

Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

Sharae Deckard

In an interview with Carmen Boullosa shortly before his death, Roberto Bolaño suggestively characterized his aesthetics as “realist,” yet suffused by a perception of the real that sometimes seemed “irreal” to the point of the science-fictional: “As to my writing, I don’t know what to say. I suppose it’s realist. I’d like to be a writer of the fantastic, like Philip K. Dick, although as time passes and I get older, Dick seems more and more realist to me. Deep down—and I think you’ll agree with me—the question doesn’t lie in the distinction of realist/fantastic but in language and structures, in ways of seeing.”¹ In Bolaño’s posthumous magnum opus, *2666* (2004–8), a type of peripheral realism in which realist aesthetics are impurely intermingled with the irreal is crucial to the novel’s registration of the uneven structural relations of capitalist modernity.² This essay explores how Bolaño reformulates realism to interrogate the ideological nature of art and the limits of

¹ Carmen Boullosa, “Interview with Roberto Bolaño,” *Bomb*, no. 78 (2002), bombsite.com/issues/78/articles/2460.

² My use of *peripheral* draws on a world-systems theory of literature, which understands peripherality as the expression of a structural relation in the capitalist world-system rather than as a term of aesthetic valuation.

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realism while encoding the conditions of millennial capitalism in the semiperiphery.

In his journalism, interviews, and critical writing Bolaño took up oppositional stances to the modes of realism available in the Latin American tradition while striving to forge a literary aesthetics that superseded these modes. As a young poet in Mexico in the 1970s, he attempted to reactivate avant-gardism by cofounding a literary movement, *infra-realismo*, that conjoined surrealism and Dadaism with a punk antagonism toward established poets such as Octavio Paz. Later in life Bolaño turned to writing fiction out of economic necessity and affectionately satirized his youthful poetic pretensions in *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998), about a gang of “visceral realist” poets. In a brilliant review Edmond Caldwell argues that this novel works out a historical-cultural dialectic that replaces the restorationist aesthetic and political vanguardism that *infra-realismo* problematically implied with a radically democratized and indigenous aesthetic of serial narration:

First-person testimonial-style narrative . . . came to occupy an important place in Latin American prose in the period *after* the Boom. This was the period not of revolution and self-assertion but of reaction and retrenchment, of dictatorships and death-squads, and its predominant literary mode is correspondingly both more chastened and more populist—a bedrock of fugitive resistance. *The Savage Detectives*, then, may be read as a Boom novel filtered through, and revised by, the post-Boom testimonial, in the service of creating a new form that includes its own prehistory. It’s a feat of insurgent literary *zapatismo*.³

While admiring the “gigantic” literature of the Boom, Bolaño was critical of its commodification and subsequent debasement. He pug-naciously attacked writers whose work he considered co-opted by its ideological relation to the national-popular state and to the literary market, decrying “the rancid private club full of cobwebs presided over by Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, Fuentes, and other pterodactyls.”⁴

³ Edmond Caldwell, “Gutless Realism: James Wood’s Housebroken Bolaño,” *Contra James Wood: The Emperor Has No Clothes*, January 1, 2009, contrajameswood.blogspot.com/2009/01/gutless-realism-james-woods-housebroken.html. See Roberto Bolaño, *Los detectives salvajes* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1998); *The Savage Detectives*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

⁴ Horacio Castellanos Moya, “Bolaño Inc.,” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, November 1, 2009, www.guernicamag.com/features/1382/bolano_inc.

As Michael Denning argues, magical realism had been stripped of its revolutionary associations with the “novelist’s international” and had come to serve “as the aesthetic of globalization, often as empty and contrived a signifier as the modernism and socialist realism it supplanted.”⁵ With Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967) as its avatar, the “world novel” had become a marketing device that homogenized regional and literary particularities under the sign of universalized cosmopolitanism. Latin American magical realism, while it may have hailed from economic semiperipheries, was far from culturally peripheral, having assumed market dominance in the literary world field. Bolaño disparaged those imitators who produced debased versions of magical realism chock-full of exotic stereotypes of Latin America for export: dictators, patriarchs, sexy ghosts, and flying women. At the same time, he rejected the cosmopolitanism and urban realism of the *El Crack* and *McOndo* generations in the 1990s as programmatic rebellions imitating North American or European fictions.

If *The Savage Detectives* represents Bolaño’s reformulation of *testimonio* into a post-Boom form, the “collective *testimonio*,” then *2666* can be understood as an equally insurgent attempt to reformulate the realist world novel in order to overcome the reification of earlier modes of realism and to register the changed historical situation of Latin America in the era of millennial capital, when, as Natasha Wimmer eloquently puts it, “capitalism, the World Bank, and the international drug trade replaced caudillos, death squads, and political persecution as the new faces of evil.”⁶ The novel’s form is systemically world-historical, uniting a particular semiperiphery (Ciudad Juárez) and a particular historical conjuncture (late capitalism at the millennium) with a vast geopolitical scope. At the heart of *2666* lies the Mexican city of Santa Teresa, a thinly fictionalized version of Ciudad Juárez. This industrial town straddling Mexico and the United States is the portal into a modernity characterized by neoliberalism’s extreme socioeconomic inequities and systemic violence. The maquiladora export factories across the Mexican-US border region have historically served as laboratories for structural adjustments. In 1994 the North American Free Trade Agree-

⁵ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 51.

⁶ Natasha Wimmer, “Roberto Bolaño and *The Savage Detectives*,” us.macmillan.com/uploadedFiles/custompagecontents/titles/bolano-biographicalessay.pdf (accessed July 16, 2011).

ment (NAFTA) executed a drastic round of privatization, deregulation, and land appropriation to remove barriers to transnational capital. This catalyzed criminal and social violence alongside the rapid expansion of the “shadow economy” in narcotics, arms, and smuggling. Ciudad Juárez became notorious for “femicides,” the unsolved murders of as many as five thousand female workers along the border region, along with an intensification of state violence to protect the interests of political elites and transnational corporations.⁷

“Millennial capitalism,” according to Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, is characterized by an apotheosis of consumption that shapes societies, subjectivities, and epistemic realities, concomitant with an eclipse in production that erases the role of labor in the creation of value and identity.⁸ The rise of financialization in the “spatial” fixes to overaccumulation crises results in a spectral perception of capital as amassed in an immaterial flow of value ever more swiftly across time and space yet ever more concentrated in the hands of the few. In peripheral nation-states, the contradiction between neoliberal orthodoxy, which promises consumer plenitude and individual freedom, and the state’s complicity in subjecting its citizens to abject destitution produces doubled consciousness and “occult economies,” in which “the spectacular rise . . . of organized crime” enacts “disturbing caricatures of market enterprise in motion, of the impetus to acquire vast fortunes without ordinary labor costs.”⁹

2666’s border setting makes profoundly tangible the tragic asymmetries and experiential contradictions of the semiperiphery’s relation to the core. Bolaño replaces the political violence of the dictator novel with the systemic violence of millennial capitalism, staging the femicides and narcoviolence attendant on structural adjustment in post-NAFTA Mexico in relation to the ascendancy of neoliberal capital after the fascist and Stalinist political cultures of World War II. Spectral

⁷ For two influential studies of the femicides see Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); and Diana Washington Valdez, *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women* (Burbank, CA: Peace at the Border, 2006).

⁸ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 295.

⁹ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 786.

metaphorics figure what Nicholas Brown calls the “rift between capital and labor,” especially as it is particularized in the phantom history of the migrant maquiladora worker.¹⁰

The experiential contradictions of neoliberal capitalism are manifested in the periphery by the zombie, the “embodied dispirited phantasm” that is historically linked to periods of drastic change in control over the production and circulation of value and that now makes visible the local content of immigrant labor at the cusp of the millennium (Comaroff and Comaroff, “Alien-Nation,” 782–83). Figures of vampires, ghosts, and mummies, as well as zombies, proliferate throughout the novel, persistently signaling the occult economies and doubled consciousnesses of millennial capitalism. However, these beings serve only as similes and metaphors. The novel hews to “realistic” plots, narratives, and characters; the treatment of temporality, space, and causality likewise remains fundamentally realist. One character might be described as vampiric or ghostly, but there are no levitating women or literal ghosts in *2666* as in magical realist novels. 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.

Michael Löwy usefully argues that while the ideal type of realism may be a “pure” epistemological construction, most literary texts are “impure” mixtures of realism and irrealism.¹¹ In Löwy’s intermediary category of “critical irrealism,” otherwise realist narration is punctuated by the “logic of the imagination, of the marvelous, of the mystery or the dream” (196). Within this mode, irrealist language and figuration function less as eruptions of a repressed political unconscious than as the conscious expression of a negative critique of bourgeois social reality, a critique in which oneiric, fantastic, or surreal forms repudiate the diabolical, machinelike reality of capitalist modernity (203). Fredric Jameson contends that realism “requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, an aesthetic need

¹⁰ Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

¹¹ Michael Löwy, “The Current of Critical Irrealism: ‘A Moonlit Enchanted Night,’” in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 195.

to avoid recognition of deep structural social change . . . and contradictory tendencies within the social order.”¹² By this definition, conventional realism might be expected to undergo distortion or incongruity when confronted with the task of representing the structural relations and contradictions within the economic peripheries of the world-system. Benita Parry argues that peripheral literary aesthetics encode combined and uneven development through generic incongruity, narratological innovation, and stylistic “unevenness,” registering what Ernst Bloch called the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.”¹³ The welding of multiple genres and modes of realism with irrealist imagery and language in *2666* can be understood in this light as corresponding to the radical mixtures of residual and modern temporalities, cultural formations, and social relations in the peripheries of millennial capitalism.

In the next two sections I will concentrate on three layers of the novel’s approach to representation of reality in the borderlands: first, the femicides as objects of representation; second, the economic conditions underlying the systemic violence perpetrated against laboring women and the rift between labor and capital; and third, the relation of art to ideology and reality and the artist’s problematic role in representing either the murders or their structural causes. *2666* self-reflexively stages the problem of realism on the level of both form and content. I will begin by examining the novel’s thematization of the problems of commodification and reification that confront the artist’s realist project of representing a totality, before moving to a more sustained examination of the novel’s formal features.

But first, some notes about this mammoth novel: *2666* is divided into five books, each of which draws on different genres and could be freestanding: *The Part about the Critics* (academic satire/campus novel), *The Part about Amalfitano* (philosophical thriller), *The Part about Fate* (Beat road novel), *The Part about Crimes* (crime/detective fiction), and *The Part about Archiboldi* (*Künstlerroman*/historical fiction). The cast of characters is immense, but I confine my discussion to the following: in

¹² Fredric Jameson, “A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion,” in Beaumont, *Adventures in Realism*, 270.

¹³ Benita Parry, “Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms,” *Ariel* 40, no. 1 (2009): 27–55.

the first book, a trio of European literary critics, Norton, Pelletier, and Espinoza, who meet Amalfitano, an exiled Chilean intellectual in Santa Teresa; in the fourth, the investigative reporter Sergio, the television psychic Florita Almada, and the detective Juan; and in the fifth, Hans Reiter, who becomes the writer Benno von Archimboldi. Narrative time expands and contracts across the books, which span a few days (*Fate*), a few years (*Critics*), or a lifetime (*Archimboldi*). The initial structure is proleptic: the first book begins in the late 1990s, with the critics visiting Mexico in search of Archimboldi, and the next three books move forward, following the fate of Amalfitano and his daughter in Santa Teresa before entering an extended consideration of the femicides. However, the fifth book leaps backward to Archimboldi's birth in eastern Prussia and tracks the "progress" of twentieth-century history through his lifetime, concluding at the very moment he departs for Santa Teresa in search of his prodigal nephew, Klaus Haas. Within the individual books the plot is mostly linear and chronological. Nor can the action be considered what James Wood sardonically dubs "hysterical realism": it is detached and meditative, the opposite of manic or hysterical.¹⁴

Semblance and Realism

It was all real, at least in appearance. —Roberto Bolaño

In *Critics* and *Archimboldi*, the books most concerned by virtue of their genres with the roles of art and the artist, two didactic "set pieces" stage the problem of literary representation as reification. In the first Amalfitano narrates a satirical parable of the relationship of Mexican intellectuals to the state. The imagery of his bravura speech, couched in a complex metaphor revolving around a proscenium, verges on the surreal:

And so you arrive on a kind of stage, without your shadow, and you start to translate reality or reinterpret it or sing it. The stage is really a proscenium and upstage there's an enormous tube, something like a mine shaft or the gigantic opening of a mine. . . . From the opening of the mine come unintelligible noises. . . . Stage machinery, the play

¹⁴ James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman," *New Republic Online*, August 30, 2001, www.powells.com/review/2001_08_30.html.

of light and shadows, a trick of time, hides the real shape of the opening from the gaze of the audience. In fact, only the spectators who are closest to the stage, right up against the orchestra pit, can see the shape of something behind the dense veil of camouflage, not the real shape, but at any rate, it's the shape of something. . . . The shadowless intellectuals are always facing the audience, so unless they have eyes in the back of their heads, they can't see anything. They only hear the sounds that come from deep in the mine. And they translate or reinterpret or re-create them. Their work, it goes without saying, is of a very low standard. They employ rhetoric where they sense a hurricane, they try to be eloquent where they sense fury unleashed, they strive to maintain the discipline of meter where there's only a deafening and hopeless silence.¹⁵

The passage imagines literary mimesis as so much “stage machinery,” “camouflage” veiling an aleatory reality; the intellectuals’ tricks of craft and rhyme construct order and imply presence where there is none. Their *mise-en-scène* is a second-rate simulacrum, constructed around an abyss. This is not the *mise en abyme* of the infinite regression of language. Rather, the mine shaft is a metaphor of extraction that recalls the colonial mines of Latin America, those “mouths of hell” insatiably devouring indigenous labor, like the contemporary maquiladoras swallowing women and evacuating profits across the border. Karl Marx’s depiction of capital as “dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” haunts Bolaño’s satirical image of intellectuals as vampires sustained by a state dependent on neoliberal capital and its ruthless exploitation of migrant labor.¹⁶ They purport to “mine” reality in order to represent truth, yet the reality they reassemble as fiction is ideological, circumscribed by lack of consciousness of its own conditions of production.

Even if the Mexican writer is critical of the state, his work is co-opted to buttress corporatist cultural institutions, mythologize the local-national, and legitimate labor relations under millennial capitalism: “The state feeds him and watches over him in silence. And it puts this giant cohort of essentially useless writers to use. How? It exorcises demons, it alters the national climate or at least tries to sway it. It adds

¹⁵ Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), 122.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Ernest Untermann, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 257.

layers of lime to a pit that may or may not exist, no one knows for sure” (121). This pit foreshadows the mass pit dug by the Nazi bureaucrat Sammer in *Archimboldi* to conceal a trainload of massacred Jews. Sammer’s injunction to his gravediggers, “Remember the idea isn’t to find things, it’s to *not* find them” (764), is a lesson in mystification that resonates with Amalfitano’s critique of the intellectuals’ deliberate “mis-translations.” An uneasy equation can thus be drawn between intellectuals’ participation in the mystification of social conditions—adding lime to the pit of mass femicides in neoliberal Mexico—and bureaucrats’ participation in the fascist machinery of genocide (764). Amalfitano’s address enfolds the critics, modulating from the third person into an accusatory second—“so you arrive on the stage” (121)—yet the European critics remain oblivious of his critique.

As Amalfitano speaks, his extended parable takes on a hallucinatory quality, reminiscent of the nightmares that visit the critics. Their repressed understanding of their social relation emerges only unconsciously. Yet in Amalfitano’s speech the dream content is conscious and lucid, expanding an intricate central metaphor to account for a whole social relation. The critics’ sense that the speech is hallucinatory signals an epistemic rupture, the presence of some real beyond their perception, encoding the dissonance between Amalfitano’s self-reflexive understanding and their own solipsism. *2666* understatedly valorizes individuals who seek the world totality and coolly stare into the pit: young Hans Reiter diving into the depths; Florita, the medium of Santa Teresa’s hell; Mrs. Bubis, “a woman who plunged into the abyss *sitting down*” (26). By contrast, the critics are fundamentally incurious. They fail to be properly critical, to understand world literature as world-systemic and world-historical. From the depoliticized perspective of their arid formalist understanding of comparative literature, Amalfitano’s spectral figuration of art as ideological is unintelligible: “I don’t understand a word you’ve said,” exclaims Norton (123).

However, the explicit theatricality of the stage metaphor transcends a localized critique of intellectuals to become a commentary on *Darstellung* itself. “The shape of something behind the dense veil” implies an objective reality, that *thing* that makes noise. Noise as the emission of an aleatory real is a recurrent trope: the shriek of Allied carpet bombings (795); the “sounds of the abyss” through the telephone from Santa

Teresa (890); the noise that Klaus, mistakenly incarcerated as the serial killer, describes emanating from the Santa Teresa prison: “It’s like a noise you hear in a dream. The dream, like everything dreamed in enclosed spaces, is contagious. . . . But the *noise* you hear isn’t part of the dream, it’s real. The noise belongs to a separate order of things. . . . First someone and then everyone hears a noise in a dream, but the noise is from real life, not the dream” (490). The prison’s Piranesi-esque architecture is eerily anthropomorphic, resembling a woman “who’s been hacked to pieces but is still alive” (496). This mutilated woman allegorizes the body politic, the social totality perceived in dismembered form. The prison seems alive because in it the intersections of money, violence, crime, and state become visible. Each prisoner knows how his criminal labor was commissioned—whether by the *narcos*, the state, or his own will. In perceiving the noise, Klaus shares with the other prisoners a collective consciousness-from-below of systemic violence, which seems to supersede narrative—hence its rendering as noise rather than as words—yet is, after all, “real life.”

The detectives, lawyers, and journalists who visit the prison are unable to decode this noise, to access the collective body of knowledge. They seek single causes for the femicides: originary motives, separately identifiable explanations, or individual agents, rather than relations. Juridical, criminological, and media actors fail to perceive the femicides as complex rather than simple phenomena, the products of an assemblage of structures: the relations between the neoliberal economy and its treatment of women as disposable labor, worth less than the parts they assemble in the maquiladoras; the corrosive social values of machismo and homophobia, corresponding to the occult narco-economy and the snuff films of the pornography industry; and the machinery of the state, both local and federal, exercising its monopoly on violence to mystify the sources of crime and to disappear any journalist or activist who seeks to expose the complicity of politicians, police, and judges. Given the proliferation of documentary and journalistic books about the femicides, including the reporter Sergio González Rodríguez’s *Huesos en el desierto*, one of Bolaño’s primary sources, the novel might be said to justify its own necessity by demonstrating this failure.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Sergio González Rodríguez, *Huesos en el desierto* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002).

The noise emitted from the backstage mine and from Klaus's prison may appear to be the *infra-real*: some reality beyond ideological semblance or concealed beneath mystification, like "the seabed, the other earth," that Reiter discovers beneath the "surface of the sea" (639). Yet it can be more precisely understood in Althusserian terms as a reality that is itself the structured relation of appearances. "In *Darstellung*," argues Louis Althusser, "*There is nothing behind*: the very thing is there, 'da' presented in the position of presence."¹⁸ The action on Amalfitano's stage is not the faithful copy of reality that empiricists believe they see in a play; rather, it is theater in which the presence of a completed whole can be intuited only in the latent structure of the relations among the characters. *2666* stages a critique of empirical or scientific representation that fails to apprehend dialectically the social whole as a "parallelogram of forces each bearing within itself the imprint of its conditions of existence."¹⁹ It suggests a unique role for literature in representation that revolves not around the factual capture of events but around attempts to discern or render the mystified structures of causality.

In *Archimboldi* the second set piece restages the problem of literary representation in the context of Reiter's development as an artist. The old man who sells him his typewriter vilifies the reification of the literary profession. His contemplation of literary artifacts as documents of barbarism is suffused with Benjaminian horror. The old man characterizes the minor writer's work, like that of the "shadowless intellectuals," as a "charade that leads us, likely as not, into the void," arising "not from an exercise of style or will, as the poor unfortunate believes, but as the result of an exercise of *concealment*" (786–87). Here again the reality effects of literary representation, in the absence of dialectical consciousness, open only into void, the intellectual's hecatomb. The old man imagines world literature as a "forest" of semblance:

The academies make sure it flourishes unhindered, as do boosters and universities (breeding grounds for the shameless) and government institutions and patrons and cultural associations and declaimers of

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, *Lire "le Capital"*, vol. 2 (Paris: Maspero, 1965), 171. For the translated quotation see Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1987), 291.

¹⁹ Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 51–52.

poetry—all aid the forest to grow and hide what must be hidden, all aid the forest to reproduce what must be reproduced, since the process is inevitable, though no one ever sees what exactly is being reproduced, what is being tamely mirrored back. (787)

This image encapsulates the market dynamics of the world-literary field: writers, critics, consumers, publishers, and academics are all complicit in the production of cultural capital and the reproduction of imaginary relations to the conditions of real existence. The old man's critique of world literature haunts Reiter as he ponders how ideology produces subjectivities, desires, affects, even agency. Reiter realizes that his yearning for artistic autonomy could be self-reflexively understood as an ideological illusion of freedom when true human emancipation has not yet been achieved: "He felt the strength to prolong as far as possible this impulse toward freedom, toward sovereignty. And yet the possibility that it was all nothing but semblance troubled him" (741). No artist dependent on material constraints, forced to mine his or her own experience and sell it as a commodity, can claim to be autonomous.

This point is first embodied in the critics' encounter with Edwin Johns, a self-amputating British painter who creates the most "radical self-portrait of our time," at the center of which hangs his "mummified right hand" (53). This "combine" of stump and canvas grotesquely parodies the logical extension of commodity fetishism that reifies the artist's creative labor and turns it into exchange value: a hand, a *thing*. The mummification suggests the dried-up residues of formerly emergent cultures that linger in the dominant, drained of radical vitality. It similarly indicts the critics, whose labor is to perform market valuations, establishing the aesthetic and monetary worth of artworks. The critics cannot fathom why Johns would self-mutilate, even when one of them, Morini, makes a pilgrimage to ask Johns in his insane asylum in Switzerland. "Because he believed in investments," Johns cynically replies, "the flow of capital, one has to play the game to win, that kind of thing" (97). Yet this understanding of the artist's reification, art's commodification, and literature's ideological nature is crucial not only to Reiter's development in the concluding *Künstlerroman* but to the entire aesthetic and form of 2666.

Form and Aesthetics

Let's say the story and the plot arise by chance, that they belong to the realm of chance, that is, chaos, disorder, or to a realm that's in constant turmoil (some call it apocalyptic). Form, on the other hand, is a choice made through intelligence, cunning and silence, all the weapons used by Ulysses in his battle against death. —Roberto Bolaño

As Benjamin Kunkel neatly observes, Bolaño mostly treats literature as an undignified compulsion that rationalizes the narcissistic delusions and suffering of its careerist practitioners and critics. Kunkel hence speaks of the “basic Bolaño aporia—literature is all that matters, literature doesn't matter at all.”²⁰ Rather than an aporia, however, this is an antinomy that yields to dialectical understanding. While the minor fascist writers lampooned in Bolaño's *La literatura nazi en América* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 1996) do not matter much, the old man's harangue imputes an opposite aesthetic to the major writer, who might not be content merely to reproduce semblance or the reigning political ideology.²¹ In a metatextual articulation of 2666's aesthetic, Amalfitano derides intellectuals who prefer small-scale, perfect exercises over “great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown” (227). Elsewhere Bolaño claims that all literature of the Americas springs from two sources, Mark Twain and Herman Melville, and that if *The Savage Detectives* is his *Huck Finn*, his picaresque of platonic adventure in late capitalism, then 2666 is his *Moby-Dick*, an allegorical, totalizing epic of the Americas, whose mapping of “the territories of evil” and ineluctable pursuit of an unknowable enigma reveals a whole world of exploitation and violence.²²

Bolaño's style in this “imperfect, torrential” work is singularly anti-literary, stripped of rhetorical color, eschewing the “perfect craft” of either hermetic lyricism or the pyrotechnical neobaroque. To be sure, there are masterfully subtle stylistic differences across the five parts,

²⁰ Benjamin Kunkel, “On Bolaño,” *n + 1*, November 25, 2008, nplusemag.com/on-bolano.

²¹ Roberto Bolaño, *La literatura nazi en América* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1996); *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2008).

²² The *Moby-Dick* quotation is from Bolaño's introduction to a Spanish edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: see Natasha Wimmer, “Notes toward an Annotated Edition of 2666,” us.macmillan.com/uploadedFiles/FSGAdult/finalessay2666.pdf (accessed July 16, 2011).

corresponding to the generic shifts among academic satire, philosophical thriller, hard-boiled crime, police procedural, historical fiction, and *Künstlerroman*, and also to the incremental shifts of characters' consciousness. Satirizing the critics' insular pretensions requires a more academic register than the clipped, kinetic, Chandleresque prose of *Fate* or the brutally forensic language of *Crimes*. However, the five books are yoked by a blunted narratorial affect. Most pronounced in *Crimes*, it emerges from the clinical style that Bolaño famously perfected through his obsessive correspondence with González Rodríguez.²³ The narration is hyperrealist, an empiricist stenography drained of emotion: "In October the next victim was found at the new city dump. . . . The dead girl was between fifteen and seventeen years old, according to the medical examiner, although the final word was left to the pathologist, who examined her three days later and concurred with his colleague. She had been anally and vaginally raped and then strangled. She was four foot seven" (423). Across the paratactic accumulation of cases, the fugal repetition of inconclusive phrases—"the case was left unsolved," "no one came to claim the body"—reaches toward litany but denies poetic catharsis. The bodies are reduced to things, objects of halfhearted investigation emptied of human personality; the causes of the women's deaths remain incomprehensible, since they are not understood relationally. Even the general description of events gives the impression of plotlessness. Characters arrive, characters depart, bodies are dumped, bodies are found, but the narrative does not drive toward resolution. Here detective fiction fails to meet generic expectations: the revelation of the killers, the resuturing of the social body. The accumulation of characters' stories, like the accumulation of the bodies, seems without purpose, ultimately realistic in its very meaninglessness. Throughout *2666*, but particularly in *Crimes*, characterization is minimal and psychological insight rare; motives are unnamed, left to the reader to decipher. The forensic language of homicide has invaded the subjectivities and speech of every character, while all affect has been emptied out.

Thus Juan de Dios Martínez, one of the more morally invested

²³ For the story of González Rodríguez and Bolaño's correspondence see Marcela Valdes, "Alone among the Ghosts: Roberto Bolaño's '2666,'" *Nation*, November 19, 2008, www.thenation.com/article/alone-among-ghosts-roberto-bolanos-2666.

detectives, struggles to express emotion after viewing the corpse of a child who suffered four heart attacks while enduring sexual torture: “A faint and precise sob escaped his lips, as if he were weeping or trying to weep, but when he finally removed his hands, all that appeared, lit by the TV screen, was his old face, his old skin, stripped and dry, and not the slightest trace of a tear” (534). The detective yearns for but is denied catharsis; his desiccation symbolizes a subjectivity indelibly marked by the systemic violence that permeates social relations in Santa Teresa. Earlier the reader has learned that Martínez craves a romantic, rather than a purely erotic, relationship with Elvira Campos, but she “fucks like someone on the brink of death” (424) and expresses a perverse desire for cosmetic surgery that would swathe her in bandages “like a Mexican mummy” (535). Peripheral sexualities, bodily dispositions, and subjectivities are all evacuated by their relation to millennial capital. Not just the factory workers but the detectives, journalists, and prisoners in *Crimes* are all living dead, repeatedly likened to mummies or zombies. These similes of reification are particularly persistent in the last book, where Archimboldi’s journeys through the terrain of war and genocide elicit scores of allusions to cannibalism, the drinking of semen by postwar prostitutes, the draining of blood.

The incongruity between irrealist similes and hyperrealist narration is most extreme in *Crimes*. Here Bolaño’s narrative is the most urgent, the testimonial impulse strongest, and the realist aesthetic starkest. Yet because this book is dedicated to narrating local characters’ experiences of the incongruities and violence of the semiperiphery’s uneven space-time—unlike the previous two books, *Amalfitano* and *Fate*, which narrate expatriates’ perspectives—it also erupts more often in violent metaphors of the irreal. The “roaring noise” first heard through the telephone at the end of *Amalfitano* grows louder and louder in *Crimes*: Santa Teresa is the semiperipheral conjuncture whose borderland (ir)reality radiates throughout 2666, and its effects are most concentrated here. The dry prose occasionally gives way to sentence cascades in which clauses surge one after another before culminating in an image of void or abyss, then abruptly reverting to clipped, unadorned diction. Consider the television psychic Florita’s observation of a ventriloquist: “[He] looked back and forth between her and his dummy, as if he had no idea what was going on but he could smell

danger, the moment of revelation, unsolicited and afterward uncomprehended, the kind of revelation that flashes past and leaves us with only the certainty of a void, a void that very quickly escapes even the word that contains it" (436). Florita uses television to speak for the murdered daughters of the infernal city. Her dialogue and indirect discourse more frequently erupt into imagery that is saturated with the unreal precisely because it is associated with subjectivist revelation, with the ventriloquism of an ever-present yet obscured reality. It is as if the critical apprehension of a totality, however fleeting, briefly reverses the process of alienation and admits a quality of subjectivity or sensuality hitherto absent or repressed.

Thus far I have shown how *2666* formally embodies the reification both of the cultural commodity and of social relations under millennial capitalism. As such, it also raises the question of whether literature can still bear witness if representation is only a set of reality effects. Bolaño's style refuses aestheticism because it has been reified by ideological programs of fascism and nationalism or has been commodified in the world literary market. But his form can also be understood to mirror the mummified affect corresponding to the cultural logic of millennial capitalism: a colonization of subjectivity and the reification of cultural formations that recalls but also exceeds the representations of late capitalism in Boom novels of the 1960s. Whereas those novels figured the structural violence of caudillo regimes and monocommodity extraction economies in Latin America with a gesture to the utopian possibility engendered by their historical proximity to the Cuban Revolution, *2666* registers late neoliberal capitalism with a heightened intensity compounded by the waning of revolutionary horizons and the emergence of new forms of labor exploitation.

The effacement of individual personality, the withdrawal of narrative from outer consciousness to the blankly impersonal third-person, evokes Jameson's positing of a realism that is no longer subjectivist yet is "clearly not inseparable from the empirical reality of the older realisms" and is "perfectly consistent with experimental variation and with the alternative pasts or futures" (270). *2666*'s flat affect does not mean that it is not critical. To the contrary, Bolaño's realism is suffused with testimonial urgency, and his antiliterary aesthetic embodies precisely his commitment to writing as a radical way of living. The critical unreal,

essential to the novel's negative critique, constitutes a refusal of the totality of millennial capitalist modernity, which it strives to reveal in all its horror. The lyrical bursts of the unreal that punctuate the otherwise flat affect suggest velleities that have not yet been colonized, unconscious tremors of revolt.

Bolaño's oeuvre is haunted by a sense of political belatedness, the specter of failed Latin American revolutions. Yet his fiction remains critical, to the extent that the formal organization of *2666* around an "axis of disturbance" between art and politics may appear anachronistic to First World readers.²⁴ The novel's title derives from Bolaño's novella *Amulet*, in which the disconsolate poet Auxilio Lacouture describes Mexico City as "a cemetery from the year 2666, a cemetery forgotten under a dead or unborn eyelid, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that, for wanting to forget something, has ended forgetting everything."²⁵ *2666*'s postmortem of capitalist modernity mourns not only the present neoliberal holocaust unfolding in Ciudad Juárez but all the political dead of the past century, from the generations of "young Latin Americans led to sacrifice" in failed revolutions and fascist regimes, to executions under the Nazis, to the millions disappeared in Stalin's gulags (*Amulet*, 184). The apocalyptic revelation of *2666*'s title is that Auxilio's cemetery is the likely future of a modernity in which all the utopian possibilities of historical moments have been forgotten and capitalism continues unchallenged to suck the life out of labor.

Negations of the extant social order permeate *2666*. In *Archimboldi* the narrative digression into the formation of the Soviet Union opposes to capitalism an alternate reality, albeit one now collapsed and revealed even then as fatally compromised. Reiter observes of the Jewish Marxist intellectual Boris Ansky, who rushed to Russia to join the revolution, only to flee under the persecution of Stalin, that he "lived his whole life in rabid immaturity because the revolution, the one true revolution, is also immature" (741). Immature revolution haunts the novel as a negative possibility embedded formally as an absence at the heart of a nested narrative. The story of Archimboldi's eventual disappearance in Mexico contains the journal of Ansky's death in a Nazi

²⁴ Siddhartha Deb, "The Wandering Years: Roberto Bolaño's Nomadic Fiction," *Harper's*, April 2007, 102.

²⁵ Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet*, trans. Chris Andrews (London: Picador, 2010), 86.

concentration camp, which in turn contains the story of the Soviet Russian science fiction writer Ivanov's death in a Stalinist gulag. Caldwell argues that *The Savage Detectives* "articulates the stubborn *persistencia* of a utopia of poetry (poetry in its broadest sense, not just verse but the subversive transformation of daily life by the 'marvelous') in the face of history's sharpest disappointments. This utopia persists precisely to the extent that it *has not appeared*; it is the 'absent center' of the novel itself" ("Gutless Realism"). So too in *2666* the deaths of writers signal the collapse of the historical possibilities of communism as an alternative to capitalism, which linger only in the trace of the insurgent art form. Archimboldi never "appears" to the critics except through his fiction; Ansky never "appears" to Archimboldi, though he is paradoxically present in his journal. Here again is an antinomy between a literature that matters, whose form is insurgent or utopian, and a literature that does not matter. For Bolaño, revolutionary horizons may have receded to near oblivion in the era of millennial capitalism, but their historical trace lingers in the novel as a refutation of present conditions.

In combining the bildungsroman and the historical novel, genres long associated with the rise of capitalism, *Archimboldi* reconfigures earlier story types into forms of representation that register the contemporary dynamics of capital. *2666*'s multiple genres are embedded in a new realist narrative that represents the conjunctions of millennial capital across a range of peripheries and former colonies and metropolises: this compendium of realist genres might be said to register anachronistic temporalities within a singular modernity. To this new mode of representation is juxtaposed a totalizing historical impulse, which recuperates the possibilities of earlier moments of political opportunity. Here *2666* reinvents the *novela totalizadora*, as theorized by Mario Vargas Llosa and developed by Carlos Fuentes. It superficially shares Vargas Llosa's commitment to realism, yet without his interest in creating an illusion of coherence and autonomy that supplants the *infinito vertigo* of reality.²⁶ More sympathetic is Fuentes's perception of "a crisis in realism that the total novel attempts to address by including parts of reality

²⁶ See the discussion of Vargas Llosa's "total novel" in Ryan F. Long, *Fictions of Totality: The Mexican Novel, 1968, and the National-Popular State* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 4.

that are masked or ‘mutilated.’”²⁷ Bolaño’s project is not nationalist, or even macroregional in the sense of mapping Latin American modernity. Instead, it might be called a “world-system novel,” mapping the incommensurable geographies of global capital from Europe to the Americas. Yet its antiliterary aesthetic refuses the *jouissance* of paradigmatic overspill and heteroglossia. It does not strive to take the whole world into itself, enfolding whole fields of knowledge. This is not an encyclopedic fiction but a “novel in parts,” “each independent . . . but functionally correlated by the sweep of the whole” (2666, 186). If *The Savage Detectives* reinvents the *testimonio* as a form of collectivized narration comprising more than fifty narrators who encapsulate the post-Boom period, 2666 demonstrates a similar impulse to transform the novel to reflect the millennial period through the form of the whole-in-parts. The irrealist tropes that permeate Bolaño’s prose do not represent totality by themselves: rather, the novel’s structure, moving among classes, geographies, and genres, re-creates the fractured social relations of reality in the semiperiphery.

Each of 2666’s semiautonomous books corresponds to a social or cultural formation in a different geography, but they are not welded into a coherent whole by a plot that resolves the mysteries of the successive sections. Rather, the disparate parts are bound by a web of recurring spectral motifs—voids, rats, hells, cannibals, zombies, dreams—that function like the outward-rippling signs of a black hole, which, though invisible, can be perceived through its distortions of space-time. Totality can emerge only if each section is understood as a relation catalyzed by the reader’s apprehension of how the effects of the Santa Teresa crimes radiate through the rest of the books: the formal corollary of the displacements effected by the structure of a whole on its parts. The femicides in *Crimes* function like the death’s head in Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting *The Ambassadors*. The skull introduces death at the level of form, producing an optic whose incommensurability with that of the stable spectator “is metonymic of a domain in which the commodities that advertise the ambassadors’ economic, political and symbolic capital have neither exchange value

²⁷ Mark Anderson, “A Reappraisal of the ‘Total’ Novel: Totality and Communicative Systems in Carlos Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra*,” *Symposium* 57, no. 2 (2003): 60.

nor use value.”²⁸ So too the Santa Teresa deaths posit “the coded presence of an almost unrepresentable alternative reality that momentarily obtrudes on reality as it is ordinarily understood, thereby rendering the latter oddly arbitrary and ontologically inconsistent” (Beaumont, “Aleatory Realism,” 19). This immanent critique of perspective overturns the world of cultural capital and literary commodities that the critics inhabit in the first book and reveals the systemic violence underlying their relations. As Oscar Fate recalls in *Fate*, “No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them” (348).

Unlike the critics, the novel’s artists come to an exemplary awareness of totality within their fictional reality. For Ansky, the surreal composite portraits by Archimboldi’s namesake, the sixteenth-century painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo—objects that, when assembled, form a whole face—exemplify “simplicity” in complexity, “the end of semblance,” “Everything in everything” (734). First Arcimboldo, then Ansky, then Reiter learns this “single lesson of vital importance,” but its meaning is not directly formulated.²⁹ Instead, the novel’s metatextual allusion to its own aesthetic is staged as a lesson in the apprehension of *Darstellung*, whereby the reader must correlate the novel’s parts to their social structures and “move ceaselessly from one level of analysis to another: from a given level of generality to a more specific one and from a given level of specificity to a more general one” (Resch, 51–52).

In conclusion, I want to return to the question of how Bolaño’s realism reflexively interrogates the ideological nature of art and the limits of realism while striving to indicate an objective reality beyond mysti-

²⁸ Matthew Beaumont, “Aleatory Realism: Reflections on the Parable of the Pier-Glass,” *Synthesis*, no. 3 (2011): 18.

²⁹ This “single lesson” is comparable to Sergio’s realization that the femicides are of workers: “The whore replied that he [Sergio] was wrong, in the story as he had told it the women dying were factory workers, not whores. Workers, workers, she said. And then Sergio apologized, as if a lightbulb had gone on over his head, he glimpsed an aspect of the situation that until now he’d overlooked” (466). A page earlier another reporter tells him: “Santa Teresa was a center of the drug trade and most likely nothing happened there that wasn’t related to the phenomenon one way or another. This struck him as an obvious answer, an answer anyone might have given him, but every so often he pondered it, as if despite the obviousness or simplicity of what the reporter had said, the answer was orbiting his brain and emitting signals” (465). In connecting neoliberal labor with the occult economy, Sergio correlates two relations that together give a clearer sense of the whole.

fication and representation. Michael Sprinker argues in his exegesis of Althusser's essay on Carlo Bertolazzi and Bertolt Brecht that materialist artworks deploy a different means of understanding totality: not "scientific or empirical knowledge of modes of production" but the "aesthetic apprehension of those structures as they are presented in the phenomenon of the theatrical performance" (278). The "asymmetrical, decentered structure" of Bertolazzi's theater produces an "objective structure of cognition that is consequent upon a poetic relation realized in the material of the play itself" (279). In particular, the copresence of temporalities, of worlds unlike yet united by a social relation, produces a deepening awareness of structural contradictions and "an eventual recognition beyond the boundaries of the phenomena themselves (for the structure the audience apprehends is nowhere represented on stage) of the structural relations between the two worlds of the contradictory unity which unites them, in a word, of the capitalist society" (278).

So too in *2666* the contradictory unity of the diverse geographies of the novel's separate parts is that of capitalist modernity, which connects the bourgeois critics from the western European core with Archimboldi from the eastern European periphery and also with the maquiladora workers of the North American semiperiphery. In a reversal of the poets' exilic movement in *The Savage Detectives* from the New World to the Old, the artists and intellectuals of *2666* move from Europe to the Americas, from the centers to the periphery, and *Crimes* is the black hole that draws the characters into its dark heart. The novel's spatial poetics activate the concrete histories attached to each geography, so that as its characters move, each locality stimulates different histories, thus reconstituting the social relations between cores and peripheries. However, this awareness of the capitalist totality is always held in tension with the nature of the novel as itself a commodity formed from ideological materials.

Sarah Pollack and Alberto Medina describe how the anglophone literary field has commodified Bolaño's translated fictions, marketing an exilic sensibility that appeals to exoticist stereotypes of Latin America and that distorts the political content of his work.³⁰ *2666* has been her-

³⁰ Sarah Pollack, "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States," *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (2009): 346–65; Alberto Medina, "Arts of Homelessness: Roberto Bolaño, or The Commodification of Exile," *Novel* 42, no. 3 (2009): 546–54.

alded as the successor to García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and improbably transformed into a global best seller, one of the heftiest "airport novels" ever. It is ironic that *2666*, which meditates so deeply on literature as a commodity and struggles to retrieve some political provenance for art, should have been so thoroughly and swiftly commodified, turned from a world-systemic novel into yet another world novel stripped of context. Even the images of the hellish world of post-NAFTA factories and narcocorridors can be reassimilated into the dominant imaginary of Mexico as an infernal borderland to the United States' civilized North, instead of read as indictments of the systemic violence implicit in the North's exploitation of the South. If the *McOndo* movement set out to satirize the "McDonaldization" of magical realism, a new movement may in turn emerge to satirize the reified picaresque of *The Savage Detectives* or the realist mixtures of *2666*. Yet the realism of *2666* anticipates its own reification via the dialectical understanding that artworks are simultaneously ideological and nonideological and via the formal embedding of the contradiction between the novel's own commodity status and its aim to produce an ideologically distanced understanding of totality. Similarly, the novel's content self-consciously raises questions about the production of literary value within the subordination of culture to market laws and the corporatization of humanities scholarship. Far from being a marker of literary backwardness, Bolaño's form demonstrates peripheral realism's capacity for self-reflexive experimentalism. *2666*'s formal fluctuations make visible the uneven structural relations of millennial capitalism that result in specific embodied experiences and social formations. If the danger of realism is that it threatens to affirm the dominant ideologies of the social formations that it so thickly encodes, then the dissonant manifestations of the critical unreal in *2666* open up the imaginative possibility of their dissolution.

Sharae Deckard is lecturer in world literature at University College Dublin. She is author of *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden* (2010) and editor of a special issue of *Green Letters* on postcolonial and world ecologies.