisible towards a hyperbolism of invisibility that both exceeds and conditions visibility, we have to move beyond Merleau-Ponty. For his project still comes off as a holistic search for organic totality, "a sort of *hyper-reflection (sur-réflexion)* that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account." (VI\* 28)

It is precisely this organic (we could even say: romantic) conception of philosophy that Marc Richir criticizes in his attempt to radicalize Merleau-Ponty's insights in *Le visible et l'invisible*. According to Richir we cannot take into account "the brute thing and brute perception" (VI\* 38) because there is no such thing as purely given phenomenality and undisturbed perception. Instead, "tout phénomène est affecté d'une distorsion originaire", writes Richir in a reading of Merleau-Ponty's final project.<sup>285</sup> The crack of the invisible goes right through the phenomenon:

s'il y a de l'être, ce ne peut être que dans une sorte de mélange originaire avec le non-être... transformer le phénomène en être brut et plein, c'est donc le couper de sa part irréductible de non-être et de non-vérité.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Sartre has already been Merleau-Ponty's main adversary in his *Phénoménologie de la perception* [1946], Gallimard, Paris, 1976.

<sup>285</sup> Marc Richir: "Le sens de la phénoménologie dans 'Le Visible et L'Invisible,'" in *Esprit* 66:6, June 1982, 124–145, 134.

<sup>286</sup> Richir, "Sens," 131. This passage also demonstrates the possible proximity of inhumanism and phenomenology against the claim that phenomenology must necessarily be humanist. The

There is a much more radical idea of *nature* behind such phrases – the phenomena are not only tied to invisible surroundings, but to what is non-existent *inside* them. This leads to a profound transformation of the notion of the phenomenon itself – probably the fourth significant transformation within the history of phenomenology.<sup>287</sup> Phenomena are not only those bright zones surrounded by dark margins, they are subjected to a savage and unpredictable rhythm of appearance and disappearance, "surgissant de manière discontinue (ES 312)," wildly flickering as "clignotements (ES 148)," "protéiforme[s], fugace[s], fluctuante[s] et intermittente[s] (ES 148)."

### *Santa Teresa as centro intermitente of 2666*

In Bolaño's *2666*, intermittence is not only an important compositional mode of the novel,<sup>288</sup> it also has its unique explicit moment. After the four literary critics, experts of the work of German writer Benno von Archimboldi, have finally met at a congress in Bremen, their nocturnal foray through the Northern German city is described as follows:

todos, empezando por Pelletier y terminando por Morini, que pese a ser de común el más callado aquella noche se mostró locuaz, explicaron anécdotas y cotilleos, compararon por undécima vez vagas informaciones ya sabidas

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Inhuman not as radically other, but as a force inextricably tied to and operative within the human is the topic of various texts by Reza Negarestani. See "The Labor of the Inhuman. Part II: Inhuman," in *e-flux* #53, March 2014, 1–14; and "The Corpse Bride. Thinking with Nigredo," in *Collapse IV*, ed. Robin Mackay, Urbanomic, Falmouth, May 2008, 129–161.

<sup>287</sup> After Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>288</sup> Intermittence then not only describes the rhythm of appearing and disappearing. It also is an important compositional mode of *hyperbolic realism* as I will try to demonstrate in the concluding parts of this dissertation.

y especularon, como quien vuelve a dar vueltas alrededor de una película querida, sobre el secreto del paradero y de la vida del gran escritor, finalmente, mientras caminaban por las calles mojadas y luminosas (eso sí, de una luminosidad intermitente, como si Bremen fuera una máquina a la que sólo de tanto en tanto recorrieran vívidas y breves descargas eléctricas) hablaron de sí mismos. (B 27-8)

The fact that Bolaño does not wait until the novel moves its setting to Mexico to propose intermittence as the crucial mode of the conditions of visibility indicates that it is not limited to a local description, but a much more general feature of the novel's cosmo-phenomenology. Even in the homely atmosphere of a German mid-sized city, light is hectically flashing, and the bold, almost forced metaphor for Bremen (an electrically charged machine that only sporadically discharges its tension) creates an uncanny feeling that even in the safest environment there is a potential for unexpected events.

In the afterword of the novel, Bolaño's editor Ignacio Echevarría speculates about a note left by Bolaño:

En una de sus abundantes notas relativas a 2666 Bolaño señala la existencia en la obra de un 'centro oculto' que se escondería debajo de lo que cabe considerar, por así decirlo, su 'centro físico'. Hay razones para pensar que ese centro físico sería la ciudad de Santa Teresa, fiel trasunto de Ciudad Juárez, en la frontera de México con Estados Unidos. Allí convergen, al cabo, las cinco partes de la novela; allí tienen lugar los crímenes que configuran su impresionante telón de fondo (y de los que, en un pasaje de la novela, dice un personaje que 'en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo'). (B 1123)

Despite its essayistic wit, there are several problems with this idea. First, Santa Teresa is not the only *centro oculto* of the novel – Archiboldi, most prominently, is at least as occult and mysterious as the Mexican border city. We might even think about less obvious candidates such as the history

of colonial violence, for example, to which Bolaño obliquely alludes at various occasions.<sup>289</sup> It is also imprecise to say that Santa Teresa and the *feminicidios* remain fully in the background (*telón de fondo*) until, in part IV, they eventually come to the forefront. Already at the end of part I and all the way through until the end of part IV,<sup>290</sup> a large part of the action takes place in Santa Teresa and the *feminicidios* flicker through the novel as a recurring reference point from the moment the Spanish literary critic Espinoza learns about "la historia de las mujeres asesinadas" (B 181) onwards. In that sense, we shouldn't speak of Santa Teresa as *the centro oculto*, but rather as *a centro intermitente* of the novel – arguably the most important one.

Correspondingly, the same mode of intermittence organizes the disappearance and re-appearance of the murdered women in part IV. They are usually found within the by now familiar setting of "semioscuridad," in scarcely lit areas, at urban outskirts where the city slowly recedes to make room for the growing Sonoran Desert, but also visibly at the roadside where they have been dumped by their murderers. Despite their intermittent visibility, they remain unnoticed for a considerable while, suggesting that intermittence is not only a "natural" rhythm of appearance, but intensified by the mixed atmosphere of ignorance, fear and intimidation that governs Santa Teresa. When the corpses are eventually found by the police, they are "semioculto detrás de unas cajas de cartón" (B 577), "semienterrada en posición decúbito ventral" (B 578) and often half or almost naked. They are extremely hard to identify since their corpses are in an advanced stage of decomposition (B 548) and their faces are often mutilated (B 624). Both the investigating

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<sup>289</sup> Most prominently in two memorable scenes. 1) the scene about the impossible book of a racist Chilean writer (B 276–87), and 2) the sad genealogy of Lalo Cura whose female ancestors who are all called *Maria Expósito* have all been raped by Europeans or descendants of Europeans (B 693–697).

<sup>290</sup> Even part V is connected to Mexico through the last scene where Archiboldi is boarding the plane.

detectives and the novel are not confronted with complete invisibility and absence, but they face the task of reconstructing identities and circumstances from extremely precarious traces that have a lot in common with Richir's notion of the precarious; a wildly flickering phenomenon that only allows glimpses into its form of existence.

This might help us explain why the responsible authorities continuously fail in dealing with the crimes and why, to a certain extent at least, the novel is an adequate response to this failure. First, the investigating policemen refuse to see the killings as an outcome of systemic violence. The ridiculous search for a serial killer reduces the *feminicidios* to singular events calling for direct responses. But since these crimes are intermittent cases of a rotten systemic structure, this is not how the problem can be solved.

At the same time, the failure to acknowledge the complexity of reality plays into the hands of those actors and institutions with an interest to cover up the real causes in order to perpetuate and reinforce the system that supports their privileged position. As the novel unfolds, almost everybody seems to become part of that cartel of accomplices: the *narcos*, politicians, multinational concerns, the police, the press, legal institutions, but also the university system, cultural institutions and, eventually, literature itself.<sup>291</sup>

2666 is no exception to this danger of complicity and we shouldn't too easily brush aside concerns accusing the novel of exploiting real suffering for the reproduction of violence as spectacle. No matter how this question may be answered, we can also understand its complicity as an intricate part of the literary strategy. In that sense, the seemingly endless catalogue of hyperbolic violence in part IV, well prepared by several instants of violent outbursts and sexist incursions throughout the whole novel, not only references the overwhelming abundance of the *feminicidios*, but also makes them

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<sup>291</sup> The tragic complicity of literature with systems of violence is a major theme of Bolaño's work. See above all *La Literatura Nazi en América* (Anagrama, Barcelona, 1996), but also *Estrella Distante*, and *Nocturno de Chile*.

painfully tangible. The mode of enumeration is hyperbolic since it tends towards exhaustion, but repeatedly intimates that there might always be more violence that has not been discovered yet or has yet to happen. This gesture towards a reality always larger than what can be accounted for in the novel is made clear from the very beginning of the fourth part:

Esto ocurrió en 1993. En enero de 1993. A partir de esta muerte comenzaron a contarse los asesinatos de mujeres. Pero es probable que antes hubiera otras. La primera muerte se llamaba Esperanza Gómez Saldaña y tenía trece años. Pero es probable que no fuera la primera muerte. Tal vez por comodidad, por ser la primera asesinada en el año 1993, ella encabezaba la lista. Aunque seguramente en 1992 murieron otras. Otras que quedaron fuera de la lista o que jamás nadie las encontró, enterradas en fosas comunes en el desierto o esparcidas sus cenizas en medio de la noche, cuando ni el que siembra sabe en dónde, en qué lugar se encuentra. (B 444)

The beginning of the list is as arbitrary as its end. There is always more than we can see. Yet, we must stick to the few things visible in a setting where not even those who have sown the ashes of the murdered women know where to find them.

Hence, in a spectacular reshaping of the maximalist form, the fourth part of *2666* refuses to set its focus on singular destinies and provokes thus an effect that reminds us of the epic obligation to reproduce the real in its entirety. This does not mean, however, that the novel does not try to account for the singularity of each crime and the uniqueness of its victim. Bolaño tries to solve this by inserting horrifying details<sup>292</sup> into the monotony of the catalogue. The following scene serves as an extreme example of the disappearing

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<sup>292</sup> Many of those details seem exaggerated, but we have every reason to fear that they are actually realistic.

of traces and the post-mortem mutilation of bodies characteristic for most of the *feminicidios*:

El cuerpo había sido introducido en un tambor de doscientos litros que contenía ácido corrosivo. Sólo quedaban sin disolverse las manos y los pies. Se logró su identificación gracias a los implantes de silicona. (B 645)

According to what we learn right after, this woman has been raped and then murdered by seventeen (!) perpetrators. After killing her, they did everything to make her identity disappear – as her body is dissolved in acid only the hands and feet remain –, but she can be identified by her silicone implants.<sup>293</sup>

Another example goes even further:

La muerta tenía diez años, aproximadamente. Su estatura era de un metro y veintisiete centímetros. Llevaba zapatillas de plástico transparente, atadas con una hebilla de metal. Tenía el pelo castaño, más claro en la parte que le cubría la frente, como si lo llevara teñido. En el cuerpo se apreciaron ocho heridas de cuchillo, tres a la altura del corazón. Uno de los policías se puso a llorar cuando la vio. Los tipos de la ambulancia bajaron a la vaguada y procedieron a atarla en la camilla, porque el ascenso podía ser accidentado y en un traspie dar con su cuerpecito en el suelo. Nadie fue a reclamarla. Según declaró oficialmente la policía, no vivía en Santa Teresa. ¿Qué hacía allí? ¿Cómo había llegado allí? Eso no lo dijeron. Sus datos fueron enviados por fax a varias comisarías del país. De la investigación se encargó el judicial Ángel Fernández y el caso pronto se cerró. (B 627)

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<sup>293</sup> Obliquely, this scene references two important thematic interests of the novel beyond the human scale: the persistence of the inorganic and the intricate relation of sexism and industrial production behind the crimes.

*Nadie fue a reclamarla.* At this point of the book, we've read this formula often enough to risk ignoring its specifically sad implications in the present scene. The girl found dead is only 10 years old and therefore the youngest victim of the whole catalogue in 2666. Yet nobody has reported her missing or comes to claim her body. The causality with which this information is hidden (or rather: half-visible) within the staged neutrality of the forensic representation makes it all the more cruel. Despite the distancing narrative tone, the narrator creates a rare moment of empathic proximity via the specific use of minutiae – the detailed description of her hair color, the crying policeman, the girl's transparent plastic slippers as if she had just been playing on the playground or on the streets in front of her house, the use of the diminutive (*cuerpito, zapatillas*), all of which brings her fragile dead body in front of our eyes, a body that is now aggressively attached to the stretcher so that she doesn't risk falling on the ground.

Such examples demonstrate that 2666 tries to move beyond the classical mode of narrating collective tragedies by focusing on a singular destiny. 2666 in general and *La parte de los crímenes* in particular can be understood as the attempt to account for both: the abundance and systemic structure of these crimes *and* the singularity of each event and its victim. Despite the general ontological precariousness of traces that always naturally tend to vanish and the personal and institutional efforts to accelerate this process of vanishing, the novel tries to rescue as much as possible from the few things that remain.

If most of the time there is indeed something remaining, the novel also acknowledges a reality beyond what can be witnessed. In that sense, 2666 moves beyond the canonical mode of accounting for these tragedies in Latin America, namely the literary tradition of *testimonio*. *Testimonio* is necessarily based on the existence of a witness – both on her survival and on her willingness to speak. Both things are extremely threatened in Santa Teresa.



The recurring phrase "No había testigos" (B 569; 732) points towards a much larger structure beyond the specific cases and most of the forensic reports conclude with some version of the formula "y el caso se cerró." (B 524; 630 etc.) But while the cases can be closed, this does not apply to reality.

At one point in his book on the genocide of the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh writes: "Je me répète, mais la répétition est indispensable pour approcher les grands crimes [...]." <sup>294</sup> In that sense, the tiring abundance of the fourth part is not only a stylistic choice, but dramatizes the epic obligation for completeness and the ethical commitment to count with (and account for) a largely unwitnessed and partly unwitnessable reality. If the extreme monotony *La parte de los crímenes* challenges to the extreme the reader's patience and her capacity for empathizing, the novel forces us to pay attention to those crimes in a way watching the news or learning about singular destinies can't. The risk of becoming numb to violence is always present, but maximalist reading transforms it into an exercise of not accepting the normalization of horror:

¿Cómo huelen el semen y el alcohol? Pues mal, dijo Juan de Dios Martínez, francamente huelen mal. Pero luego te acostumbras. No es como el olor de la carne en descomposición que no te acostumbras nunca y que se te mete dentro de la cabeza, hasta en los pensamientos. (B 663)

This short conversation between policemen reads like an oblique apostrophe to the reader. Don't get accustomed to this, read on and let your thoughts be infected by what you read! In "Why study the past?," Spivak claims that without a broader view on the past and the present "we can neither mourn nor judge." (WSP 6) The same is at stake in Bolaño's effort in *2666*, which not only creates a monument for the murdered women of Santa

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<sup>294</sup> Rithy Panh: *L'élimination*, avec Christoph Baille, Grasset, Paris, 2011, 101.

Teresa / Ciudad Juárez, but also provides an informed portrait of the life of individuals communities under the conditions of millennial capitalism at the global periphery.<sup>295</sup>

The epic commitment to completeness and the resulting abundance of the material, the gesturing, nevertheless, towards an always larger reality that can't be contained,<sup>296</sup> the specific use of detail and the continual glimpses into the larger structure of violence produced by an alliance of global corporate capital, culturally anchored *machismo* and dysfunctional institutions, are the ingredients of this specific repurposing of the maximalist tradition. Intermittence according to Richir's radicalization of Merleau-Ponty's new notion of the phenomenon is its phenomenological mode. This produces not so much a "literature of exhaustion"<sup>297</sup> as an exhausting literature.

### *Perfect darkness and capitalist sorcery in Against the Day*

Let me conclude this chapter by turning the focus back to Pynchon, who demonstrates that tuning into the rhythms of intermittence is not only a way of creating a more granular take on the complexity of reality, but can also serve as an art of control – all too often on behalf of the dark forces of the universe. *Iceland Spar*, the second part of *Against the Day*, is particularly invested in questions of perception beyond the classical paradigm of direct experience in a well-lit world. Half through the chapter, we meet a minor,

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<sup>295</sup> See Sharae Deckard: "Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's 2666," in *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3, September 2012, 351–372.

<sup>296</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas: *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* [1961], Livre de Poche, Paris, 1990, 78: "L'Infini ne se laisse pas intégrer." In the following quoted directly in the text with short title TI + page number.

<sup>297</sup> See John Barth: "The Literature of Exhaustion [1967]," in: Mark Currie (ed.), *Metafiction*. Longman, London i. a., 1995, 161–178.

but flamboyant character, the Italian magician Luca Zombini, in his apartment in New York City where he initiates his kids into the phenomenology of wizardry:

'Remember, God didn't say, 'I'm gonna make light now,' he said, 'Let there be light.' His first act was to *allow light in* to what had been Nothing. Like God, you also have to always work with the light, make it do only what you want it to.'

He unrolled an expanse of absolute fluid blackness. "Magician-grade velvet, perfect absorber of light. Imported from Italy. Very expensive. Dyed, sheared, and brushed by hand many, many times. Finished with a secret method of applying platinum black. Factory inspections are merciless. Same as mirrors, only opposite. The perfect mirror must *send back everything*, same amount of light, same colors exactly—but perfect velvet must *let nothing escape*, must hold on to every last little drop of light that falls on it. Because if the smallest amount of light you can think of bounces off one single thread, the whole act—*affondato, vero?* It's all about the light, you control the light, you control the effect, *capisci?*" (P 354)

Sovereign are they who decide on the light effect. In this cheerful and seemingly innocent scene, neither the references to God nor the flickering allusions to capitalism (importation, trade secrets, factory inspections, the invisible manual labor behind the production of the expensive material) are mere coincidence.

In Pynchon's fictional universes, the ones who know best how to control the light effects are often such elusive, auratic, villain-type characters like Pierce Inverarity in *The Crying of Lot 49* or Weissmann / Blicero in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In *Against the Day*, this function is fulfilled by Scarsdale Vibe, a New York-based financial tycoon. Some of his side hobbies include Italian Renaissance Art and waging war against anarchists in mining areas like Col-

orado. Scarsdale is a capitalist wizard<sup>298</sup> who masters the art of disappearance by engaging a multi-talented stooge (Foley Walker), who also serves as his doppelganger from time to time.<sup>299</sup> Early in the novel, Vibe consults with a notorious Yale professor about ways of neutralizing Nicolas Tesla's plans for making electricity freely available, a project he calls

'the most terrible weapon the world has seen, designed to destroy not armies or matériel, but the very nature of exchange, our Economy's long struggle to evolve up out of the fish-market anarchy of all battling all to the rational systems of control whose blessings we enjoy at present.' (P 34)

Scarsdale intimates one of the most dominating themes / constellations of the novel: the conflict between anarchism and the 'rational' systems of control.<sup>300</sup> Throughout the long journey of *Against the Day*, it becomes clearer and clearer that those systems of control are not only predicated upon violence, deprivation, and the colonialist and imperialist practices of exploitation. They also depend on a huge variety of secret operations, rarely visible from above the polished surfaces and largely ignorant of the Scarsdale's cynical rationality.<sup>301</sup> Against his praise of global capitalism, this rationality of various systems of control evoked in *Against the Day* is above all a cunning lighting effect projected by a whole system of sorcerers or even, as Pignarre and Stengers put it: "un système sorcier sans sorciers."<sup>302</sup> Within a phenomenology of intermittence, we don't have to play out the system vs. its agents.

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<sup>298</sup> I adopt the notion of capitalist wizardry from Philippe Pignarre, Isabelle Stengers: *La sorcellerie capitaliste. Pratiques de désenvoûtement*, La Découverte, Paris, 2005.

<sup>299</sup> "'You are still the 'other' Scarsdale Vibe, are you not?'" (P 724)

<sup>300</sup> Later in the novel, however, Scarsdale prophesies capital's fate to turn anarchist itself: "Anarchism will pass, its race will degenerate into silence, but money will beget money, grow like the bluebells in the meadow, spread and brighten and gather force, and bring low all before it. It is simple. It is inevitable. It has begun." (P 1001)

<sup>301</sup> The main agent of these invisible forces are the *Chums of Chance*.

<sup>302</sup> Pignarre, Stengers, *Sorcellerie*, 59.

What we are dealing with is a system of sorcery that is largely anonymous, but nevertheless produces its sorcerers and accumulation artists.

Capitalism loves to portray itself as a rational, enlightened and enlightening system against superstitious backwardness and for the benefit of all (where the trickle-down effect, so to speak, also works cognitively). Yet, in *Against the Day* capitalism and its allied subsystems of control are much closer to structures that the Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani calls *occultures*.<sup>303</sup>

Constantly seeking to manipulate the effects of collective perception, powerful capitalist agents like Scarsdale Vibe can be understood as magicians putting to use those velvet mirrors that absorb a lot more than they reflect.<sup>304</sup> Applied to much larger structures than the craft of conjuring, Zombini's "perfect darkness" shouldn't evoke the image of absolute invisibility, but rather that of the perfect crime. In the scene quoted above, the megalomaniac Scarsdale plans to use his money and network of semi-illegal agents and resources to neutralize another megalomaniac project (that of Nicolas Tesla), which dreams of socializing the access to energy – one of the most dangerous threats imaginable to a system aiming for full privatization.<sup>305</sup>

How to resist such systems of control that disguise themselves as rational structures, but are much better described as occultures or systems of sorcery? Pignarre and Stengers never tire of emphasizing that rehearsing the

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<sup>303</sup> See Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 26-7.

<sup>304</sup> According to Pignarre and Stengers, capitalism pushes this art of concealment to the extreme since it constantly manages to hide its true ontological condition as a system of sorcery.

<sup>305</sup> Electricity is a general paradigm of how things happen in *Against the Day* – unseen – though easily enough and sometimes dangerously felt – electrical events." (P 98) Scarsdale and other capitalist sorcerers are eager to control the current of electricity, which in the days of its discovery is seen as a mysterious, occult force and thus serves very well for manipulation of all sorts.

same old rituals of criticizing capital is not an effective way of confronting the structures that firmly hold us in their grip:

[Il] ne suffit pas de dénoncer une capture, comme on pourrait dénoncer une idéologie. Alors que l'idéologie fait écran, la capture fait prise, et elle fait prise sur quelque chose qui importe, qui fait vivre et penser celui ou celle qui est capturé.<sup>306</sup>

Or si le capitalisme devait être mis en danger par la dénonciation, il aurait crevé depuis longtemps.<sup>307</sup>

This is the main motif for Stenger's and Pignarre's interest in various practices associated to altermodernity, anti-globalization and counter-enlightenment. This might also be an important motif for Pynchon's fascination with all kinds of obsolete theories, subaltern beliefs and mystical contacts with and transformations of the real. Like the philosophers' pragmatic alliance with ecosophy, protest culture, feminism and indigenous forms of knowledge, Pynchon's obsession with obsolescent epistemologies in *Against the Day* is not a celebration of irrationalism, but rather an acknowledgment of all those modes of existence that have been oppressed and violently eradicated by Enlightened modernity and that some Anthropocenic thinkers try to resuscitate. Against this, Pynchon turns his ontological focus on everything "invisible but felt" (P 753) With an attitude that we could call 'pragmatic animism,' Pynchon expands the senses of agency and community and probes the limits of a generally distributed and disseminated general intellect (the Anarchists, Nicolas Tesla etc.).

The phenomenology of intermittence, as made clear in a curious scene of the novel, is also capable of challenging the ready-made solutions of standard Enlightenment. After a drug overdose at a party among math

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<sup>306</sup> Pignarre, Stengers, *Sorcellerie*, 62.

<sup>307</sup> Pignarre, Stengers, *Sorcellerie*, 20.

nerds, Kit Traverse finds himself waking up in the *Klappsmühle* (i.e. the loony bin) in Göttingen where he encounters a patient who seems to believe he is a jelly-doughnut.<sup>308</sup> This is how the treating physician, Dr. Willi Dingkopf, explains his case to Kit:

'The jelly-*doughnut* being such a powerful metaphor for body and spirit, to find one's way back to sanity merely through reason becomes quite problematic—so we must resort to Phenomenology, and accept the literal truth of his delusion—bringing him into Göttingen, to a certain *Konditorei* where he is all over powdered with *Puderzucker* and allowed to sit, or actually recline, up on a shelf ordinarily reserved for the pastries.' (P 626)

Even though the German doctor is himself a member of a powerful and specifically modern system of control, the psychiatric hospital, we can adopt his conception of phenomenology, which not only descriptively "accepts the literal truth of delusion," but pragmatically translates it into an exaggerated *mise en scene* with a hilarious sense for nuances and subtleties.<sup>309</sup>

If pure reason is not enough to overcome the strong metaphoric illusions we are captured in, some kind of counter-sorcery will be needed to "break the spell" of the systems of control. Yet, both Pynchon and Bolaño are less optimistic or at least agnostic about the possibilities of revolutionary action than works of politically engaged theory such as Pignarre and Stengers' *La sorcellerie capitaliste*. More modestly, they ask the question of what it takes

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<sup>308</sup> Which he underscores with a phrase quoted by JFK in 1963: "*Ich bin ein Berliner!*" (P 626) To further complicate the phenomenological intricacies, it turns out that he only feigns his mental illness and is sent over by Yashmeen in order to contact Kit. However, his speech is still confusing which suggests that there is no performance that does not affect reality in some way or another.

<sup>309</sup> The patient not only sits, but *reclines* on the shelf of the pastry shop.

to survive and endure<sup>310</sup> within the systems of control. In one of Pynchon's characteristic constructions of resonances between widely separated scenes, we learn that it might be the same (or rather the opposite) art of disappearing that the capitalist sorcerers use:

Bria had known about the Venetian Zombinis since she was a girl, when her father had motioned her one day into his study and dug from its sumptuous chaos an ancient volume, bound in shark leather, *The travels and adventures of Niccolò dei Zombini, Specchiere*. Back in the seventeenth century, Niccolo had been apprenticed by his family to the mirror-makers of the island, who like the glassmakers on Murano were fanatically protective about their trade secrets. Corporations today are gentle and caring compared to those early factory owners, whose secrecy and obsession just got meaner and meaner as the years and generations passed. They kept their workers confined to the one swampy little island, prisoners, forbidden to run away—the penalty for anyone who tried to was pursuit and death. But Niccolò made his escape anyway, and the book Luca was showing her began with his departure from the island. Luca got into the habit of reading the kids to sleep from it, one *guaglion* chasing another, place to place across the map of Europe and through the Renaissance, no telegraphs, no passports, no international spy networks, all you needed to stay ahead was better speed and some imagination. Niccolo managed to disappear into all the noise and confusion, which is what Europe was then. (P 569)

Among other things, this scene allows a glimpse into Pynchon's vision of history in *Against the Day*. Through the genealogy of the Zombinis and the almost literal repetition of the formula that the Venetian entrepre-

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<sup>310</sup> Endurance instead of resistance is a recurrent theme in Elizabeth Povinelli's anthropological research. See *Economies of Abandonment. Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, Duke University Press, Durham/NC, 2011.



neurs are "fanatically protective about their trade secrets," Pynchon intimates a deep continuity between corporate practices from the Renaissance all the way through to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

But within this continuity, the situation has drastically changed. Presumably during the time of the Thirty Years' War when corporate brutality seemed much stronger than today, Luca's illustrious ancestor Niccolò managed to escape from his predicament as a forced laborer. Yet, as the character of Scarsdale exemplifies, this doesn't mean that corporate practices are becoming less violent. It's just that the infinitely adaptive capitalist sorcerers are using subtler magic tricks. While direct physical violence might have decreased, the systemic powers have grown much stronger – and "better speed and some imagination" seem hardly enough to outwit the increasingly efficient surveillance technologies and tightly knit state control that will only grow more important as Europe moves into the twentieth century and back to what it had already been at the time when Niccolò managed to disappear: "noise and confusion."

## II.3 AS IF. HYPERBOLIC METAPHORS, FLAT FICTIONALITY, AND THE IRREALITY OF THE REAL

*Pero lo que aquella tarde vi rebasó  
todas mis suposiciones, todas mis posibilidades imaginativas,  
sobre la línea donde lo irreal pesa más que lo real  
y le da como pies para andar.*

(J. Lezama Lima)

### *Métaphores filées*

As the subject of this chapter is the metaphor, I shall begin with a metaphor:

Los ojos de la señora Bubis se iluminaron. Como si estuviera presenciando un incendio, le dijo después Pelletier a Liz Norton. Pero no un incendio en su punto crítico, sino uno que, después de meses de arder, estuviera a punto de apagarse. (B 46, my emphasis)

A typical Bolaño metaphor. It begins with a rather stale image: the glowing eyes of Ms. Bubis, the widow of Archimboldi's German editor. But Bolaño's metaphors never remain static. Instead, they follow a recognizable dynamic pattern which, in our example, is apparent in its almost purest form. In a first step, the metaphoric situation is made explicit by the conjunction *como si*, placing the metaphor in an openly modal context. Next the already less familiar image is corrected with the help of a prominent phrase in Bolaño's corpus (arguably as prominent as his use of "as if"): *pero no ... sino que*. This phrase performs various functions: it singles out a special feature of the larger metaphorical context, it lists a few of its possible connotations,

it negates the relevance of these secondary meanings for the actual metaphorical context, it substitutes the discarded elements with other (seemingly) more appropriate ones (*sino que*), thereby opening the initially confined image towards a larger metaphorical scene. In this process of temporalization / narrativization, the initial image is further complicated and becomes receptive to all kinds of spatial, temporal or otherwise adverbial modifications.<sup>311</sup>

Bolaño's metaphors are under constant revision. There is hardly a single metaphorical moment that is not extended to a larger figurative scene, where layers of complexity are piled up on top of the starting image – which has the double effect of making the image more and more concrete and of gradually defying the possibility of its mental visualization as a coherent image. The extremely frequent formula *as if* makes the metaphorical context explicit and the permanent renegotiation of connotations, secondary meanings, and possible interpretations adds a reflexive, self-commenting dimension to the text. In those processes of connotative negotiation, negativity is often outdoes the substituting elements greatly:

el camino que para él [Archiboldi] no era horizontal o accidentadamente horizontal o zigzagueantemente horizontal, sino vertical, una prolongada caída hacia el fondo del mar [...]. (B 810)

Bolaño is fond of strong images. But there is a lot more that his metaphors, images, figurative phrases do *not* say than what they actually do say.

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<sup>311</sup> Bolaño employs this rhythmic structure in uncountable examples. A passage in which this rhythmic template occurs in almost pure form can be found in the short story *Días de 1978*: "La atmósfera que se respira en la casa de sus amigos es fúnebre. El ambiente, los movimientos que se registran, son de conciliábulo, pero no de conciliábulo general, sino de conciliábulo en petit comité o conciliábulo fragmentados en las diferentes habitaciones de la vivienda, como si una conversación entre todos estuviera vedada por motivos indecibles que todos acatan." Roberto Bolaño: *Días de 1978*, in R. B.: *Cuentos*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2010, 265–278, 271; my emphasis.

The way that various metaphorical options are sorted out by the narrator before he eventually finds a figurative solution points to another characteristic of Bolaño's use of metaphors: its sometimes extreme mannerism. Before Bolaño's metaphorical wanderings finally (but only temporarily) settle down, they undergo long preparatory phases that often border on the absurd and ridiculous. Many writers on metaphor have stressed the point that, in general, metaphors are not only deviant, but also condensed forms of expression:<sup>312</sup> epiphanic, elliptic, enigmatic. The standard view on metaphors assumes that, like in poetry itself, often the most important things in metaphors remain unsaid. Metaphor hides more than it reveals and "leaves a good deal to be supplied at the reader's discretion."<sup>313</sup>

Bolaño's case is much more complicated than that. In the example quoted just now, a condensed form of speaking might have stated that being on the road was a long fall down to the bottom of the sea, nothing more. Bolaño's narrator, however, feels the need to prepare the core moment of his metaphor in a way that is much closer to the sinuous horizontal movement that had been refuted by the very metaphorical expression itself.

In that way, however, the apparently excluded elements remain present as part of the figurative gesture – as insinuation qua negation. This metaphorical move is prominently performed in a scene of Bolaño's novel *Amuleto* about the student massacre 1968 in Mexico where the enigmatic title of his late masterpiece originated. Describing the atmosphere of Mexico City by night, the narrator Auxilio Lacouture writes that

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<sup>312</sup> Speaking about Aristotle, Christopher Johnson demonstrates that the condensing nature of metaphor can even be assumed where metaphors become hyperbolic and accumulative: "Metaphor and metaphoric hyperbole can be employed judiciously to balance the far off and the familiar, thereby producing knowledge. They also produce such knowledge more swiftly than more discursive language." (HY 54)

<sup>313</sup> Max Black: "How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson," in *Critical Inquiry* 6:1, 1979, 131–143, 142.

la [avenida] Guerrero, a esa hora, se parece sobre todas las cosas a un cementerio, pero no a un cementerio de 1974, ni a un cementerio de 1968, ni a un cementerio de 1975, sino a un cementerio del año 2666 [...]<sup>314</sup>

Riddles abound: why exactly those three dates 1968, 1974, 1975? If we can relate 1968 directly to the Tlatleloco massacre, the relation is much less transparent with 1974 and 1975. A reference to the years directly following Pinochet's coup and seizure of power in Chile in 1973 seems most likely – an event that together with the 1968 massacre of hundreds of demonstrating Mexican students marks one of the crucial dates for what Bolaño has called the lost generation of Latin American intellectuals<sup>315</sup> who saw their progressive and revolutionary aspirations fail in the face of internationally supported reactionary and sometimes neo-fascist military coups and the dictatorial regimes they inaugurated. Still we might ask: why the sequence of 1974 – 1968 – 1975? Why that extremely mannered distinction between two immediately successive years? Why not include a date from a more distant past or one that is closer to the narrator's present?<sup>316</sup> And what is the meaning of the preliminary outcome of the metaphorical process, the positively remaining, hyperbolic year 2666? Does it refer to the apocalyptic horizon of human extinction, to the devil's numeric signature (666) or more simply to the eccentric temper of the narrator, the Uruguayan, self-described poets' muse Auxilio Lacouture?

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<sup>314</sup> Roberto Bolaño: *Amuleto*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1999, 77. Playing around with dates is one of the favorite occupations of Bolaño's first-person narrator in *Amuleto*, the Uruguayan self-described muse of the poets, Auxilio Lacouture. Her numbers games reach their peak towards the end of the novel when she speculates about the future fate of poetry. The following quote (134) is only a short excerpt from a larger narrative delirium that spans multiple pages (134-6): "Virginia Woolf se reencarnará en una narradora argentina en el año 2076. Louis Ferdinand Céline entrará en el Purgatorio en el año 2094. Paul Eluard será un poeta de masas en el año 2101. Metempsicosis. La poesía no desaparecerá. Su no-poder se hará visible de otra manera."

<sup>315</sup> [See footnote 428]

<sup>316</sup> 1998 in Blanes, Spain.

No matter how readers might react to these metaphoric riddles, it seems obvious that the cumbersome way in which they are introduced, prepared and worked through comes as a rejection of both classical and modernist models of metaphoric usage. If the classical model seeks to balance *energeia* and *enargeia*, *dynamis* and *stasis*, liveliness and clarity in order to produce a homeostatic harmony between the centrifugal and centripetal forces of the metaphoric process, modernist aesthetics pushes the energetic dimension of metaphor further and further to its limits. In his short, but comprehensive book about the Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik, César Aira writes:

Se diría que en el arte clásico hay una armonía entre proceso y resultado, y por esta armonía se define lo clásico. En la era moderna esta dialéctica se ha ido exacerbando; las vanguardias del siglo XX la pusieron en primer plano, en una carrera por lograr un arte que fuera todo proceso [...].<sup>317</sup>

Neither harmony nor pure process seem adequate terms to describe Bolaño's use of metaphor. It does not seek to reproduce the organic economy of the classical image nor does it wholeheartedly venture into streams of unleashed language where metaphors rise as rare and precious epiphanies. Instead, various forms of metaphORIZATION – clearly signaled metaphorical moments with epiphanic qualities, mannered explications of metaphorical implicitness, or the attempts to revitalize the worn-out expressive qualities of 'dead' metaphors – co-exist in an ostensibly non-figurative textual environment.<sup>318</sup> The process of finding a metaphorical solution for an expressive task often seems to result from an extremely laborious effort on the narrators'

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<sup>317</sup> César Aira: *Alejandra Pizarnik*, Beatriz Viterbo, Rosario, 1998, 11.

<sup>318</sup> This co-existence partly explains the uncanny impression witnessed by many readers and commentators of Bolaño that the extraordinary in his work often seems to emerge from an otherwise inconspicuous atmosphere. His poetics of metaphor, thus, can be seen as a miniaturized constellation of procedures which are also operative on larger scales of the text.

part. Yet, it also demonstrates the pleasure those narrators gain in the telling and arranging of poetic images, indulging in often wild and uncontrolled forms of digressive exuberance with a particularly carefree attitude towards the textual redundancies they inevitably produce.

Negativity most often outdoes the (temporary) remainders of these poetic images while simultaneously insinuating often unexpected connotations. At the same time, it is made clear that many things will remain unsaid. Bolaño's specific use of negation in his metaphorology is reminiscent of what Georges Bataille has called unemployed negativity:

Si l'action (le 'faire') est – comme dit Hegel – la négativité, la question se pose alors de savoir si la négativité de qui n'a 'plus rien à faire' disparaît ou subsiste à l'état de 'négativité sans emploi' : personnellement, je ne puis décider que dans un sens, étant moi-même exactement cette 'négativité sans emploi' (je ne pourrais me définir de façon plus précise).<sup>319</sup>

Marc Richir has his own phenomenological version of this emphatically non-dialectical, persistent form of negativity. Against Husserl's notion of *Durchstreichung* (striking through), a form of negativity that remains dependent upon a preceding positivity, he speaks of a "vraie négativité [...], ni négativité hégélienne, ni négativité sartrienne" (ES 302) – a negativity that refuses to play its roles assigned by Hegel's dynamics of sublation or Sartre's sterile nothingness. Richir's negativity is a form of action (and not just the absence of agency) and a phenomenologically "positive" and autonomous mode of progression. Just like in Bolaño's rhythmically complex metaphorical scenes, it is not an intermediary state, but co-exists with other tonalities in a shared space.

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<sup>319</sup> Georges Bataille: *Lettre à Kojève*, 6.12.1937.

### *A facilitator of passages*

Co-existence, juxtaposition, adjacency<sup>320</sup> are some of the notions that come to mind in the face of the conflicting dynamics within Bolaño's metaphorical gestures. In the chapter on *Abundant Discourses* (II.1), I followed the intention of many commentators in placing both Bolaño's *2666* and Pynchon's *Against the Day* in a line with other aesthetic efforts aiming or gesturing towards specific forms of totality. It is highly seductive to describe those structures in dialectical terms, which is, e.g., what many projects of cultural mappings inspired by the ideas and methods of Fredric Jameson do.<sup>321</sup> Dialectics, however, doesn't seem to be what is at stake in Bolaño's and, as we will see in a moment, in Pynchon's metaphorologies. One way to demonstrate this is by taking a closer look at the metaphorical moments and scenes to see how different layers and dimensions are exposed to a shared environment, dynamically evolving according to rhythmic patterns that cannot be understood as a Hegelian negotiation of opposites within a progressing and progressive teleology.<sup>322</sup>

Let's take a closer look at *Against the Day*. If I claimed that metaphors don't have a teleological mission, this shouldn't imply that they exist autonomously in a, say, postmodernist space of permanent reversibility. Instead, Pynchon mobilizes parts of his metaphorical insights into historical debates on mathematics to explore the nature of metaphor itself. This meta-metaphorology, however, does not stand outside of the novel, but is (although not

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<sup>320</sup> For a thorough exploration of adjacency as a literary mode of uncertainty see SMU 119-52.

<sup>321</sup> See most recently for an advanced, but still debatable version of dialectical mapping Toscano, Kinkle, *Cartographies*.

<sup>322</sup> Another possible approach looks at the way the novels explore the discursive potential of metaphors and images. I will come back to Bolaño's and Pynchon's handling of images in chapter II.5.



always organically) integrated into the flux of the narration itself. Reflections on what metaphors are arise in narrative contexts that are themselves shaped or at least impregnated by the permanent possibility of the emergence of highly figurative language. The will to definition never abolishes the potential of figurality.

In Bolaño's *2666*, strong images are comparatively rare,<sup>323</sup> embedded into long passages of technically non-figurative speech without exactly emerging as epiphanies or crystalline revelations. In Pynchon's *Against the Day*, the use of metaphor is much more abundant, almost superabundant, which amounts to a comparable albeit differently produced mannerism. In a way, the exuberant use of metaphorical and allusive language, even in the most irrelevant, absurd, comic and remote moments of the plot, obliterates the expressive force of metaphor and figurative speech.

Yet while in Pynchon as well as in Bolaño, we encounter many remarkable images with expressive qualities throughout the vastness of the text, they somehow acquire a special attention or, so to speak, a specific form of labor from the reader's part. How can we know which metaphors to select from the vastness of images inhabiting these mega-novels in order to filter out a little sound from a lot of noise and to wrestle away a few scraps of information from the dizzying abundance of *cruff*?<sup>324</sup> How do these instants of metaphor depend (or not depend) on the specific contexts in which they are used, and on the characters who use them? For example, similar to the way that the same characteristic lighting conditions unfold in distant scenes and on various scales, metaphor is used trans-contextually evoking similar

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<sup>323</sup> Which is surprising and only obliquely revealed to the reader. A more immersed reception mode would probably produce the impression that Bolaño uses metaphors all the time due to his inclination for strong, dramatic, surrealist images and their often largely extended and sometimes extremely mannered *mise en scène*.

<sup>324</sup> For a definition and discussion of the concept of *cruff* in the maximalist novel see chapter II.1.

meanings and logics within highly different contexts and across only loosely related fictional environments.

In *Against the Day*, as Amy Elias among many others has observed, uncountable metaphors cluster around ideas and phenomena of duality. "Iceland spar, a rock crystal that splits light to reveal multidimensionality"<sup>325</sup> is one of the leading objects epitomizing this structure. *Iceland Spar* is also the title of the novel's second part while the third part, *Bilocation*, equally (but in another register) plays on the idea of duality. Under the banner of these two notions, the novel performs a shift from duality as perceptive (or epistemological) effect towards the more radical idea of an ontological embodiment of two irreducible states.<sup>326</sup>

With this in mind, let's have a look at the very beginning of the third part, *Bilocation*:

While the *Inconvenience* was in New York, Lindsay had heard rumors of a 'Turkish Corner' that really was supposed, in some not strictly metaphorical way, to provide an 'escape nook to Asia.' Like, 'One minute you're in a horrible high-bourgeois New York parlor, the next out on the Asian desert, on top of a Bactrian camel, searching for a lost subterranean city.'

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<sup>325</sup> Amy J. Elias: "Plots, Pilgrimage, and the Politics of Genre in *Against the Day*," in Christopher Leise, Jeffrey Severs (eds.): *Pynchon's Against the Day. A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, University of Delaware Press, Newark/NJ, 2011, 29–46, 29. "The novel is replete with metaphors of duality: light refraction, bilocation, mirroring, multiple time and space dimensions, and metaphysical duality." (31)

<sup>326</sup> As *Against the Day* is in part an exploration of the potentials of modern mathematics and physics for a renewal of narrative and the ontology of the novelistic universe, we can relate the fact of bilocation to the popularized idea about quantum theory that it describes the state of an entity as being at two different locations at the same time. The relationship between modern physics and the temporalities of Pynchon's later novels is analyzed in Simon de Bourcier: *Pynchon and Relativity. Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Late Novels*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013. The relationship between mathematics, fiction and reality is treated in Nina Engelhardt: "Mathematics, Reality and Fiction in Pynchon's *Against the Day*," in Zofia Kolbuszewska (ed.): *Thomas Pynchon and the (De)vices of Global (Post)modernity*, Lublin, 2013, 212–31.

'After a brief visit to Chinatown to inhale some fumes, you mean.'

'Not exactly. Not as subjective as that.'

'Not just mental transportation, you're saying, but actual, physical –'

'Translation of the body, sort of lateral resurrection, if you like.'

'Say, who wouldn't? Where is this miraculous nook?'

'Where indeed ... behind which of those heaped thousands on thousands of windows lighted and dark? A formidable quest, you'd have to say.' (P 431)

Introducing the third part, this little dialogue points toward the shift that the novel is about to perform: from bi-perception to bi-location. Pynchon's narrator had already demonstrated how easily he could jump from one setting to another. The comical and comic-like character of this change of location is not only supported by the scurrility of the plot, but also pushed forward by more fine-grained elements like the recurrent conjunction "meanwhile" (P 21; 259; 493) – which we know as a canonical marker for simultaneous events in comic books. Over the course of the novel, the ability of the narrator to change locations blazingly fast is intensified by the capacity (and sometimes the curse) of the characters to be at two places at the exact same time.

In this process, metaphor is liberated from its narrow limitations as a cognitive figure and somehow translated into the world. The possibility of teleportation from an urban, high-bourgeois New York environment into the Central Asian desert is considered as a real possibility of experience and embodiment – and not only as a drug-induced, subjective hallucination. Here, the metaphorical signature is not lost, but somehow hyperbolically expanded. Metaphors tend towards their realization, but they continue, however, to oscillate between fantastic imagination and historical facticity, between "rumor" and fact. It is less the comparison between two unconnected things or ideas that is at stake in such a metaphorology, but rather the meta-

morphosis of bodies and produced by acts of transmission and the traversing of disparate environments which is much closer to the original etymology of metaphor.

Pynchon gives metaphor a material twist that reconfigures it as a drug-like "facilitator of passages between the worlds" (P 433), as a poetic figure with shamanic abilities. The focus is turned away from the singular metaphor, its function and meaning, and directed towards the metaphorical and figurative drift that runs through the whole novel. The standard model views metaphor as a rather "vertical" phenomenon interrupting the continuity of the text and forcing the reader to explore, on the paradigmatic level, the universe of secondary meanings and resonances produced by the poetic "disturbances" of non-figurative language. At the beginning of *Bilocation*, however, what we experience is a more "horizontal" mode of metaphor, the translations of language and bodies in space, the insistence on simultaneity, co-existence, juxtaposition, the lateral shifts and displacements that according to the underworld theme does not always come through to the visible surface.

### *The occult trade of metaphor*

In *Le Visible et L'Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty offers a few reflections about Bergson whose resonance with some of Pynchon's metaphorological moves and reflections in *Against the Day* (and elsewhere) is remarkable:

Il faut donc croire que le langage n'est pas simplement le contraire de la vérité, de la coïncidence, qu'il y a ou qu'il pourrait y avoir – et c'est ce qu'il

[Bergson] cherche – un langage de la coïncidence, une manière de faire parler les choses mêmes. Ce serait un langage dont il ne serait pas l'organisateur, des mots qu'il n'assemblerait pas, qui s'uniraient à travers lui par entrelacement naturel de leur sens, par le trafic occulte de la métaphore, - ce qui compte n'étant plus le sens manifeste de chaque mot et de chaque image, mais les rapports latéraux, les parentés, qui sont impliqués dans leurs virements et leurs échanges. (VI 164)

The "occult trading of metaphor" paves the way for a conception of language where the poetic figure is not primarily meant to expand the repertoire of expressing and representing reality, but where figuration is an opening to another conception of language and reality. Away from the "sens manifeste de chaque mot et de chaque image" and towards the lateral relations, the family resemblances, the largely intransitive processes of exchange and circulation of language and its entanglement with the material world. In such a framework, meaning is not produced by an autonomous and sovereign subject. Rather, the subject (i.e. the philosopher for Bergson, the narrative voices in literature) is itself defined as a medium in which language occurs as a largely autopoietic or intransitive process where literal and figurative elements are not hierarchically, but horizontally arranged, "par entrelacement naturel de leur sens."

To critical ears this might sound highly suspicious. For has it not been the central task of critical thinking to denaturalize all kinds of discourses and practices and to expose them as social, linguistic and epistemological constructions manufacturing more and more illusions and ideologies as they become increasingly powerful? One strategy of critical thinking (which by now appears more and more problematically as unquestioned habitus) has been to withdraw any legitimacy from "nature." Instead, nature became the quintessential example of what postmodern theory has named the simulacrum. Merleau-Ponty, however, was chasing a completely different concept of nature – not as unproblematic and always available material, as "Easy Think

Substance"<sup>327</sup> to use Timothy Morton's words, but as a complex and autogenous process which is largely independent of subjective experience.

As such, nature unfolds behind the back of human institutions as the "labor of the inhuman."<sup>328</sup> One shouldn't imagine this natural interlacement as a self-evident and frictionless process, but rather as the wild and anarchic movement of the *sens se faisant* that is loaded with contingencies, surprises, unexpected encounters and sudden turns. The critical allergic reaction against a phrase such as "entrelacement naturel" is predicated upon a pre-modern concept of nature.<sup>329</sup> Nature in the pre-modern sense is dead matter, inanimate and passive. Merleau-Ponty, instead, seems en route to a conception of nature that is not organized around humans and their faculties (correlationism), but as an understanding of natural interconnections themselves (relationism). In *Against the Day*, the same purpose is present in Pynchon's recurring use of animist figures that bestow life and agency to inorganic materials (ice, light, minerals, sand etc.). The photographer Merle, for example, testifies to the fact that humans are at least as dependent on materials as materials are on the way they are conceived and used by humans:

Lately Merle had been visited by a strange feeling that 'photography' and 'alchemy' were just two ways of getting at the same thing—redeeming light

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<sup>327</sup> Timothy Morton: *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York/NY, 2016, 47: "Agrilogistic ontology, formalized by Aristotle about ten thousand years in, supposes a being to consist of a bland lump of whatever decorated with accidents. It's the Easy Think Substance because it resembles what comes out of an Easy Bake Oven, a children's toy. Some kind of brown featureless lump emerges, which one subsequently decorates with sprinkles."

<sup>328</sup> See Negarestani: "Labor of Inhuman II."

<sup>329</sup> See Levi Bryant: "A Conversation with Lucretius," Fordham University, April 24, 2013, on <https://larvalsubjects.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/bryantfordham.pdf>, retrieved on October 22, 2017, 1-26, 14: "[...] modern science has transformed our concept of nature. The pre-modern concept of nature was premised on an essentialist distinction between *phusis* and *techne*. In the pre-modern conception, 'nature' or *phusis* signified what is *intrinsically* within a thing as when we say 'this is the nature of a thing.'"

from the inertia of precious metals. And maybe his and Dally's long road out here was not the result of any idle drift but more of a secret imperative, like the force of gravity, from all the silver he'd been developing out into the pictures he'd been taking over these years—as if silver were alive, with a soul and a voice, and he'd been working for it as much as it for him. (P 80)

The *as if* of existence signals the line of uncertainty between the actual liveliness of the material (silver) and its "only" metaphorical animation.<sup>330</sup> As this doubt remains largely undecided, what emerges from Pynchon's novel is something we could call "pragmatic animism."<sup>331</sup> To which degree of reality (or fictitiousness) silver is actually alive remains an open question. But what is certain is the fact that matter radiates a certain "Force of Gravity,"<sup>332</sup> which determines the fate and the labor conditions of Merle and his wife Dally who will later leave him to move on with the magician Zombini who, as we have seen in chapter II.3, shares Merle's professional intimacy with light.

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<sup>330</sup> Pynchon's animistic poetics is neatly summed up by Tiina Käkälä-Pumula (*OTHER SIDE OF THIS LIFE. Death, Value, and Social Being in Thomas Pynchon's Fiction*, dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2017, 55): "The material world—objects, physical phenomena, nature—and its eventual uncontrollability constitute a pervasive element in Pynchon's prose: the earth appears as a 'living critter' (GR, 590), objects are given a life of their own, and they turn into sublime beings that are far above the comprehension of men; the attributes of animate and inanimate are blurred. Living objects or personified natural phenomena are, of course, very literary beings, usually situated under the rubric of 'fantasy,' which gestures to something essentially different from realism. In Pynchon's prose, however, realistic accuracy and fantasy appear superimposed, impossible to separate. What is thematized in such a mode of writing is the distinction itself—the distinction between real and unreal, human and non-human, organic and inorganic—and thinking that proceeds by making such distinctions. In short, rationalism."

<sup>331</sup> Which comes close to the position presented by one of the most influential contemporary theorists of animism, Isabelle Stengers, in her essay "Reclaiming Animism," in *e-flux* 07:12, 1–10.

<sup>332</sup> Thomas Pynchon: *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973], Picador, London, 1975, 639. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title GR + page number.

Parallelizing alchemy and photography elegantly feeds into Pynchon's attacks against the Enlightenment already announced in the title of the novel. The animist tendencies of both practices seem to defy orthodox Enlightenment convictions: a mystic craft devalued as pseudo-science by scientific rationalism on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the historically most advanced form of mimesis pointing towards the threatening substitution of 18<sup>th</sup> century reason by industrialized technology. In contrast to an Enlightenment attitude, both practices are not interested in neutralizing light, but are flirting with mysticism in order to redeem light from inertia and to gain grace from gravity.<sup>333</sup> Against Enlightenment ideology of the sovereign subject, animation participates in the creating of reality, with and against human forces, in an all-encompassing parliament of things ungraspable by the view on social totality alone.<sup>334</sup>

Seen in that context, the shifts and interlacements of language seem to imitate matter and nature's self-binding processes. In Merleau-Ponty's and Richir's phenomenologies, the contact of language with itself precedes intentional speech and the semantic production of meaning.<sup>335</sup> Both phenomenology and *hyperbolic realism* turn our attention towards a register of language (or proto-language) where images are not yet framed, meanings not yet fixed and narratives not yet tightly knit. Less aggressively than in some accounts inspired by critical theory, this approach is not about debunking semantics and intentionality, but tries to *ground* intentionality, semantics, rhetoric and narrativity in a proto-categorical, phenomenological and poetic realm.

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<sup>333</sup> Both terms, grace and gravity, are mentioned on the very last page of *Against the Day*.

<sup>334</sup> Susceptible to concerns of the Anthropocene, *hyperbolic realism* is, among other things, an important expansion of the social novel and its powerful, but ultimately constrained exploration of totality.

<sup>335</sup> Contact, however, does not mean immediacy. "D'ailleurs, ce n'est pas à proprement parler un 'rapport', mais plutôt un *contact* de soi à soi – par écart." (ER 151)



All of the destabilized categories above could be viewed as examples for "symbolic institutions." I adopt this term from Marc Richir who himself adopts it from anthropology. Symbolic institutions are cultural sub-systems based on institutionally regulated and socially rehearsed practices. On the one hand, symbolic institutions are simply necessary for societies to survive. Yet, on the other hand, they inevitably tend towards fixating, reinforcing and normalizing the status quo. In other words, symbolic institutions are extremely conservative formations, both in a political and intellectual sense. Thus, Richir's anarchic (or, to be more precise, *anarchitectonic*) critique of symbolic institutions seems at first glance less radical than the critiques put forth by critical theory and post-structuralism. Yet, we can also see it as more radical since it defies ready-made solutions and insists on the radical concreteness of situations and contingency of contexts.<sup>336</sup>

Something similar is at stake in *hyperbolic realism*, which is neither interested in restituting a direct and unproblematic relationship between words and things nor willing to subscribe to a clearly avant-gardist project whose main concern is to destabilize the relation between signs and the world in constantly renewed variations. Here as elsewhere, *hyperbolic realism* proves to be a characteristically late phenomenon both *after* realism and *after* the avant-garde.<sup>337</sup> In a situation where realism and experimentalism as ready-made solutions have become equally historical, the focus is shifted from the single image to the larger organization of images. In both novels, there is a tendency that could be described with Merleau-Ponty as a chiasmic

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<sup>336</sup> Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that actually existing phenomenology has hardly exhausted its potential for radical political critique. All too often, its commitment to the concrete has led to a devastating ignorance and avoidance of political issue. One obvious indication of this, is the theological turn that phenomenology has taken according to: Dominique Janicaud: *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, Gallimard, Paris, 1991.

<sup>337</sup> [See footnote 121].

*entrelacement* of metaphor and metonymy.<sup>338</sup> According to this view, metaphor and metonymy are never completely distinct from each other, but emerge in mixed proportions whereby metaphor is related to a "horizontal" substitution qua contiguity and metonymy refers to a "vertical" transfer qua resemblance – a structure brilliantly intimated by Pynchon's formula of "lateral resurrections." (P 431)

### *Flat fictionality*

Lateral resurrections can be understood through the multiple features of the recurrent formula of *as if / como si*. Two of these features seem to be in direct conflict with each other. On the one hand, *as if* explicitly signals a metaphorical context, announces that language is about to turn figurative, that expressivity might become more important than adequacy and that a virtual distance between discourse and reality is at work at the core of the novel. On the other hand, the excessively repeated formula creates a virtual atmosphere that defines the whole novel as a space of radical contingency where facts are as much exposed to as-if-ness as the fantastic, the extraordinary, the exaggerated, "the weird and the eerie."<sup>339</sup> As the metaphorical images in the wake of *as if* are largely non-epiphanic, they give way to extensive narrativizations and sinuous unfoldings. As a result, it becomes more and more unclear where exactly the figurative frame begins and where it ends. Mirroring the sliding in and out of the fantastic within the realist setting on a larger scale, the novels slip in and out of the figurative register which is

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<sup>338</sup> See also Richir's interpretation of the chiasm as "dérivation métaphoro-métonymique" with regards to Laplace. Marc Richir: "Phénoménalisation, distorsion, logologie. Essai sur la dernière pensée de Merleau-Ponty," in *Textures* 72:4-5, 1972, 63–114, 107-8.

<sup>339</sup> See Fisher, *Weird and Eerie*.

sometimes explicitly marked, sometimes only intimated and sometimes completely uncertain.

Inverting what is maybe the most influential concept of object-oriented ontology, i.e. the concept of flat ontology, the accumulative, anaphoric use of *as if* creates a general atmosphere that we could call *flat fictionality*. Flat fictionality plunges all elements of the poetic text into the same atmosphere of fictionality, contingency, fantasy, and, ultimately, unreality, even where the text seems to allude clearly to a recognizable 'real' world. It is not a bodiless world, but as in dreams the material beings of this world are "corps [...] sans poids," (VI 310) weightless bodies.

Flat fictionality is, of course, a general feature of the ontology of the novel where, strictly speaking, all the elements are, by definition, equally fictional. This is also why it is so extremely difficult to talk about ontology, materiality, reality etc. from within literature because there is a radical uncertainty about the reliability of actions, signs and events in a universe fictionalized by definition. The world of every novel is a possible world that can contain many other possible worlds except the one in which we actually live our daily lives. A possible world that is always *grounded* in its natural environment of production and reception no matter how fantastic, elusive or absurd it might seem. It is a product of the shared reality between readers and writers, it reflects to a certain extent the material conditions of the production of literature, it is dependent upon the contingencies of writing, publishing and reading, it takes part in the construction of aesthetic values and archives, it is exposed to the threat of oblivion and disappearance that all literature as a human product faces. But it is a possible world – never fully coinciding with its natural environment nor producing immediate effects on it. Flat fictionality detaches literature from the world and it is only by violation of this logic that the borders between the literary universe and the natural world can be transgressed.

In *hyperbolic realism*, this general feature of flat fictionality is complicated in various ways. Excessive fictionality is the signature of these narrations. Yet metafictional play is not as clear a concern in its own right as it is in some of the most canonical anti-realistic projects of postmodern literature. Metafictionality, self-referentiality and the narrative exposure of flat fictionality are important elements of *hyperbolic realism*, which is however less concerned with exhibiting the story as a machine made to produce fictionality and, ultimately, illusions. One strategy in both *Against the Day* and *2666* to attenuate the characteristic explicitness of postmodern metafictionality while at the same time not seeking refuge in a new myth of immediacy between signs and things is the allusion to a reality where the laws of flat fictionality are operative themselves. A scene early in Pynchon's novel sets the tone:

The Chums of Chance could have been granted no more appropriate form of "ground-leave" than the Chicago Fair, as the great national celebration possessed the exact degree of fictitiousness to permit the boys access and agency. The harsh nonfictional world waited outside the White City's limits, held off for this brief summer, making the entire commemorative season beside Lake Michigan at once dream-like and real.

If there were any plots afoot to commit bomb or other outrages upon the Fair, the *Inconvenience* was ideal not only for scanning the grounds fence to fence, but also for keeping an eye out against any sea-borne assaults contemplated from the Lake side. Fairgoers would see the ship overhead and yet not see it, for at the Fair, where miracles were routinely expected, nothing this summer was too big, too fast, too fantastically rigged out to impress anybody for more than a minute and a half, before the next marvel appeared. *Inconvenience* would fit right in, as one more effect whose only purpose was to entertain. (P 36)

Here, the opening setting of Pynchon's *Against the Day*, the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, is introduced as a both temporarily and spatially limited territory (6 months, 280 hectares) isolated from the "harsh nonfictional world" and much more ruled by the law of flat fictionality than by causality and daily commerce. However, as cut off as it seems from the outside world, the Fair is not presented as a simulation of reality, but rather as the aestheticized space of the festival where some ordinary laws are suspended, but others are still active or even more so. The Fair's "exact degree of fictitiousness" allows the Chums of Chance, a carefree boy group of freelance aeronauts who might or might not know on behalf of which dark forces they are sent on their adventures to the four corners of the world, to slip out of their cramped space of genre literature and into the more "real" space of the World Fair or the "genre-poaching" (McHale) novel respectively.

Once again, this conception is completely different from simulationism, the view that sees all of reality as a simulacrum. Simulations are imagined as closed, conceptual spaces that do not permit real "access and agency (P 36)." As highly fictional entities, the Chums use flat fictionality as camouflage to mingle with the "real" world's population who can and cannot see them at the same time. As the novel proceeds deeper into the disastrous (and long) 20<sup>th</sup> century and closer towards World War I, the fictional energies bound in the limited space of the World Exhibition seem to be increasingly unleashed onto the whole World-Island. The decline of Empires at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century leaves formerly colonized and clearly demarcated territories open for geopolitical contest where states of exception increasingly become the norm. The novel moves comically from one exceptional situation to another, but the background remains constantly dark and all-too-real.

In what follows, the borders between fact and fiction, between the imaginary and the real, between genre integrity and genre transgression become more and more porous. However, the imaginary complements the real instead of replacing it altogether. Instead of a simulation of reality, we get an

expanded sense of the real where imaginary and speculative elements exist alongside the more familiar features of empirical experience. One privileged site of this expansion of the sense and structure of the real in *Against the Day* is the evolution of modern mathematics. In one of the novel's many moments where the metaphorical potential of mathematics is translated into the novelistic space, we listen to an Indian mathematical prodigy and Yoga practitioner speculatively (and spectacularly) applying the "discovery of Imaginary numbers" (P 133) to human existence:

And considered subjectively," added Dr. V. Ganesh Rao of the Calcutta University, "as an act of becoming longer or shorter, while at the same time turning, among axes whose unit vector is not the familiar and comforting 'one' but the altogether disquieting square root of minus one. If you were a vector, mademoiselle, you would begin in the 'real' world, change your length, enter an 'imaginary' reference system, rotate up to three different ways, and return to 'reality' a new person. Or vector."

"Fascinating. But... human beings aren't vectors. Are they? (P 539)

Human beings might not really be vectors, but literary characters might.<sup>340</sup> Anyway, it doesn't seem to be of too great importance for the speculative ontology unfolded by Ganesh Rao in this little scene. The Parmenidian ontology of the One is not only loosened into a Heraclitian dialectics, but exaggerated into the hardly thinkable by means of the latest discoveries in mathematics, namely imaginary numbers. Within the mathematically infused metaphorology, what has been otherwise hard to imagine becomes suddenly thinkable – an action that begins in three-dimensional,

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<sup>340</sup> This is also suggested by the name of the core family in *Against the Day* – TRAVERSE.

Euclidean reality, then expands into an imaginary space beyond the geometric and spatiotemporal habits from where it comes back as an altered entity.<sup>341</sup>

The extension of empirical reality by an additional imaginary coordinate axis produces a growing sense of the unreality of experience. When the African American sports journalist Oscar Fate moves further and further into the vortex of the North Mexican night life, Bolaño writes succinctly and quite unmetaphorically: "La sensación de la irrealidad que le perseguía aquella noche se acentuó." (B 407) In conjunction with the recurring formula *as if*, then, the hyperbolically expanded metaphorical scenes are a privileged site for the sense of unreality to creep in. This has, of course, the function of exposing the poetic discourse in its flat fictionality and elusiveness. But it also reveals a trace of the real which points to the fact that many vital and fateful events and encounters occur under the signature of heightened irreality.

Like many commentators from the camp newly interested in ontology beyond the human, Timothy Morton's concept of *hyperobjects* references such a structure of reality where the experience of irreality is precisely a symptom of something important being at stake: "The feeling of being inside a hyperobject contains a necessary element of unreality – yet this is a symptom of its reality." (HO 146) Morton starts with a survey of reality at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Reality is becoming weirder and weirder (HO 147),<sup>342</sup> excessive, and untamable for both the subject and society. Humans are losing their status as privileged forms of existence and appear on one and

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<sup>341</sup> This movement beyond the familiar, but also the return to shared perceptual grounds is precisely hyperbole's role in Marc Richir's philosophy. It is, however, always a risky movement, in which the return from provisional madness can never be fully guaranteed.

<sup>342</sup> Weirdness is one of the key interests of both speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy. See Graham Harman: *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Zero Books, Alresford, 2012; and Fisher: *Weird and Eerie*.

the same ontological level together with other organisms and even inorganic actants. On the other hand, humans suddenly find themselves forced into a new special role at the center of planetary existence. As a result of cultural and technological interference with nature, they have become a geological factor – a tragic fact that has led to the claim that we are moving into a new planetary era named after its central and ominous protagonist: *anthropos*. Human hubris and the furor of modernization without any ecological sense for sustainability and political regulation have produced a reality structure where man traumatically encounters the disastrous consequences of his own, seemingly innocent creations. A large, perhaps the most important, part of the real in the Anthropocenic era and in a world that is in permanent danger of ecological collapse operates on extremely macroscopic and microscopic scales at the same time. This poses severe challenges to our systems of attention and perception largely accustomed to directly perceptible objects and narratives with a modest quantity of characters and a manageable degree of complexity.

*Hyperbolic realism* can be understood as the attempt to translate Morton's essayistic claims into the space of literature. Irreality, flat fictionality and the intermittence of the counterfactual and fantastic are mobilized in order to approach a reality that appears as already strange, distorted, fantastic, excessive and hyperbolic. In a brilliant reading of *2666*, Sharae Deckard has summed this up succinctly: "This work does not deal in supernatural events narrated in a naturalist style but appropriates a language of the spectral or supernatural to narrate a totality experienced as unreal."<sup>343</sup>

It follows from the unreal experience of the hyperbolically real that human agency and, accordingly, narrative form are condemned to a constitutive belatedness in relation to the very reality they try to handle. In Pynchon's and Bolaño's texts, this constitutive lateness or, as we could say, this

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<sup>343</sup> Deckard: "Peripheral Realism," 355.



transcendental trauma is constantly at play. If retrospection is usually supposed to bring order to chaos, to sort out what exactly has happened from a distance, here the sensation of irreality is continued beyond the actual event: "Con la luz diurna los sucesos de la noche anterior parecían irreales, revestidos de una gravedad infantil." (B 434)

What Chris Kraus writes in one of the smartest sentences in a book replete with smartness also applies to our novels' refusal to fix a "view from nowhere"<sup>344</sup> from which the sensation of irreality can ultimately be integrated into the larger system of reality: "You never sense the 'aftermath' because always, something else starts up along the way."<sup>345</sup> Just as there is no aftermath in which the past events can be fully described and controlled, there is also no clearly defined beginning of any sequence of the real. The already quoted passage from the beginning of the fourth part makes this unmistakably clear when the narrator starts his counting of (and accounting for) the *feminicidios* with the first victim of the year 1993 – "pero es probable que no fuera la primera muerta", and: "seguramente en 1992 murieron otros." (444) The inevitability of beginning somewhere is confronted with the impossibility of a beginning which is not always already thwarted by reality itself. In *hyperbolic realism*, there is no view from nowhere, no ultimate distance from which discourse can retrospectively describe and control experience. The diachrony between reality and narrative, event and reflection, being and appearance is fundamental and cannot be cancelled out.

The experience of irreality, when suspected to be a symptom of a particularly powerful formation of the real, often leads to situations of perceptual claustrophobia. We can already see this in one of the very first metaphorical moments in 2666:

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<sup>344</sup> Thomas Nagel: *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, New York/NY i. a., 1989.

<sup>345</sup> Chris Kraus: *I Love Dick*, Semiotext(e), New York/NY, 1997, 75.

Ambos, Pelletier y Espinoza, respetaban los estudios de Morini, pero las palabras de Pelletier (pronunciadas como en el interior de un viejo castillo o como en el interior de una mazmorra excavada bajo el foso de un viejo castillo) sonaron como una amenaza en el apacible restaurancito de la rue Galande y contribuyeron a poner punto final a una velada que se había iniciado bajo los auspicios de la cortesía y de los deseos satisfechos. (B 25)

The parenthesis optically preconfigures what is fully realized by metaphorical language: the words seem distanced, uncannily duplicated by the echo chambers of an old castle shaped to accommodate something like the "ritual reluctance,"<sup>346</sup> which is the aesthetic signature of the Jacobean revenge play in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. At the same time, we encounter Bolaño's beloved tactic to negate, correct and hyperbolically stretch his initial metaphors. Since while it had been somehow intelligible how threatening words sound in the wide spaces of an old castle, it is infinitely more difficult to determine what the same words mean when uttered in a dungeon excavated from under a moat.

At least two remote passages in *2666* connect the phenomenon of metaphorical "insideness" with the cultural imaginary of Aztec culture – the quintessential enigmatic other for the colonial eye of us Westerners: "los yacimientos aztecas que surgían como [...] flores de piedra en medio de otras floras de piedra" (B 140), and: "así imagino [...] el lago de los aztecas [...] con

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<sup>346</sup> Thomas Pynchon: *The Crying of Lot 49* [1966], Vintage, New York/NY, 2007, 51. This is how the longer quote reads: "It is at about this point in the play, in fact, that things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now, as the Duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage; though it is difficult to imagine, given the excesses of the preceding acts, what these things could possibly be."

multitud de pirámides, tantas y tan grandes que es imposible contarlas, pirámides superpuestas, pirámides que ocultan otras pirámides (B 871).

One of the many minor characters with short but spectacular appearances defines reality itself with an image of immersion: "La realidad es como un padrote drogado en medio de una tormenta de truenos y relámpagos, dijo la diputada." (B 765) Once again the riddle is hard to solve: reality as a pimp high on drugs – what on earth could this mean? And what could be the equivalent of the prostitutes, the suitors and the guardians of public morals (not mentioned by the metaphorical turn)? By keeping contact with the concrete speech act, there is also always the rather trivial option that this image is nothing else but an effect of an affect on the side of the uttering subject, the *diputada* en Santa Teresa. Bolaño's metaphors are often surrounded by an aura of considerable *pathos* – but at the same time they are constantly exposed to the opposite effect of *bathos*, of falling back into the quotidian, the literal, the non-figurative and the impulsive affect.

Metaphoric claustrophobia is, more than in *Against the Day*, a determining feature of *Gravity's Rainbow* where not only Tyrone Slothrop, but many other characters constantly suffer from the paranoid<sup>347</sup> fear of being captured under violent surveillance systems they cannot fully decipher nor escape in the long run.<sup>348</sup> For one, the early sentence: "Slothrop's Progress:

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<sup>347</sup> See Kathryn Hume: "The Religious and Political Vision of *Against the Day*," (in Christopher Leise, Jeffrey Severs (eds.): *Pynchon's Against the Day. A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, University of Delaware Press, Newark/NJ, 2011, 167–190) who calls *ATD* Pynchon's "least paranoid novel." (168)

<sup>348</sup> In *Against the Day*, figurative claustrophobia more often seems to be an individual state than the result of a socio-technological apparatus: "Deuce sometimes felt like he had put his head into a very small room, one no bigger, in fact, than human head size, unechoing, close and still." (P 476) Whereas in *Gravity's Rainbow* survival seems to be hardly possible outside of the tiny interstices so far unconquered by the system, *ATD*'s reality is often defined as vast and open leaving space for all kinds of navigating enthusiasms and conquering fantasies, but

London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he can find himself inside a parable" (GR 25) is extremely cynical because Slothrop isn't getting away from the dark forces that have him under control. As the famous formula at the very beginning of the novel states, progression in Gravity's Rainbow (and in Pynchon's literature, in general) is usually not emancipative – not "a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into" (GR 3) the structures of bio-political control and surveillance. On the other hand, the novel intimates that insights into one's own fate are only, if at all, possible when characters plunge adventurously into the inner space of those parables constantly provided by reality and its oppressing corporate apparatuses (capitalism, fascism, the State, the military, science).

As a consequence of his experimentally induced state of constant arousal, Slothrop's perceptual adventures are often closely linked to his experimentation with out-of-the-ordinary sexual behavior. Among his many encounters is the one with "little Bianca," the daughter of famous actress Greta Erdmann, somewhere in the Zone and the middle of the book – a scene that dangerously oscillates between actual event and hallucinatory fantasy. In this potentially pedophilic moment of borderline intimacy, Slothrop suddenly experiences the world from, no joke, inside his erect member:

Now something, oh, kind of *funny* happens here. Not that Slothrop is really aware of it now, while it's going on—but later on, it will occur to him that he was—this may sound odd, but he was somehow, actually, well, *inside his own cock*. If you can imagine such a thing. Yes, inside the metropolitan organ entirely, all other colonial tissue forgotten and left to fend for itself, his arms and legs it seems *woven* among vessels and ducts, his sperm roaring louder

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also growing danger of disorientation. However, *ATD* also intimates that the room for maneuvering is becoming increasingly smaller as reality moves closer into modernity which is, paradoxically, the historical moment where the means for physical mobility will be accelerated to the extreme.

and louder, getting ready to erupt, somewhere below his feet . . . maroon and evening cunlight reaches him in a single ray through the opening at the top, refracted through the clear juices flowing up around him. He is enclosed. Everything is about to come, come incredibly, and he's helpless here in this exploding *emprise* . . . red flesh echoing ... an extraordinary sense of *waiting to rise*. . . . (GR 469-70)

The scene accommodates a sufficient number of elements we've already encountered: the retrospective view rendering the event as strange as or even stranger than it was in the heat of the moment; the lack of straightforwardness with which the metaphor is delivered; its somehow, but "not strictly metaphorical" (P 431) character as an actually embodied state of perception; the structure of self-commentary and self-reflection; the pushing of the figurative expression to the edge of credibility and the possibility of visualizing it as a coherent image; the sense of confinement, helplessness and yet, if not real "access and agency" (P 36), a certain contact with the world.

As almost everything in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the encounter with Bianca will ultimately resist final interpretation by the reader and by Slothrop himself, leaving behind a sense of wonder about both the extreme event and the eccentric language used to deal with it. But if Slothrop's, the narrator's and somehow the readers' question: "What happened back there?" (GR 470) remains ultimately unanswered, this doesn't mean that there is nothing to retain from the scene, the event, the description. Bianca's real nature is hiding out in the text just like she promises Slothrop to hide him: "I'm a child, I know how to hide." (GR 470) This will not happen, Slothrop will continue his uncertain pilgrimage further into the Zone and Bianca will vanish into the "textual unconscious."<sup>349</sup> But, as we have seen in the previous chapter, within the

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<sup>349</sup> Bernard Duyfhuizen: "'A Suspension Forever at the Hinge of Doubt.' The Reader-Trap Of Bianca in *Gravity's Rainbow*," in *Postmodern Culture* 2:1, September 1991, <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.991/duyfhu-1.991> (accessed January 30, 2018), § 1–27, § 13.

strange worlds of *hyperbolic realism* disappearance is sometimes the condition for characters to come into existence in the first place: "Right here, right now, under the makeup and the fancy underwear, she *exists*, love, invisibility. . . . For Slothrop this is some discovery." (GR 470)

### *The dismal metonymies of the dead*

Let me conclude with this: Irreality is lurking everywhere in the universe of *hyperbolic realism*. At times the whole discourse appears to be impregnated by the formula *as if* which often inaugurates extensive figurative scenes such that it remains unclear where its influence ends. As a whole, metaphorical expressions metonymically dominate the text while bursting out into punctually hyperbolic "lateral resurrections." At the same time, the sense of irreality often points towards the signature of extreme reality where what initially seemed exaggerated and hard to believe gradually reveals itself as rather probable or actually true. [see chapter III.2 of this dissertation]

Pynchon and Bolaño venture deep into the fantastic and the metaphorical, but they do it within realistically grounded poetic projects that do not halt at the subjective distortions of perception, but try to get at the eccentricity of the real itself. Hyperbolic expressions often produce extremely mannered unfoldings of metaphors full of redundancies, exaltations and cat-achreses. Metaphors clothed with hyperboles are risky forms of expression, always in danger of being too exaggerated, too ridiculous, too hypertrophic, too much of everything.

In the same vein, we could problematize Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects by stating that the heightened sense of irreality alone is not enough to prove that an extreme form of reality lies behind. Morton's elaborations are often seductive, but they don't tell us how we can distinguish

between irreality produced by the hyperobject and irreality produced by esoteric projection and magical thinking.

Bernhard Duyfhuizen writes about Slothrop's encounter with Bianca: "If we grant that we cannot know Bianca because of the narrative filters of fetish and hallucination, can we even be sure – in a perfectly pynchonian paradox–of the certainty of our fantasy?"<sup>350</sup>

With Bolaño and Pynchon we could answer: not at all, or at least not case by case. *Against the Day* (much more than *2666*) strains ontological tolerance to the extreme – even the most improbable phenomena can co-exist with the most accepted realities for the perceptual faith of characters and readers. It is this very uncertainty about the distinction between the real and the rest, between fantasy and history that drives the narrative and its not always quite human actors: Inspired by remote interpretations of historical mathematics, political extremism or cutting-edge capitalist management strategies, the characters pursue their fate trying to endure and survive, or, like the main villain Scarsdale Vibe, to manipulate the world for his evil needs.

Linked to the trajectories of the novels' characters, metaphor not only works as the extension of semiotic capacities, but often gives way to meta-metaphorological reflections taking part in the formation of a hidden theory of action. In Bolaño's *2666*, the reflection that comes closest to an aphoristic definition is staged by Barry Seaman, African American editor-in-chief of a Harlem sports magazine, who sends the main protagonist of the third part, Oscar Fate, to Santa Teresa to report on a boxing match:

Las metáforas son nuestra manera de perdernos en las apariciones o de quedarnos inmóviles en el mar de las apariencias. (B 322)

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<sup>350</sup> Duyfhuizen, "Reader-Trap," § 14.

Metaphor not as *decorum* or as the attempt to express the ineffable, but as a strategy of survival and endurance in the overwhelming flood of appearances. Like in many metaphor theories, Barry Seaman's definition of the metaphor is itself metaphorical.<sup>351</sup> Metaphor is linked to adventure, but against expectations it is not an adventure that sparks activity. Instead, the adventure lies in the task of remaining passive, immobile, and of getting lost.

What the metaphor teaches to characters and readers alike as theory of action is, to say it with the words of Timothy Morton, action in the mode of as-if. Facing ecological and political challenges on a global scale in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we cannot always afford to wait for statistical evidence in order to get active. Confronted with a possible threat, Morton highly recommends that we should act "as if the threat was real."<sup>352</sup> A similar ethos shines through the novels of *hyperbolic realism* where the most supernatural and counterfactual phenomena can be treated as unapologetically real while the realist intention is never fully abandoned. Metaphor is a vehicle for temporary and never quite unproblematic access to (or contact with) parallel universes that have always existed alongside our day-to-day-world, but interact with it only sporadically. There is something about the notorious ambivalence of metaphors that simultaneously veils and unveils this flickering appearance of alternative universes within the world constructed by our perceptual faith.

Bolaño and Pynchon push this ambivalence further by not conceiving concealment as a lack, but often as a condition that something can survive within the "ocean of appearances" in the first place. Their metaphor works

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<sup>351</sup> See the very first sentence of Donald Davidson: "What Metaphors Mean," in *Critical Inquiry* 5:1, Autumn 1978, 31–47, 31: "Metaphor is the dreamwork of language."

<sup>352</sup> See (HO 182): "What we need is more like what Judge Nicolas Zambrano finally did in the case, which was to suspend the endless construction of (necessarily incomplete statistical) data, and specify that precisely because there is a gap in our knowledge – what do these heavy hydrocarbons do exactly? – to determine that the best action is to act as if the threat were real."



analogously to *Iceland Spar*, the powerful mineral that plays a leading role in *Against the Day* and is responsible for widening the doors of perception (*bi-perception*) before it becomes the entry point for alternative ontological forms of existence (*bilocation*):

Iceland spar is what hides the Hidden People, makes it possible for them to move through the world that thinks of itself as 'real,' provides that all-important ninety-degree twist to their light, so they can exist alongside our own world but not be seen. They and others as well, visitors from elsewhere, of non-human aspect. (P 133)

The various underworlds revealed in Pynchon's and Bolaño's novels exist quite untouched from the "daylit" (P 566) reality that doesn't deny deviant elements, but always keeps them safely away in a sort of "ontological quarantine."<sup>353</sup> In *hyperbolic realism*, the manifold borders between dominant and alternative worlds are not completely blurred, but they become permeable and porous to various degrees.<sup>354</sup> Within the whole hyperreal and fantastic atmosphere, the realistic question always lurks in the background echoing Slothrop's astonishment in the aftermath of his liminal encounter with Bianca: "What happened back there?" Yet, at times this question remains so far in the background that the whole atmosphere of the novel becomes oneiric and dreamlike. In *Paradiso*, arguably one of the most challenging maximalist novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, José Lezama Lima finds timeless words for

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<sup>353</sup> Anselm Franke: "The Third House," in *Glass Bead, Site 0: Castalia, The Game of Ends and Meanings*, 2016, <http://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-third-house/?lang=enview> (accessed January 25, 2018), 1–15, 8.

<sup>354</sup> "The luxuriant world of the parrot on the label, though seemingly as remote from this severe ice-scape as could be imagined, in fact was **separated from it by only the thinnest of membranes**. To get from one to the other one had only to fill one's attention unremittingly with the bird's image, abasing oneself meantime before his contempt, and repeat '*Cuidado cabrón!*' preferably with a parrot accent, until the phrase no longer had meaning [...]." (P 130, my emphasis)

the porosities between the worlds resonating with the most ethereal moments in *hyperbolic realism* where the *as if* temporarily kidnaps the whole discourse:

Ahora en el fondo del tragante, José Eugenio Cemí levantaba la jarra, curvándola sobre un vaso, que a medida que su mano acrecentaba la parábola de la caída de las aguas, por esa elasticidad del sueño que borra las dimensiones entre los objetos, llegando a convertirse en una cascada rodeada de una naturaleza detenida, congelada, sin claroscuro temporal, donde la materia se había rendido a la penetración de las aguas en el sueño. Mundo espongiario, indistinto, donde las concéntricas rosetas indiferenciadas, señalaban las contracciones de su desprendimiento, inexistente la región donde el color, como una sombra que muerde al retroceder, también inútil sus mordeduras, comenzó a fijarse. (PA 125)

Let me affirm for the last time that this onto-poetic view on the world, although it recognizes extreme degrees of irreality, does not consider the world as a conspiratorial network of simulations. Comparing reality to a sponge produces a much more porous imagination than what postmodern paranoia can produce. Reality as a sponge releases its stored energies depending on the pressure exerted on it and provides greater possibilities for the new and fantastic to permeate our everyday ontologies.

Once and again, in moments of extreme sensation of irreality, the hyperbolically real paves its way through the spongy world and reveals itself at the joints of juxtaposed possible universes. As the alternative ontologies of these universes can be deciphered metaphorically and metonymically, at least partly and indirectly, strange and fateful encounters across conflicting realities become possible.

As a last consequence, trans-mundane encounters become negotiations between the worlds of the living and the dead. He "coalesced slowly into the dark institutional hour" (P 673) is the opener of the scene where Kit

meets his dead father, once a leading anarchist in Colorado, assassinated by vile capitalist Scarsdale Vibe's henchmen.<sup>355</sup> The formula prepares the exceptional merging of two worlds that are usually separate. Kit's confusion drives him into claustrophobic anxiety "thinking he was somehow in jail." Again, night and darkness are particularly susceptible to accommodate liminal experiences. Kit is attuned to receive all the "voices and flows and mechanical repetitions he was forbidden to hear in daytime." A typically brief moment of revelation follows where he feels a "terrible certainty he couldn't immediately name but which he knew he had to live under the weight of now."

The encounter is marked by the mutual feeling of guilt and failure – on Webb's side, the failure of care and fatherhood; on Kit's side, his guilty conscience about receiving life support from his father's assassins and the fact that he was not there when his father died. The bitter lesson of this scene, then, is that post-mortal communication cannot compensate for what had been missed out in the past. The encounter between the worlds, between the living and the dead does not lead to salvation. Despite the brief contact between Kit and his father, despite the hyperbolic "lateral resurrection[s]" (P 431) of metaphors – what prevails in the end is the insurmountable distance, the melancholy about the fact that what should have been spoken out once can only be implied by the extremely elliptic form of metonymy:

He must have wanted all along to be the one son Webb could believe in – no matter what kind of trouble Reef might be rambling around out there looking to get into, or how pro-or anti-Union Frank's engineering ambitions might turn out to be, Kit had always thought he would be there for his father no matter what, if only because there was nothing in the way of it, nothing he could see. But then just like that there he was, out of the house and down in the meanest part of the U.S., and before he could even remember who he

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<sup>355</sup> The encounter is delicate since, in a typically Pynchonian systemic irony, Scarsdale, the murder of his father, has financed Kit's math studies with a scholarship.

was, Webb was gone. If he could only've been surer of Kit, maybe when the awful hour came to claim him, he could have fought back by just enough extra will to survive after all. Restricted now to séances and dreams, he could no longer say this to Kit in so many words but must use the stripped and dismal metonymies of the dead. (P 673)

## II.4 SED TAMEN EFFABOR. ONTOLOGICAL SIMULACRUM, NARRATIVE DOUBT, AND THE STUBBORNESS OF LANGUAGE

*Meu duvidar é uma petição por mais certeza.*

(J. G. Rosa)

*First you say you can't believe it – and then you really don't believe it*

Towards the end of the first part of 2666, the novel takes the two European critics Pelletier and Espinoza and its readers to Mexico to try to follow the tracks of Archiboldi. At this point of the novel, the critics' literary appraisal for the German reclusive writer is has already become a capricious obsession. Unsurprisingly, they don't find Archiboldi, but the failure of their quest confronts them with an even more enigmatic reality: the "history of the murdered women":

Espinoza recordó entonces que durante la noche pasada uno de los muchachos les había contado la historia de las mujeres asesinadas. Sólo recordaba que el muchacho había dicho que eran más de doscientas y que tuvo que repetirlo dos o tres veces, pues ni él ni Pelletier daban crédito a lo que oían.  
(B 181)

The critics' first reaction to news about the *feminicidios* is astonishment and disbelief. Critical doubt being part of their professional identities, they seem to be at first too involved with the symbolic to be ready for the brutal reality waiting for them in Santa Teresa. While Espinoza embarks on a love-seeking adventure with Rosa Amalfitano (who will be one of the main protagonists of the second and especially the third part), Pelletier, after a brief moment of consternation, swaps Archiboldi's novels for the daily pa-

per, lifts his head from his immersion in Archiboldi's aesthetics of marginality and tries to get a picture of what is going on around him: "Quiero enterarme de qué está pasando en esta ciudad." (B 181)

While Pelletier is trying to break through the sealed surfaces of words and signs (he doesn't really speak Spanish), Espinoza meditates on the possible meaning of the formula *no dar crédito* used by the narrator.

No dar crédito, sin embargo, pensó Espinoza, es una forma de exagerar. Uno ve algo hermoso y no da crédito a sus ojos. Te cuentan algo sobre... la belleza natural de Islandia..., gente bañándose en aguas termales, entre géiseres, en realidad tú ya lo has visto en fotos, pero igual dices que no te lo puedes creer... Aunque evidentemente lo crees... Exagerar es una forma de admirar cortésmente... Das el pie para que tu interlocutor diga: es verdad... Y entonces dices: es increíble. Primero no te lo puedes creer y luego te parece increíble. (B 181)

Once again, Bolaño's scene oscillates between the narrator's extensive but not unrestricted omniscience and the focalization on the characters' view. It also flickers between almost unintelligible banality and evocative reflexivity with metapoetic weight. Taken seriously, Espinoza's daydreaming reflection stages a direct confrontation of disbelief and exaggeration, or, to put it differently, of doubt and hyperbole.

The unsuspecting phrase *no dar crédito* gives way to two paradoxes. The first is rather harmless: confronted with a powerful phenomenon we say that we can't believe it even if we saw it before and even if, *en realidad*, we usually do believe it. At least *somehow, anyhow*.

Yet, what seems to be a mere rhetorical effect – the faking of doubt and disbelief in the face of extreme reality – can get out of control: "y luego te parece increíble." This second paradox is much less common sense than the pretension of disbelief that was previously portrayed as a standard effect of language. The formulaic use of exaggeration is intended to maintain the

phatic contact between the interlocutors, but there is always the danger that you *really* don't believe something you only pretended to doubt.

At least *somehow, anyhow*. In the context of the *feminicidios* in Santa Teresa, we could interpret Espinoza's phrasing as a subtle hint to the cynical relation between knowledge and political action. All actors know and believe more or less what is going on in the North Mexican city that borders the US, yet most of them don't seem to believe it strongly enough or in the right manner to gather forces to do something about it. Transposed into a political key, "I can't believe it" sounds like the society of spectacle's infinitely rehearsed standard reaction to violence and inequality: constant indignation without the willingness to disentangle the systemic conditions of violence, to name names and to assume political responsibility. Instead, public rumor, the media and even the institutions that are supposed to solve the crimes produce and reproduce "unbelievable" stories about alleged serial killers who roam around Santa Teresa torturing, raping and killing preferably working class women at random.

In another vein, *no dar crédito* is what Bolaño and Pynchon constantly do in relation to the official versions of history and the narratives that shape the present. Since radical skepticism about all sorts of alleged authenticity (history, language, gender etc.) has been a trademark feature of postmodernism, this might be hardly worth mentioning as a new thing.

Yet, when juxtaposing *2666* and *Against the Day* with the larger context of the authors' corpus, doubt and uncertainty seem less excessively foregrounded than in more orthodox postmodern settings. Earlier texts by the same authors such as *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Estrella distante*, for instance,

perform linguistic and expressive skepticism much more explicitly than do their maximalist counterparts.<sup>356</sup>

In times of gradually fading postmodern convictions, *2666* and *Against the Day* refuse to put their narrative doubt into the service of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Instead, narrative doubt remains a rather hidden potential of the text's unconscious that only sporadically pops up on the surface.<sup>357</sup> This touches on my conception of hyperbole as an intermittent *figura* that impregnates the whole narrative universe while often remaining discretely in the background.

At first glance, it might seem strange to regard doubt and hyperbole as related or even homologous. Especially when we presuppose that radical doubt interrupts discourse and establishes an unbridgeable chasm between words and things whereas hyperbole is supposed to indulge in superlatives and to speak out about extreme events and experiences. However, such a binary view of doubt and hyperbole is misleading. As Descartes' famous example demonstrates, doubt tends to become hyperbolic itself without con-

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<sup>356</sup> To provide just a minor example from Pynchon's *Lot 49*, 33: "Off the coast of either what is now Carmel-by-the-Sea, or what is now Pismo Beach, around noon or possibly toward dusk, the two ships sighted each other. One of them may have fired, if it did then the other responded; but both were out of range so neither showed a scar afterward to prove anything." *Around noon or possibly towards dusk* – a time indication that leaves quite a lot of room for doubt and uncertainty.

<sup>357</sup> My conception of doubt as latent or intermittent textual potential comes close to Namwali Serpell's conception of uncertainty in her book *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*. Unlike Empson's seven types of ambiguity, vagueness and uncertainty are not so much punctual stylistic phenomena, but rather modes of composition and atmospheric *Stimmungen* of the text. They are distributive rather than locally fixed elements. Serpell writes on doubt in the context of the multiplicity of perspectives (or what she calls the discussion of the "Rashomon effect"): "If we view multiplicity under a phenomenological lens, we see that its various literary manifestations possess varying degrees of doubt about 'what really happened.' These degrees of doubt depend as much on the thickness and intensity of the text's mode of uncertainty as on where we land at its end." (SMU 116)



testing the need to seek knowledge in a more systematic way. And hyperbole, on the other hand, is not necessarily naive and triumphant, but capable of taking into account in its own shortcomings.

*Extravagant doubt and the suspension of mimesis (Johnson, Levine)*

In *Hyperboles*, Christopher Johnson keeps coming back to the complex relation between doubt and hyperbole. Through his examples, it becomes clear that doubt is not necessarily a cautionary discursive strategy, but can be extremely combative.

In Sor Juana's *Sueños*, doubt is intimately connected to desire and the risk of self-exposure (HY 268). In the ninth chapter of his book, which analyzes the relation between skepticism, stoicism and hyperbole's "provisional violence against belief," (HY 291) "extravagant doubt" (HY 309) describes the affective pathos that settles in the gaps "between saying and meaning" (HY 281) left open by textual disbelief.

In another chapter, Descartes' notorious use of hyperbolic doubt is seen as both an attack on the dogmatic certainty of scholasticism and as an attempt to overcome the skeptics influenced by the *crise pyrrhoniennne*. (HY 413) In Johnson's account, (hyperbolic) doubt reveals its extremely versatile and stubborn nature. In order to break through to his final philosophical solution – the discovery of the cogito and the exclusion of any possible existence of a *deus malignus* –, Descartes first needs to fight off a wide range of specters.

If Johnson's treatment is more concerned with poetics, rhetoric and philosophy, Elizabeth Levine analyzes doubt with a more resolute focus on

narrative. In a short chapter of her book *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense. Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*,<sup>358</sup> Levine reads George Eliot's story *The Lifted Veil* (1859) as an attack on the two main pillars of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism: mimesis and suspense.

As a result of the dwindling interest in literature as an instrument for creating suspenseful representations of reality, Eliot's first-person narrator becomes self-reflective.<sup>359</sup> His short autobiographical narrative is replete with evocative passages in which reality dissolves into impressionist pastel-colored fragments. The explicit and implicit narrative doubt around mimesis and suspense serves as a prompter for the escape of a rich banker son from business life. In seclusion, his restless mind is "wandering uncertainly in search of more vivid images" and moments of "clairvoyance."<sup>360</sup>

Let's hear one of the central passages on doubt from Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*:

So absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond to-day, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between; we should pant after the uncertainties of our one morning and our one afternoon; we should rush fiercely to the Exchange for our last possibility of speculation, of success, of disappointment: we should have a glut of political prophets foretelling a crisis or a no-crisis within the only twenty-four hours left open to prophecy.

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<sup>358</sup> University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville/VA, 2003, 127–137.

<sup>359</sup> Fittingly, he can draw from the memory of his hesitant literary ambitions as a young man.

<sup>360</sup> Levine, *Suspense*, 131. See George Eliot: *The Lifted Veil*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2165/2165-h/2165-h.htm> (accessed January 30, 2018): "I used to do as Jean Jacques did – lie down in my boat and let it glide where it would, while I looked up at the departing glow leaving one mountain-top after the other, as if the prophet's chariot of fire were passing over them on its way to the home of light."

Just like epistemic doubt does not erode the soul, but breathes life into it, narrative doubt does not interrupt the text's progress, but drives it forward.

According to its versatile nature in Eliot's text, doubt is closely associated to and almost synonymous with two other notions: hope and effort. This has two implications for a phenomenology of literary doubt. First, instead of being mutually exclusive, doubt and hope, expectation and belief uphold the enigmatic character of the real against the terror of certainty.<sup>361</sup> And secondly, the coupling of doubt and effort, which connects doubt to the concept of labor, suggest that both the soul's and the text's life cannot be organized once and for all. The labor of figuration includes doubt, textual decisions must be taken laboriously, case by case, and every time anew.

### *Lucretius reacts to the myth of the ineffable*

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book 5, verse 104. Right at the beginning of the crucial moment in Lucretius' epos where he outlines his cosmology, we encounter the following passage:

But for the rest, – lest we delay thee here  
Longer by empty promises – behold,  
Before all else, the seas, the lands, the sky:  
O Memmius, their threefold nature, lo,  
Their bodies three, three aspects so unlike,  
Three frames so vast, a single day shall give

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<sup>361</sup> It is important that this attack on certainty entails both positive and negative affects although we must not hastily identify doubt with the negative and hope with the positive pole of affectivity. At the same time, fetishizing doubt and uncertainty can have the undesirable opposite effect of reducing literary uncertainty to a "monolithic otherness (SMU 301)."

Unto annihilation! Then shall crash  
That massive form and fabric of the world  
Sustained so many aeons! Nor do I  
Fail to perceive how strange and marvellous  
This fact must strike the intellect of man, –  
Annihilation of the sky and earth  
That is to be, – and with what toil of words  
'Tis mine to prove the same; as happens oft  
When once ye offer to man's listening ears  
Something before unheard of, but may not  
Subject it to the view of eyes for him  
Nor put it into hand – the sight and touch,  
Whereby the opened highways of belief  
Lead most directly into human breast  
And regions of intelligence. But yet  
I will speak out. The fact itself, perchance,  
Will force belief in these my words, and thou  
Mayst see, in little time, tremendously  
With risen commotions of the lands all things  
Quaking to pieces – which afar from us  
May she, the steersman Nature, guide: and may  
Reason, O rather than the fact itself,  
Persuade us that all things can be o'erthrown  
And sink with awful-sounding breakage down!<sup>362</sup>

In this breathtaking passage, Lucretius confronts the addressee of the text, his friend Memmius, and thus the readers with nothing less than the certainty of world's future collapse. I have quoted the passage at such extended length to provide a sense of the rhythmic atmosphere in which this

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<sup>362</sup> Lucretius: *De Rerum Natura*, transl. William Ellery Leonard, Dutton, London, 1916, V 91-109.

"before unheard" fact is spoken out. Hidden at the heart of this passage is the rhetoric gesture that lends its name to my chapter: *sed tamen effabor* – "But yet I will speak it out." It is a moment where radical doubt about the expressibility of the cosmos is raised – a doubt that will be eventually overcome.

Consistently, the passage starts with a self-reflective call to stop delaying the imminent moment of decision and to move from the mere rhetorical promise to its actual fulfillment. Not only does the text state the inevitability of ultimate extinction and the immortality of all things under, but also above the sun for not even the gods are exempted from Lucretius' universal extinction. It also sets the stage for the central idea of Epicurean cosmology – that the whole universe and the formation of matter (and thus culture) is based on nothing but chance. Such ideas inevitably provoke astonishment, wonder and anxiety in among the audience members whose ears are not yet accustomed to them; and, as Lucretius anticipates, it will take a lot of laborious effort ("what toil of words") to convince his listeners of the truth of this early version of aleatory materialism.

Lucretius flirts with the famous topos of the ineffable, but his materialist theory of both language and the cosmos does not allow for absolute inexpressibility.<sup>363</sup> Instead, he presents a thought "before unheard of", a "not-yet-thought" to borrow from Timothy Morton's words.<sup>364</sup> This cosmological truth is all the more difficult to grasp insofar as it is non-empirical and equally inaccessible for "sight and touch." It contains an unheard truth that must be *heard* through speculation, intuition, metaphor, and analogy.

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<sup>363</sup> See Jonathan Pollock: *Déclinaisons. Le naturalisme poétique de Lucrèce à Lacan*, Hermann, Paris, 2010, 147: "Il n'y a pas de zéro absolu dans le monde épicurien."

<sup>364</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 1. The not-yet famously circumscribes the horizon of utopia in Ernst Bloch: *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 Vol., Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1967-8. Bringing together the temporality of the not-yet, utopia, hope and a decidedly theory of expression based on chance and labor, we could speak of *materialist hopes* (and fears) in this context.

There is no guarantee that such an act of expression succeeds since the formation of matter in the cosmos is based on radical contingency.<sup>365</sup> Despite Lucretius' practical atheism,<sup>366</sup> this inevitable recourse to hyperbole suggests that some kind of equally radical belief from the listener's side will be required to follow the argument.

It is in this atmosphere of extreme difficult expressibility that the crucial phrase is uttered: *sed tamen effabor* – "Yet I will speak it out." The continuation of the verse, then, specifies what it is that will legitimate the listener's confidence in the appropriateness of Lucretius' far-fetching speculation – *ipsa res*, the thing itself. Consequently, the subject is decentered from the speech act and language becomes an auxiliary medium for "the steersman Nature." In that way, Lucretius tries to produce a somehow paradoxical *evidentia* of the invisible ("and thou mayst see"), which then culminates with the sublime repetition that confirms "that all things can be o'erthrown."

Like every instant of totality, the cosmos as a whole is ineffable. Yet, here I am, says Lucretius, speaking it out.<sup>367</sup> Yet again – not in clearly and distinctly logical definitions, but in a mixture of poetic images, philosophical arguments and didactic recommendations that emerge on the surface of the laboriously rhythmic wanderings of *De Rerum Natura*. Moreover, there is no guarantee that his attempt will be successful since the radical contingency ascribed to the universe is also the condition of the poet's expression.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> See (AF 155–178), the part entitled "La revanche de Ptolémée.

<sup>366</sup> The gods in Epicurean philosophy are famously almost human (all-too human) and sit with their backs against the human world. If Epicureans do not necessarily deny the existence of gods, they believe at least in their absence and unwillingness to intervene.

<sup>367</sup> "Yet" is a crucial little world in the context of doubt and its overcoming. See Morton in his prologue to *Dark Ecology*, a passage fittingly entitled as *Beginning After The End*: "There is not-yet-thought that never arrives—yet here we are thinking it in the paradoxical flicker of this very sentence." (1)

<sup>368</sup> Its highly subjunctive character is demonstrated by the use of *forsitan* right after *sed tamen effabor*, which opens a context of possibility and stands as a remainder against the temptation to banish doubt from the gesture of expression.

Speaking out about the cosmos, cosmological whistleblowing so to speak, is a risky act. It can only succeed if Nature, the *res ipsa*, eventually proves it right. Lucretius, then, unfolds a resolutely materialist attempt to represent totality – yet it is a materialism that cannot do without a minimal residue of metaphysics at least (and thus intuition, speculation, metaphor etc.). This conception resonates in exciting ways with the hyperbolic ambitions of Bolaño and Pynchon who are well aware of the fact that, ultimately the absolute cannot be expressed. Their reaction, however, is not infinite suspension, indifference, and rhetorical resignation, but hyperbolic defiance. They speak it out: *sed tamen, sin embargo*, nevertheless. Against the grain and against all odds.

*Sin embargo. Ontological simulacrum and hyperbolic stubbornness*

With this in my mind, let's get back to 2666 at the end of part I. "No dar crédito, sin embargo, pensó Espinoza, es una forma de exagerar." (B 181) In this sentence, we have, closely connected, the three items that throughout the novel engage in a dynamic interplay: doubt and concession, rhetorical defiance and hyperbole.

As literary critics, Espinoza and Pelletier are trained to view reality as a fictional and imaginary construction and to raise constant linguistic and epistemological doubt against the official versions of truth. Yet, if we rely on what the narrator tells us, they fail to apply their literary competences to existential questions. In pursuing the luxurious game of hunting down both the bio- and bibliographical enigmas of a literary *desaparecido*, they have

escaped into a realm where they are largely ignorant of the actually existing mysteries produced by millennial capitalism.<sup>369</sup>

The discovery of the *femincidios* brutally cuts through this naive system of reality (although we cannot know if the distortion has a lasting effect since Bolaño abandons the critics after the first part and leaves their fate open to speculation): "A partir de ese momento la realidad, para Pelletier y Espinoza, pareció rajarse como una escenografía de papel [...]." (B 179)

The image reproduces the well-known postmodern view of reality as ontological simulacrum.<sup>370</sup> Bolaño, however, is not interested in cultivating this view in favor of skeptical resignation or ironic detachment. Instead, what follows is a hyperbolic image of what the real looks like once the scenery of reality is torn apart: "y al caer dejó ver lo que había detrás: un paisaje humeante, como si alguien, tal vez un ángel, estuviera haciendo cientos de barbacoas para una multitud de seres invisibles." (B 179)

Different from the standard postmodern scenario, the encounter with the ontological simulacrum does not pull us away from reality and into a space of self-referential semiotic claustrophobia, but produces a hyperbolic "plunge into reality."<sup>371</sup> Yet hyperbole in Bolaño's (and Pynchon's) narrative will never abolish the persistence of doubt. On the one hand, then, the

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<sup>369</sup> This is not to say, of course, that literature and social reality are incompatible. Bolaño's whole work is an attempt to demonstrate literature's continuity with life. The problem is not literature, but rather the professionalization of literature.

<sup>370</sup> Richir states: "le simulacre est ontologique au sens qu'il semble produire de l'être," (ER 133) This is different from simulationism where the whole reality is declared as a simulation.

<sup>371</sup> O'Connor: " Aim of Fiction," 78. The whole quote is also a polemic against the middle-brow complaint that modern and difficult writers cultivate despair: "People are always complaining that the modern novelist has no hope and that the picture he paints of the world is unbearable. The only answer to this is that people without hope do not write novels. Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I'm always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system. If the novelist is not sustained by a hope of money, then he must be sustained by a hope of salvation, or he simply won't survive the ordeal." (78-9)



hyperbolic image tries to provide an image for a reality that appears under the sign of irreality and inexpressibility – on the other hand, it does not hide to which extent it remains a risky and fragile scene of expression, based on radical contingency and prone to failure.

*Pynchon's hyperbolic carnival*

One of the funniest and most inventive instants of outdoing in Pynchon's *Against the Day* occurs in part IV of the book:

On one of the outer islands in the Lagoon, which had belonged to the Spongiatosta family for centuries, over an hour away even by motor craft, stood a slowly drowning palazzo. Here at midnight between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday began the secret counter-Carnevale known as Carnesalve, not a farewell but an enthusiastic welcome to flesh in all its promise. As object of desire, as food, as temple, as gateway to conditions beyond immediate knowledge. (P 879)

The atmosphere to host transgressive behavior could hardly be more inviting. A remote underworld, an island in the Venetian Lagoon, a "slowly drowning palazzo," and midnight as ominous time of the day provide the setting for the "secret life of Masks" that is going to unfold in the next couple of pages. Constraints are cast aside, identities loosened up, masks put on – but again not as a pretext for escaping reality, but as a springboard to plunge into it; "not a farewell but an enthusiastic welcome to flesh in all its promise." (all P 880)

Three characters from the main cast of the book attend to the spectacular event: Cyprian Latewood who is dressed in drag,<sup>372</sup> "in a black taffeta ball toilette borrowed from the Principessa, an abbreviated mask of black leather over his eyes"; Reef Traverse, a Colorado gunslinger epitomizing masculinity, who is wearing a tight Pierrot costume; and Yashmeen Halfcourt, "in satin domino, speaking from behind a lace veil that covered her face from hairline to just below her chin." When Cyprian illicitly arouses Reef's genitals, Yashmeen abducts the two into "an upper room" (all P 881) decorated with velvet furniture and frescos whose puttos "over the generations had seen it all." (P 882) The quirky trio is choreographed into a transgressive threesome by Yashmeen who forces Cyprian to receive Reef's ejaculate with his mouth and deliver it to her.

Carnesalve ends with an aposiopesis that leaves the scene pending until later in the book when its outcome will be revealed. The interruption of the narrative is a curious and one of only a few direct interferences of the narrator. After having played with pornographic elements, the narrator suddenly becomes prudish (although his tone remains sardonic):

But here let us reluctantly leave them, for biomechanics is one thing but intimacy quite another, isn't it, yes and by now Reef and Yashmeen were smiling too directly at one another, with Cyprian feeling too absurdly grateful here held between them so securely as to make the vigorous seeing-to he was now receiving seem almost—though only almost—incidental. (P 883)

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<sup>372</sup> Let us remember that drag is not (just) disguise, as Jennie Livingston's movie *Paris is Burning* and any other example of drag culture can show. The difference between drag and disguise pretty much describes the difference between carnevale and carnesalve. Drag is not escapist since *keeping it real* is a major quality standard in drag culture. To be in drag not only means a short moment of relaxation from everyday life, but creates a sort of fictional space in real time for the invention of aesthetic forms, the creation of social bonds and the building of communities.

Let us jump back to the beginning of the passage where Pynchon introduced the strange festivity with great exuberance:

With no interference from authority, church or civic, all this bounded world here succumbed to a masked imperative, all hold on verbatim identities loosening until lost altogether in the delirium. Eventually, after a day or two, there would emerge the certainty that there had always existed separately a world in which masks were the real, everyday faces, faces with their own rules of expression, which knew and understand one another—a secret life of Masks. It was not quite the same as during Carnevale, when civilians were allowed to pretend to be members of the Mask-world, to borrow some of that hieratic distance, that deeper intimacy with the unexpressed dreams of Masks. At Carnevale, masks had suggested a privileged indifference to the world of flesh, which one was after all bidding farewell to. But here at Carnesalve, as in espionage, or some revolutionary project, the Mask's desire was to be invisible, unthreatening, transparent yet mercilessly deceptive, as beneath its dark authority danger ruled and all was transgressed. (P 879)

Like fiction itself, Carnesalve is a "bounded world," a fictional fold within the fictional universe. It is a separate realm, yet accessible from a more realistic point of departure (historical Venice), although it takes "a day or two" to perform the transition. As Pynchon starts his engine of laborious figuration, we learn that Carnesalve is in a way like carnival, but in another way "not quite" like it – the main difference being that during Carnesalve the masquerade is not "of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality."<sup>373</sup> The passage ends, tellingly, with an instant of *sed tamen*, as the little word "yet" indicates an apparent

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<sup>373</sup> William Gaddis: *The Recognitions* [1955], Dalkey Archive Press, Victoria/TX, 2012, 3.

paradox where absolute transparency is revealed to be the most opaque situation imaginable and instead of being a condition of insight, turns out to be "mercilessly deceptive."<sup>374</sup>

Carnesalve is anything but an ordinary costume party; it is a potentially life-changing event in drag where the mask, as its etymologic origin suggests, does not just veil a person's face, but creates a persona in the flesh. Consequently, all three characters undergo profound emotional and existential changes: Reef's hyper-masculine identity is softened as he responds positively to Cyprian's erotic encroachments; Cyprian learns to enjoy his submissive preferences without risking his life as before; and Yashmeen gets pregnant by Reef in an act of procreation that somehow also included Cyprian who acted as sperm messenger between the biological parents:

It was around this same time that Yashmeen discovered she was pregnant with Reef's child—and, as Cyprian would be pleased to imagine, in some auxiliary sense, in ambiguous lamplight and masked fantasy, his own. (P 891)

Despite the textual *coitus interruptus* right after Reef starts penetrating Cyprian, the narrative revisits the scene later to tell us its outcome. In general, *hyperbolic realism* often picks up the threads left unconnected to solve a good deal of questions that had remained open or ambiguous. This tendency quite strongly differentiates it from more orthodox postmodern poetics that are more reluctant to disentangle ambiguities and solve open questions.

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<sup>374</sup> The scene also gives way to a favorite technique of Pynchon in *Against the Day*, which projects an individual scene onto a larger context resonating with important themes and motifs of the rest of the novel. Here, the mentioning of espionage and revolution evokes two practices exemplified by the Chums, Pinkertons and Lew Basnight on the one hand and Anarchists, the workers' movement and the Mexican revolution on the other.

*The (pen)ultimate self-portrait of Edwin Johns*

Archimboldi is not the only enigmatic artist to be chased down in 2666. In the first part of the novel, the English literary critic Liz Norton tells his Italian friend and colleague Piero Morini about a British painter who as a young man singlehandedly inaugurated an avant-garde art movement that came to be known as "*nuevo decadentismo o animalismo inglés*." (B 76) Johns is exemplarily introduced as an anarchic anti-artist who comes from a modest background, challenges the establishment and slips from radicalism into madness. In a moment of sudden panic just before he is admitted into a psychiatric hospital, Johns cuts off his own right hand, which, tragically, happens to be "la mano con la que pintaba." (B 76)

But Bolaño does more than place Johns in one line with modernist geniuses who ended up destroying themselves in pursuit of their radical aesthetics. The popular folk fantasy of the insane genius who cuts off his ear is outdone by the passage where Johns places his cut-off hand in the center of his final work of art. His act becomes even more charged with side meanings when it becomes clear that his self-mutilation is the main reason for the phenomenal success of his exhibition in a so-called alternative art gallery in a former working-class district, which is now presumably gentrified.

Pese a todo, la exposición no hubiera tenido ni el éxito ni la repercusión que tuvo de no ser por el cuadro estrella, mucho más pequeño que los otros, la obra maestra que empujó a tantos artistas británicos, años después, por la senda del nuevo decadentismo. Éste, de dos metros por uno, era, bien mirado (aunque nadie podía estar seguro de mirarlo bien), una elipsis de autorretratos, en ocasiones una espiral de autorretratos (depende del lugar desde donde fuera contemplado), en cuyo centro, momificada, pendía la mano derecha del pintor. (B 76)

In Johns' hyperbolic self-portrait, which marks a certain endpoint (as both an apex and a *cul-de-sac*)<sup>375</sup> of the genre's long history, self-representation culminates in an obliquely incarnated *mise en abyme* that instantly sparks Morini's interest – an interest that soon becomes obsession. From the narrator's allusions, we can infer that something much more personal than mere aesthetic fascination might be at stake for the literary critic who is tied to a wheelchair. To get there, we have to read very carefully for in those passages the narrator adopts a certain "ritual reluctance"<sup>376</sup> or focalizes strongly on the perspectives of the other Archimboldians.

Towards the middle of the first part, Morini meets Johns in a Swiss psychiatric hospital accompanied by his friends and colleagues Pelletier and Espinoza. Bolaño creates the atmosphere of a duel between the melancholic intellectual and the manic artist. Morini asks a few questions, Johns gives effusive, incoherent and multidimensional answers that oscillate between dilettante nonsense and profound originality. As the interview approaches its climax, the narrator immerses the scene in an eerie play of light and shadow – Bolaño's favored lighting conditions and one of his most effective techniques to create sudden suspense: "El italiano y el inglés estaban ahora rodeados de penumbra." (B 124) It is precisely at this moment that Morini asks a fateful question:

Entonces, justo entonces, Espinoza y también Pelletier oyeron o intuyeron que Morini formulaba en voz baja la pregunta que había ido a hacer, adelantando el torso hacia adelante, en una postura que los hizo temer que se fuera a caer de la silla de ruedas.

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<sup>375</sup> The strong limitations of self-mutilation as a means of aesthetic expression are summed up in Martin Kippenberger's famous statement: "Ich kann mir nicht jeden Tag ein Ohr abschneiden." (I can't cut off an ear everyday.) See also Anne Haun: "Martin Kippenberger. Götterdämmerung," in Anne Marie Freybourg (ed.): *Die Inszenierung des Künstlers*, Jovis, Berlin, 2008, 48–53, 49.

<sup>376</sup> Pynchon, *Lot* 49, 51.

–¿Por qué se mutiló? (B 122-3)

Johns' answer is dressed in a rapidly increasing darkness:

La enfermera hizo el gesto de levantarse para encender las luces, pero Pelletier se llevó un dedo a los labios y no la dejó. La enfermera volvió a sentarse. Los zapatos de la enfermera eran blancos. Los zapatos de Pelletier y Espinoza eran negros. Los zapatos de Morini eran marrones. Los zapatos de Johns eran blancos y estaban hechos para correr grandes distancias, ya fuera en el pavimento de las calles de una ciudad como a campo través. Eso fue lo último que vio Pelletier, el color de los zapatos y su forma y su quietud, antes de que la noche los sumergiera en la nada fría de los Alpes.

–Le diré por qué lo hice –dijo Johns, y por primera vez su cuerpo abandonó la rigidez y el porte erguido, marcial, y se inclinó y se acercó a Morini y le dijo algo al oído. (B 123-4)

Johns then stands up and shakes hands with Espinoza and Pelletier, which adds another grotesque image to the scene if we remember that he only has one hand left to shake. He leaves without shaking Morini's hand. The three critics go back to their hotel and the next day Morini disappears. We are left with an unanswered question concerning why Johns cut off his hand and we suspect that the answer will plunge into the same cold nothingness of the Alps that swallowed the characters in the Swiss psychiatric hospital.

However, a couple of pages later, a certain, if not final answer is given by the text when Morini suddenly reappears in London. At this point, the atmosphere surrounding the Johns theme is brimming with suspense, but its *dénouement* could hardly be more casual:<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Before, casualness had been a theme in the conversation between Morini and Johns who had defined it as follows: "La casualidad no es un lujo, es la otra cara del destino y también algo más – dijo Johns." (B 123)

Al día siguiente le dijo a Norton que tenía que marcharse. Norton lo fue a dejar al aeropuerto. Mientras esperaban Morini, adoptando un tono de voz casual, le dijo que creía saber por qué Johns se había cercenado la mano derecha.

–¿Qué Johns? –dijo Norton.

–Edwin Johns, el pintor que tú me descubriste –dijo Morini.

–Ah, Edwin Johns –dijo Norton–. ¿Por qué?

–Por dinero –dijo Morini.

–¿Por dinero?

–Porque creía en las inversiones, en el flujo de capital, quien no invierte no gana, esa clase de cosas. Norton puso cara de pensárselo dos veces y luego dijo: puede ser.

–Lo hizo por dinero –dijo Morini. (B 130-1)

To create suspense and to fill it with ambiguity and a good deal of pathos is a familiar narrative technique in Bolaño's fiction. Yet, not only does he often solve the enigmas he has laid out; such solutions are also "mercilessly deceptive" (P 880) compared to the pathetic tension and sense of mystery he had created before. Suspense is not perpetuated into endless suspension; pathos falls back into bathos.

At least partially. On a larger scale of the novel, this is precisely what happens when Archiboldi eventually appears in the fifth part to serve as its protagonist. Suspension in *2666*, though highly dramatized, is usually hyperbolic, not infinite. Enigmas are solved, ambiguities disentangled. The circumstances under which they are solved, however, are often extremely casual. Very long periods of suspension unfold between enigma and solution, in which new enigmas are created. Fittingly, the circumstances of Johns' death, by which this narrative episode that is distributed throughout the first part of *2666* is concluded, couldn't be more casual than it is:



Entonces Johns comenzó a dibujar con su mano izquierda, con la cual había adquirido cierta habilidad. El paisaje comprendía la cascada, las montañas, los salientes de roca, el bosque y la enfermera que ajena a todo leía el libro. Entonces ocurrió el accidente. Johns se levantó de la roca, resbaló y, aunque el muchacho fuerte y atlético trató de agarrarlo, cayó al abismo.

Eso era todo. (B 197)

### *The melancholy of totality*

*Eso era todo* – that was all? What remains after *hyperbolic realism* has accomplished what is perhaps not an exhaustive, but at least a saturated description of a presumed totality? What remains after Pynchon releases the last indication of his "corrupted pilgrim's guide" (P 566), and Bolaño adds his last brushstroke to his "retrato del mundo industrial en el Tercer Mundo" (B 373)?

Not that much, we might say – not that much else than resignation, a sense of powerlessness and a few dazzling descriptions of spectacular landscapes from which humans will soon disappear.<sup>378</sup> Despite all the jocularly, despite the abundance of life-affirming minutiae, despite the seemingly conciliatory conclusions of the novels, both have their long moments of deep melancholy.

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<sup>378</sup> Extinction is especially a topic in Bolaño's fifth part and seems to be a concern of Archiboldi's imaginary poetics too: This is how the narrator via a focalization on Lotte, Archiboldi's sister, summarizes the impression left by the novel *El rey de la selva* in whose author Lotte recognizes her brother: "El estilo era extraño, la escritura era clara y en ocasiones incluso transparente pero la manera en que se sucedían las historias no llevaba a ninguna parte: sólo quedaban los niños, sus padres, los animales, algunos vecinos y al final, en realidad, lo único que quedaba era la naturaleza, una naturaleza que poco a poco se iba deshaciendo en un caldero hirviendo hasta desaparecer del todo." (B 1111)

As much as there exists a melancholy of lack, there exists a melancholy of totality – a melancholy of the absolute, a melancholy stemming from the fact that a presumed totality has been more or less successfully represented which, nevertheless, leaves us with a sense of collective defeat and impotence.

A final image for this specific kind of melancholy can be found in one of the most fascinating texts ever written on the problem of totality: Jorge Luis Borges' *El Aleph*, one of his longest, yet still quite short stories.

When the first-person narrator ("soy yo, soy Borges")<sup>379</sup> enters the basement of the Viterbos, he is skeptical that he will really encounter his beloved and deceased Beatriz. After having glimpsed at the Aleph and seen "*todas las imágenes de Beatriz*" (AL 339), he is faced with the next problem: How to speak of the "infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca" in a language "cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten?" Two things, then, are responsible for the "desesperación de escritor" (all AL 340) that hits Borges after the fateful encounter with the *Aleph*: the untranslatable simultaneity of infinity and the incommunicable singularity of its experience or, to be more precise, of its vision.

As if in a panic-induced reaction, his discourse turns into a paradoxical and hyperbolic quest for analogies in the infinitely resonant spaces of poetry. In that sense, the narrator compares the Aleph to "un pájaro que de algún modo es todos los pájaros," or "una esfera cuyo centro está en todas partes," or "un ángel de cuatro caras que a un tiempo se dirige al Oriente y al Occidente, al Norte y al Sur" (all AL 340).<sup>380</sup> All these similes

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<sup>379</sup> Jorge Luis Borges: *El Aleph*, in J. L. B.: *Cuentos completos*, Debolsillo, Barcelona, 2017, 330–344, 339. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title AL + page number.

<sup>380</sup> Borges' hyperbolic angel certainly outdoes both the mythological Janus head and Benjamin's angel of history. See Walter Benjamin: "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in W. B.: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1.2., ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1991, 691–704, 697–8.

ultimately fail despite having "alguna relación con el Aleph." The writer's desperation stems from two sources: the too-much of vision and the too-little or, rather, the too-late of language:

Quizá los dioses no me negarían un hallazgo de una imagen equivalente, pero este informe quedaría contaminado de literatura, de falsedad. Por lo demás, el problema central es irresoluble: la enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito. En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. (AL 340)

In Pynchon's hyperbolic carnival, *Carnesalve*, the mask's absolute transparency produces a complete symbiosis of the mask and the body and thus provides a perfect delusionary effect. Vice versa, in Borges' *Aleph* the indiscriminate presence of all cosmic elements produces an absolute opacity, "sin superposición y sin transparencia" (AL 340). The resulting melancholy results from the insolubility of the emerging rift between the simultaneity of vision and the lateness of language.<sup>381</sup>

As is often the case in Borges' work, literature is seemingly discredited as an artificial and ex post forgery of experience.<sup>382</sup> This refers of course

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<sup>381</sup> See Chapter II.2.

<sup>382</sup> See, for instance, Borges' preface to his first volume of stories containing the following, rather serious self-critical words: "[Los cuentos] Son el irresponsable juego de un tímido que no se animó a escribir cuentos y que se distrajo en falsear y tergiversar (sin justificación estética alguna vez) ajenas historias." (Jorge Luis Borges: "Prologue to the 1954 edition of *Historia Universal de la Infamia*," in J. L. B.: *Cuentos completos*, Debolsillo, Barcelona, 2017, 11–12, 11). Less obviously self-critical and already as part of the meta-fictional repertoire are the introductory remarks to what is perhaps the only text in Borges' corpus where explicit sexual actions are intimated: "Mi relato será fiel a la realidad o, en todo caso, a mi recuerdo personal de la realidad, lo cual es lo mismo. Los hechos ocurrieron hace muy poco, pero sé que el hábito

to a (yet another) subtly structural irony in Borges' fiction, for we can hardly imagine a writer whose fictional worlds are more invested with the derivative, the artificial, the secondary, and the apocryphal. It is this very irony that gives way to an act of rhetorical defiance that speaks out what is inexpressible in a logical or discursive linguistic register. I quote the crucial passage with the equally crucial final sentence that I held in suspense until now:

En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos deleitables o atroces; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. Algo, sin embargo, recogeré. (AL 340)

Something remains, but its persistence depends on the concessive phrase *sin embargo*. The future form of the verb places the remainder under the sign of promise, suspense and uncertainty. In Borges' *El Aleph*, there is no *cogito* that can abolish the persistence of doubt. Even where doubt is hyperbolically overcome, it stubbornly continues to perforate the literary discourse. However, Borges' suspense is of a different kind than suspense in more conventional narrative settings where it primarily serves as technique for dramatizing the disclosure of plot-driving intrigues.

In Borges' case, suspense is not afraid of dramatizing, but this happens in a much more intellectual, cerebral manner. Intellectual suspense, then, leads into a realm of the sublime in which the world as a whole becomes visible as an ontological simulacrum. Nevertheless, although transposed into a subjunctive mode, literature dares courageously to portray a specific kind of totality.

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literario es asimismo el hábito de intercalar rasgos circunstanciales y de acentuar los énfasis." (Jorge Luis Borges: *Ulrica*, in J. L. B.: *Cuentos completos*, Debolsillo, Barcelona, 435–439, 435)

However, even the most fantastic act of language cannot repeal the melancholy grounded in the mutual exclusiveness of vision and narrative. Language can bring comfort to the mourning narrator, but it can't bring back to life its object of mourning: Beatriz Viterbo. Similar to a séance-like encounter with the dead,<sup>383</sup> the encounter with totality remains ephemeral and non-redemptive – the fragile achievements of literary séances in which separate worlds become briefly visible before disappearing again – into oblivion, into the *abismo*, into "the cold nothingness of the Alps." (B 124)

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<sup>383</sup> For another encounter between the living and the dead see chapter II.3 of this dissertation.

## II.5 EKPHRASIS BEYOND IMAGINATION

*esfoladas aberturas, rasgados por unhas*

(C. Lispector)

### *Ekphrasis between rupture and long durée*

Descriptions of images are among the oldest literary techniques. At least since Homer invented the shield of Achilles, writers throughout the centuries have constantly taken recourse to the visual arts as a prompter for their own poetic forays. Despite its constancy as a technique, ekphrasis has unsurprisingly undergone important evolutionary shifts and modifications since its birth scene within the Western canon (although we should assume that ekphrasis looks back to a much older history of oral practices). Let me briefly sketch three of these historical trajectories.

One of the most frequently mentioned modifications in the history of ekphrasis is the fact that it has been isolated from its larger epic or dramatic context and turned into a genre of its own – mostly in the form of the lyric poem. Famous examples like Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* or Rilke's *Archaischer Torso Apolls* rapidly come to mind. These are texts in which a lyrical voice immerses itself in the observation of a single work of art (which is usually exhibited in a museum space) not only to describe it in detail, but also to speculate about its less objective qualities (the affects of the viewer, the philosophical meaning, the biographical background etc.).

A second historical shift in ekphrastic practice is directed against this tendency of condensation emphasizing the expansion of ekphrasis in two important ways at least. On the one hand, in line with its Antique origins, ekphrasis has transcended the rather self-imposed limitations as a mimetic representation of art and turns its focus to objects and phenomena beyond the arts. In this view, ekphrasis becomes the verbal representation of any

bundle of impressions, to which is ascribed the status of a quasi-image. On the other hand, the technical repertoire of ekphrasis is more decisively applied to art forms beyond the visual,<sup>384</sup> which adds a dimension of aesthetic flexibility to the ontological expansion of ekphrasis' objective range.

The third modification transposes the notoriously complicated relationship between word and image, telling and showing, saying and seeing in the center of the text itself. Think of Wilde's genre-defining *Picture of Dorian Gray* where ekphrasis is infused with gothic elements in order to ironize and exaggerate faith into mimetic adequacy. In postmodern literature, ekphrastic failure often becomes a welcome ally to a theory of language that radically dis-correlates signs from things. At the same time, visual art invested in raising doubt about the mimetic and iconic powers of sign systems can serve as a role model for literature that pursues a fundamentally anti-mimetic agenda. One of the most cited examples of such a twisted form of mimesis (i.e., the ostensible imitation of non-imitative art) is John Ashbery's long poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

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<sup>384</sup> To provide just a few examples from the canon of mostly twentieth-century literature. 1) Music: Cortázar's description of jazz in *El Perseguidor* and many other texts; Proust's little melody of the fictional composer Vinteuil; Thomas Mann's twelve-tone composition that his equally fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn creates with diabolic support. 2) Theater: Pynchon's extensive account of the fictional revenge play *A Courier's Tragedy*. 3) Poetry: Orlando's long-duration writing project (*The Oak Tree*) in Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel that is written and re-written, abandoned and resumed in syncopated correspondence with its author's adventurous forays through the centuries; Balzac's description of poetic processes, the writing of poems (or rather the recycling of his own juvenile poetic outpourings), and also the printing of poems in *Illusions perdues*. 4) Art criticism: in Balzac's *Illusions perdues*; Stanislaw Lem's imaginary literary critiques that in part inspired Bolaño's invention of a whole tradition of Fascist writers in *La literatura nazi en América*; Chris Kraus' essays about feminist art in *I Love Dick*. 5) Fake Art: Gaddis' *Recognitions*; Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. 6) Performance Art, Conceptual Art: Chris Kraus again, or Donald Barthelme's hyper-minimalist texts such as *The Balloon*. 7) Alternative art forms such as cooking: Karen Blixen's *Babette's Feast*. 8) The Art of Speculation: Gaddis' *J R*.

Despite these evolutionary tendencies, ekphrasis embodies a *longue durée* of specific features that have been present from its beginning, although they are often considered to be rather modern aesthetic accomplishments. Let me briefly sketch out four of these permanent markers of ekphrastic practice across the genres and throughout the centuries that are also somehow related to the way ekphrasis informs the writing of Pynchon and Bolaño. The *shield of Achilles* can serve as a point of reference:

1) *Energeia*. Ekphrasis not only provides an image but is equally interested in the expressive gesture itself. If it aims to bring the object or image in front of our eyes (*enargeia, evidentia*), which is not necessarily the case, it also turns its attention towards the energetic potential (*energeia*) which brings the image / object to life. If ekphrasis is supposed to be closer related to *enargeia*, *energeia* is often as important or even prevailing. In Homer's description of the shield of Achilles it seems at times as if *energeia* was the more appropriate technique to render the shield's abundance of visual effects.

2) *Notional Ekphrasis*. In "notional ekphrasis,"<sup>385</sup> the poetic description does not presuppose the existence of the works of art it describes. The object is imagined with no actual pictorial correlate. Homer's description prominently defies realistic understandings of scale and artistic competence, which is only partly neutralized by the fact that the shield's craftsman is the Greek god Hephaestus. W. J. T. Mitchell sees "notional ekphrasis" as the normal situation. In the realm of fiction, it doesn't matter if the described works of art do have referential counterparts or not. According to Mitchell, all ekphrastic descriptions are equally invented.

3) *Self-referentiality*. Ashbery's quintessentially self-reflective poem is not the first instance of ekphrasis' self-reflexivity. The shield as a representation of a whole (the Greeks, the cosmos etc.) is organized around binary, yet

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<sup>385</sup> See John Hollander: "The Poetics of Ekphrasis," in *Word & Image* 4:1, January 1988, 209–19.



complementary oppositions. The space available for representation, the canvas so to speak, is large, but confined. Time is organized non-linearly and circularly. The cosmos is dimensionally reduced and projected onto the two-dimensional shield from where it is transposed into the one-dimensionality of the epic poem. At the same time, both shield and text aim to metaphorically carve three-dimensional effects into the shield's surface. In a speculative leap, we could even conjecture that the epic itself serves as a shield, an instrument of defense but also a tool that metonymically indicates attack – both an instrument of war and a tool for protection.

4) *Intertextuality and intermediality*. As a representation of a representation,<sup>386</sup> ekphrasis is fundamentally intertextual and intermedial. As such, ekphrasis has a citational structure or is at least highly susceptible for intertextual infiltration. Intertextuality in ekphrasis can go both ways. The shield of Achilles is a forged encyclopedia of Greek mythology and cosmology. At the same time, it prompts many imitations, variations and 'outdoings,' of which the most famous is arguably Vergil's shield of Aeneas.

The notorious oscillation between long duration and evolutionary vectors within the history of ekphrasis makes it particularly apt as a topic for the understanding of Pynchon's and Bolaño's late maximalist novels. As *hyperbolic realism's* innovations are compositional rather than stylistic, the analysis of how these novels reconfigure ekphrastic elements for their specific purposes constitutes the cardinal point of my last chapter. I will start with looking closer at a few concrete passages in Pynchon and Bolaño; and then proceed to a broader discussion of *hyperbolic realism's* iconopoetics with the help of ekphrastic criticism that allows us to place these scenes in a larger poetological and philosophical context. In line with the phenomenological

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<sup>386</sup> James Heffernan: *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/IL, 1993, 3.

motif that runs through my project, I will also refer to the conceptual labor of Richir and Merleau-Ponty which will allow us to problematize the all-too-often unquestioned notions of image and imagination by developing an account of what they call dehiscence and *phantasia* respectively.

### *Photography as modern alchemy*

The invention of photography marks a crucial moment in the history of ekphrasis. As a technology and practice it not only adds a new art form to the reservoir for possible ekphrastic exploration. It also threatens to plunge the verbalization of images into a deep crisis for at least two reasons.

The first reason concerns the novel relationship between image and reality based on photography's seductive promise of immediate mimesis. Considering the mimetic qualities of painting, even the most quixotic realist must concede that mimesis can only be the result of aesthetic labor, however minimal that might be. (Although, as we know, people who believe in the untouchable value of verisimilitude are well aware of the rather maximal labor it demands and laud the painter precisely for his efforts while regarding abstract painting as something their children could fabricate just as well.) In contrast, widespread beliefs about photography don't acknowledge the aesthetic labor invested in the composition of the image. The photographer, then, is celebrated for two other, non-aesthetic reasons: first, for owning a special equipment and second, for mastering the technological challenges that come with it.

The second reason is closely associated with the creeping of technology into an aesthetics epitomized by photography (both logically and historically). It touches on what Benjamin called the technological reproducibility of the image. In the wake of their industrialization, images are endangered

of losing their uniqueness (their *aura* in Benjamin's words) and become (at least in theory) generally available.

At the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography defies the hegemony of painting in determining the ontology of the image. Unsurprisingly, this has far-reaching and highly ambiguous consequences for ekphrasis. On the one hand, photography threatens to obliterate literature whose mimetic capabilities appear derisory next to the novel mimetic powers of the former.

On the other hand, however, literary ideology disputed photography's status as an autonomous art form while simultaneously (and more importantly perhaps) motivating anti-realist, self-conscious, experimental writing. In that way, anti-realist literature is promoted as a result of an intuitive understanding that a direct, neutral and undisturbed reflection of reality should better be left to other media.<sup>387</sup>

The period in which *Against the Day* is situated is contemporaneous to the emergence and increasing significance of photography. Unsurprisingly, Pynchon is extremely aware of this, as we can see from the very beginning of the novel. The following scene depicts the moment that photographer Merle Rideout is initiated in the magic of the photographic image or, more precisely, the marvelous process of its development, "the mysteriously guarded transition from plate to print:"

'O.K., here we go.' Roswell lit a ruby darkroom lamp. Took a dry plate from a earning case. "Hold this a minute." Started measuring out liquids from two or three different bottles, keeping up a sort of patter meantime, hardly any of which Merle could follow— 'Pyrogallic, mumblemumble citric, potassium bromide ... ammonia ...' Stirring it all in a beaker, he put the plate in a developing tray and poured the mixture over it. 'Now watch.' And

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<sup>387</sup> See e.g. Baudelaire's ambivalent relation to photography, as described in Antoine Compagnon: *Baudelaire. L'irréductible*, Flammarion, Paris, 2014, 91-134.

Merle saw the image appear. Come from nothing. Come in out of the pale Invisible, down into this otherwise explainable world, clearer than real. It happened to be the Newburgh asylum, with two or three inmates standing in the foreground, staring. Merle peered uneasily. Something was wrong with the faces. The whites of their eyes were dark gray. The sky behind the tall, jagged roofline was nearly black, windows that should have been light-colored were dark. As if light had been witched somehow into its opposite... 'What is it? They look like spirits, or haunts or something.'

'It's a negative. When we print this, it'll all flip back to normal.' (P 64)

It is revealing that this scene is less concerned with the image itself and much more with the artificial process of its manifestation. The image itself (its content, its aesthetic) does not completely fall out of scope but much more attention is dedicated to the technological development of the image, the dramatic, mystical play of light and shadows in the darkroom and on the dry plate, the uncanny feeling that the visual coming-out provokes in Merle.

So far, photography for Merle had seemed "like an idiot's game" (P 64) without any aesthetic implications, an easy way of making money by entertaining the masses. Now, on the contrary, photography becomes a mystical practice, the modern counterpart to witchcraft, which is suggested by Roswell's mumbling of an abracadabra of technical terms as if he were brewing a magic potion.

The image that arises from this technologically updated incantation of matter is highly ambivalent: on the one hand, it emerges as a hyperreal epiphany, "clearer than real" – a piece of reality hiding its context of fabrication; on the other, it appears as disturbingly unreal – a foreign substance creeping into an "otherwise explainable world" thereby producing wonder and discomfort in the observer.

As we learn at the end of the passage, Merle's uneasiness is not only due to the mystic atmosphere in the darkroom but also to the fact that what he sees is not the final product but only the negative of the photographic

image. Pynchon's obsession with the inversion of light in this scene directly resonates with the telling title of his novel and its connotations: *Against the Day*, against light, against the obvious, the easily visible. In order to reach its hyperreal effect, each photograph has to pass through the transitional phase of a counter-image where light is "witched somehow into its opposite."

The fact that the narrative makes a halt to insist on this process is obviously not accidental. Displaying the shaping forces of the whole novel such as the disseminated as-if-structure [see chapter II.3] and the intricate play of light and shadow [see chapter II.2], the scene warns us to pay attention not only to the 'positive' images we are familiar with from our cultural interfaces but also to the less canonized, 'negative' images hidden or buried in the archives. It is exactly these hidden material undercurrents of history that the novel promises to uncover by exploring the underrepresented history of militant anarchism and labor struggles, the diversity of alternative and irreverent belief systems, the insufficiently documented colonial and imperial adventures and conflicts in the run-up to World War I, the battle for the most obscure interpretation of science's permanent revolutions at the turn of the century, etc.

The content of the photograph that Merle sees coming into shape in front of his eyes seems to resonate with the aesthetics of the undercurrents: inmates from a mental asylum staring back at the photographer and the archivists alike – as if rejecting their role as muted objects for the mortifying gaze of the camera. The scene and the site are clearly recognizable, yet strangely dis-correlated from Merle's realist expectations. However, after having accustomed our views to the altered lighting conditions, it almost seems as if the negative image was the much more appropriate mode in which the inmates-as-images enter the "daylit" (P 566) world – a world that does everything in its power to keep them locked-in and at a safe distance.

This can be considered as exemplary for the whole novel: In order to pursue the historical unconscious and a reality that is partly veiled and

partly lost, Pynchon constantly comes back to the fantastic and speculative distortions of verisimilitude. Some form of documented history, however, remains reliably visible – even where it is staring back with inverted eyes at the viewer who, consciously or not, tries to reduce it to inert and uncomplicated matter ready at hand.

### *Bolaño's negative epiphanies*

The fascination for photography's flipsides is also a widespread feature in Bolaño's fiction. Early in 2666, the four critics encounter a character named *el suave*. He is introduced as a rather unknown German writer who worked as a cultural promoter for a small city in the German South shortly after the war. In this function, he invites Archimboldi to read from one of his books and publishes a biographical text about their meeting in the grotesquely marginal (and, as far as I know, fictitious) *Diario de Mañana de Reutlingen*.

The four critics have divergent opinions about the elusive character who worked as a cultural promoter in the little town of Reutlingen in South Germany at the time he met Archimboldi. While Pelletier and Espinoza think that he is merely an impostor who had an affair with the publisher's widow, Morini provides a much more speculative interpretation:

Según Morini, el suave era, de forma espantosa, el doble de Archimboldi, su hermano gemelo, la imagen que el tiempo y el azar va transformando en el negativo de una foto revelada, de una foto que paulatinamente se va haciendo más grande, más potente, de un peso asfixiante, sin por ello perder las ataduras con su negativo (que sufre un proceso a la inversa), pero que esencialmente es igual a la foto revelada: ambos jóvenes en los años del terror y la barbarie hitlerianos, ambos veteranos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, ambos escritores, ambos ciudadanos de un país en bancarrota, ambos

dos pobres diablos a la deriva en el momento en que se encuentran y (a su manera espantosa) se reconocen, Archimboldi como escritor muerto de hambre, el suave como 'promotor cultural' de un pueblo en donde lo menos importante, sin duda, era la cultura. (B 58)

Morini does not deal with an actual negative, but he uses its metaphorical potential in order to create a speculative connection between two enigmatic writers who are both marginal at the time of their encounter and share a problematic history as (innocent? complicit? sacrificed?) parts of the Nazi war machine during their youth. The idea itself is not spectacular but it gives way to a conception of the image that has larger implications for the poetic fabric of the novel: like everything in Bolaño's cosmos, the image of the double will vanish. It will not, however, completely disappear. It will slowly and irregularly wither away exposed to "time and fate," just like the geometry book Amalfitano hangs on a line in his backyard in part II of the novel. At the same time, the image has a mysterious weight "that keeps looming larger" and ties the developed product ever more closely to its negative. The scene exploits the ambiguity of the word "revelada" – here in the sense of the developed photograph (as the revealing of its negative), but at the same time evoking a dramatic moment of decisive disclosure and revelation.

Drawing from Bolaño's own words,<sup>388</sup> Carlos Cuevas Guerrero has fittingly described such moments that run through the whole oeuvre as negative epiphanies. In his short essay "Escritura e hipérbole," he argues that

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<sup>388</sup> See Roberto Bolaño: "Literatura y exilio," in R. B.: *Entre Paréntesis. Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, 2004, 40–46, 42: "[...] y allí [= Mexico City] murió Mario [Santiago], como mueren los poetas, sumido en la inconsciencia y sin papeles, motivo por el cual cuando llegó una ambulancia a buscar su cuerpo roto nadie supo quién era y el cadáver se pasó varios días en la morgue, sin deudos que lo reclamaran, en una suerte de revelación final, en una suerte de epifanía negativa, quiero decir, como el negativo fotográfico de una epifanía, que es también la crónica cotidiana de nuestros países."

Bolaño stylistically creates the promise of an epiphanic moment that he leaves eventually unsatisfied, empty or constantly delayed. The result is rather "ocultamiento" than illumination:

Este mecanismo de ocultamiento se aprecia en varias secciones de la obra, en donde se aleja cualquiera satisfacción de encontrar, con el lenguaje, una conclusión de una imagen que nos entregue, como la epifanía joyceana, la revelación de ciertas cualidades interiores de las cosas. En Bolaño, el sopetón revelador es omitido y cualquier aclaración que puede sugerir una imagen nos aparta de cualquier brillo exegético inmediato. Una epifanía negativa, diría él, como el negativo fotográfico de una epifanía.<sup>389</sup>

While I agree that Bolaño's epiphanies are not much like those epiphanies we know from modernist writing – precious moments of insights into a world otherwise replete with darkness, noise and insignificance –, Guerrero's interpretation, in my opinion, overstrains the way in which revelation and occultation are played off against each other. As we saw in the scene above, Bolaño has a much more nuanced vision of the relationship between negative proto-image and the developed result when he treats them as chiasmic counterparts rather than mutually exclusive opposites. Another passage later in the novel supports this view:

Al despertar creyó que había soñado con una película que había visto no hacía mucho. Pero todo era distinto. Los personajes eran negros, así que la película del sueño era como un negativo de la película real. Y también ocurrían cosas distintas. El argumento era el mismo, las anécdotas, pero el desarrollo era diferente o en algún momento daba un giro inesperado y se convertía en algo totalmente distinto. (B 298)

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<sup>389</sup> Carlos Cuevas Guerrero: "Escritura e hipérbole. Lectura de 2666 de Bolaño," in *Espéculo. Revista de Estudios Literarios* 34, 2006, n. p., <https://webs.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero34/hiperbol.html> (accessed January 25, 2018)



Rather than exclusionary, the relationship between negative and positive image is one of uncanny repetition: the same, yet different. Similar to Merle's experience in *Against the Day*, the characters look like spirits, at the same time weirdly real and eerily distant. Seen again in the broader scope of Bolaño's aesthetics, the scene imitates, on a smaller scale, what Bolaño's texts frequently perform on a larger level – the gradual, but also brutally sudden sliding into the extreme from an initially inconspicuous setting.

Carlos Guerrero is right when he speaks of the highly ambiguous relationship between image and narrative in 2666: "La situación diegética se ralentiza, dando origen a una imagen solapada que se encuentra descentrada de la secuencia de acciones pero, sin duda, inserta en éstas."<sup>390</sup> The same holds for ekphrastic moments in the narrower sense of the term. These scenes often stand out as rather isolated moments within the whole narrative, as emblematic miniatures relatively independent from the pulse that is pushing forward the narrative.

Two modifications of this analysis, however, are important. First, deceleration, digressions and Baroque amplifications of scenes apparently insignificant for the main plot lines is, in a way, the quintessence of Bolaño's poetics. It is therefore imprecise to relate those techniques exclusively to the level of images, let alone ekphrasis. In Bolaño's fiction and especially<sup>391</sup> in

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<sup>390</sup> Guerrero, "Escritura e hipérbole."

<sup>391</sup> Although this is also true for his very short novels. Think, for example, of *Estrella Distante*, which has a clearly definable main plot line, the story of the Fascist neo-avant-gardist poet Carlos Wieder. Yet after having introduced Wieder's dirty agenda in the first chapters, the narrative interrupts its main plot line with a rough cut to tell the story of two older poets who lead the opposing poetry circles in Santiago de Chile at the time shortly before Pinochet's coup: Diego Soto and Juan Stein (chapters 3 & 4).

2666, even the most marginal and transitional character has its short "moment of grace."<sup>392</sup> Bolaño's stretches the concept of the main protagonist to the extreme, although the readers might agree on a countable amount of central characters in 2666.<sup>393</sup>

The second modification turns the attention away from the way images relate to their larger narrative environment and toward the inner poetic dynamics of the images themselves. Not only do Bolaño's images refuse ultimate revelation, they constantly stage their own precarious presence and their entropic drift towards gradual vanishing. Bolaño's images permanently tend to fall apart or collapse. However, they usually don't vanish into nothingness, but transform the energies released through the process of visual integration into something else. To give a few examples: the image can become strangely alive and act against its own creator: "como si yo fuera [...] un cuadro viviente (e inacabado) que de pronto se entera de la muerte de su pintor (B 195). It can burst into fragments, "imágenes sin asidero...fragmentos, fragmentos (B 265)," it can be combined with psychic qualities that often

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<sup>392</sup> Flannery O'Connor is arguably one of America's post-WWII writers with the most nuanced interest in the problem of grace. "Grace" is the last word of *Against the Day* where it is dramatically opposed to a buzz word in Pynchon's fiction: "gravity." For the relation to Bolaño, O'Connor's reflection about the relationship between excessive violence and subsequent grace is revealing although it seems that the Catholic dimension of salvation is rather absent from Bolaño's fiction. See O'Connor: "On her Own Work," F. O.: *Mystery and Manners. Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York/NY, 1970, 107–120, 112: "I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world."

<sup>393</sup> Namely the four critics, Archimboldi, the Mexican philosopher Amalfitano, his daughter Rosa, the Afro American sports reporter Oscar Fate, the young policeman Lalo Cura, the Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, the clinical psychiatrist Elvira Campos, Archimboldi's sister Lotte and a few more.

evoke restless nervousness and touch upon the obscure and paradoxical:  
"Pensar sin pensar. O pensar con imágenes temblorosas." (B 463)

*Dehiscence and phantasia at the periphery*

An important subtype of the decomposition of images from within in Bolaño's oeuvre is the tearing apart of the physical carrier of the image. Driven from one crazy encounter to the next in search of explanations for the seemingly inexplicable events in Santa Teresa, the journalist Sergio González ends up in the house of a fortuneteller who see and imagine things others can't (B 793). This is how she rhapsodizes about the difference between ordinary killings and the serial *feminicidios* seen from her intuitive inner sense:

[Florita] dijo que un asesinato común y corriente (aunque no existían asesinatos comunes y corrientes) terminaba casi siempre con una imagen líquida, lago o pozo que tras ser hendido volvía a quietarse, mientras que una sucesión de asesinatos, como los de la ciudad fronteriza, proyectaban una imagen *pesada*, metálica o mineral, una imagen que quemaba, por ejemplo, que quemaba cortinas, que bailaba, pero que a más cortinas quemaba más oscura se hacía la habitación o el salón o el galpón o el granero donde aquello acontecía. (B 794)

No matter how unintelligible and close to the *état clinique* of language these words might seem, its conception of images that have weight, material qualities and that are subjected to entropic vanishing resonates strongly with other passages in 2666.

In chapter II.4, I quote from a section that marks an essential rupture in the novel's seemingly innocent playfulness surrounding the chase of the disappeared German writer: "A partir de ese momento la realidad, para Pelletier y Espinoza, pareció rajarse como una escenografía de papel [...]." (B

179) A similar, yet much more exuberant rupture of cohesion can be observed in this scene taken from Bolaño's novel *Amuleto* about the Tlatelolco massacre 1968 in Mexico City:

Cuando llegábamos al quirófano la visión se empañaba y luego se trizaba y luego caía y se fragmentaba y luego un rayo pulverizaba los fragmentos y luego el viento se llevaba el polvo en medio de la nada o de la Ciudad de México.<sup>394</sup>

Guerrero's take on Bolaño's images rightly identifies three important elements: its relative resistance against the narrative flux, its complicated dynamic as a negative epiphany and its oblique re-integration into the narrative. I would like to add a fourth dimension: the sudden implosion of the image's components, the materially grounded destruction of its coherence, the falling apart and "burning" of the very fabric that holds the image physically together.

To distinguish this particular threat to the image's internal cohesiveness from what we ordinarily know as deconstruction of the relationships among signs, meanings and objects – I suggest adopting a notion that Merleau-Ponty starts to develop in the last part of *Le Visible et l'Invisible*. The earliest occurrence in literature I could find is in Beckett's early and rather unknown novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*:

I think of Beethoven's earlier compositions where into the body of the musical statement he incorporates a punctuation of dehiscence, flottements, the coherence gone to pieces, the continuity bitched to hell. because the units of

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<sup>394</sup> Bolaño, *Amuleto*, 119.

continuity have abdicated their unity, they have gone multiple, they fall apart, the notes fly about, a blizzard of electrons [...].<sup>395</sup>

His face surged forward at you, coming unstuck, coming to pieces, invading the airs, a red dehiscence of flesh in action. You warded it off. Jesus, you thought, it wants to dissolve. Then the gestures, the horrid gestures, of the little fat hands and the splendid words and the seaweed smile, all coiling and uncoiling and unfolding and flowering into nothingness, his whole person a stew of disruption and flux. And that from the fresh miracle of coherence that he presented every time he turned up. How he kept himself together is one of those mysteries. By right he should have broken up into bits, he should have become a mist of dust in the airs. He was disintegrating bric-a-brac.<sup>396</sup>

Quand je retrouve le monde actuel, tel qu'il est, sous mes mains, sous mes yeux, contre mon corps, je retrouve beaucoup plus qu'un objet : un Être dont ma vision fait partie, une visibilité plus vieille que mes opérations ou mes actes. Mais cela ne veut pas dire qu'il y ait, de moi à lui, fusion, coïncidence : au contraire, cela se fait parce qu'une sorte de déhiscence ouvre en deux mon corps, et qu'entre lui regardé et lui regardant, lui touché et lui touchant, il y a recouvrement ou empiètement, de sorte qu'il faut dire que les choses passent en nous aussi bien que nous dans les choses. (VI 162, my emphasis)

Dehiscence concerns both the image and the observing (and therefore writing) body. The scene of observation is not unidirectional, but the things and images insist on their independence from any correlation with a subject. Instead of being mute objects, they actively stare back – just like Shelley's *Medusa* ("It lieth, gazing") and Rilke's *Apollinischer Torso* ("da ist keine Stelle

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<sup>395</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* [1932], Arcade, New York/NY, 1993, 139, my emphasis.

<sup>396</sup> Beckett, *Middling Women*, 116, my emphasis.

/ die dich nicht sieht.")<sup>397</sup> But unlike their famous predecessors, they do not paralyze "the gazer's spirit into stone" (Shelley) nor do they appeal to its conscience for ethical rejuvenation ("Du musst dein Leben ändern.")<sup>398</sup> What happens between the observer and the object, between the writing body and the image is not a complete conflation, an indiscriminate merging, but, in Merleau-Ponty's words, an overlapping, an entanglement, an interference – an intimate contact that is nevertheless keeping the distance.

From a reading of Beckett and Merleau-Ponty, we can arrive at a conception of dehiscence which is not merely disruptive. The two passages' scope in Beckett's novel may be limited to the formalist understanding of art, but at the end of the first passage quoted above, they turn into programmatic, vitalist depictions of an aesthetics of dehiscence: "a blizzard of electrons."

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological twist, dehiscence is not at all a hindrance for (poetic) perception, but its necessary condition.

The dehiscence of the image leads to the exposure of a more granular phenomenological sphere, not behind the coherence of the image, but *beneath* it, so to speak. Marc Richir calls this sphere *phantasia*, a notion adopted in turn from Husserl, although Richir uses it (albeit radically complicating its meaning).<sup>399</sup>

Unlike on the level of imagination, in *phantasia* there is no clearly distinguishable *sujet* of an image. The structures of meaning and objecthood are temporarily suspended to give way to the appearance of the phenomenon as *nonada* or *rien-que-phénomène*: "l'anecdote des aperceptions de *phantasia* est mise hors circuit par le clignotement d'invisibles apparitions de *phantasia*."

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<sup>397</sup> English translations: 1) "there is no place / which does not see you". 2) "there is no angle from which / it does not see you."

<sup>398</sup> English translation: "You have to change your life."

<sup>399</sup> See Edmund Husserl: *Phantasie und Bildbewußtsein*, ed. Eduard Marbach, Meiner, Hamburg, 2006.

(ES 365) Like Beckett's blizzard of electrons, we are dealing with pulsating, intermittent excesses of appearance that only temporarily condense into what Bolaño calls "imágenes temblorosas" (B 463).

*Phantasia* describes the "most archaic phenomenological register (ES 486)."<sup>400</sup> It is pure *imaginatum* without *fictum* (ES 72), i.e. the intensity of a movement without an objective correlate, mere *sujet* without *noema*, a pulsation, a trembling and a floating of phenomena. Its mode of appearance is not stable<sup>401</sup> but, as described in chapter II, "proteus-like, fleeting, fluctuating and intermittent." (ES 148)

This means two things for the strange nature of the *phantastic*<sup>402</sup> phenomena: Firstly, they carry a taint of irreality and are thus reminiscent of Morton's hyperobjects: "il [= the *phantastic* perception] porte avec soi le caractère de l'irréalité (ES 84)." And secondly, also in line with Morton's hyperobjects, they are only visible in an indirect way, from a 'higher' phenomenological register such as imagination.

Hence, imagination and *phantasia* have a complicated relation. On the one hand, it is only from the more coherently structured register of imagination that the fleeting phenomena or proto-phenomena of *phantasia* can be glimpsed. On the other hand, the 'higher' registers always threaten to neutralize the nervous pulsation of *phantasia* as a result of what Richir calls *architectonic transpositions*.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> I translate sporadically from the French to provide a better readability.

<sup>401</sup> "le clignotement des aperceptions instables de *phantasia*" (ES 290)

<sup>402</sup> I use this dated form of writing to distinguish the phenomena of *phantasia* from fantastic phenomena which are related, yet not completely congruent things. Richir emphasizes that the *phantastic* phenomena are not phantasmagoric hallucinations.

<sup>403</sup> "Transposition architectonique" is one of many concepts with a considerable amount of jargon in Richir's philosophy. It describes the transposition from one phenomenological register to the next through *coherent deformation*, e.g. the transposition from *phantasia* to imagination. In that process, the 'lower' register is not merely sublated into the 'higher' one. In a phenomenological framework, *phantasia* and imagination do not describe different levels of reality but are only abstractly separable layers with their possibilities and limitations. Those

The *phantastic* phenomena are thus only tangible as *entre-aperceptions* flashing in the interstices of perception, imagination, memory and language as an "écho de ce qui [...] reste irréductiblement insaisissable" (ES 182) and in a "jeu complexe entre aperception et image." (ES 175)

Poetry, art and aesthetics are important fields and practices for the understanding of *phantasia*. In aesthetics, we don't encounter the already fixed image, an isolated image that is already translated into a concept, but neither do we encounter mere hallucinations (ES 135). We observe the *savage process of figuration* itself, the *sens se faisant* in Richir's words, the *sens en train de se faire* in Merleau-Ponty's.

To trace such excessively fleeting phenomena, we must *bracket* our natural attitude. But Richir goes further than Husserl: Not only certain conditions of perception, but the whole structure of perception and subjectivity is bracketed in Richir's inhumanist phenomenology. His term for such a radicalized form of a phenomenological bracketing is *hyperbolic epoché* (ES 482). *Phantasia* as the phenomenological layer beneath the more familiar registers of imagination and memory directly leads into a hyperbolic sphere.

Dehiscence and *phantasia* are at play in most of Bolaño's outstanding ekphrastic moments. We can see them at work in the self-mutilating self-portrait of Edwin Johns, where not the image itself but the artist's body is irreversibly disfigured (B 76-7); in the cycle of wall paintings from the lives of construction workers in Detroit (B 307); in the graphic tattoo on the back of the sparring partner of Mexican boxer Merolino Fernández (348); in the depiction of the virgin of Guadalupe painted on the outside walls of a car

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layers must be permeable, otherwise they would be "mortes." This is what Richir calls *trans-possibilité*, a notion he adopts from Henry Maldiney. The particularity of *phantasia* stems from the fact that it in this register is much more 'overshadowed' by those 'higher' registers where shapes and forms are more developed. Richir's attempt is not an insurrection of *phantasia* against all other registers but to show what lies behind those forms, "ce qui les fait vivre." (ER 151) See also Marc Richir: *Fragments phénoménologiques sur le temps et l'espace*, Millon, Grenoble, 2006, 377 i. a.



park (B 403-4); in the "fresco" with scenes from the lives of German Wehrmacht soldiers in the South-Eastern European territories occupied by the Nazis (B 927).

Like Bolaño's metaphors, his visual descriptions follow a certain pattern or formula that can be obtained from a comparative analysis. The beginning is often marked by the curious awakening of the observer's attention: "entró, por curiosidad, en el edificio" (B 927), or: "vio un mural que le pareció curioso" (B 307). Next the attention is turned towards the medium or material ground on which the image is to be found – which often has an exceptional size or deviates from the standard norm in some other way: the cement wall of a car park (B 403); the walls of an abandoned ruin at the front line (B 927); the naked back of a Mexican boxer (B 348). Next we get a referentially saturated description of the pictorial elements in which exceptional phenomena are often normalized by comparison with more familiar ones before they are again defamiliarized and projected back into a more fantastic rhetorical register. Accordingly, each ekphrasis plays with the difficulty to adequately name and categorize the aesthetic genre of the image: "el fresco, por llamarlo de alguna manera" (B 927); "la, llamémosla así, botella de la izquierda." (B 438)

The descriptions are replete with concreteness, but the evoked objects often are not (or only vaguely) recognizable oscillating between the two phenomenological registers of imagination and *phantasia*: "un monumento de piedra cuya forma resultaba todavía indiscernible." (B 927) Not only the image itself, but also its surroundings are tinted with irreality: "Todo lo demás era oscuridad y formas vagas." (B 438) Within the often drastically realistic, but at the same time remote and blurred setting, there is a constant interference of imaginary and fantastic elements: "una plaza imaginaria que Kostekino jamás tuvo." (B 927)

The strong impact on their observers is not provoked by images as ready-made objects. As wildly dramatic and highly speculative processes of

concretization in front of the observer's eyes, they not only excite wonder and astonishment, but also provoke frequent uneasiness. This dimension of affective provocation is much more important than the aesthetic perfection of the image. Among many other examples, we can see this clearly in the description of the tattoo on the Mexican boxer's back: "El tatuaje, aunque era formalmente bueno, daba la impresión de que se lo habían hecho en la cárcel y que el tatuador carecía, si no de experiencia, sí de herramientas y tintas, pero su argumento resultaba inquietante." (B 348) Those images are haunted by an internal tension that threatens to tear them apart ("en su rostro [...] había algo que discordaba," B 404). As Guerrero has observed, they do not display enough exegetic transparency; obscurity prevails in most cases. What remains, however, is, as in the case of Johns' self-portrait, the savage gesture of the image's creation ("lúgubres trazos salvajes," B 76) and the confusion of diverging and irreconcilable perspectives ("nadie podía estar seguro de mirarlo bien," B 76).

Nevertheless, as fantastic and elusive as these images often seem, for the characters and the narrator alike they happen to be precarious works of art located in extremely unfamiliar settings at the edges of our attention. Only the closest look can discern the aesthetic qualities of these images which often appear archaic<sup>404</sup> or premodern<sup>405</sup> and are, again, far from aesthetic perfection:<sup>406</sup> "la disposición de cada elemento dejaba adivinar [...] una maestría secreta mucho mayor que al primer golpe de vista se ofrecía [...]" (B 927)

In line with the tendency that ekphrastic practices have gradually emancipated themselves from their dependence on individual artworks exhibited in museums, Bolaño often deploys the means of the genre to scenes

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<sup>404</sup> The murals on the front appear as modern versions of cave paintings.

<sup>405</sup> Perspectives are described as "pre-Renaissance" (B927).

<sup>406</sup> See also Amalfitano's implied polemic against Valéry above [footnote 189]; and the savage detectives' rebellion against the well-written poetry of Octavio Paz in *Los Detectives Salvajes*.

and moments which are not ekphrastic moments in the proper sense of the word. One of these scenes takes place in the Sonoran Desert: the sudden and hallucinatory apparition of a strange version of the goddess of justice in Oscar Fate's imagination. The scene alludes to the spectacular fresco of the virgin of Guadalupe (and thus to a more conventional ekphrastic instance) in Santa Teresa whose disturbing quality lies in the fact that one of her eyes is open and the other closed. The image, thus, is a graphic *pars pro toto* for the damaged ecology of justice in the North Mexican border town – where one eye witnesses the excessive wrongs and the systematic violence while the other deliberately refuses to pay attention and assume responsibility. A few pages later, pondering the *feminicidios*, Fate has an hallucination where he sees the image of a scale, "semejante a la balanza que tiene en sus manos la justicia ciega" (B 438).

In this scene, *phantasia* becomes visible as a hyperbolic strategy that outbids the already concretized self-evidence of the image and imagination. First, the Santa Teresa goddess of justice is only vicariously present, in Fate's fantasy, as "non-present indeterminacy" (ES 230), as vaguely intended but not (yet) materialized. Her most important insignia, the scale, has become profoundly estranged. Instead of the two pans, she holds two enigmatic objects reminiscent of plastic bottles. The left is transparent and filled with sand which is trickling off through various holes. The right bottle provides a much more radical image: it has no holes, but is filled with acid and "el ácido se estaba comiendo la botella desde dentro." (B 438) This is the act of dehiscence in a nutshell: the fabric of the bottle that is supposed to contain its content, is eaten away from within and something similar happens with the cohesiveness of the image – which ultimately has serious consequences on Fate's cognitive state:

Durante el camino hacia Tucson Fate fue incapaz de reconocer nada de lo que había visto unos días atrás, cuando recorrió el mismo camino en sentido

contrario. Lo que antes era mi derecha ahora es mi izquierda y ya no consigo tener ni un solo punto de referencia. Todo borrado. (B 438)

### *Andrea Tancredi's impossible avant-garde art*

If *Against the Day* is not as intensely populated with artists as 2666 and most of Bolaño's other texts, it hides a remarkable artist persona in the interstices of its densely-painted canvas:

Tancredi's paintings were like explosions. He favored the palette of fire and explosion. He worked quickly. *Preliminary Studies Toward an Infernal Machine*. (P 585)

The Italian anarchist and avant-garde painter Andrea Tancredi is an eclectic construction cobbled together from fragmented elements taken from the history of postimpressionist, modern and avant-garde art. An almost impossible figure, comparable to Flaubert's *objets composés* such as Charles' monstrous hat from the opening pages of *Madame Bovary* – an entity that, strictly speaking, is only thinkable within the speculative space of literature and language and can hardly be visualized as a coherent object of our imagination.

In good avant-garde tradition, Tancredi wants to use the medium of painting to overcome its anachronistic limitations from within. As is his political conviction, his aesthetics is one of sabotage. His artworks are projectiles against the "inertia of paint" (P 586), against the very concept of color, thus resonating with the novel's recurrent theme of photography's assault on the timeliness of painting and other classical art forms. On the other hand, he still works within the outdated art form, aiming to reconfigure its material structure towards for revolutionary political purpose.

The scene is one of the most outstanding examples of Pynchon's joyful use of the hyperbolic craft of *outdoing* in which Tancredi both anticipates and surpasses canonical gestures of modernism and the avant-garde. "He worked quickly" (P 585) is reminiscent of the methodological madness of Jackson Pollock's action paintings and literally embodies his futuristic aesthetics of velocity. "To reveal the future, we must get around the inertia of paint" (P 586) is the quintessential avant-garde credo that tries to abolish the past by juxtaposing aesthetic with political revolution.

Tancredi's work on a revolutionary infernal machine probably alludes to Duchamp's famous *machine célibataire*, with the difference that this machine is not only meant to be symbolic. It is meant to be used in a revolutionary struggle against the oppressive powers of the system. Outdoing the tradition of the *artistes maudits* and their aim of *épater le bourgeois*, Tancredi's machine is meant to be an instrument of emancipatory nihilism and productive alienation. However, between the lines Pynchon intimates a historical possibility that is one of Bolaño's most poignant obsessions – the complicity of avant-garde in the perpetuation of violence:

Some define Hell as the absence of God, and that is the least we may expect of the infernal machine— that the bourgeoisie be deprived of what most sustains them, their personal problem-solver sitting at his celestial bureau, correcting defects in the everyday world below... (P 586)

Tancredi's self-declared objective to liberate color from its auxiliary role as filler for fixed forms and recognizable objects resonates with the efforts of impressionism and postimpressionism to liberate color from its secondariness:

the target patch seemed to light up like a birthday cake, and before any of it could dry he was at it with an impossibly narrow brush, no more than a bristle or two, stabbing tiny dots among larger ones. "The energies of motion,

the grammatical tyrannies of becoming, in *divisionismo* we discover how to break them apart into their component frequencies ... we define a smallest picture element, a dot of color which becomes the basic unit of reality... .' (P 586-7)

But if *divisionismo* sounds suspiciously like pointillism, Tancredi seems to be much more radical than Seurat & Co., at least if we trust this acute observation of Hunter Penhallow, Tancredi's painter colleague:

'It isn't Seurat [...], none of that cool static calm, somehow you've got these dots behaving dynamically, violent ensembles of energy-states, Brownian movement...' (P 587)

If the emancipation of color towards pure visual energy is tightly connected to Tancredi's futuristic program, he simultaneously contrasts his work with that of "Marinetti and his circle (P 587)." As we know from our contemporary perspective, futurism would go down in history as an avant-garde movement that used and abused art to idealize war, masculine sacrifice and collaborated openly with Mussolini's fascism.

By contrast, Tancredi's anarchist futurism is militantly anti-fascist. He despises the social forces that shaped the 19<sup>th</sup> century: industrialized and corporate Capital, Bourgeois morality, tourism, the old religion etc. He rejects the implicit violence of these social forces which would eventually be unleashed in the two World Wars of the twentieth century.

This does not mean, however, that he is a pacifist. His rejection of the Capital and the Bourgeoisie is instead based on a glorification of revolutionary violence and destructivity, which is directed both against individuals and the infrastructure of the Bourgeois society.

The strong limitations of Tancredi's belief in the purifying benefits of violence become clear in his plea for the complete destruction of Venice,

which reminds us of the urbanistic myopia and socio-hygienic phantasies of modernist architects like Le Corbusier:

'Look at it. Someday we'll tear the place down, and use the rubble to fill in those canals. Take apart the churches, salvage the gold, sell off what's left to collectors. The new religion will be public hygiene, whose temples will be waterworks and sewage-treatment plants. The deadly sins will be cholera and decadence.' (P 587)

This does not only suggest the atmospheric complicity of Left-wing avant-garde futurism in the process of implementing historical violence via modernization. His belief in art-fueled, militant terrorism against oppressive authorities and Capitalist puppet masters is also prone to failure – albeit for another, more mundane reason. In his attempted assassination of the novel's main villain Scarsdale Vibe, who is on a trip in Northern Italy to scout for rare Renaissance art, Tancredi dies himself with an almost tragic inevitability. With his death, he joins the sad gallery of failing anarchists, a recurring motif in Pynchon's fiction both in *Against the Day* and in other texts.<sup>407</sup>

In his hopelessly amateurish attempted murder, Tancredi deploys his infernal machine without success. Within the context of anarchist and unionist failure on the eve of World War I, we can read this failure as a resigned reference to the weakness of art and its tendency of ineffective self-sacrifice when facing globally organized power. For now, corporate capital, which has the power to integrate (revolutionary) art as a commodity in its infernal circle, retains the upper hand:

'He said he had an infernal machine, which would bring down Vibe and, some distant day, the order Vibe expresses most completely and hatefully. This was his precious instrument of destruction. It gave off a light and heat

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<sup>407</sup> Compare the Argentinian anarchists around Squalidozzi in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Tancredi alone could sense, it blinded him, it burned fiercely in his hands, like the glowing coal in the Buddhist parable, he could not let it go. If Vibe was an acquirer of art, then here was Tancredi's creation, his offering, the masterwork he thought would change any who beheld it, even this corrupted American millionaire, blind him to the life he had been inhabiting, bring him to a different kind of seeing. No one gave him a chance to say, 'Here it is, here is a bounded and finite volume of God's absence, here is all you need to stand before and truly see, and you will know Hell.' (P 742)

Despite being aware that art cannot escape the fangs of capital and the market, Tancredi yearns tragically (and similarly to Edwin Johns in *2666*) for a novel role for art within a new religion promised by utopian modernism:

It's not the price tag," Tancredi cried, "it's what comes after—investment, reselling, killing something born in the living delirium of paint meeting canvas, turning it into a dead object, to be traded, on and on, for whatever the market will bear. A market whose forces are always exerted against creation, in the direction of death." (P 738)

The mortifying tendency of painting turns it into a dead object, i.e. a commodity, to be traded and used for speculation, prestige and money-laundering. That the only escape out of this is found in madness and self-sacrifice (John's cuts off his hand and ends up in the mental asylum, Tancredi fetishizes the "delirium of paint" and ends up dying in the hands of Scarsdale's thugs) is a deeply depressive evaluation of the emancipative potentials of revolutionary art. Without of a functioning community, art still produces radical aesthetic forms, but can hardly make a difference in the real world. Among other things, this seems to be Pynchon's message behind Andrea Tancredi's impossible avant-garde art, a sparkling cameo appearance that



stands for the text's thoroughly ambivalent relation with the legacy of Euro-American modernism and the historical avant-garde.

### *Hyperbolic Realism's phantasia*

Pynchon's and Bolaño's poetics of ekphrasis are exemplary for the eclectic and specific aesthetics of *hyperbolic realism*. Both novels contain scenes with epiphanic qualities – dramatic moments of illumination where seemingly unconnected elements are suddenly synthesized. On the other hand, those epiphanic moments remain strangely negative, disappointing, or without consequences – epiphanies without content, as Guerrero writes about Bolaño.

In *Against the Day*, almost every character has her moment of illumination, her spiritual moment of grace,<sup>408</sup> but these moments usually don't have a lot of consequences. Reality remains untouched and demonstrates its central trait of *inemendabilità*.<sup>409</sup>

The relation between image and narrative is similarly ambivalent: on the one hand, narrative ekphrasis interrupts narrative; on the other, the pictorial descriptions become themselves little narratives as they are reintegrated in the flux of the novel.

The figurative material gained from ekphrasis re-emerges elsewhere in a modulated and iterated form, or transposed into dreams and phantasies. At times, it seems as if there was a general ekphrastic energy circulation through the novels that can be tapped into by the various characters in various moments. Three times in *2666*, a said image or visual impression appears like the "last painting of a mad person" (B 77; 307; 927).

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<sup>408</sup> See e.g. Yashmeen's moment of *seeing* the spine of reality. (P 604) [See ch. ψ]

<sup>409</sup> See Ferraris, "Inemendabilità," 167. [See footnote 52]

The metaphorization of madness, which especially in Bolaño's case is not without its problems, occurs repeatedly both in *Against the Day* and *2666*. I have tried to grasp the dynamic at play by deploying the conceptual couple of dehiscence and *phantasia*. At the heart of the image, pictorial elements collapse and implode and the distance between observer and object dwindles.

In other instances, the focus is shifted from the image itself to the physical image carrier. Images often appear as a surprising shock and are located in remote and peripheral settings – far away from the museum or other institutions with symbolic control over the presentation of images. While it is true that Bolaño's and Pynchon's images are emphatically dramatized moments, it is also true that they are porous to their (linguistic) context and their (material) environments.

Yet the dehiscence of the image-as-a-whole is not only a negative, disruptive process. It triggers the exploration of a phenomenological register beyond (or rather beneath) imagination and conceptual and transparent language. While it seems impossible for rigid language to touch upon that register sufficiently, it is still difficult for literary language, especially for the novel and for other genres with a strong narrative tendency to deal with *phantasia*. Since *phantastic* phenomena are only obliquely graspable, literature's familiarity with speculation, hyperbole and experimentation becomes an indispensable source.

The term *hyperbolic realism*, however, suggests that literature is not merely the poetic exploration, evocation or production of *phantasia*, which seems to be Richir's position at times and comes certainly close to those formalist accounts that try to reduce literature to its musical, compositional, completely non-verbal and non-conceptual elements.

By contrast, insofar as novels still hold on to a certain form of mimesis, they do not entirely abandon the realm of representation. Mimesis partly remains partly in the safer zones of imagination, memory, mimesis etc., but

from there it allows us glimpses into the more archaic phenomenological layer "where salvation does not yet exist" (P 566). *Hyperbolic realism* does not attempt to play off the phenomenological and linguistic registers against each other (the semiotic vs. the symbolic, *energeia* vs. *enargeia*, difference vs. sameness), but strives for an integral architecture in which all registers communicate permanently through the mediation of *architectonic transposition*.

Within such a phenomenological architecture, there is no symmetrical ambivalence between process and stasis, or rhythm and form. In both novels, it seems that a certain entropic drift produces the preponderance of "unemployed negativity" over the representational and positional elements. The stuff that *hyperbolic realism* is made of flickers between the many modes of the visible and the invisible – before they eventually disappear, once and for all.

Seen in that way, dehiscence is an interruption that prepares the release of *phantasia's* energy. Again and again, Bolaño seeks to translate *phantasia* into surrealist images that push the narrative to the edge of communicability: "No la oía con los oídos sino directamente en el interior de su cerebro (B 70)."<sup>410</sup>

Bolaño sets out from mimetic, clearly recognizable situations and drags us slowly, but relentlessly into the "weird geometries" (WE 25) at the inside of things. From established meanings and presupposed objects, the

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<sup>410</sup> Note that this is at the same time an example of the dwindling distance between observer and object (in fact, the distance becomes zero) as well as the evocation of an alternative cognitive tool, which comes close to Bergson's *intuition*.

focus is directed towards the hyperbolically small, yet "massively distributed in time and space (HO 1)."<sup>411,412</sup> Once and again, we are reminded of this perspective "desde interior" (B 873), which, in the strict sense, is no perspective at all, but an intimate, visceral contact with things. In that sense, Bolaño's fiction comes much closer to the description as *visceral realism* than the poetics of Lima and Ulises in *Los detectives salvajes*.<sup>413</sup>

Within *phantasia*, the naively presupposed distance of the observer is suspended and replaced by the intimate contact with the temporalizing formation of the image. In Merleau-Ponty's works, contact is the mode of relation directly opposed to access.<sup>414</sup> *Phantasia* points out that no distancing of

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<sup>411</sup> Resonating with my coinage for Richir's philosophy as quantum phenomenology, Morton (HO 45) also calls hyperobjects *quantum objects* insofar as they occur on the microscopic or even nanoscopic level, which resonates with my coinage of Richir's philosophy as quantum phenomenology.

<sup>412</sup> A few examples from 2666: "al principio con movimientos imperceptibles, pero después con violencia [...]" (B 864); "un tiempo de dos velocidades, uno era muy lento y las personas y los objetos se movían en este tiempo de forma casi imperceptible, el otro era muy rápido y todo, hasta las cosas inertes, centellaban de velocidad" (B 1001); "un gesto casi imperceptible" (B 1112); and, similarly, the objects and phenomena in dreams that are "apenas perceptible[s]." (B 109)

<sup>413</sup> Visceral realism is Bolaño's coinage for the avant-garde movement in *Los detectives salvajes*. Both the fictional movement and the aesthetic category are autobiographical reminiscences to the movement of *infrarrealismo* of which Bolaño was a co-founder and member. While quite descriptive in Bolaño's case, *realismo visceral* applied to the savage detectives seems to be more of a performative, slightly inappropriate name that is aware of its own inappropriateness. The situation can be compared to the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, a group of artists (Yves Klein, Pierre Restany, Niki de Saint Phalle etc.) in the 1960s whose aesthetics seems to be anything but realist. In this context, the performative act of (mis)naming becomes itself part of the artistic gesture which, according to the grammar of avant-garde movements, must always transcend the single work of art. From this perspective, Bolaño's use of *realismo visceral* in *LDS* can be understood as an oblique self-portrayal of his own post-vanguard present instead of a mere fictionalization of his rebellious, avant-garde youth.

<sup>414</sup> See also Graham Harman's, Jocelyn Benoist's and Lambert Wiesing's critiques of the philosophies of access. [See footnotes 49-51]

observation or conceptualization (as necessary and inevitable as these processes are) can abolish the promiscuous<sup>415</sup> entanglements of our embodiment with both things and signs (what Richir calls *le sens se faisant*).

*Phantasia*, as opposed to and in addition to imagination and conceptual language, is a register reminding us that all phenomenological layers and conceptual scales in literature ultimately appear within the same zero-dimensionality of fiction.<sup>416</sup> *Phantasia* points to the non-spatial, non-temporal, non-experiential (inhuman) ground of existence, to the preformation of things before their crystallization in the more familiar forms of space, time, and human experience.

But *phantasia*, rightly deployed, is not an escape from reality, history, technology, ethics, politics and other instances of the *institution symbolique*.<sup>417</sup> In Pynchon and Bolaño, these dimensions are never cancelled out in favor of an eternal, ahistorical, apolitical literary space that is autonomous in the bad sense. But in pursuing dimensions of art and visual experience that can not entirely be grasped in a conceptual or even imaginary way, *hyperbolic realism* tries to renegotiate the very conditions of time, space and human-scaled experience from the vantage points of time, space and experience themselves.

*Phantasia* can not escape death, but it can obtain immortality<sup>418</sup> – albeit a radically secularized and speculative form of immortality – not as an escape from historical experience and social reality, but as their re-evaluation.

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<sup>415</sup> *Promiscuité* occurs six times in Merleau-Ponty's *Le visible et l'invisible* (VI 115; 153; 282; 288; 302; 318)

<sup>416</sup> See my notion of *flat fictionality*, chapter II.3.

<sup>417</sup> [See ch. II.3]

<sup>418</sup> To adopt a mystical, *phantasia*-like insight from the cult movie *La montaña sagrada* (1973) by Bolaño's Chilean compatriot Alejandro Jodorowsky.

As the images crack open (*dehiscence*), nothing remains but words, words, words (*the stubbornness of language*) – confusing, distorted, alienated words (*phantasia, hyperbole*). One of the most courageous explorers of literary *phantasia*, Jorge Luis Borges, knew that productive alienation and self-extradition<sup>419</sup> is the only immortality we can hope for:

A mi entender, la conclusión es inadmisibile. 'Cuando se acerca el fin', escribió Cartaphilus, 'ya no quedan imágenes del recuerdo; sólo quedan palabras.' Palabras, palabras desplazadas y mutiladas, palabras de otros, fue la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas y los siglos.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> A self-extradition to the future which must be sharply distinguished from the self-extradition to the past which is crucial for Oswald Spengler's reactionary historical fatalism. See Martin Heidegger: *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, in M. H.: *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 60, ed. Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly, Claudius Strube, Vitorio Klostermann, Frankfurt/M., 1995, 1–156, 38; 40-43.

<sup>420</sup> Jorge Luis Borges: *El Inmortal*, in J. L. B.: *Cuentos completos*, Debolsillo, Barcelona, 2017, 223–238, 238.

## **PART III. HYPERBOLIC REALISM**

### III.1 MINOR ADVENTURES

*qualquer gato, qualquer cachorro*

*vale mais do que a literatura*

(C. Lispector)

#### *The adventure novel after the end of adventures*

According to Renzi, Ricardo Piglia's distorted self-portrait and an important character in *Respiración Artificial* (1980), the end of history, an idea haunting the world long before Francis Fukuyama's controversial publications,<sup>421</sup> means that there are no adventures anymore nor even experiences, but only parodies of adventures :

Todos queremos, le digo, tener aventuras. Renzi me dijo que estaba convencido de que ya no existían ni las experiencias, ni las aventuras. Ya no hay aventuras, me dijo, sólo parodias. Pensaba, dijo, que las aventuras, hoy, no eran más que parodias. Porque, dijo, la parodia había dejado de ser, como pensaron en su momento los tipos de la banda de Tinianov, la señal del cambio literario para convertirse en el centro mismo de la vida moderna. No es que esté inventando una teoría o algo parecido, me dijo Renzi. Sencillamente se me ocurre que la parodia se ha desplazado y hoy invade los gestos, las acciones. Donde antes había acontecimientos, experiencias, pasiones, hoy quedan sólo parodias. Eso trataba a veces de decirle a Marcelo en mis cartas: que la parodia ha sustituido por completo a la historia. ¿O no es la parodia la negación misma de la historia? Ineluctable modalidad de lo visible, como

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<sup>421</sup> See Francis Fukuyama: "The End of History?," in *The National Interest*, 16, Summer 1989, 3–18; F. F.: *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York/NY i. a., 1992. The genealogy of the topos runs at least through four thinkers: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Kojève.



decía el Irlandés disfrazado de Telémaco, en el carnaval de Trieste, año 1921, dijo, críptico, Renzi.<sup>422</sup>

Piglia's readers know very well that Renzi is a passionate hyperbolist Piglia frequently used as a mask by Piglia to make all kinds of bold statements about literature, politics and the rest of the world.<sup>423</sup> Bearing this in mind, we shouldn't take the scene's message at face value but rather view it as a confrontation between the first-person narrator's youthful wish for adventures and Renzi's snobbish dismissal of the possibility of adventures (experience, passion, surprise etc.) after the alleged end of history.

Apparently unimpressed by Renzi's diagnosis, Bolaño's and Pynchon's late novels can be read as revivals of the adventure novel. They span many centuries, countries and continents. Their characters are constantly on the move, there is murder and revenge, love, intrigue and deception, people are chased, others are chosen, they must overcome obstacles, they must pass tests. Rapid changes of direction are reminiscent of the picaresque novel, and the episodic juxtaposition of the larger parts and chapters makes it difficult to discern any harmonious order at first glance. This invites the reader to

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<sup>422</sup> Ricardo Piglia: *Respiración artificial* [1980], Anagrama, Barcelona, 2006, 110. (In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title RA + page number.) The last sentence is a reference to Joyce, and more specifically the Proteus-chapter in *Ulysses*. The phrase "ineluctable modality of the visible" introduces the passage which is taken to be Joyce's definition of epiphany.

<sup>423</sup> Renzi's hyperbolizing spirit shows up in the way he reduces a particular literary work to one single question. See e.g. Ricardo Piglia: "Noticias sobre Macedonio en un Diario," in R. P.: *Formas breves*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2000, 13–28, 28: "Pero hay otra cuestión", dice Renzi. '¿Cuál es el problema mayor del arte de Macedonio? Las relaciones del pensamiento con la literatura.' El pensar, diría Macedonio, es algo que se puede narrar como se narra un viaje o una historia de amor, pero no del mismo modo. Le parece posible que en una novela pueden expresarse pensamientos tan difíciles y de forma tan abstracta como en una obra filosófica, pero a condición de que parezcan falsos. 'Esa ilusión de falsedad', dijo Renzi, 'es la literatura misma.'"

adopt the role of an adventurer who travels through the vast landscape of the maximalist novel.

The location of these novels is the world or several worlds – not the infinite universe. Very large finitudes (HO 60), not infinite abstract spaces. Pascal would not have to be terrified by the vast space of *hyperbolic realism* since it is neither infinite nor empty.<sup>424</sup> If we accept Levinas' formula that metaphysics is the adventurous desire for the invisible and the infinite,<sup>425</sup> *2666* and *Against the Day* are not metaphysical novels. They contain a lot, but they have a beginning (or several beginnings) and a more or less clearly defined ending. They flirt with spirituality, but they refuse salvation.

### *Bolaño's poetic fracasology*

In one way or another, all texts by Bolaño partake in the genre of adventure literature. Its restless protagonists generally share two things. They are on the search for something that is often elusive or strangely unimportant from the outside view. And they are constantly in danger of disappearing.

This holds even more for *Los Detectives Salvajes*, Bolaño's decisive contribution to the history of the adventure novel, which is crossed by two other

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<sup>424</sup> See Blaise Pascal: *Pensées*, n° 64, ed. Michel Le Guern, Gallimard, Paris, 1977, 91: "Quand je considère la petite durée de ma vie, absorbée dans l'éternité précédente et suivante, (*memoria hospitis unius diei praetereuntis*), le petit espace que je remplis et même que je vois abîmé dans l'infinie immensité des espaces que j'ignore et qui m'ignorent, je m'effraie et m'étonne de me voir ici plutôt que là, car il n'y a point de raison pourquoi ici plutôt que là, pourquoi à présent plutôt que lors. Qui m'y a mis ? Par l'ordre et la conduite de qui ce lieu et ce temps a-t-il été destiné à moi ?"

<sup>425</sup> "Sous la forme la plus générale qu'elle [= la métaphysique] a revêtue dans l'histoire de la pensée, elle apparaît, en effet, comme un mouvement partant d'un monde qui nous est familier quelles que soient les terres encore inconnues qui le bordent ou qu'il cache d'un 'chez soi' que nous habitons, vers un hors-de-soi étranger, vers un là-bas." (TI 21)

important genres: the detective novel and the artist novel. Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, friends, poets and founders of the Neo-avant-garde movement of *visceral realism*, search for biographical traces and lost poems of fictional Mexican surrealist poet Cesárea Tinajero.

Tinajero is a typical textual enigma at the heart of Bolaño's fiction, a flickering center around which most of the protagonists, their agencies and desires are organized. She is marginalized in at least four ways: as a woman, as a Latin American, as an avant-gardist, and as a poet.

To a certain extent, Belano and Lima share her marginal status. We don't learn a lot about their poetry from the narrator, but the few things that leak through reveal that they are subaltern existences, living a poor life, and write against the established aesthetics of Octavio Paz and Pablo Neruda. They seem to be a Latin American, Bohemio-proletarian re-enactment of the surrealists, and we can roughly identify Lima with Breton and Belano with Aragon.

The search for Tinajero and what is presumably her only poem and the aggressive performances against the literary establishment, especially against Octavio Paz, seem to be their main poetic occupation. When they take part in an excursion with the association of Mexican writers to Nicaragua, Belano and Lima disappear without a trace. The long middle part of the novel multiplies the search, by providing several dozens of *testimonios* from characters who, in one way or another, know something about the whereabouts of the savage detectives. The novel thus produces a polyphonic, non-synchronizable kaleidoscope of reports with often contradictory and useless information.

The constellation Lima – Belano – Tinajero is representative of the typical mode of adventure in Bolaño's poetics. Readers of his texts witness adventures at the brink of the invisible, in remote locales at peripheries of the periphery. These minor adventures, quixotic events located in Bolaño's

favorite social and aesthetic sphere, the *lumpen-bohème* of society,<sup>426</sup> are by far more important than adventures in the classical sense. Despite the constant moving, there is a strong feeling of eventlessness that comes with Bolaño's narratives.

Literature is included in this structure that emphasizes adventures from below. While it is hard to find a contemporary writer with a stronger belief in the autonomy of literature and the figure of the writer (and especially the poet) than Bolaño,<sup>427</sup> literature in his texts is simultaneously cursed with a constitutive weakness. Bolaño's narratives are reflections on failure in many ways, but there is maybe one that stands out: the failure of the progressive Left in Latin America, the *generación perdida*, which had to cede the political field first to violent, military dictatorships and later to unbridled neoliberal regimes.<sup>428</sup>

In this context, literature becomes representative of Bolaño's cosmological pessimism: "el mundo (percibido como naufragio interminable)." (B 504) Like the world itself, the adventure of literature is a constant shipwreck, and Bolaño, inventor of adventure novels in the time after the end of adventures, writes under the auspices of Cervantes: "desde la mesa donde escribo

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<sup>426</sup> For the use of the notion "lumpen-bohème" to describe the insurrectionist potential of the "pub-crawling boozier" see Hal Draper: *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Vol. III., *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* [1986], Aakar Books, 2011, 186.

<sup>427</sup> In that vein, Bolaño has been called by Jorge Volpi the last Latin American writer. See Jorge Volpi: "Bolaño, epidemia," in *Revista de la Universidad de México* 49, 2008, [http://www.revistadelauniversidad.unam.mx/ojs\\_rum/index.php/rum/article/view/3042/4280](http://www.revistadelauniversidad.unam.mx/ojs_rum/index.php/rum/article/view/3042/4280) (accessed January 26, 2018), 77–84.

<sup>428</sup> If *2666* stresses the neoliberal present with references towards globalized labor exploitation and the industry of drug trafficking, three of his shorter novels are directly concerned with the recent past and the traumas of the Left in Latin America. *Nocturno de Chile* and *Estrella Distante* narrate events around the coup against Allende and Pinochet's seizure of power in Chile. And *Amuleto* deals with the events and the aftermath of the Tlateloco massacre in 1968 where several hundreds of peacefully protesting students were killed by the military in Mexico City.

estoy viendo mis dos ediciones del *Quijote*."<sup>429</sup> Since literature is inseparable from its own almost inevitable failure, writing becomes the task of "fracasar con éxito." Yet, for the reasons suggested above, we shouldn't identify this definition of literature as *fracasología* with the familiar poetics of impossibility epitomized by Samuel Beckett and his famous dictum of try again – fail better.

While Bolaño's texts are replete with uncertainty (much more explicitly so in earlier works than in *2666*), it is hardly expressivity in crisis that we encounter in his late maximalism. Radical doubt and unemployed negativity are either part of positive expressive gestures or frequently overcome (*sin embargo*). Instead of semiotic insufficiency, the ultimate dimension of Bolaño's failure lies more in the tragic contradiction between the abundance and richness of poetic expression and its political powerlessness (*the melancholy of totality*).<sup>430</sup>

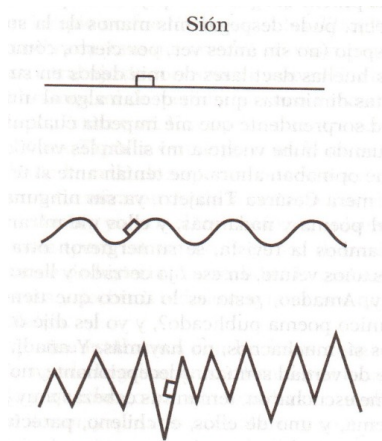
Among all his texts, *Los detectives salvajes* is probably the quintessential text that demonstrates this tendency. In the adventures of the savage detectives, literature oscillates between the almost-nothing and the near-to-the-absolute, the *nonada* and the vastness of the *sertão*, to say it with the words of another maximalist novel whose mode of adventurism is that of inferior adventures.

The enigma at the heart of *Los detectives salvajes* is not entirely illusory, but it is almost nothing: one poem, in three lines (not even verses), with a silly title that is not even a recognizable word but just a sound or a suffix or a syllable:

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<sup>429</sup> Bolaño, "Discurso de Caracas," 37.

<sup>430</sup> From the perspective of the Left, added to this tragic tendency is the fact that the artists and intellectuals most likely to undertake significant acts in the world are conservatives, opportunists and fascists. Carlos Wieder in *Estrella Distante*, the imaginary, yet extremely frightening gallery of Fascist writers in *La literatura nazi en América*, the Catholic literary critic in *Nocturno de Chile* who teaches the right-wing putschists around Pinochet classes in Communism to prepare them against their enemies on the Left.



(LDS 376)

The speculation about the meaning of the title of Tinajero's hyperbolically minimalist legacy leads to one interpretation that reads the title as a corrupted abbreviation of *navegación*.<sup>431</sup> The three different shapes of the geometric line could point to an always more agitated ocean, and the little rectangular figure is the symbol for a boat or a coffin that struggles not to sink.

Poetry lies at the bottom of Bolaño's poetic miserabilism. In his aesthetic view, the poet is the quintessential hero as much as she is the quintessential anti-hero. Poetry itself oscillates between heroic exceptionality<sup>432</sup> and tragic powerlessness although it is not possible to assign clear values such as positive and negative to these two poles. As stated by Auxilio Lacoture, the flamboyant protagonist of *Amuleto*, the powerlessness of poetry is also its

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<sup>431</sup> Jordi Balada Campo takes this as an occasion to compare Bolaño's anti-heroic adventurism and particularly *Los detectives salvajes* with one of the most spectacular *fracasos con éxito* in the history of poetry: the life and work of Arthur Rimbaud. See his "Ulises y Rimbaud en Roberto Bolaño, Los detectives salvajes," in *Romanische Studien* 1, 2015, 85–110, <http://www.romanischestudien.de/index.php/rst/article/view/11/66> (accessed January 26, 2018).

<sup>432</sup> This exceptionality is stated by the son of the president of the university of Santa Teresa when he says to Amalfitano that poetry is the only thing outside of capitalism: "Sólo la poesía no está contaminada, sólo la poesía está fuera del negocio." (B 288-9) The distinction between poetry and literature is crucial.

condition of survival: "Metempsychosis. La poesía no desaparecerá. Su no-poder se hará visible de otra manera."<sup>433</sup>

### *Pynchon's slow adventures*

Among many other elements, Pynchon's *Against the Day* is the narrativization of unionist and anarchist defeat by corporate capitalism and colonialist/imperialist extractivism and militarization. Webb's adventurous resistance against the violence of capital ends when he is killed by Scarsdale's thugs and even if two of his sons try to continue his legacy, Webb's kids are dispersed throughout the world (mostly Europe) and lose connection to collective struggles when they settle down for calmer private lives.

One of the novel's funniest and saddest moments for anarchism occurs when some of its protagonists meet in the Anarchist spa of *Yz-les-Bains* – a quiet haven from the impositions of history, but also a place that stands for the confession of defeat. The anarchist spa is an uncanny foreshadowing the fact that radical political alternatives to corporate Capitalism and other totalitarisms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will migrate into nostalgia, the cultural industries of entertainment and wellness.

Dispersion, scattering is also the fate that famously befalls Slothrop at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. At the same time, it seems to be his only strategy left to escape from "Them", the system of malicious forces to which he is exposed since his father had literally sold him. When two of the functionaries of *The White Visitation*, an important subsystem of "Them," see each other again after the War, they try to retrospectively disentangle the power relations and stakes in the zone during the War:

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<sup>433</sup> Bolaño, *Amuleto*, 134.

'Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary — but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system —' (GR 638)

*For every They there ought to be a We.* But there isn't. Even the most intimate relationships in *Gravity's Rainbow* are conditioned by or unwittingly performing the system's will. Slothrop's fatal gift for prophetic erections is the glaring image of how occult institutions such as *The White Visitation* control affects, the body and its libido.

But Slothrop's condition is only the tip of the iceberg of a much more general structure in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Another character in the novel, Franz Pökler, works as an engineer for the Nazis when he slowly learns about the fact that his own daughter is a prisoner of the labor camp right next to his work place. He is only allowed to see his daughter for a short period during summer vacation. In good paranoid style, each year he wonders anew if the girl *They* send him is really his daughter:

So it has gone for the six years since. A daughter a year, each one about a year older, each time taking up nearly from scratch. The only continuity has been her name, and Zwölfkinder, and Pökler's love— love something like the persistence of vision, for They have used it to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing him only these summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child... (GR 422)



Affectivity and intimacy in *Gravity's Rainbow* are a currency, an anesthetic.<sup>434</sup> Paranoia is widely taken to be the preferred cognitive mode of post-modern thinking, and it is the way that Slothrop and most of the novel's characters are aware of the biopower that keeps them confined. Despite its state of heightened awareness that paranoia produces, cognitive paranoia leaves them helpless and hopeless to alter their condition in any meaningful way.

This form of cognitive paranoia, knowing your misery without being able to change it, is a deeply depressive mode. It knows or it believes it knows, but has no leverage to improve its condition, let alone that of the world. Towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the depressive dimension of paranoia is epitomized by one of Pynchon's most applauded inventions, Byron the Bulb:

Byron, as he burns on, sees more and more of this pattern. He learns how to make contact with other kinds of electric appliances, in homes, in factories and out in the streets. Each has something to tell him. The pattern gathers in his soul (*Seek*, as the core of the earlier carbon filament was known in Germany), and the grander and clearer it grows, the more desperate Byron gets. Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don't last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever,

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<sup>434</sup> With maybe one exception: the love story between Roger and Jessica in part I of the novel. "There's never much talk but touches and looks, smiles together, curses for parting. It is marginal, hungry, chilly – most times they're too paranoid to risk a fire – but it's something they want to keep, so much that to keep it they will take on more than propaganda has ever asked them for. They are in love. Fuck the war." (GR 41-2) However, it seems as if they needed the tense atmosphere of the war for their love that ends as soon as the war is over.

knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it.... (GR 654)

*Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before.* Byron's dream of organizing all the bulbs, of literally tapping into the existing energies on the ground to build a counter-network to "the Grid" fails spectacularly. His fate is not even that of those prophets and martyrs who are intimidated and attacked by the system until they perish or pull back to be reabsorbed by it. His tragic immortality does not give way to a tale of heroic failure, but is a poignant example of paranoia's bad infinity in which the infinitely smart, yet powerless subject is doomed to burn on forever, neither allowed to burn out nor to fade away.

As a "theory of negative affect (PR 24)," depressive paranoia has its only thinkable positive outcome in a perverted cynicism directed against one's own self – the *jouissance* of one's own misery as the last resort to gain power over it.

Byron's impotence is a powerful image for the extremely limited agency of most characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Similar to Bolaño's defeatist tendency that the characters who align themselves with the ruling forces are those whose actions are most likely to gain traction, it is Captain Blicero who knows best how to make use of the Grid turning depressive paranoia into creative, anticipatory paranoia.

Blicero is a master. He learned quite early to fall into a trance, to wait for the illumination, which always comes. It is nothing he's ever spoken of aloud. (GR 758)

If Blicero eventually fails too, he does not fail without dragging almost everybody around into his circle of death and infection.

For many, paranoia defines the totality of Pynchon's corpus<sup>435</sup> and, by way of synekdoche, the works of postmodernism in general. It is true that paranoia dominates *Gravity's Rainbow* in many ways. However, Pynchon reveals an extremely sophisticated sensibility for the different modes of paranoia as he nourishes his denunciations of the They-system with great historical detail and constant poetic inventiveness.

In her introduction to *Novel Gazing*, a series of highly original, queer and reparative readings of novels, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick complains with great rhetorical verve about

the exclusiveness of paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure: only its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is *other* people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions). (PR 22)

As I have tried to demonstrate above, in *Against the Day* Pynchon's path is clearly not that of paranoia anymore (and again, I doubt that paranoia had ever been Pynchon's only or even preferred historical vision). Pynchon's reparative genre-poaching allows the characters to escape at least partly from the impositions of history, although this does not by any means alleviate the historical pain or prevent wars.

Pynchon's search for grace in the midst of gravity gives *Against the Day* a surprising spiritual twist that is seconded by his pragmatist animism

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<sup>435</sup> See Leo Bersani: "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature," in *Representations* 25, Winter 1989, 99–118. For paranoia not only as a "theory of affect," but as totalizing mode of planetary organization see Emily Apter: "On Oneworldedness. Or Paranoia as World-System," in *American Literary History* 18:2, Summer 2006, 365–389.

and interest for all kinds of alternative and subaltern religions and belief practices.<sup>436</sup> While paranoia is a "theory of negative affect" (PR 24) and a closure of future horizons, *Against the Day* allows its characters considerable room for serendipity and Deleuzian lines of flight,<sup>437</sup> which is rather impossible within a paranoid framework.

As usual in Pynchon's fiction, humor and parody play an important role, but in *Against the Day*, these parodic elements seem to slow down

come at a slower pace, less in the over-excited mood of postmodernism and closer to the affectionate display of high camp performances.<sup>438</sup>

This might be how Pynchon's minor adventures in *Against the Day* can be best described: as slow adventures, unfolding in expanded environments (see the title of part I: "The Light over the Ranges"), where human history appears on a much larger canvas on which the fantastic and the non-human have their equal share.

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<sup>436</sup> See Coffman: "Bogomilism." [see footnote 232]

<sup>437</sup> The last sentence of the novel synthesizes the open future and the search for grace (but not salvation!) when it says about the Chums: "The fly towards grace." (P 1085)

<sup>438</sup> Sedgwick's little catalogue of classic camp with its emphasis on mannerism and deliberate ridiculousness reads like an abstract inventory of the novel's manifold hilarious scenes and moments: "the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternate historiographies; the "over"-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture." (PR 28)

## III.2 RETRO-PROLEPTIC REALISM

*entregado con entusiasmo a la visión dionisiaca,  
festiva, de exégesis de último carnaval  
(o penúltimo carnaval)  
(R. Bolaño)*

### *Imminent realism*

Re-reading the works of Philip K. Dick, Rodrigo Fresán, in his short digital conversation with Roberto Bolaño, uses the most standardized terms to praise the science fiction writer, namely that "su obra no haya envejecido en absoluto."<sup>439</sup> But as if imitating Bolaño's technique of breathing fresh air into "dead metaphors,"<sup>440</sup> Fresán remains in the register of time metaphors to further develop the image of Dick's non-aging. The futuristic "novelitas" (F) that Dick produced in a "devilish rhythm" (B) are different from less genre-transgressive science fiction in at least two ways. First, *science* plays a minor role in Dick's speculative scenarios. And second, there is less *fiction*,

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<sup>439</sup> Roberto Bolaño, Rodrigo Fresán: *Dos hombres en el castillo: una conversación electrónica sobre Philip K. Dick*, June 30, 2002, <http://www.letraslibres.com/mexico-espana/dos-hombres-en-el-castillouna-conversacion-electronica-sobre-philip-k-dick> (accessed January 26, 2018). In the following, I use the name shortcuts (R) and (B) directly behind to quotes to indicate the speaker.

<sup>440</sup> See Richard Rorty: "The Contingency of Language," in R. R.: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, 3–32, 18. Rorty writes that if a metaphor is repeatedly used in ordinary language, "it will gradually require a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor – or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. It will be just one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language."

less invention in his *novelitas*. The allusively evoked future in Dick's literature is not that of hardly conceivable interstellar scenarios, but that of the imminent future.

Disquieting imminence (seemingly far and yet incredibly close) and the predominance of speculation on techno phantasy are the two elements which render Dick's literature unique. As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Fresán's claim is a cunning exaggeration. Dick's works have indeed aged since the 60s and 70s, in an era defined by the Cold War, the nuclear bomb and paranoia. Only in a good way, like a precious, well-matured wine.<sup>441</sup> In this ripening process, Dick's imminent future scenarios become increasingly readable as adequate descriptions of reality.<sup>442</sup> As time goes by, Dick's work gets restored from the cave of popular genre fiction into the shelves of world literature: "Dick se ha convertido en un gran escritor realista/naturalista." (F)

The rest of the conversation unfolds this idea – that history can gradually convert a fiction that had been produced in an environment of specific, anti-realist conventions of form and genre into realistic world literature. As the chatting goes on, Bolaño's and Fresán's contributions become increasingly divergent, although they seem to agree on the most important aspects. Fresán seems to adopt the role of the thoughtful critic who arranges acute observations within a system of aesthetic categories – even where he speaks

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<sup>441</sup> See Name June Paik: *Video*, Brussels, 1974, n. p., <http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Artists4/NamJP/KnokkeHeist.pdf> (accessed January 26, 2018): "[...] the process of 'aging' is important not only in the art of 'wine making' but also in any non-dualist relationships."

<sup>442</sup> Dick foreshadows the Anthropocenic idea that we are caught in a form of existence that is already post-apocalyptic without us noticing and that we are living in a world after the end of the world. See Morton, *Hyperobjects*; Morton, *Dark Ecology*; and Deborah Danowski, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: *Há mundo por vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins*, Desterro, Florianópolis, 2014.

of Dick being impossible to qualify (Valis), which is, after all, a standard move of the literary critic.<sup>443</sup>

Bolaño speaks much more decisively as a writer (or according to his conception of the "wild reader") who is less in thrall of his role as a mediator between poetics and aesthetics. He speaks about literature in a much more literary way. This starts in Bolaño's first answer where he calls Dick the "escritor de los paranoicos" (B), comparable with Byron who is the "escritor de los románticos" (B). Reminiscent of his poetic literary critique of imaginary works (most prominently in *La Literatura nazi en América*), Bolaño draws wild parallels between life and literature. Dick's intense and self-destructive life style foreshadows the "shared adventures" (B) which are crucial for the structure of Dick's novels. In *Entre paréntesis*, Bolaño described Dick in a typically hybrid way as "Kafka steeped in LSD and rage."<sup>444</sup> The consumption of hard drugs is translated into "narcotic structures" (B) and becomes the bio-poetic pivot of texts such as *A Scanner Darkly* and *Ubik*. According to the logic of good aging, Dick becomes a prophet post hoc who worked in the realm of narcotic speculation what will later become reality. Fresán tells us more about the concrete texture of his fiction than Bolaño whose remarks remain

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<sup>443</sup> "Valis es un libro inclasificable que ha llegado a ser definido como el Tristram Shandy de la ciencia-ficción: ¿crónica de una posesión cósmica?, ¿autobiografía alternativa?, ¿tractate para una nueva religión?, ¿pedido de auxilio de un escritor enloquecido por años de bombardeo químico a su sistema nervioso y comida para perro a su aparato digestivo?, ¿roman à clef con la participación de Linda Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, David Bowie y Brian Eno entre muchos otros?, ¿mensaje en la botella de un náufrago paranoico seguro de estar siendo observado por la KGB y el FBI luego de haber tomado contacto con el "rayo rosado" de una inteligencia superior o de su hermanita gemela muerta? Todas y cada una de estas definiciones son aplicables a lo que es, indiscutiblemente, una obra maestra dentro de cualquier categoría literaria." (F)

<sup>444</sup> Roberto Bolaño: "Philip K. Dick," in *Entre paréntesis Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2004, 183–4, 183: "Dick era una especie de Kafka pasado por el ácido lisérgico y por la rabia."

elliptic and highly suggestive. Yet, he is not the prophet of churches and religions, but a very specific prophet which Bolaño introduces in his typically way in striking a pathetic tone just to withdraw its pathetic signature in the next moment:

Un profeta callejero, diríamos un profeta lumpen, sin el prestigio de un Norman Mailer, un Arthur Miller o un John Updike. Y sin el aura de un Salinger (los lectores de Dick y Salinger suelen ser jóvenes, pero los de Dick son jóvenes freaks). (B)

Bolaño's hyperbolic habitus is represented by three elements in this short characterization: (1) the marginality, minority and inferiority of Dick's literature; (2) the dense accumulation of intertextual signals reduced to four names by authors and one descriptive feature; and the technique of *outdoing*: Dick's readers are not only young, but young freaks – in two ways distanced from the standard of adult normality. Fresán adds a fourth hyperbolization in calling Dick a prophet in the as-if mode: "En algún lado leí que Dick dijo que 'la mala ciencia ficción predice mientras que la buena ciencia-ficción parece que predice.'" (F)

Via the reported Dick quote, Fresán insidiously criticizes conventional fiction claiming that while it invents alternative worlds enriched by geekily researched minutiae, literary form is often left out of its inventive playfulness.

"Bad" science fiction celebrates fiction as fabulation while "good" science fiction enacts fiction as feigning – as a game with possibilities, contingencies and masquerades. In contrast with conventional genre science fiction, Dick's literature contains less *science* and less *fiction* (in the sense of fabulation) – but more art. Experimenting in the realm of speculation about the imminent future, Dick's literature is capable of anticipating the reality of



the imminent future (not in detail, but according to its structure<sup>445</sup>) as its narcotic-paranoid method makes visible what is somehow already present, but only half-visible, emergent.

This doesn't mean that Dick's aesthetic nobilitation follows the familiar recipe {genre literature + good style = world literature}. On the contrary, Bolaño and Fresán agree on what is also a common opinion among Dick's readers – that his style does not succeed in the sense of "buena escritura" (B/F).<sup>446</sup> Dick's achievement offers a deep riddle; great literature against all odds – written in bad style and in discordance with the rules of the genre. But if it is not style that makes him "one of the ten best American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,"<sup>447</sup> the following quote not only gives us some answer to the enigma of his alternative value. It also provides an important hint to Bolaño's conception of what great literature should be:

Pero evidentemente la gran literatura no es una cuestión de estilo ni de gramática, como también sabía Swift. Es una cuestión de iluminación, tal como entiende Rimbaud esta palabra. Es una cuestión de videncia. Es decir, por un lado es una lectura **lúcida y exhaustiva** del árbol canónico y por otro lado

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<sup>445</sup> "el mundo invisible de la Red" (F)

<sup>446</sup> The idea that aesthetically revolutionary literature often appears as bad writing, especially for more conservatively spirited contemporaries of writers who are later held to be visionary, has, of course, a long tradition. Even Flaubert, the writer who stands for poetic succeeding by stylistic achievement, seemed to think a little bit like that, as we can see in a letter to Louise Colet: "Shakespeare est quelque chose de formidable sous ce rapport ; ce n'était pas un homme, mais un continent ; il y avait des grands hommes en lui, des foules entières, des paysages; ils n'ont pas besoin de faire du style, ceux-là ; ils sont forts en dépit de toutes les fautes et à cause d'elles. – Mais nous, les petits, nous ne valons que par l'exécution achevée. Hugo, en ce siècle, enfoncera tout le monde, quoiqu'il soit plein de mauvaises choses. Mais quel souffle ! – Je hasarde ici une proposition que je n'oserais dire nulle part, c'est que les très grands écrivent souvent fort mal. – Et tant mieux pour eux." (Gustave Flaubert: *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, ed. Jean Bruneau, Gallimard, Paris, 1980, 164 (letter to Louise Colet, September 25, 1852).

<sup>447</sup> Bolaño: " Dick," 183.

es una **bomba de relojería**. Un testimonio (o una obra, como queramos llamarle) que explota en las manos de los lectores y que se proyecta **hacia el futuro**. (B, my emphasis)

In what is arguably the climax of the conversation between Bolaño and Fresán, we get a clearer sense of this particular kind of realism or naturalism. A realism that is both a repetition and a disruption of the whole canon. A visionary realism – not anti-mimetic, but differently mimetic. A realism of minor adventures suggested by the reference to Swift and Rimbaud – adventures of distorted proportions (giants and lilliputs), of caustic satire, of brilliant, rebellious youth, of self-sacrifice and poetry's loss of innocence. A realism that, like Rimbaud's odes to steamboats and industrial chimneys, has the intention to accustom the anachronistic awareness of its contemporaries to the imminent future by way of poetic persuasion. A realism of the future.

That realism and prophecy are not necessarily opposites is further demonstrated in Bolaño's preface to *Estrella Distante*:

*En el último capítulo de mi novela La literatura nazi en América se narraba tal vez demasiado esquemáticamente (no pasaba de las veinte páginas) la historia del teniente Ramírez Hoffman, de la FACH. Esta historia me la contó mi compatriota Arturo B, veterano de las guerras floridas y suicida en África, quien no quedó satisfecho del resultado final. El último capítulo de La literatura nazi servía como contrapunto, acaso como anticlímax del grotesco literario que lo precedía, y Arturo deseaba una historia más larga, no espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en sí misma. Así pues, nos encerramos durante un mes y medio en mi casa de Blanes y con el último capítulo en mano y al dictado de sus sueños y pesadillas compusimos la novela que el lector tiene ahora ante sí. Mi función se redujo a preparar bebidas, consultar algunos libros, y discutir, con él y con el fantasma cada día más vivo de Pierre Menard, la validez de muchos párrafos repetidos. (ED 11)*

Mirror and explosion – repetition and reflection, but also explosion, scattering, dehiscence – both tendencies collaborate to create a realism that is anticipatory, not only reflective of the status quo.

*The invention of futures past*

"Explosions" heavily circulate through *Against the Day*, too. We have seen one example in chapter II.5. at the example of the anarcho-futuristic painter Andrea Tancredi: "Tancredi's paintings were like explosions. He favored the palette of fire and explosion." (P 585) Pynchon's novel narrates and evokes politically and aesthetically explosive materials without performing the same gesture with his own poetic project. In contrast with his own poetic time bomb called *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Against the Day* is a text that accepts its lateness – after aesthetic and political avant-gardes whose tragic (or tragicomic) history it only narrates without fully embodying it. The sequential composition of *Against the Day* has no clearly recognizable harmonious structure, but it doesn't militate against all kinds of order. It largely follows a historical chronology and its syntax is often sinuous, but never ungrammatical as in *Gravity's Rainbow* nor obsolete as in *Mason & Dixon*. Its rhythm is less erratic and wild than that of Pynchon's short novel which is often viewed as his most orthodox postmodern text and whose poetic mode has been described, among comparable characterizations, as "textual zani-ness."<sup>448</sup> The novel defies a certain set of conventional reading experiences in terms of length, conciseness, narrative economy, readability and genre – but this defiance takes place within the safe space of literary fiction without the avant-garde ambition of exorcizing literature from life with literature.

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<sup>448</sup> Grausam, *Endings*, 44.

Nevertheless, Pynchon's realism in *Against the Day* can also be viewed as a realism of the future, albeit in different terms than Dick's transposition of the imminent future in the medium of speculative, techno-ascetic science fiction. Instead, Pynchon scavenges historical genres to expand the imaginary, political and aesthetic possibilities of history and the contemporary novel. Reading Pynchon's historical narratives, the reader experiences history as "past future"<sup>449</sup>, or, in the words of Daniel Grausam, gets a sense of "the spectral foreshadowings of future in various past events" that may or may not have become real. Pynchon's poaching of historical genres and his speculative, fantastic exploitation of the imaginary of historical mathematics, geopolitics, aesthetics etc. is an explosion of the one-to-three-dimensional versions of recorded history and a release of the fourth dimension which had been discovered in mathematics and physics of the time period he covers in *Against the Day*. Against the default formula of the historical novel, Pynchon not only narrativizes real events to which he adds invented details, characters and local color (although he does these things as well). He also narrativizes the dreams, the fantasies, the superstitions, the possibilities and impossibilities of the historical era (including sporadic evocations of our contemporary present). Following Daniel Grausam's analysis of Pynchon's "proleptic imagination,"<sup>450</sup> we could call such a writing proleptic realism – a realism not afraid of inserting well-researched historical evidence into its narrative, but one that more importantly accounts for the probable, the improbable and the impossible of history.

This proleptic or, to put it in a somewhat cumbersome wording, retro-proleptic realism releases the noise of contingency surrounding the official version of recorded history. The narrative slips in and out of recorded

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<sup>449</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck: *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. and intr. Keith Tribe, Columbia University Press, New York/NY, 2004.

<sup>450</sup> Grausam, *Endings*, 45.

historical reality into the space of speculative, counterfactual, literary fantasy. According to Pynchon's leitmotif of bi-location and bi-perception in *Against the Day*, to give a full account of an era without erasing the time of the writing and its "difficult textuality"<sup>451</sup> demands a stereoscopic view acknowledging both vectors (the historical and the fantastic) at once.

The broader composition of *2666* and *Against the Day* demonstrates that both novels also play out the logic of proleptic realism internally. *Against the Day's* uncountable fantastic speculations and inventions, set in sharp contrast against Euclidean positivism of the 19th century, obtain the status of possible realities as modern science and mathematics grow more and more complex. Pynchon's characters ponder the possibility of a fourth dimension which will later be scientifically realized: as imaginary numbers in mathematics; as space-time in quantum physics and relativity theory.

As characters, the Chums of Chance are the primary example of the gradual approximation of 'reality' to what had first seemed exaggerated, phantasmagoric, or esoteric at best. Over the course of the novel, their "degrees of fictitiousness" dwindle as they swap their timeless, literary existence for a more historical, time-bound existence. Their fantastic vector cuts deeper and deeper through their historical vector – their agency is expanded, they start to age and marry, they build a union, they lose much of their youthful carelessness and become responsible beings with agency (albeit still on behalf of hidden powers they largely ignore).

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<sup>451</sup> Grausam, *Endings*, 46.

## *Undocumentable realism*

Even though *Against the Day* ends on a seemingly conciliatory note: the evocation of grace in the midst of gravity,<sup>452</sup> the novel can be read as the allegory of lost innocence: the lost innocence of youth, of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of literature. The historical *telos* of this lost innocence, which was of course never innocent to begin with, is the empty reference at the heart of the novel: World War I.

The First World War is at the same time the realistic and hyperbolic climax of the historical period narrated in *Against the Day*. On the one hand, the harsh reality of a global war that wasted more material and killed more humans than anything before, a rage of materials and an extent of suffering that seem to deride the idea its representation in literature, the tragic outcome of what is rendered in a playful, comic-like and often juvenile mode in the novel. On the other hand, a reality whose disfiguring grotesqueness is capable of outdoing even the most far-fetched invention that the characters in *Against the Day* and their author could come up with.

In this respect, Bolaño's 2666 offers a glaring difference. While during the first three parts, its central and massive historical event, the phenomenon of the *feminicidios*, is represented in enigmatic allusions and indirect effects similarly to World War I in *Against the Day* or World War II in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in the fourth and longest part, it becomes the central focus of the narrative.<sup>453</sup> Before, Bolaño had created a misty atmosphere of uncertainty and

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<sup>452</sup> Pynchon's juxtaposition of gravity and grace in the last two paragraphs of the novel resonates with Simone Weil's mystical classic *La pesanteur et la grâce*, Plon, Paris, 1978. If I have not found substantial relations between the two texts, it is certainly worth looking for them considering the great importance of mystical practices and structures in *Against the Day*.

<sup>453</sup> Something similar lies behind the late appearance of Archimboldi, which points to Bolaño's oft-used technique of a very long suspension with an undramatic solution. The puzzle that is Archimboldi is not only resolved, it is resolved in a profoundly unpathetic way: pathos falls into bathos. Yet this resolution is not without its remainders. Bolaño's dealing with narrative

mystery around its central enigma. As readers trained in the habits of modernism and postmodernism, we have learned that the ultimate reality of massive events is unspeakable and that it can only be accounted for in two possible ways: first, via testimony, the work of poetic remembrance, the empathic narration of an exemplary fate inserted into its larger historical environment; and second via the meta-literary deconstruction of the event's expressibility and the reliance of the witness.

Bolaño, however, does both things – and then adds a little more. First, the *feminicidios* appear in the horizon of the characters and even the most impersonally forensic enumeration of victims does not entirely cancel out their personality. At times, this personality and individuality is even restituted by the narrator through an act of poetic justice.

On the other hand, the *feminicidios* are narrated in a collective way that plays with documentary material. However, Bolaño seeks more than *testimonio* plus documentarism in pursuing the hyperbolic attempt to describe a reality that exists and persists beyond the witness and documentable traces.

What seems unbelievable and supernatural at first, becomes abruptly real: proleptic conjecture is transformed into retrospective reality. In a way, Bolaño's proleptic realism follows the opposite dynamic of the formula *no dar crédito* in Espinoza's reflection of the first scene which entails the first occurrence of the *feminicidios*: "Primero no te lo puedes creer y luego te parece increíble."<sup>454</sup>

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puzzles seems to follow the dynamic of Derrida's *différance*: While some enigmas are solved, others are created.

<sup>454</sup> In the larger context of the whole quote: "No dar crédito, sin embargo, pensó Espinoza, es una forma de exagerar. Uno ve algo hermoso y no da crédito a sus ojos. Te cuentan algo sobre... la belleza natural de Islandia..., gente bañándose en aguas termales, entre géiseres, en realidad tú ya lo has visto en fotos, pero igual dices que no te lo puedes creer... Aunque evidentemente lo crees... Exagerar es una forma de admirar cortésmente... Das el pie para que tu

In the Latin American context, the horizon of a (tragic) reality beyond witnesses and traces bears an uncanny resonance to the sad reality of the *desaparecidos*. Under the extreme conditions of invisibility that violent regimes have created, the need to hyperbolize becomes an ethical obligation.

Bolaño's novel evokes a dimension of a historically under-documented reality in which the witnesses were killed and most of the traces blurred and destroyed. To a certain degree, what seemed to be exaggerated in parts I-III becomes altogether real in part IV. One can even go further and say that reality actually outbids fiction. In the same sense, WWI in *Against the Day*, although only indirectly narrated, outbids the cabinet of curiosities gathered by Pynchon in the decades before the War.

Pynchon's carnesalve is as fictional as the historically documented Tunguska event, and part IV of *2666* is (at least) as much invention and poetry as parts I-III and V. Historical factuality does not entail the abolition of fiction or the restitution of the simulacrum of direct mimesis. By contrast, mimesis *switches to the fourth gear*, it expands the possibilities of the novel from within.

Part IV of *2666* remains a part of the novel and yet stands out: as a long list of mourning; as a ruthless enumeration of the dead with an awareness for epic completeness; as a catalogue that is a very large and exhausting finitude, but repeatedly refers to its own incompleteness. In that way, the fourth part, the part of the crimes, is at the same time the most realistic and the most hyperbolic sequence of the novel, which expands the novel by implanting a long-durational, performative experience at the heart of the text.

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interlocutor diga: es verdad... Y entonces dices: es increíble. Primero no te lo puedes creer y luego te parece increíble." (B 181)



### III.3 THE LABOR OF FIGURATION

*We talked as we had never talked before,  
an outpouring.  
(M. Nelson)*

*un mundo de arquitecturas en continua metamorfosis,  
rumores que se configuran en significaciones,  
archipiélagos del sentido  
(O. Paz)*

#### *Hyperbolically realist*

¿A usted le gusta su obra?, le digo. ¿La obra de Joyce? No creo que se pueda nombrar a ningún escritor en este siglo, me dice. Bueno, le digo, no le parece que era un poco, ¿cómo lo diré?, ¿no le parece que era un poco **exageradamente realista?** ¿Realista?, dice Renzi. ¿Realista? Sin duda. Pero ¿qué es realismo?, dijo. Una representación interpretada de la realidad, eso es el realismo, dijo Renzi. En el fondo, dijo después, Joyce se planteó un solo problema: ¿Como narrar los hechos reales? ¿Los hechos qué?, le digo. Los hechos reales, me dice Renzi. Ah, le digo, había entendido los hechos morales. (RA 147-8, my emphasis)

In his typically hyperbolic manner, which reduces the entire corpus of an author to a single question, Renzi defines the work of Joyce – the most anti-realistic writer of all anti-realists – as *hyperbolic realism*.

To be more precise: as hyperbolically realist – the adverbial form is of importance here. In his conference talk "Réalisme épistémologique, liberté ontologique,"<sup>455</sup> Tristan Garcia distinguishes three ways of doing realism philosophically by using grammatical categories: nominal, adjectival, adverbial. Trying to grasp new modes of contemporary realist writing, literary criticism often adds descriptive adjectives to the genre-defining noun *realism*: pastoral, traumatic, depressive, hysterical, peripheral, allegorical etc.

This is certainly recommendable as an essayistic strategy to make oneself felt in the highly competitive visibility-economy of literary criticism – a delicate strategy that should be watched with a considerable amount of suspicion.<sup>456</sup> (And my own project shouldn't be exempted from suspicion.). Most of these critical efforts, of course, are not only meant to be a vehicle for the increase of their own visibility or for bullying and intimidation – which is arguably the first and foremost function of James Wood's adjective "hysterical" –, they also have descriptive and analytic functions, e.g. insofar as they point to the fact that there can be no realism 1.0 in art and literature, and that all representations of reality are biased in many ways. Yet the mere act of enriching the noun realism with descriptive adjectives risks providing not "interpreted representations of reality (RA 147)," but reproductions of reality as *manifest image* tinted with supernatural kitsch and imitative experimentalism.

Luz Horne's project stands out positively from this critical habitus. The *realismo despiado* she pursues is not merciless in the sense of an unvarnished representation of social existence, which is the project of *dirty realism* or *realismo sucio*. While dirty realism seeks to provide an iconic illustration of a world from which any symbolic dimension is absent, Horne's *literaturas*

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<sup>455</sup> [See footnote 53].

<sup>456</sup> My own project should certainly not be exempted from this suspicion.

*reales* operate simultaneously beneath the symbolic *and* the iconic. As arrangements of "palabras sueltas, ('sin pies ni cabeza') [que] refieren ostensivamente (despiadamente) a pies y a troncos; a cuerpos mutilados (LR 166),"<sup>457</sup> their primary mode of operation is indexical.

In that sense, the texts of Horne's corpus do not combine Garcia's first and second mode, namely nominal and adjectival realism. They come closer to his third mode of adverbial realism or *réelisme*, to say it with the words of Philippe Forest.<sup>458</sup>

Contrary to what one might suspect, however, this indexical attitude does not give way to a minimalist poetics, although there is a strong inclination for the short form in Horne's corpus. Horne's examples are not only indexical and merciless, they are also ostentatious, performative and delirious.<sup>459</sup> They are performative in the sense that they involve the reader in the becoming of the narrative ontology rather than soothing her with a seductive or slightly unsettling, but recognizable image of reality. They are delirious in the sense that they explore the fantastic and implausible, which is partly motivated by a reality that seems to be delirious and "out of joint"<sup>460</sup> itself.

Indexicality presupposes a certain continuity or, more precisely, a mutual permeability between language and reality, between words and events. Similarly, in Pynchon's and Bolaño's fiction the hyperbolic is way too entangled with the real in order to adequately describe their conjunction with a colorful adjective that adds itself as a mere accident to realism-as-a-noun.

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<sup>457</sup> [See footnote 130] See also Borges' *El Inmortal*, FN 419.

<sup>458</sup> [See footnote 126].

<sup>459</sup> "En estas narrativas se construye un realismo ostensivo, pero *inverosímil*; discontinuo, pero *indicial y performativo*; vuelto hacia los temas clásicos del realismo relacionados con lo bajo y la escoria social, pero de un modo no pedagógico sino *despiadado*." (LR 32)

<sup>460</sup> For a literary account of the out-of-joint world see Bernardo Carvalho's *O mundo fora dos eixos. Crônicas, resenhas e ficções*, Publifolha, São Paulo, 2005.

The fact that *hyperbolic realism* is more adverbial than anything else motivates my decision to understand it as a mode rather than a genre.<sup>461</sup> My argument isn't so much that it is not possible to regard these texts within a context of generic similarity, but rather that understanding them in terms of a writing mode, a *manière de faire*, acknowledges the fact that these texts are cultural artifacts that still belong to our time. We might retrospectively define them as examples of the same genre, but for now they are part of a still ongoing evolution of a "new cultural geology"<sup>462</sup> – a dynamic I've tried to illustrate by drawing from Anthropocenic thought, speculative philosophy and phenomenology. For an analysis of writing as a modality, or, for that matter, a mode of cultural production, the question whether the corpus consists of one or two or thirty novels is not that important, as long as we follow the texts' permeability and porosity to other modes of writing, theoretical practices and onto-phenomenological reconfigurations.

While the 'hyperbolic' in *hyperbolic realism* is meant to be more adverbial than adjectival, this does not mean that Pynchon's and Bolaño's novels are not *also* adjectivally and even nominally realistic, or even that they don't at times showcase what David Foster Wallace has called "classical big-R realism."<sup>463</sup> At many occasions, their realism is not only hyperbolically realist,

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<sup>461</sup> Which is the main concern of Stefano Ercolino's book *The Maximalist Novel*. Let me enumerate the ten formal features that he gains from comprehensive but rather distant readings and that are, as he argues, shared by all post-War maximalist novels: extreme length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrational omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment, hybrid realism.

<sup>462</sup> Marc McGurl: "The New Cultural Geology," in *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57:3-4, Fall/Winter 2011, 380–390.

<sup>463</sup> Larry McCaffery: "An Interview with Foster Wallace," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2, Summer 1993, 127–50, 138.

but also peripheral (Deckard), picaresque and social (Elias), hybrid (Erco-  
lino), dirty and cynical,<sup>464</sup> or even, in rare moments of inattention, magical.

In contrast to other outstanding works of the genre such as *Ulysses*,  
*Paradiso*, *Grande Sertão*, *The Man without Qualities*, *Infinite Jest*, or to Pynchon's  
and Bolaño's own earlier maximalist efforts (*Gravity's Rainbow* & *Los detec-  
tives salvajes*), the softened radicalism and the largely guaranteed readability  
of *2666* and *Against the Day* might provoke the impression that those texts  
partake in a conservative relapse of literature. Compared to the short list of  
maximalist novels above, critics could come to the verdict that they are less  
constantly inventive than *Ulysses*, less exquisitely hermetic and poetically vi-  
sionary than *Paradiso*,<sup>465</sup> less radically doubtful than *Grande Sertão*, less  
openly essayistic than *The Man without Qualities*, less metafictional than *Infi-  
nite Jest*, and less stylistically extravagant than all of the examples just men-  
tioned.

Instead of an encompassing cosmological vision and a renewal of our  
aesthetic sensibilities, we suspect getting the spectacle of big-R realism from  
those later maximalist novels by Bolaño and Pynchon, a spectacle that is not  
only aesthetically less relevant, but also more entertaining when it is done  
much better by TV culture. As David Foster Wallace says in the interview  
with McCaffery:

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<sup>464</sup> Ilse Logie: "La 'originalidad' de Roberto Bolaño," in *América. Cahiers du CRICCAL* 33, 2005,  
Les modèles et leur circulation en Amérique latine, Vol. 1, 203–211, 207; 205.

<sup>465</sup> Cortázar tried to make sense of *Paradiso*'s exceptional status in defining the adequate mode  
of reception not as reading, but as a preparation for reading, as meta-reading, so to speak: "En  
sus instantes más altos *Paradiso* es una ceremonia, algo que preexiste a toda lectura con fines  
y modos literarios; tiene esa acuciosa presencia típica de lo que fue la visión primordial de los  
eléatas, amalgama de lo que más tarde se llamó poema y filosofía, desnuda confrontación del  
hombre con un cielo de zarpas de estrellas. Una obra así no se lee; se la consulta, se avanza  
por ella línea a línea, jugo a jugo, en una participación intelectual y sensible tan tensa y vehe-  
mente como la que desde esas líneas y esos jugos nos busca y nos revela." See Cortázar, "Le-  
zama Lima," 157.

I'm not much interested in trying for classical, big-R Realism, not because the big R's form has now been absorbed and suborned by commercial entertainment. The classical Realist form is soothing, familiar and anesthetic; it drops right into spectatorship.<sup>466</sup>

It is indeed true that *Against the Day* and *2666* have interesting affinities with the format of the TV series, which is probably the dominant cultural product of the last decade. Pynchon's dramaturgy is reminiscent of those by now well-established series with uncontained episodes and season-long narrative arcs, and it seems obvious that his Wild West scenes are directly inspired by HBO's *Deadwood* and the Western movie in general. And Bolaño's mix of sex / drugs / violence and the sharp contrast between an armada of corrupted characters and a few heroic exceptions (Lalo Cura, Sergio González Rodríguez, Rosa Amalfitano) feed exquisitely on the melodramatic cynicism of the *narconovelas*.

From the other side of the shore, the indefatigable James Wood sees in *Against the Day* another example of *hysterical realism* where aesthetic radicality is only faked:

One of the problems with hysterical realism, of which this novel is a kind of zany Baedeker, is that one suffers both the hysteria *and* the realism: the worst of both worlds. There is the weightless excess, the incredibilities, the boredom that always attends upon cartoonish, inauthentic novelistic activity. But there is also the boredom attendant upon the rather old-fashioned, straightforward realism used to create this very escape from realism. Thus one of the most peculiar elements of this clearly ambitious and daring novel is that its stylistic syntax is relatively undaring, and so conventional. Of

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<sup>466</sup> McCaffery, "Interview with Foster Wallace," 138.

course much of it is pastiche, so in a sense it slips out of the charge of conventionality. But the practical effect is a grammar of realism that challenges nobody and nothing.<sup>467</sup>

The alleged absence of aesthetic radicality and its conventional grammar, hidden behind cosmopolitan busyness and encyclopedic erudition, could lead to the impression that *hyperbolic realism* is a typically late aesthetic phenomenon. Taken together with Mark Fisher's argument that realism is *per definitionem* a reification of the society of spectacle and thus a reinforcement of the status quo, one could see *Against the Day* and *2666* as examples not only of Capitalist Realism, but of Late Capitalist Realism.<sup>468</sup>

Besides the tedious boredom, the infinite repetitions and the overwritten mannerism of those books, such readers might take offense at Pynchon's comic-like de-realizations, his operetta-like distortion of the American West at the beginning of the twentieth century and his reproduction of cultural stereotypes; at Bolaño's trivialization of violence, his annoying metaphorization of madness, and both authors' "depressive hedonia"<sup>469</sup> in the face of the triumph of Capitalism.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> James Wood: "All Rainbow, no Gravity." in *The New Republic* March 5, 2007, <https://newrepublic.com/article/63049/all-rainbow-no-gravity> (accessed January 30, 2018). Note Wood's tiring habit of dismissing *hysterical realism* with the unfounded assumption that it is inauthentic. For the sake of decency, I have to mention that his critical reaction to Bolaño is overall positive, if not euphoric. See James Wood: "The Visceral Realist," in *New York Times*, April 15, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/books/review/Wood.t.html> (accessed January 30, 2018).

<sup>468</sup> "Late" in two senses; first, because they come late to the game of realism, and second, because the specific world-historical relation they reinforce via symbolic reproduction is the era of Late Capitalism, or, as I would prefer to call it, Late Liberalism. For literature & late capitalism see Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1992. For the slightly different and, as I believe, more appropriate notion of "late liberalism" see e.g. Povinelli, *Economies*, and lately Elizabeth Povinelli: *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Duke University Press, Durham/NC i. a., 2016, 13.

<sup>469</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 21.

<sup>470</sup> We could add the objection that the boastful pretention of the maximalist novel is a particularly masculinist version of the "soothing, familiar and anesthetic" Realism with a big-R that

I don't believe that such objections are completely unfounded. On the whole, however, they are not convincing. If many of the scenes somehow refer to a recognizable reality, the "sand-grain manyness of things" (UW 60) produces a certain uncanny valley of too much description. Copious juxtaposition (see ch. II.1) is in fact the primary mode of uncertainty in *Against the Day* and *2666*,<sup>471</sup> and the atmospheric irreality of the novelistic universes (II.3) makes it hard to separate the unreal from the real or the substantial from the accidental. The result is a temporary, yet sometimes traumatic dis-correlation between words and events.

If it is true that there is a lot of mundane realism in these books, the framing mode is non-realistic, metabolic. Mimesis is not abolished or radically pushed to the margins, as is the case in some examples of Luz Horne's *literaturas reales*. Instead, metabolic intertextuality becomes a shelter for more classically mimetic strategies, for the exploitation of inherited genres and literary techniques that are partly imitated, partly upgraded and partly 'repaired.' *Against the Day* and *2666* are indeed late phenomena, but they are

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Foster Wallace criticizes. In moments like this, literary criticism usually assumes that such a question lies beyond the scope of the present work. I do not want to defend myself so easily. A reflection on the apparent masculinity (and, for that matter, the apparent whiteness) of the maximalist novel is in fact a task that I simply did not manage to handle in any publishable way. It is my belief that, instead of hiding behind disciplinary routines, even the most comprehensive account has to question itself what it violently excludes and on whose exclusion its existence might probably depend. I know of no better way of speaking out this important and cruel truth than Ursula LeGuin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*: "They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery." (Ursula K. LeGuin: *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* [1973], <https://www.utilitarianism.com/nu/omelas.pdf> (accessed January 31, 2018))

<sup>471</sup> And could therefore be added as an eight type of uncertainty to Serpell's catalogue.



aware and open about it, and they testify to the inevitable lateness of literature in two senses: as literature that comes after *both* realism and the avant-gardes.

If I said a little bit earlier, mimesis "switches in the fourth gear,"<sup>472</sup> this is, in Pynchon's case at least, not meant in a "some not strictly metaphorical way (P 433)." The hilarious theory of people as vectors presented by Pynchon's character Ganesh Roa, a mathematical genius and yoga practitioner, serves as a *pars pro toto* for the structure of the novel that expands the three dimensions of historical realism with a fourth axis: that of fantastic literatures. Pynchon's novel seems to partake in the delicate practice of *bilocation*, which doesn't always guarantee a happy outcome for his characters.

Considering that *hyperbolic realism* unites elements from all three types of Garcia's model of realisms, i.e. the nominal, the adjectival and the adverbial, we can read it as the realization of his fourth kind, namely paradoxical realism. This realism is not only a realism of the possible, but of the impossible – a realism that tries to know the unknown and speak out that which seems or even is unspeakable. Garcia equates this fourth kind with speculative realism (and Lewis' modal realism of possible worlds). Punctually, this penchant for paradoxes pops up at the surface of the texts, in Bolaño's neo-surrealist imagery or in Pynchon's use of modern mathematics and physics as a source of inspiration for paradoxical narrative effects.

*Hyperbolic realism's* attenuated radicalism on a stylistic level, then, becomes readable not so much as a concession to the literary market, but as a conscious aesthetic decision. The structure that I've tried to describe in chapters II.2 – II.4 demonstrates that the linguistic skepticism of the postmodern age, modernism's infatuation with invisibility and darkness and the laborious adventurism of figuration that characterizes the maximalist novel in

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<sup>472</sup> [See footnote 277].

general, are not banished from *hyperbolic realism*, but are simply reworked in a more nuanced and idiosyncratic fashion.

The as-if ness of the whole discourse stands for the permanent danger of unreality, which is a major feature of Anthropocenic existence, but they are also the enabling possibility for an expansion of the expressible. Radical doubt, radical fictionality, temporarily vanquished by the persistence and stubbornness of expression (*sed tamen*), provide the signature of Pynchon's and Bolaño's *hyperbolic realism*. If there is a lot of failure in their novels, these failures are much more political and existential than linguistic. Unlike in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the communication between the living and the dead is disturbed by entropic noise, in *Against the Day*, Kit Traverse and his dead father Webb manage to communicate despite the limited semiotic resources of the afterworld ("the stripped and dismal metonymies of the dead," P 673). Yet if this communication between the dead and the living succeeds, it is only reparative to a certain extent. There is no salvation from gravity in Pynchon's novel, where a provisional and fleeting state of grace is the only thing its characters can ever hope for.

The novels of *hyperbolic realism* are abundant discourses in which the visible is greatly outdone by *its* dynamic and surrounding invisibles. Their hyperbolic use of metaphor is both a limiting and an enabling mode of making distant contact with the real through language. Against the idea that metaphors are unparaphrasable,<sup>473</sup> the metaphors in these novels are not only autonomous acts of expression, but also mutually entangled acts of paraphrasing. The idea that only a metaphor can explain another metaphor,<sup>474</sup> is adequate, not because metaphors are unphrasable, but because there is no act of paraphrasing that does not produce its own unparaphrasable remainder, its "halo de misterio vertiginoso (B 822)."

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<sup>473</sup> Rorty, "Contingency," 18.

<sup>474</sup> [See footnote 350].

The same holds true for narrative enigmas: the quest for a certain object of desire does not lead to the "terrible indifference" (B 822) we know from orthodox postmodernist aporia; by contrast, narrative enigmas are frequently solved, albeit sometimes after extremely long arcs of suspense. But none of the narrative puzzles has a solution that does not create at least one more puzzle.

In the narrative universes of *hyperbolic realism*, the reader encounters many moments of radical and hyperbolic doubt that are frequently overcome (*sed tamen effabor*) without abolishing the linguistic uncertainty and sinuous unfolding of language that characterize these discourses. The deconstructive processes at the heart of these texts are not merely semiotic, but imagined as a literal tearing apart of the material fabric of the text (*dehiscence*). In the interstices of these "esfoladas aberturas, rasgadas por unhas,"<sup>475</sup> *flayed openings, scratched out by fingernails*, we glimpse not the opposite of the manifest spectacle of the real, but the less fixed and reified elements (*phantasia*) that make it work (and thus have the potential to disturb and renew the order in place).

All this makes it difficult to see *Against the Day*, 2666 and related writings as texts that use a "grammar of realism" just to inflate themselves<sup>476</sup> with

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<sup>475</sup> Clarice Lispector: *Água viva* [1973], Nova Fronteira, Rio de Janeiro, 1978, 78.

<sup>476</sup> If it is true that there is a lot of hot air in Pynchon's *Against the Day*, this turns out to be a modality of the novel's fantastic realism. After all, the narrative spends considerable amounts of time in the airship of the *Chums of Chance*, a vantage point that is eerily distant from the messiness of life on earth's surface, but from which things can also be seen with a "balloon-headed clarity (P 157)." The continuity between our world and theirs is suggested in Lindsay's warning at the very beginning of the novel: "'Do not imagine,' Lindsay instructed, 'that in coming aboard *Inconvenience* you have escaped into any realm of the counterfactual. There may not be mangrove swamps or lynch law up here, but we must nonetheless live with the constraints of the given world, notable among them the decrease of temperature with altitude. Eventually your sensitivities in that regard should moderate, and in the meantime'—tossing him a foul-weather cloak of black Japanese goatskin with C. of C. property stenciled in bright yellow on the back — 'this is to be considered as a transitional garment only, until such time

all kinds of zany and inauthentic textual magic tricks. Instead, their project is a mimesis of the fourth dimension that ventures deep into the paradoxical nature of objects, words and phenomena. As inferior adventures of laborious figuration, they offer an account of a complex and difficult reality that "dice lo indecible dejándole su carácter de indecibilidad (LR 185)."

### *Against ineffability*

Pynchon's and Bolaño's late maximalist novels challenge the myth of ineffability without banning doubt, uncertainty and *phantasia* from their discourses. To illustrate the situation of (in)effability in our contemporary moment, let me conclude this section by taking yet another *détour*, this time via one of the most powerful contemporary attacks against the myth of the ineffable: Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*.<sup>477</sup>

Nelson's autotheoretical account of her love relationship with the gender-fluent, transsexual video artist Harry Dodge does not only engage with queer bodies, desires and sexuality, but equally and prominently with the capacities of language to express. After a shockingly obscene beginning that ends on a note of perplexity,<sup>478</sup> Nelson immediately turns to the problem of (in)effability:

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as you adapt to these altitudes and, if fortunate, learn the lessons of un-premeditated habitude among them." (P 9)

<sup>477</sup> Maggie Nelson: *The Argonauts*, Graywolf, Minneapolis/MI, 2015. In the following quoted directly in the text with short title ARG + page number.

<sup>478</sup> The by now famous incipit of the book foreshadows the promiscuity between language and obscenity in *The Argonauts*, which explores the latter's potential to reduce the former's performance anxiety: "October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the

Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed. This idea gets less air time than his more reverential *Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent*, but it is, I think, the deeper idea. Its paradox is, quite literally, why I write, or how I feel able to keep writing.

For it doesn't feed or exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. It doesn't punish what can be said for what, by definition, it cannot be. Nor does it ham it up by miming a constricted throat: *Lo, what I would say, were words good enough. Words are good enough.* (ARG 3)

*Words are good enough* – a pragmatist heresy in the midst of a metaliterary orthodoxy still dominated by the postmodern master tropes of simulation and *différance*.

Nelson's wording is the almost exact reproduction of Luz Horne's formula to describe the situation of expressibility in her *litteraturas reales*. The inexpressible or, in Richir's words, the *infigurable*, is not or not merely a limitation for literary discourse, but that which enables it and vouches for its relevance. Literary discourse is neither a celebration of aphasia nor a stooge for the reification of transparency.

On the other side of the shore stands the video artist Harry claiming that words are

corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable

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cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had *Molloy* by your bedside and a stack of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? *What's your pleasure?* you asked, then stuck around for an answer." (ARG 3)

falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds. (ARG 4)

Harry's lack of confidence in the capacities of language is neither textualist nor does it come from language's complete outside. It comes from an immersion into the metabolic proliferation of signs that produces profound effects of discorrelation.<sup>479</sup>

This is the initial aporia that motivates Nelson's essay whose adventurous intention is already suggested in the title. If the founding paradox of her writing so far had been the idea of the (later) "Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed" (ARG 3), her new one is the juxtaposition of pragmatist exuberance ("I argued along the lines of Thomas Jefferson and the churches—for plethora, for kaleidoscopic shifting, for excess," ARG 4) vs. the discorrelation of language and reality ("the cookie-cutter function of our minds," ARG 4).

*The Argonauts*, then, becomes the dramatic adventure of assertion and withdrawal. The paradoxes are not 'bridged,' but navigated ("We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice," ARG 4) – language is neither adequate nor inadequate. Words are good enough, language is what it is, but in order to be like that, it has to be slightly out of sync with itself, always too much or too little – hyperbolic.<sup>480</sup>

Much later in the book, Nelson finds a certain 'solution' for the tensed relationship between pragmatism and discorrelation:

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<sup>479</sup> [See footnote 265].

<sup>480</sup> The redefinition of language's capacities entails a redefinition of romantic love – not as the typical loss of contour to which both sides of the couple are subjected after having successfully merged their horizons, but as the irregular unfolding of differences and contrasts, as the joint self-exposure to the inhumanism of desire. This inhumanist conception of love and desire bears strong resemblance to Marco Perniola: *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic. Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World*, transl. Massimo Verdicchio, Continuum, New York/NY, 2004.

**Afraid of assertion.** Always trying to get out of 'totalizing' language, i.e., language that rides roughshod over specificity; realizing **this is another form of paranoia**. Barthes found the exit to this merry-go-round by reminding himself that 'it is language which is assertive, not he.' It is absurd, Barthes says, to try to flee from language's assertive nature by 'add[ing] to each sentence some little phrase of uncertainty, **as if anything that came out of language could make language tremble.**'

My writing is riddled with such **tics of uncertainty**. I have no excuse or solution, save to allow myself the tremblings, then go back in later and slash them out. In this way **I edit myself into a boldness** that is neither native nor foreign to me.

At times I grow tired of this approach, and all its gendered baggage. Over the years I've had to train myself to wipe the sorry off almost every work e-mail I write; otherwise, each might begin, Sorry for the delay, Sorry for the confusion, Sorry for whatever. One only has to read interviews with outstanding women to hear them apologizing. But I don't intend to denigrate the power of apology: I keep in my *sorry* when I really mean it. And certainly there are many speakers whom I'd like to see do **more trembling, more unknowing, more apologizing**. (ARG 98)

The solution to the problem of the myth of the ineffable is not the return to *rigid realism*, the myth of a transparent language or the triumphalism of the literary genius who creates a divine language to make the unspeakably real nevertheless tangible.

Instead, it is the inhumanism of a *language itself that speaks*, using the subject, the author and the text as a mouthpiece. It might seem surprising that this is a recurrent idea of the phenomenological authors whose works I discuss in this dissertation – an undercurrent theme, often overlooked, for it doesn't fit neatly into the alleged coupling of phenomenology and humanism.

Ainsi commence le langage. Celui qui me parle et qui, à travers les mots, se propose à moi conserve l'étrangeté foncière d'autrui qui me juge; nos relations ne sont jamais réversibles. (TI 104)

La philosophie n'a jamais parlé - je ne dis pas de la *passivité*: nous ne sommes pas des effets - mais je dirais de la passivité de notre activité, comme Valéry parlait d'un *corps de l'esprit*: si neuves que soient nos initiatives, elles naissent au coeur de l'être, elles sont embrayées sur le temps qui fuse en nous, appuyées sur les pivots ou charnières de notre vie, leur sens est une 'direction.' - L'âme pense toujours: c'est en elle une propriété d'état, elle ne peut pas ne pas penser parce qu'un champ a été ouvert où s'inscrit toujours quelque chose ou l'absence de quelque chose. Ce n'est pas là une activité de l'âme, ni une production de pensées au pluriel, et je ne suis pas même l'auteur de ce creux qui se fait en moi par le passage du présent à la rétention, ce n'est pas moi qui me fais penser pas plus que ce n'est moi qui fais battre mon coeur. (VI 270)

In *hyperbolic realism*, the author is neither dead nor sovereign – she is the executive functionary of a *language that speaks itself*, embodied in a productive nature that surpasses her and makes her heart beat. Just like the soul cannot not think (Merleau-Ponty), and, remember, just like you "cannot not decide if you are actually in the field of social justice (WSP 12)," language cannot *not* express. However, just like the subject in Merleau-Ponty's *note de travail*, the author is not reduced to a mere effect without agency and responsibility: "nous sommes pas des effets" (VI 270). But in the realm of productive alienation, only the author who knows how to absorb the inhumanism of language survives, as she enters "el pozo de los grandes poetas, en donde solo se escucha su voz que poco a poco se va confundiendo con las voces de otro."<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Bolaño: "Fragmentos de un regreso," 70. [See footnote 275]



Ethically relevant uncertainty is not produced "by adding to each sentence some little phrase of uncertainty," but by letting your "tics of uncertainty" creep into the text. The author's act of expression only 'succeeds' if she does not erase her hesitations and idiosyncrasies and allows herself the tremblings – not to slash them out later, as I would correct Nelson here, but to exaggerate them even further.

Nelson's explicit description and Bolaño's and Pynchon's implicit poetics thus have the potential of outdoing the postmodern master tropes of simulation and *déconstruction*. The reality experienced as ontological simulacrum does not produce an image of reality as spectacle. While simulationism is predicated upon a philosophy of access, *hyperbolic realism* acknowledges our contact with the real that is nevertheless *imprésentable* and precedes our efforts of knowing and acting. The fault lines do not run neatly between humanity and nature, but the inhuman traverses the human as a force from within, yet gesturing towards the *Grand Dehors*, the ancestral reality and the future horizon of extinction, the very real possibility of a planet without us. To adopt a hyperbolic attitude means to count with the ontological simulacrum in the midst of that which is seemingly inconspicuous.

In *hyperbolic realism*, discursive abundance is not the triumph of linguistic narcissism, but the result of an editing process "into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to" the author, but comes from language and, for that matter, from reality itself. Abundance in these texts is not a vehicle of triumphalism, but a mode of uncertainty. The hyperbolic is radically different from the absolute certainty of Meillassoux's mathematics, it does not bridge the gaps and chasms (or, at least, not all of them). *Dehiscence*, as a much more materially grounded version of *déconstruction*, cracks open the familiarities of imagination, mythology, language, memory, logical transparency, and other avatars of the symbolic institution. And *phantasia* leaves space for the "least things whose essence is flicker, flow," (ARG 4) and the possibility

that, while words are good enough, there are necessarily alternative ways of articulating our contact with the real.

This close affinity between the hyperbolic and the inhuman might explain the weirdness and eeriness surrounding many of these novels' scenes and instants, the flickering irreality, the haunting of the text by constant doubt and uncertainty. It might also explain why there are so many characters, but almost no perspectival shifts – a stark contrast between, on the one hand, these late maximalist novels, and, on the other, Bolaño's abundant multi-perspectivism in *Los detectives salvajes* and Pynchon's rapid shifts of direction in *Gravity's Rainbow*. By contrast, in *Against the Day* and *2666*, and that is maybe where they most fundamentally converge, the idiom of the narrator oscillates between a ghostly omniscience and an anonymous detachment that does not hover above the perspectives as a unifying instance. This is why they often provoke the uncanny impression as if we were witnessing a hyperbolic reality that occurs largely on its own accounts, as if we experiences what happens to us not as passive victims, but as *esprit de corps*, exposed to "the passivity of our activity" (Merleau-Ponty). Representing what might be the feeling of many readers of *2666* (and *Against the Day*), another contemporary hyperbolist describes this in an essay fittingly called *Idiots of the Cosmos*:

Liest man *2666*, hat es den Anschein, als sei dieses Gefühl eines Zentrums, das auf einer Vorstellung oder einem Erlebnis beruht, dass etwas nah oder etwas anderes fern ist, aufgelöst oder aufgehoben. [...] Die Gegend und die Ereignisse werden nicht als fremd beschrieben, es gibt keine erkenntnismäßige Kluft in Form von etwas ungewohntem, Unverständlichen oder Exotischem zwischen den Personen und dem, was sie sehen. [...] Andererseits gibt es aber auch keine Vertrautheit. Die Distanz ist immer dieselbe, die Personen sind weder nah an etwas noch fern von etwas, es scheint, als hätte die Umgebung keinerlei Wirkung auf sie, ähnlich einem Ambiente, das wir im Fernsehen sehen [...]. Die Welt ist in gewisser Weise fertig gesehen, und dass

sie nun zum ersten Mal dort sind, ändert daran gar nichts. Dieses Von-Vorn-herin-Bescheidwissen, das ihren Blick färbt, verkörpert einen Abstand zu dem Fremden, den keine Reise aufheben kann. Und wenn Tolstoi es mit seinen Beschreibungen der Wirklichkeit geschafft hat, das Fremde so darzustellen, als würden wir es das erste Mal sehen, und es uns als wahrhaftig und nicht durch Sehgewohnheiten getrübt erscheint, erreicht Bolaño das Gegenteil. Er beschreibt die Abschwächung der Bilder in der Wirklichkeit. Merkwürdigerweise erreicht er jedoch etwas Ähnliches wie Tolstoi, denn die Welt, die Bolaño beschreibt, ist ebenfalls geheimnisvoll, gerade durch die fehlende Vertrautheit und den fehlenden Versuch, sie zu durchdringen: Wir sehen es, und das, was wir sehen, wird in einer Weise geschildert, in der weder das eine noch das andere gesichtet wird, es ist unerklärlich.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Karl Ove Knausgård: "Idioten des Kosmos," in K. O. K.: *Das Amerika der Seele. Essays*, transl. Paul Berf and Ulrich Sonnenberg, Luchterhand, Munich, 231–260, 250-1. I owe this reference to Johanna Nuber.

## Ψ) EPILOGUE. A FIFTH CONCEPT OF REALITY

*Now it is time to wake,  
into the breath of what was always real.*

(T. Pynchon)

While "the adventurous labor of figuration" serves as a short description of the literary *mode d'opération* of *hyperbolic realism*, my conclusion remarks would be incomplete without a complementary reflection on some of the consequences of my readings for ontology, phenomenology and Anthropocenic thought and existence.

Therefore, it is time to return to Blumenberg's essay that I discussed briefly at the end of chapter I.1.<sup>483</sup> In many ways, Pynchon's and Bolaño's texts gesture towards a reality outside or beneath human access, yet again and again haunting our present. Not only do they try to come to terms with the ancestrality of nature, the imminent destruction of the future and the weirdness of the real – they also bear witness to the inhumanism of *language itself that speaks through* their narrators and characters.

If Blumenberg's fourth concept of reality (R4), that of modernism and, as he claims, his contemporary moment (1964), acknowledges a certain exteriority and unavailability of the real to human access, his definition of reality as that which resists our appropriation is not exactly what is at stake in *hyperbolic realism*. In Bolaño's and Pynchon's fiction, in the poetic texts that I consulted for comparison and nuance, in a very specific phenomenological

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<sup>483</sup> Let me briefly recall the four (occidental) concepts of reality according to Blumenberg. R1 = reality as instantaneous evidence (Plato); R2 = reality guaranteed by an absolute witness (Middle Ages); R3 = reality as actualization of an internally coherent context (positivism); R4 = reality as that which resist appropriation (modernism).

practice and, on a broader, although not always analytically useful level, Anthropocenic thought and speculative philosophy –, in all of these writings, the real reveals itself not only as resistant undefinable mass, but as an active force of production, a semi-autonomous inorganic organism. Matter not as mute, inert, timeless, unhistorical, but matter as agential, internally temporalized, historical, albeit historical according to the laws of physics and geology, not to the familiarities of human-scaled experience.

More than fifty years after Blumenberg, we should envisage a new, fifth concept of reality that has probably been operative for a considerable amount of time<sup>484</sup> but whose full ramifications and dramatic consequences are yet to be awaited.

The phenomena of this new configuration of the real associated with the rise of the Anthropocene are neither immediately given (Blumenberg's R1-R2) nor completely hidden and invisible (R4). At the same time, it is not possible to entirely ignore the phenomenal realm and to press reality into a narrow frame whose only function is to provide the construction of a contextually coherent system (R3).

By contrast, Anthropocenic phenomena appear according to the rhythm of intermittence, wildly flickering between presence and absence, the visible and the invisible, and reality and irreality. The Anthropocene makes it brutally visible that humanity is a late and improbable phenomenon, a relatively short episode on the surface of the Earth, whose even

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<sup>484</sup> There is a lot of speculation where exactly we should fix the beginning of the Anthropocene and, for that matter, the emergence of a reality that requires a new concept. Some candidates are: the beginning of agriculture (Morton), the European colonization of the American continent and the beginning of the modern world-system, Watt's invention of the steam machine and the rise of industrialism (Crutzen), the Trinity test and the subsequent dropping of Atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 1964 bomb spike (Lewis, Maslin), a the end of the Cold War and the triumph of global Capitalism. I suspect that the very fuzziness of its beginning is part of the traumatic realism that defines Anthropocene.

shorter moment in the geological spotlight will almost certainly be the condition for its slow, but relentless disappearance "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."<sup>485</sup>

Almost all Anthropocenic writing suggests this traumatic lateness of humans to an unavailable reality captured between an ancestral past perfect and the *future proche* of imminent extinction by taking recourse to extreme metaphors and the parsing out of paradox and aporia, which is motivated by the fact that we have to account for a form of existence in a world that is already irredeemably lost. The primary mode of Anthropocenic reality is survival, not dwelling

In Pynchon's *Against the Day*, the characters and, synecdochically, the readers are trespassers, fleeting vectors through a vast, but finite world that is populated with animated spirits, uncanny atmospheric phenomena and unnamable things with a "mineral consciousness (P 133)." As the novel moves further into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the possible worlds and alternative universes juxtaposed with the three-dimensional realm of recorded history become more and more adequate images of a reality that eventually surpasses its boldest fantastic inventions. Similarly, Bolaño's half-distant narrative idiom deals with a "nuevo mundo, silencioso y paradigmático y atroz, en donde todo cabe menos los seres humanos."<sup>486</sup>

Of course, the new configuration of the real is not reduced to *hyperbolic realism*, but is operative in many other projects I have discussed or mentioned. In my view, the most nuanced account I found until now is elaborated in Luz Horne's *literaturas reales*. The Argentinian cultural critic Graciela Speranza writes about works from both fields. In her *Atlas portátil de la América Latina*, an indispensable source for the understanding of Latin American contemporary art in a planetary context, she describes Sergio Chejfec's short

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<sup>485</sup> Foucault, *Les mots*, 398.

<sup>486</sup> Roberto Bolaño: "Meridiano de Sangre," in R. B.: *Entre paréntesis Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2004, 186–8, 187.

book *Mis dos mundos* as a requiem to the flâneur.<sup>487</sup> Chejfec's anti-flâneur does not seek botanical rarities (Rousseau), the pleasures of the asphalt (Baudelaire), the grace of hazardous encounters (Breton), the epiphanies of the ordinary (Joyce), the geometrical order of the city of tomorrow (Le Corbusier), or the ruins of history (Sebald). Chejfec's mode of strolling comes closest to the "errancia sin esfuerzo," the effortless wandering around that Speranza identifies with the work of Robert Walser.

In a similar vein, *Against the Day* and *2666* appear like a requiem to the topos of the postmodern quest. Bolaño and Pynchon do not abolish the extraordinary, as Speranza describes it for Chejfec, but they find it either in reality itself or they reveal its trivial underpinnings. In *hyperbolic realism*, the many enigmas are not as infinitely postponed as in Pynchon's canonically postmodern texts *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*.<sup>488</sup> Pynchon's and Bolaño's characters do not always find what they are looking for, but something else is uncovered along the way, a reality sometimes more extreme and far-reaching than the one they were searching for.

Unlike in the "negative affect theory" prompted by cognitive paranoia, there is not only gravity in these novelistic universes. Yet they leave behind a melancholic aftertaste: while *hyperbolic realism* finds grace in gravity, it does not find salvation nor even justice. The trauma of total recognition, which nevertheless can not intervene in the world of affairs, is best described by Borges in *El Aleph*, and transposed into a more political key in my novels. In *Against the Day*, the melancholy of total knowledge that nevertheless remains powerless is illustrated in the failure of Anarchism and union labor struggles; in *2666*, the same effect is produced insofar as the narrator

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<sup>487</sup> Graciela Speranza: *Atlas portátil de América Latina. Artes y ficciones errantes*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2012, 111.

<sup>488</sup> *Los detectives salvajes* is still a bit closer to the structural template of postmodern quest although the savage detectives find the enigmatic poem and re-appear in the third part after they had gotten lost in the long middle part of the novel.

suggests the infinite perpetuation of systemic violence against mainly working-class women, which is fueled by the structural inequalities under millennial capitalism at the periphery in 2666.

What can literature as the quintessential mode of minor adventures do against all this? Not a lot, as Bolaño and Pynchon melancholically suggest. At least, we could say, it can help to spell out the new (or not that new) conditions of existence and its underlying concept of reality by involving its readers into an experience that is not merely conceptually challenging and does not speak only to the senses.

*Hyperbolic realism* presents itself as a (hopefully non-trivial) formal compromise that speaks to our conceptual as well as to our affectual "modalities of experience."<sup>489</sup> Without cancelling out the fundamental uncertainties vital for literary discourse, *hyperbolic realism* nevertheless rejects the pre-conception that being and appearance are insurmountably separate.

The attempt to trespass the strict border between phenomenology and ontology defines a project with the extravagant title of a *phenomenodelics of experience* by the Argentinian quantum physicist, philosopher and avid reader of experimental poetry, Gabriel Catren. Directed against the claustrophobia of critical philosophy (from Kant to Derrida), Catren's hyperbolic philosophical effort seeks to leap out of the confined circle of correlationism to open thought "onto post-critical modes of reason." (PL 64)

Against Kant and critical philosophy, Catren argues that our transcendental apparatus is neither unified nor ahistorical, but instead historical, multiple and not merely conceptual. Instead of crudely reducing the tran-

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<sup>489</sup> Gabriel Catren: "Pleromatica or Elsinore's Drunkenness," in Sarah de Sanctis, Anna Longo (eds.): *Breaking the Spell. Contemporary Realism under Discussion*, Mimesis International, Milan, 2015, 63–88, 65. In the following quoted directly in the text with the short title PL + page number.



scendental to logics (here is the reason for the suffix *-delics*), Catren's modalities of experience are also "perceptual, imaginary, affective, oneiric, intersubjective, etc. (PL 65)."

Insofar as 'nature,' according to the new concept of reality, is not just dead matter that resists human appropriation, but a productive and persistent force that flees from his access, our transcendental apparatus is directly produced by nature and therefore undeniably dependent on it. Yet since we are also a part of nature, we can change or at least shift and variegate our transcendentals to a certain degree within the limits of nature:

The operations of transcendental variation should not be understood as some sort of definite deliverance of human experience with respect to any form of transcendental framing, but rather as a successful differential transgression of the limits that apply for each particular occasion. Far from giving access to a hypothetical noumenal realm absolved from any form of transcendental overdetermination, these speculative operations merely loosen the anchoring of experience to a fixed (and contingent) transcendental structure, thereby activating phenomenological (or transumweltic) degrees of freedom. (PL 68)

Transcendental variation can feed from many sources: the learning of a new craft or a new language, computational models, the use of archiving and mnemonic techniques, cyborgian extensions of the body, the experimentation with narcotic substances, cross-cultural encounters and cross-class affective relationships, the reading of experimental poetry etc. Catren's suffix *-delics* indicates the difference between phenomenology; the *u* in *phenomenology* points towards the conjunction of phenomenology and ontology (or noumenology).

Consequently, experience in Catren's is always an event that puts us in contact with both the human (phenomenon) and the nonhuman (noumenon). Yet this means not an expansion of personal experience in the sense of

a *phénoménologie de la vie*, but simultaneously and maybe more importantly an expansion of *impersonal* experience. Catren's notion of *umwelt* (environment – but in its German version also with connotations to the works of Heidegger, Scheler and most importantly to Jakob von Uexküll) suggests that experience occurs in a "concrete and *impersonal* field of experience,"<sup>490</sup> in natural and virtual environments, in which the very distinction between nature and virtuality becomes less and less important. Yet another of Catren's neo-Baroque coinages, *transumweltization*, describes the fact that there are necessary passages between these different milieus, that a compositional organization between the different modes of experience is in fact possible (which is not to conflate with a hermeneutic merging of horizons).<sup>491</sup>

It is no coincidence that the suffix *-delics* points towards the effect of narcotic substances.<sup>492</sup> In lieu of Husserl's *transcendental phenomenology*, Catren's *immanent phenomenodelics* invites you not only to think about something different, but to think and experience differently by putting yourself in a state of altered awareness. The suffix *-delics* then stands for the temporary acceptance of your loss of autonomy, the readiness to accept the labor of the inhuman and to expose yourself to the *vent de l'alterité* in order to ex-

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<sup>490</sup> Gabriel Catren: "The Trans-Umweltic Express," in *Glass Bead, Site 0: Castalia, The Game of Ends and Meanings*, 2016, 1–13, 1.

<sup>491</sup> See Catren: "Trans-Umweltic Express," 1: "The reading of The Glass Bead Game by Herman Hesse in my late adolescence exposed me for the first time to the idea of a practice intended to compose the different modes of exploration of the experiential field in which we find ourselves (modes such as science, art, and politics)."

<sup>492</sup> The intricate relationship between drugs, hyperbole and *transumweltic* or *transmarginal* (GR 79) experiences is treated in Rich Doyle: "Hyperbolic: Divining Ayahuasca," in *Discourse*, 27:1, Winter 2005, 6–33. The experimentation of narcotic substances and all kinds of other experiments with self-medication has of course a long tradition in literature. Yet according to Catren's and Doyle's ideas, we could conjecture that writers don't use drugs that much for inspiration (as it is usually thought in popular opinion), but to shift their transcendental modalities of experience.

pand your experiential field and agency from within (immanent, not transcendental). This process is compellingly described by Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts*:

One of the gifts of recognizing oneself in thrall to a substance is the perforation of such subterfuge. In place of an exhausting autonomy, there is the blunt admittance of dependence, and its subsequent relief. I will always aspire to contain my shit as best I can, but I am no longer interested in hiding my dependencies in an effort to appear superior to those who are more visibly undone or aching. Most people decide at some point that it is better ... *to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one's being and becoming* (Butler). I'm glad not to be there right now, but I'm also glad to have been there, to know how it is. (ARG 102)

Transcendental variation, then, is not only a change in perspective (in the sense of looking at things), but a shift in our embodied agency within the immanent field of personal and impersonal experience.<sup>493</sup> In rare moments

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<sup>493</sup> The concept of perspective not as a limitation of the field of visibility, but as an embodiment is developed out of a reconstruction of Amerindian philosophy and cosmology in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: *Metafísicas canibais*, Cosac Naify, São Paulo, 2015.

of *swing*<sup>494</sup> or *entente*<sup>495</sup> – just like in improvisation in the moment of a sudden, non-hierarchical and non-planned accordance (not necessarily harmony!) among the participating performers – this can lead to epiphanic moments of insight into the fabric of the real.

In Pynchon's and Bolaño's poetics, the new concept of reality is largely implied and hides half-visibly in the abundant spectacle on the surface. Yet in rare moments with epiphanic qualities, it suddenly bursts through the surface. In one of these moments, Yashmeen Halfcourt experiences this:

'There is also this ... spine of reality.' Afterward she would remember she actually said '*Rückgrat von Wirklichkeit.*' Though the members of a Hermit-

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<sup>494</sup> The following scene in *Rayuela* is both a description and an attempted realization of *swing*, which is one of Cortázar's favorite criteria to grasp the succeeding of literature: "Por más que le gustara el jazz Oliveira nunca entraría en el juego como Ronald, para él sería bueno o malo, hot o cool, blanco o negro, antiguo o moderno, Chicago o New Orleans, nunca el jazz, nunca eso que ahora eran Satchmo, Ronald y Babs, *Baby don't you play me cheap because I look so meek*, y después la llamarada de la trompeta, el falo amarillo rompiendo el aire y gozando con avances y retrocesos y hacia el final tres notas ascendentes, hipnóticamente de oro puro, **una perfecta pausa donde todo el swing del mundo palpitaba en un instante intolerable**, y entonces la eyaculación de un sobreagudo resbalando y cayendo como un cohete en la noche sexual, la mano de Ronald acariciando el cuello de Babs y la crepitación de la púa mientras el disco seguía girando y el silencio que había en toda música verdadera se desarrimaba lentamente de las paredes, salía de debajo del diván, se despegaba como labios o capullos." (ch. 13, my emphasis)

<sup>495</sup> In André Bourgeois' *Unifying Concerns and Entente. Locating and Pursuing the Idiomaticity of Free Improvisation* (dissertation, Universidade Federal Fluminense / Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, 2016), the notion of "entente" serves as a non-disciplinary measure of success or failure in musical improvisation and can also be used to describe the rare epiphanic moments and temporary *clignotements* of Pynchon's and Bolaños characters with the inner core of reality: "It [entente] is a momentary commitment just as open to transgression as any other type of rule. In improvised performances, momentary *entente* and volition may, then, serve as a gauge for considering something as a success or failure, or simply for evaluating how one is progressing." (272)

ian may be complex, the eigenvalues are real. The entries on the main diagonal are real. The  $\zeta$ -function zeroes which lie along Real part =  $\frac{1}{2}$ , are symmetrical about the real axis, and so ...' She hesitated. She had *seen* it, for the moment, so clearly. (P 604)

Yashmeen's glimpse into the spine of reality stands as a *pars pro toto* for the novel's complex juxtaposition of imaginary and real variables in order to create a mimesis in the fourth dimension. However, the moments of illumination cannot be fixed, they have to be vanquish again and again, with a "patient method." (PL 63) For a brief moment, Yashmeen touches the spine of reality through the inhuman apparatus of analytic number theory. But the epiphany is followed by an anacoluthon ("and so..." She hesitated"), the rhetoric trope that in Pynchon's and Bolaño's fiction eventually prevails over triumphant generalizations.

Similarly, in Bolaño, mimesis not only seeks to be a mirror of reality, but also an explosion of it:

Dijo que incluso había serpientes que se tragaban enteras y que si uno veía a una serpiente en el acto de autotragarse más valía salir corriendo pues al final siempre ocurría algo malo, como una explosión de la realidad.<sup>496</sup>

Mirror and explosion, *espejo y explosión* – both mimesis and the dehiscence of the fabric of the spectacle to see what lies behind, or more precisely, beyond, beneath, across and within – this is the program of *hyperbolic realism*.

Let me use Bolaño's formula of literature as mirror & explosion as a spring board for the concluding presentation of a project that is one of the most advanced elaborations of the new concept of reality that I am aware of: Karen Barad's *agential realism*.

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<sup>496</sup> Roberto Bolaño: *El gusano*, R. B.: *Cuentos*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2010, 75–87, 85.

Directed against the "spectator theory of knowledge" (MU 320-1), Barad's project uses a posthumanist, performative approach to stage the unexpected encounter between Niels Bohr's interpretation of quantum physics and post-structuralism (Foucault, Butler, queer theory):

Unlike representationalism, which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being. (AR 133)

Like all other advocates of the new concept of reality, Barad proposes a reconceptualization of the very concept of the phenomenon:

Moving away from the representationalist trap of geometrical optics, I shift the focus to physical optics, to questions of diffraction rather than reflection. (AR 135)

Not reflection, but diffraction, not the individualistic insularity of the phenomenon, but complex material entanglements. In Barad's agential realism, matter is not imagined as an inert mass that is either given for us (R1-R3) or completely withdrawn from our access (R4), but "as an ontological entanglement of agentially intra-acting 'components' (MU 344)." Her phenomenon is neither that of Kant nor that of phenomenology, but the result of a complex interaction between the measuring agent (human), an experimental apparatus (the inhuman) and the measured object (nonhuman).

Matter is inherently dynamic, articulated, intra-active. More radically than Meillassoux's concept of factuality, Barad speaks of the historicity of matter, a term she adopts from Derrida's *Grammatologie* (AR 438). Her agential realism pursues not things-behind-phenomena, but things-in-phenomena (AR 140). Like in Catren's immanent approach, the phenomena are not merely given so that they can easily be mirrored, but the experimentation

with an apparatus (think of Catren's transcendental variation) produces patterns of diffraction that are not merely phenomenal, but *phenomenal*.

Like in the novels of *hyperbolic realism*, the act of experimentation is not merely a discovery of pre-given phenomena, but produces new phenomena – in order to subsequently discover what it had just been producing.<sup>497</sup> Barad bears witness to the rhythmic unfolding of the visible & the invisible and to the adventurous labor of figuration when she states that meaning

is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility. (AR 149)

The apparatus and, for that matter, the act of experimentation is itself a material act, itself part of the immanent field of experience and existence. There is no view from nowhere (Nagel). There is no perspective that is not at the same time and above all an embodiment (Viveiros). Our existence is a being-of-the world, not a being-in-the-world. Personal identity is thus not defined as the coherence of behavior (R3) or the immunization against everything that resists our appropriation (R4), but becomes a pattern of diffraction (Barad) and a compositional performance of non-harmonized modalities of experience (Catren). Long before our contemporary moment,

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<sup>497</sup> Barad (AR 144) quotes Hacking to illustrate the hard labor behind the production of phenomena: "Most experiments don't work most of the time. To ignore this fact is to forget what experimentation is doing. To experiment is to create, produce, refine and stabilize phenomena... But phenomena are hard to produce in any stable way. That is why I spoke of creating and not merely discovering phenomena. That is a long hard task. Or rather there are endless different tasks. There is designing an experiment that might work. There is learning how to make the experiment work. But perhaps the real knack is getting to know when the experiment is working." The last sentence suggests that, just like literature and improvisation, science too pursues *swing* and *entente*.

Emmanuel Levinas has found compelling words for this conception of identity not as *ipséité*, as self-hood, but as *mêmeté dans l'altérité*, as *sameness within diffraction*:

Le moi, ce n'est pas un être qui reste toujours le même, mais l'être dont l'exister consiste à s'identifier, à retrouver son identité à travers tout ce qui lui arrive. (TI 25)

In Barad's agential realism,

the knower does not stand in a relation of absolute externality to the natural world – there is no such exterior observational point. The condition of possibility for objectivity is therefore not absolute exteriority but agential separability – exteriority within phenomena. We are not outside observers of the world. Neither are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity. (AR 184)

*Exteriority within phenomena* – this is not Meillassoux's absolute exteriority but a hyperbolic outsideness that haunts our immanence and creeps into our intimacy as extimacy. "The reality is that hyperobjects were already here, and slowly but surely we understood what they were already saying. They contacted us." (HO 201) The real has already existed for a very long time,<sup>498</sup> but it is never really there, it is only "there-ish."<sup>499</sup> In relation to this configuration of the real, we humans are both not-yet-there (*imminence, extinction*) and too-late-to-the-game (*ancestrality*).

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<sup>498</sup> Which is a hyperbolic recalibration of post-structuralism's *always already* and thus slightly different from it.

<sup>499</sup> As much as we are never really here, but only *hereish*. See Povinelli: *Geontologies*, 13: "As we stretch the local across the seeping transits we need not scale up to the Human or the global, but we cannot remain in the local. We can only remain *hereish*."



This diachronic embodiment of the human animal in nature is perfectly expressed at the very end of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, in the passage STRUNG INTO THE APOLLONIAN DREAM... from which I derived the motto for this concluding section. After a thunderstorm of poetic paranoia, the real (the bomb) occurs extremely late in Pynchon's novel – *At last: something real* – although it was already there: *Now it is time to wake, into the breath of what was always real.* (GR 754)

This fifth concept of reality is the exact opposite of the Platonic notion that inaugurated Western culture – not an intuitive, immediate access to the world without separation and distance (R1), but the traumatic proximity and promiscuity with the real across ultimately unbridgeable chasms (R5). This new configuration of the real can only be glimpsed from within, as a processual *entente* and a practice that constantly reflects itself – not in the sense of a specular self-reflection from without, but as a tactile self-reflection from within, like a hand touching a touching hand.<sup>500</sup>

Within both *hyperbolic* and *agential realism*, the practices of experimentation and knowing are themselves material and processual. They are interdependent agencies, embedded in a concrete and impersonal field of juxtaposed environments, entangled with all kinds of inhuman apparatuses. It is only by virtue of these machines of experimentation that the many forms of contact between the human and the nonhuman can be grasped. This is materialism not as the reification of the status quo of nature, but as an invitation to pursue our agencies within the compositional architecture of material and "open-ended practices." (MU 344)

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<sup>500</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie*, 109: "Le corps se surprend lui-même de l'extérieur en train d'exercer une fonction de connaissance, il essaye de se toucher touchant, il ébauche 'une sorte de réflexion.'" [See footnote 87]

Literature is nothing but one of these material and open-ended practices. It is an inhuman apparatus, a machine of desire and reflection, used by humans to feel, perceive and understand what is at stake in their complex entanglement with the real. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this reality reveals itself in shockingly new, often traumatic, yet also enticing ways. It reveals itself as that which it had been long before the appearance of man and that which it will be after he disappears *like a face drawn in sand* – as hyperbolic.

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