

Imagining the Inoperative Community: Documentary Aesthetic in Roberto Bolaño and
Alfredo Jaar

by

Sebastian Ferrari

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Katherine M. Jenckes, Chair
Professor Michèle A. Hannoosh
Professor Gareth Williams
Associate Professor Santiago Colás
Associate Professor Daniel Noemi

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Dedication

a mis padres / til mine forældre / to my parents

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- whatever a sun will always sing is you -

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Chapter One: Introduction

At the heart of this dissertation is a concern for and interest in how a certain genre, form, and intentionality change when placed into a different context and used for a different means. The genre in question here is the particularly nebulous one of documentary, whether it be expressed in photography, writing, actual documentation, or some other form. The gap between the theory and practice of what documentary work does creates a space for the intervention of aesthetic practices, in which it is possible to reconfigure the documentary impulse and form. The literary and artistic works I examine here come out of a background in which the circulation of documentation is immense and its importance is viewed with great urgency while also being delegitimized or problematized in important ways. Genocidal or mass crimes committed by the state or other actors in Latin America and elsewhere must be documented and communicated; at the same time, the means through which such documentation is formulated and communicated have come into question in several different ways: traditional documentary work has undergone severe questioning in the last three decades; the value of a photograph has changed with the emergence of digital media; and the structures of the state which previously underwrote the cultural value and weight of documents have been corrupted by ties to previous orders (some of which committed the crimes in question), handicapped by amnesty laws, or weakened by the ascending power of the neoliberal market. And perhaps most importantly, there is the dilemma posed by having to document erasure and disappearance. Confronted with this problem, documentary

work, I suggest, turns toward more literary or figurative forms of gesturing at what remains beyond and before the typical frame of documentary work.

The Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño and the Chilean artist Alfredo both saw the burden placed on documentary forms and documentation and its precarious nature under that weight. In their work they incorporate documentary forms and expectations, even as they attempt to exceed their typical principals of production and meaning-making. Unlike the sharp bifurcation drawn by the Chilean theorist Nelly Richard between the avant-garde and the social sciences in their responses to the coup in Chile, Bolaño and Jaar show a lack of fear in inhabiting either set of discourses, and pass between each with fluency; this fluency and dialectic is an integral part of what I've called "documentary aesthetic." I also describe this as a kind of inoperative or suspended documentation which occurs when the gesture of documenting is lifted up from its traditional coordinates and network of meaning-making and reference, and becomes free to join forces with other aesthetic techniques. In this separation the documentary apparatus is divorced from the ideology which traditionally sustains the authority of documentation, and it thus becomes capable of questioning, if not indicting, that ideology. This is what happens, for instance, in the creative reuse and recontextualization of identity documents in Jaar's work or as instrumentalized by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

This dissertation also contributes to the work of understanding Bolaño's oeuvre by examining in greater specificity one aspect of his style. His writings are marked by forms strongly associated with the dictatorships and their aftermath: the testimonial or confessional voice (in *Nocturno de Chile* (2000), *Amuleto* (1999)); the portfolio of interviews assembled from an investigation (*Los detectives salvajes* (1998)); the

catalogue of the dead (*2666* (2005)) or the encyclopedia of artists, itself another form of catalogue (*La literatura nazi en América* (1996)); the phone calls, letters and correspondence between exiles (*Llamadas telefónicas* (1997)). This dissertation attends to the impact of these forms on our reading of Bolaño.

In chapter two, I attempt to read how the narrative techniques of *Estrella distante*, in response specifically to the fake anthology of fascist writers that composes the entirety of *La literatura nazi en América*, offer an understanding and expression of identity and community that reflect the fact that, in the post-coup era in Chile, identity and community are essentially fractured and always haunted by the possibilities foreclosed by the coup. By dialectizing the isolated entries of the encyclopedic form of *La literatura nazi en América* with the hyperactive and overdetermined doubling of stories and identities in *Estrella distante*, we glimpse a first instance of how the documentary aesthetic works at pointing out the foreclosure inherent in documentary form while absorbing and reconfiguring the ordering discourse of the encyclopedia into its own aesthetic framework.

Similarly, I argue that in the novel *2666* the reworking of the catalogue form, a poetic form extracted from ancient epic poetry which traditionally is supposed to give the listener or reader a sense of order and place, represents the disorder of the state in Santa Teresa under the influence of neoliberalism. The catalogue reimagined by Bolaño does so while also contesting the domination imposed by that disorder. The careful treatment of each death makes the corpse function as the site of political legibility and inscription, and by ritually returning to that site, the catalogue (like Antigone's cry) speaks from the "no

place” of maquila labor and life.* The catalogue embodies the search for a place of enunciation and a poesis which could render that place present, while also pointing at the limits of any such poesis.

The emphasis on limit situations in the dissertation, the many times where there is a pointing at what cannot be said but only gestured to, is not incidental in the context of a questioning of documentary work, and it can be seen over and over again in Jaar’s work in the way in which the frame occupies the center of attention. The perceived failure of the documentary photograph in Jaar’s work (its incapacity to do the work it traditionally is called upon to do) points both to the limits of the typical documentary work and to the instability inherent in the ideology which authorizes the traditional documentary mode. The documentary aesthetic always points back to the insufficiency which is its condition. This experience of incapacity and insufficiency, I argue, opens us up to an imagining of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the inoperative community, which is at its heart the common sharing of finitude. Such finitude is however, itself the product of sharing. I argue that the documentary aesthetic produces a limit-experience that “exposes us to our finitude;” we confront our own exteriority to ourselves through the “unframing” of the other in the documentary aesthetic.

The Documentation and Representation of Mass Crimes in the Southern Cone

The problem of documentation emerges as a central political issue in the post-dictatorship period in the Southern Cone. The transitional governments put effort into

* Grant Farred in his article “The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño’s *2666*” uses a similar terminology (specifically, a “no place”) to describe a different aspect of the novel: “The unknown place is the place of violence, the place that may be near or far away, the place that is everywhere, that makes every place the no place of violence” (698).

documenting and cataloguing the crimes, deaths, and disappearances of the military regimes. But amnesty laws prevented an equivalent effort in terms of actual prosecutions and trials of military officials. As Brett Levinson points out, impunity was the very condition of possibility for the final report of La Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (1991; also known as the Informe Rettig) in Chile and similar reports produced in the Truth and Reconciliation commissions of Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. The emergence and enunciation of these texts were made possible by their lack of legal strength in the court of law; equally disturbing, the truth was permitted only on a condition of reconciliation made meaningless by the amnesty. Even though the facts that emerged from the process were true (though very limited in scope by the authorities), the structure of the process takes on the irreality of a simulation or fiction through this fact of impunity, both pertaining to the real world of past history and exempted from it: “La verdad simula justicia; la justicia se mercadea mediante la verdad” (“Pos-transición y poética” 50).

The official reports and the commissions which produced them ran the danger of becoming a ritual emptied of juridical significance. But the tradeoff between truth and justice has consequences that unfolded over a long timeline. In the decade that followed the Rettig report it became harder and harder for pinochetistas to defend their position as the façade of the military’s official, “salvationist” narrative (that in 1973 the country was on the verge of collapse and the military had to step in to maintain order) came down. The arrest of Pinochet in London in 1998 accelerated this process.

Nevertheless the documentation of violence and state crimes remained a gesture toward achieving justice; a preliminary moment that should have served as a segue into

social and political justice instead became an endpoint. The knowledge gathered from these official reports into state-crimes was valuable, but it still proved inadequate, both with regards to the legal efficacy mentioned above, and in terms of providing a full view of the crimes and the fates of the victims. The Informe Rettig in particular was criticized for its narrow focus on deaths and disappearances, while leaving aside the issue of torture in the detention centers (Lazzara 18). The Informe Valech (2004) was commissioned in part to rectify this omission, but even the definition of torture used in that report is narrow and not in agreement with the United Nations Convention against Torture (Howe 18). The “transition” from dictatorship to democracy is thus still a work in progress.*

The documentation of state-based violence is inadequate then, in terms of completeness, but also in terms of its accounting of the loss and destruction incurred during the dictatorships. A list of the names of victims gives us a narrow view, not only of the victims’ identities and lives, but of the loss suffered by the families and communities of which they formed a part; these losses can never be adequately captured in any catalogue or report. The revelation of this myopic vision, and the development of an alternate expression of loss and absence which acknowledges its own limits and inadequacy, are tasks that fall to other modes of narration and representation.

One such mode is what I call “documentary aesthetic.” Documentary aesthetic is a term that emerges in *La Photographie contemporaine* by Michel Poivert, though a similar term (“documentary poetics”) has begun to gain currency in discussions on poetry. In both contexts the usage of the term differs from my own. Poivert’s interest resides in theorizing how contemporary photography forms a dialectic between the

* This is also the situation in Argentina, most strikingly in the case of the children and infants of the victims of the junta in Argentina who were adopted by military families or others with close ties to the military, and who are now adults capable of discovering their true origins.

document and the artwork to achieve a documentary aesthetic or poetics. In the context of contemporary poetry, documentary poetics refers to a content made up primarily of contemporary news items and to the documentarian impulse (found in traditional documentary film and photography) to have the subject speak through their own speech and image. My usage of documentary aesthetic is closer to Poivert's intention (and this proximity of meaning is most apparent in the chapter on Jaar, where documents are made into art) but is not identical to it. By documentary aesthetic I mean an aesthetic that lives within the form and ideology of the "document" and within its ruins. By "document" I mean any representation (textual, photographic, or otherwise) which is enlisted into a role of documentation established by an external structure of legitimation or authorization. By participating in this structure, documentary forms propose an indexical relationship which can only be gestural rather than actual; but that gestural nature is suppressed when official documents and reports are deployed within the context of bureaucracies, governments, and commissions, and frequently in traditional works of documentary photography and film.

The particular documentary forms which most concern this dissertation are the encyclopedia, the catalogue or list of names, the photograph and the identity document. These are forms of representation which become embedded in narratives not usually associated with the documentary. Their impact and presence can be subtle or overt. An overt example is found in Bolaño's *La literatura nazi en América*, a book which presents itself as an anthology or encyclopedia of fascist writers in the Americas. Here the use of a documentary form (in this case the encyclopedia) as a template is later destabilized in its companion novel, *Estrella distante*, as will be analyzed in chapter two.

A more surreptitious embedding of a documentary form occurs in Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (1998), which is not discussed in this dissertation, but is one of his most well-known novels. *Los detectives salvajes*, as Sandra Garabano elucidates, can be seen as an allegorical exploration into the origins of Latin American literature, its currents, preoccupations, and developments, in the guise of an adventure involving young poets in Mexico City in 1976 (Garabano 10); this exploration or quest takes place both on a quasi-mythical level (the young poets' search for Cesárea Tinajero) and in the more mundane discussions of the writers and poets who surface on each page. But what about the detectives referred to in the title? Bolaño's fondness for the detective genre is well-known (Paz Soldán 22) and the expression of this fondness is not limited to the figure of the detective. The novel's character as an detective story is expressed very minimally through its form. The novel is split up into three parts; the first and third parts are recognizable as belonging to the diary of one of the young protagonists. The second part, which makes up the bulk of the work (and is itself entitled *Los detectives salvajes*), is a series of interviews which forms a log or report produced by investigators who remain unnamed and unknown; their very existence is simply imputed by the form of these interviews, which is marked by times and dates and names and is organized chronologically.* There are no questions or interruptions, but the place of the interviewer is constructed by the form. Not only are there no questions however, the reader also does not know the context for these interviews, or what is the potential "crime" at the heart of this investigation; the reader is made to inhabit the position of the detective, to search the

* With the exception of "interviews" of Amadeo Salvatierra, who shows up repeatedly (he both opens and closes the second part of the novel) and all of whose entries refer to the same site and date: "calle Venezuela, cerca del Palacio de la Inquisición, México DF, enero de 1976." He is the character who gives the protagonists the most details about Cesárea Tinajero.

text for evidence, both of the pursued and of the detectives. Only at the end do we discover what the possible “crime” might be.

The usage of this form (the interrogation log) is a subtle but powerful variation on the documentary aesthetic that I illuminate in other texts by Bolaño and artworks by Jaar. A documentary form becomes the template through which the novel is read, both defamiliarizing the form of the novel and estranging the reader. The presuppositions of the documentary form are rearranged and reimagined through the documentary aesthetic, forming a critique both of the documentary form and of the institutions (the police in the case of *Los detectives salvajes*) and ideologies (the humanist outlook of the encyclopedia in *La literatura nazi en América*) which depend on the view of the world enabled or reinforced by that form. The translation of this form into an aesthetic context questions its status as a discourse of truth; turning it away from the traditional forms of authority it has relied on places the responsibility for the investigation of “truth” at the feet of the readers.

What I do *not* aim to do, however, is to reproduce an easy opposition between realism and formalism. The superficial opposition of the putative realism of documentary and the formalism of aesthetic representation is both powerful and imaginary, and it is powerful precisely because it is based on an imaginary distinction between two forms of representation that are both constructed on aesthetic grounds. The idea of a documentary aesthetic is not one in which documentary representation is seen as antithetical to aesthetic or figurative representation, rather it defamiliarizes the documentary frame. What results from the clash of differing frames and what this does to the reader or spectator is what I investigate.

Most of the texts and artworks that I discuss concern traumatic and violent moments in Chile and other peripheral zones, including Mexico, Rwanda, and African immigration in Europe. While Chile is an area of focus for Bolaño and Jaar, their works typically cross borders rather fluidly. The transnational impulse in these works registers a resistance to national literary or artistic traditions and an insistence on the global, political-economic nature of violence. The temporality of the works is also mixed. Some of these moments pertain to the dictatorship in Chile, while others are of a more recent vintage (for example, the femicide of maquiladora workers on the Mexico-U.S. border, which occurred in the 1990's and 2000's). The difficulty in representing such violent situations is in part a motivation for the use of a documentary aesthetic, which by its implementation reveals the blindness and inadequacy of official, government reports and other forms of traditional documentation. Where a documentary frame closes down possibilities, the self-inscribed inadequacy of the documentary aesthetic opens itself up to alternative viewpoints.

By the nature of the material, these representations also raise issues associated with memory narratives and trauma studies. The impact of the documentary aesthetic however on these dimensions of the representation is not clear-cut, since what it contributes is not so much greater clarity as a greater awareness of absence and the limits of representation, reinforcing the notion that a definitive account of events is impossible and in some instances not even desirable, since this repeats the trauma.

To account for the differing possible responses to these traumatic events, Michael Lazzara theorizes an opposition between closed and open memory narratives, texts which offer different levels of closure and ascribe varying degrees of linearity to the past. So he

asks “Is it best... to write about the past in linear terms and with identifiable narrative tropes [as occurs in Luz Arce’s *El Infierno*] or to employ an aesthetic based on the fragment [as in Diamela Eltit’s *El padre mío*] an aesthetic that alludes in its very composition to the impossibility of witnessing?” (32). Although both Bolaño’s and Jaar’s work could be characterized as open forms in the sense given this term by Lazzara, the opposition between such openness and the idea of closure is never absolute, just as documentary and aesthetic are not absolutely opposed. A strict delineation like this cannot be imposed and any such imposition would replicate the very structure of closure and authorization which characterizes the ‘closed’ form. Rather, the more narrow vision of documentary and the document is implanted into a wider aesthetic frame, such that the reader is faced with contrasting vanishing points, as it were. A negotiation must take place between these counterposing frames, as it does in texts with different relations to closure in memory texts.

Lazzara’s opposition resembles an earlier one theorized by Nelly Richard, in which she counterposed the avant-garde tactics of the *Escena de avanzada* during Pinochet’s dictatorship with the discourse and narratives of the social sciences. The former responded to the fracture of the social field by experimenting with language and breaking with normative forms of signification; the latter attempted to recuperate this fracture back into a coherent narrative, leaving language untouched and as the valuable instrument which could save Chilean literature and thought from descending into chaos. Richard privileges the avant-garde approach as more reflective of the actual situation in Chile, even if this reflection is expressed through a fragmented and dispersed language that at times obscures meaning. Her reaction to the sociological approach verges on the

allergic: “Faced with identities that had lost shape or unity of meaning, the professional narrative of sociological research continued abusing its technical rationality and its methodological efficacy as barometers of knowledge” (*Cultural Residues* 28). She also criticizes their technical cataloguing of victims’ testimonies into databases.

The approach of Bolaño and Jaar differ from this polarization in that their work reveals a lack of fear of slipping between different modes of representation and at times incorporating the same technical discourses which Richard disfavours. And similarly, in other instances, the fragmented and open discourses which Lazzara privileges as ways of resisting hegemonic power (Lazzara 157) can be seen in their works as capable of being appropriated by power or otherwise seen as complicit with it.* This dialectical relationship results in what I describe as a documentary aesthetic. But to understand more fully the roots of this development within the context of documentary work, both internationally and in Latin America, it is necessary to examine the general phenomenology of what “documentary” has meant and how it has changed through much of the twentieth century.

The Document and The Documentary

Briefly examining the various contexts in which the document and the documentary are deployed can help us to understand better the significance of their usage in the creative fields (writing and art) that are of most interest to this dissertation. There are several different spheres within which the idea of the document or the documentary has currency: history, film, art, photography, literature, law, commerce, corporate or

* This is an echo of Willy Thayer’s critique of the avant-garde’s political intervention, which is discussed briefly in chapter two.

government bureaucracy are among the most important, and within each sphere the idea of the document or the documentary takes on a different valence. What is recognized as a document within one context may not be recognized as such within another, and this differential aspect to the document leads to a first tentative formulation of a definition: the document is defined by the network of exchange and circulation within which it has value either as a sign, as evidence, or as a material.

The field of history reveals the difficulty of identifying what constitutes a document. Within a historical context, a document can be commonly defined as textual material (against the “artifact” which is non-textual in nature) and this broad definition allows for many types of objects and texts to fall into the category. The historical document may or may not have had a fixed meaning in its contemporary circulation, and the historian’s gaze from the future seeks to extract that meaning from the document. Naturally, it can equally be the case that the historian adds on another layer of meaning in seeking to find what the document can say about its historical context: the historian turns the document into evidence that “speaks” for the historical context in which it originated, and the whole enterprise of historical study turns on the issue of whether or not the document is “speaking” accurately. This is (to our eyes) the obvious conundrum which Michel Foucault notes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: the commonplace definition of the historical document (as textual material out of which meaning is extracted) overlooks the fact that the category of “the document” is defined discursively and is not a given which exists *a priori* to the historian’s definition of the conditions which allow documents and non-documents to emerge from history (Foucault *L’Archéologie* 13-15; qtd. in Didi-Huberman 68).

This conundrum is present in almost every field in which the document or the documentary has relevance: a tension exists between the desire to see the document as something recognizable on its face, with clear borders, filled with a certain meaning and pre-existing in the world at large; and the inescapability of the fact that the category of “the document” exists as part of our ideological projection onto the world. The issue of the document’s contestability and uncertainty has become, for some critics, an essential element of its definition in our postmodern context. In response to concerns about the truth value of certain documentary films or pictures, Hito Steyerl argues that

uncertainty is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such. The questions which they invariably trigger, the disavowed anxieties hidden behind apparent certainties, differ substantially from those associated with fictional modes. The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true” (Steyerl “Documentary Uncertainty”).

“In our times” is an important qualifier since such concerns about certainty in documentary photography were not as prevalent, for instance, in the photography of the 19th century, where the adjective “documentary” would have appeared redundant, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau remarks, and as will be discussed further (qtd. in Nichols 585).*

* The 19th century attitude was such that Baudelaire could argue that photography’s “true duty [...] is to be the servant of the sciences and arts— but the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature. Let it hasten to enrich the tourist’s album and restore to his eye the precision which his memory may lack; let it adorn the naturalist’s library, and enlarge microscopic animals; let it even provide information to corroborate the astronomer’s hypotheses; in short, let it be the secretary and clerk of whoever needs an absolute factual exactitude in his profession—up to that point nothing could be better. Let it rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins, those books, prints and manuscripts which time is devouring, precious things whose form is dissolving and which demand a place in the archives of our memory – it will be thanked and applauded. But if it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man’s soul, then it will be so much the worse for us!” (Baudelaire 232)

Steyerl's line of thought is picked up in the analysis of Régis Durand. Durand compares the uncertainty of the aesthetic value of the contemporary photograph – “between autonomy and heteronomy” – and the ontological uncertainty of the document (qtd. in Didi-Huberman 68). Or again, Michel Poivert: “C'est la relation entre l'utilité et la représentation qui semble souvent nourrir les questionnements sur la valeur des images. Ces ambiguïtés sont fondamentales et continuent d'assurer la vitalité de la 'la photographie contemporaine'" (Poivert 7).^{*} These are again debates on the photograph's referentiality versus its constructedness, or as Georges Didi-Hubermann puts it, a rehash of the opposition within Barthes between the phenomenological “that-has-been” and the semiological “effect of the real.” Didi-Huberman will argue, however, that it is precisely Jaar's work that dialectizes this dynamic, superseding the static opposition of realism and formalism. Durand, in contrast, is content with supposing an antagonism between a “*document-cry* solely modeled on the ‘that-has-been’ of an event, a disaster, a grief” and “a real *document-project*, i.e. a construction elaborated from the historically real” (68).[†]

While a document is not the same as a photograph, the parallels between them will help illuminate how we think about both documents and photographs today. In certain fields of usage, the uncertainty of the document is anxiously covered over through myriad symbolic gestures so as to give the document a sense of universality that would override subjective interpretations. Within a bureaucratic context, for example, the document agglomerates and attracts various tokens that are meant to testify universally to its status as something official which refers to the legal status of an object or person:

^{*} “It's the relationship between utility [information, documentation] and representation which seems to frequently nourish the debate about the value of the image. These ambiguities are fundamental and continue to assure the vitality of ‘contemporary photography’” (my translation)

[†] This is Didi-Huberman's characterization of Durand's outlook.

signatures, stamps, special ink, special paper, and third-party witnesses licensed by the government for the express purpose of witnessing the creation of a document. Such forced universality and standardization allows for documents to be exchangeable, archivable, and duplicable, texts with legal significance that circulate in the populace at large and within commercial and governmental bureaucracies. In this regard, the document resembles the commodity in that it is an object whose use value is superseded by its status as an object of exchange and thus accrues an ideological significance and social value wholly alien to its original status as an object. In both instances, the piece of paper (for the document) and the object (for the commodity) are transformed and come to symbolize the social and cultural transformation we perceive as taking place at the contact points between the ideological and the natural. Paper money epitomizes this aspect of the commodity and the document. Money itself is both a commodity and a document, an object of value and the measure of value, an object and a text.*

Thus far in our discussion of the document we have seen that its nature is largely determined by the context in which it is viewed and the various devices by which it is authorized or legitimated as valid. The document is a moment of legibility, out of which the historian extracts meaning, or that the bureaucrat constructs through an amalgam of verifiable signs and encoded rituals. Outside of historical, legal, and commercial contexts, however, there is a shift to documentary as meaning “factual” rather than “authorized” or legalistically legible, with the documentary serving as a seamless

* Though here I am considering documents, similar comparisons to money have been expressed vis-à-vis photography by the U.S. photographer and theorist Allan Sekula: “Just as money is the standard measure of exchange value that brings together all the goods in the world in a single system of transactions, photographs are thought to reduce all visual perceptions to relations of formal equivalence. Here, I think, we have a major aspect of the origins of the overwhelming formalism that haunts the visual arts in the bourgeois age. Formalism brings together all the images in the world in one large aesthetic market, by uprooting them from any context that has to do with their origin, sense and usage” (“Traffic in Photographs” 99)

intermediary between representation and reality. Yet the differentiation between the factual and the authorized is far from clear or rigorous. A closer examination of the origins of documentary film by Bill Nichols, for instance, reveals that the documentary movement was the recovery of a rhetoric of public persuasion, now rechanneled through the very effective use of film, editing and narration. Such film drew its force from the authority and representational power of the moving image even when the contents of representation were staged, which they frequently were in early documentary films. Despite our current-day associations of the documentary film as an instrument employed in an informational struggle against established institutions and corporations, the early documentary was frequently bankrolled and utilized by governments and commercial enterprises in order to sway public opinion in their favor.

The first time the term “documentary” was applied to a film was in 1926, a full thirty years after the Lumière brothers’ exhibition in 1895. John Grierson, a Scottish film producer trained as a sociologist, wrote a review in the *New York Sun* of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* in which he described the film as having “documentary value” (Stott 9). That the film described the daily habits of young Polynesian men seems to be a fact not accidental to this naming, since such a subject would prove attractive to a former sociologist, as William Stott recognizes.* But the film itself was far from “factual.” Indeed, like Flaherty’s previous film, *North of Nanook*, accepted by many as the first documentary, the native inhabitants of both films were employed as actors who took part

* Stott also points out that at the time the French used the term “documentaire” to refer to travelogues.

in scenes staged and directed by Flaherty. These scenes often represented practices (such as harpoon-fishing) which had been abandoned a long time before by these cultures.*

What attracted Grierson and others to the documentary films were their educational value, their advocacy of social and political causes, and their departure from Hollywood-centric modes of storytelling, which produced “false excitements” (9). Grierson sought out the factual film because it produced “the information necessary to organized and harmonious living,” most importantly because he felt that modernity, with its overwhelming amount of information, threatened the possibility of democratic citizenship (qtd. in Stott 9).[†] But even if such information were possible, what was needed was not just the facts, but “the *blazing* facts of the matter” (qtd. in Stott 9; emphasis mine); that is, the documentary had to be humanized and dramatized, while still being “factual.”[‡] As Grierson said, “I look to register what actually moves: what hits the spectator at the midriff: what yanks him up by the hair of the head or the plain bootstraps to the plane of decent seeing” (qtd. in Stott 12). And here we seem to be circling back to the “excitements” of the Hollywood-style of filmmaking, only rerouted for other

* It is worth noting that these early documentaries focused specifically on indigenous populations, and in fact, older generations of these indigenous populations, as if the more “other” they could be, the more suitable they were for documentary. The second popular subject of early documentaries were communities of workers, more specifically isolated or remote communities doing work that would be alien to most viewers. In these two senses, Jaar is definitely an inheritor of the documentary tradition, as he is attracted both to faraway peoples and worker communities.

In an ironic twist of fate, for many of the descendants of the indigenous populations featured in Flaherty’s documentaries, his films now *do* have “documentary value” in that they have served as instructive in resurrecting these long-abandoned practices. The adequacy of the term “documentary” thus has a temporal variable as well. See the 2010 documentary on Robert Flaherty by Brian Wilson, *A Boatload of Wild Irishmen*.

[†] In this regard, the use of documentary to produce an informed citizenry within democracy agrees with the ways in which Jaar implements his documentary installations.

[‡] In an interesting footnote Stott (6) notes how popular the adjective “human” is in describing the literature and photography of the thirties, “human” being a portmanteau for personal, emotional, dramatic, touching, and not necessarily objective.

purposes. Stott summarizes Grierson's position thusly: "Since all the facts could not be given, he believed that education would turn to a 'shorthand method' that dramatized the human consequences of a few facts" (10-11).

Yet despite this admission of dramatization, condensation, and selection, theorists of the documentary such as Stott frequently revert to the idea of the documentary as pure information.

Documentary is the presentation or representation of actual fact in such a way that makes it credible and vivid to people at the time. Since all emphasis is on the fact, its validity must be unquestionable as possible... Since just the facts matter, it can be transmitted in any possible medium... The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content. (Stott 14)

The disavowal of stylization seems as intrinsic to the definition of documentary film as any other facet, even when it is coupled *with* the admission of said stylization. The history of the evolution of the documentary film as a form and its ideological mission to provide information and to advocate, first spun by Grierson, but later mythologized within the history of the cinema, is later viewed as inadequate. In a 2001 article Bill Nichols revisits the origins of the documentary, where he encounters not the straight-up factual recounting of the human condition in various circumstances, but a form of storytelling that borrowed heavily from the modernist avant-garde. For Nichols, the emergence of the documentary is much more identifiable aesthetically than it is for Stott: "The appearance of documentary involves the combination of three preexisting elements – photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation – along with a new emphasis on the rhetoric of social persuasion" (582). In Nichols' interpretation, Grierson had to repress the role of modernist fragmentation in documentary because it threatened his bourgeois-democratic model of subjectivity and citizenship, within which

documentary had to stay or else risk its social advocacy mission.* The work of the modernist avant-garde “exceeded the terms of this binary opposition of affirmation and contestation centered on the bourgeois-democratic state” and thus threatened both the documentary’s political role and the bourgeois-democrat state (583).

For Grierson, the political role of the documentary, and its advocacy on behalf of governments and corporations, was essential. As mentioned before, counter to what we might expect of documentaries today, these early documentarians often made films that promoted colonial and industrial causes. Grierson pushed early on for the instrumentalization of documentary for the purpose of publicity within the Empire Marketing Board, an agency of the British government that in essence marketed “empire” as a good and useful organization of the world economy (Nichols 581). In 1948 Robert Flaherty made a “documentary” sponsored by the Standard Oil Company that represented the peaceful coexistence of Cajun culture and oil exploitation in Louisiana. Grierson and his followers believed that the documentary served as a method for educating the masses in the proper way of citizen participation in contemporary democracy. Documentary could make the masses more pliable in the wake of the mass changes caused by industrialization and the complex political and economic problems of mass society post-World War I.

* About film’s relationship with the masses, Grierson had this to say in 1926: “[Film] belongs to the strange and primitive animal with lusts in its body and dreams in its eyes which we call the mob... [but it] belongs to the people as no other social institution that has ever appeared in the world before. It is the only genuinely democratic institution that has ever appeared on a world wide scale” (qtd. in Deacon 151). Clearly, the documentary was his favored means for bringing this unruly mob within the orderly parameters of the liberal state. At the presentation of the first Academy Award for a documentary in 1942, Grierson followed up these sentiments with the following: “At that time some of us thought the Hollywood film ... was unnecessarily out of touch with the social realities ... We saw the growing complexity of modern affairs; and we thought that if our half-bewildered, half-frivolous generation did not master events, it was not unlikely that events would master us. We saw the enormous power of the film medium and believed it had the very special public duty to interpret the contemporary scene ... we were at first called a bunch of intellectuals and propagandists and told that the documentary idea had nothing to do with entertainment” (qtd. in Deacon 152).

Nichols counterposes to this official history a set of avant-garde filmmakers who were not invested in the status quo. Artists like “Man Ray, René Clair, Hans Richter, Louis Delluc, Jean Vigo, Alberto Cavalcanti, Luis Buñuel, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and the Russian constructivists” were more interested in “questions of perception and consciousness, aesthetics and ethics, behavior and the unconscious, actions and desire” than in state-building and citizen education (583). Grierson knew of these filmmakers (“Grierson contributed the English titles to [Victor Turin’s] *Turksib*; he also played a key role in the American distribution of Eisenstein’s first film, *Strike* (1925)” (Nichols 599)) and how their techniques were gaining influence and yet purposely excluded them from his history of the development of the documentary. The technique in particular that was felt to be most threatening was the fragmentation of perspective achieved in the avant-garde films by excessive cutting and montage. Such fragmentation undermined the idea of a continuity of perspective and did damage to the model of subjectivity most suitable for bourgeois-democracy: society as a collection of atomistic and autonomous individuals. Grierson argued that documentary was essentially an “anti-aesthetic” movement which could not afford to take on board these techniques without risking the loss of legitimacy as an educational instrument of the state or the corporation (Nichols 602). Instead what empowered Grierson’s wished-for documentary movement was the direct portrayal of facts coupled with the ability to persuade. Essential to sustaining this view of documentary is the need for a stable and unquestioned framing of perspective, one that should not reveal its contingent nature but aspires to universal validity.

Using the new technology of film a documentary mode was crafted that may or may not have to do with the transmission of facts, but that at all costs does effect a halo of authorization, similar to the bureaucratic document. The power of this supposed window onto reality corresponds more to its alignment with the interests of the status quo (that is, to its embeddedness within the discourses of power) than with the communicative power of its form. But as that alignment falls apart and the means of documentary production become more readily available, the documentary film becomes seen as less useful as an instrument of established powers. In Nichols' alternate history of the documentary, the modernist techniques he mentions above are re-engaged in the documentary films of the 60's and 70's, when documentary was democratized and films began to advocate on behalf of minority subjectivities seeking greater political power and when the protection of the nation-state no longer formed the nucleus of political concerns for mainstream documentary filmmakers (608).

The evolution of documentary photography follows a similar pattern, from (1) presumed window onto reality, to (2) politicized instrument of social amelioration, and finally to (3) aesthetically creative and self-conscious constructions of reality. In the first phase, the very qualifier "documentary" was superfluous to a contemporary understanding of what photography was. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out, to call Matthew Brady's photographs of the Civil War "documentary" would have been, at the time, a redundancy. Before the idea of "documentary photography" could take hold, it "took an extended period of symbolism and aestheticism in the form of photographic pictorialism to allow documentary to escape tautology and name a distinct form" (Solomon-Godeau "Who is Speaking Thus?" 195; qtd. in Nichols 585). The documentary

quality of photography evolved from being something inherent to the technology, to a characteristic requiring an adjective, a transformation which required an extended passage through aesthetic experimentation.* A second factor in documentary photography's emergence, according to Martha Rosler, was the pressing need to instrumentalize photography for political causes and social advocacy during the Great Depression (Rosler 261). If the institutionalized form of documentary film of the 20's was used to bolster imperialism and capitalism, documentary photography in the Depression waged battle in favor of a gentler form of capitalism. While street photography did proliferate from the mid-1860's to the early twentieth century in the UK and in the US (most notably in the work of Thomas Annan, John Thomson, Jacob Riis, and Lewis Hine (Wells 252)), documentary photography came to greater prominence in the United States in the 1930's with the work commissioned by government agencies such as the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The work was commissioned in order to raise awareness and popular support for greater government intervention into the economy and the social welfare of the millions unemployed by the Great Depression. So as with Grierson's championing of the documentary film, there were intimate ties between the rise of the genre of documentary photography, and its subsequent consecration as a legitimate field of aesthetic expertise, and governmental forces which sought to put in place social and political reforms as an antidote to more external revolutionary changes that could cause the whole political-economic system of liberalism

* Indeed the transformation was drastic enough that one can find Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1928 expressing the outermost counterpoint to the Baudelairian viewpoint of photography as a handmaiden of the sciences referred to earlier*, instead rejecting art itself and putting photography in its place: "Art has no place in modern life... With the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait... The photograph presents a precise moment documentarily... Crystallize man not by a single 'synthetic' portrait, but by a whole lot of snapshots taken at different times and in different conditions" (qtd. in Nichols 593).

to come crashing down. Amelioration through internal reform was the name of the game. The work produced by the agencies launched the careers of some of the most well-known documentary photographers of the twentieth century (Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, et al), and gave definitive shape to the popular conception of what documentary photography looks like. This movement did much to bring attention to the plight of many in the country, but it also reinforced and amplified the dynamic in place with the earlier reformist-oriented street photography: agency lay in the hands of the photographer; the photographed subject assumed the position of the speechless victim available only as an image (thus joining the muteness of things and animals); and finally the viewer was appealed to as the subject-who-can-act and the sole locus of political and social action. The posture of documentary photography in these images, much like literary realism of the nineteenth century, is one of allowing more direct, less mediated access to the real of social and political life, while hiding the ideological presuppositions which underpin this posture. These presuppositions inscribe the relationship between subject and object and are expressed in certain tropes present in much of traditional documentary work. Such tropes, illuminated by Solomon-Godeau, include

the depiction of the subject – and the subject’s circumstances – as a pictorial spectacle, usually deployed for a different audience and a different class. Another [trope] concerns the immobilizing effect produced by presenting the visual ‘fact’ of individual victimization or subjugation as a metonym for the (invisible) conditions that produced it. (“Who is Speaking Thus?” 204-205)

Traditional documentary work in photography and film focused almost exclusively on subject matter to the exclusion of style and form, allowing these tropes of the documentary to solidify and become invisible. Such was the case with the “victim photography” (as Martha Rosler terms it) of Jacob Riis which presented itself as offering

a window onto the squalor of slums and the wretched lives of their inhabitants. Yet as Sally Stein has pointed out, aesthetic considerations obviously did have a role in the taking and selection of such photographs; for example, Riis shunned photographs in which slum inhabitants gazed back at the camera, thus fostering a greater sense of unconscious victimhood (qtd. in Solomon-Godeau, "Who is Speaking Thus?" 203). The Farm Security Administration's photographers of the 1930's inherited similar aesthetic principles as can be seen in the fact that they would regularly ask tenant farmers and migrant workers to not wash themselves or change into nicer clothes before being photographed. The feigned ignorance or disavowal of aesthetic consideration is so prevalent it could itself be considered a major trope of the documentary.

Documentary's contrapuntal stance of both revealing content and denying form leads critics such as Solomon-Godeau to wonder what can be done about

the paradox that underlies those documentary practices that have defined themselves as critical of the status-quo, or at very least reformist... [and that] normally operate within larger structures that function to limit, contain, and ultimately neutralize them. The issue here is not cooption as such, but the structural limitations of conventional documentary imagery to disrupt the textual, epistemological, and ideological systems that inscribe and contain it. ("Who is Speaking Thus?" 197)

Per Solomon-Godeau, traditional documentary flourished when tasked with reform or amelioration of social ills, but faced greater difficulty in achieving a more radical critique of society.

These issues concern both documentary and other forms of realism and are at the heart of efforts to move beyond traditional documentary. Contemporary documentary artists wager that not only can documentary work overcome its embeddedness within the dominant ideology and its preferential form of realism, but also that, because of its

intrinsic relation to the issue of framing, documentary is uniquely positioned to critique the framing of perspective achieved in capitalist relations. Beginning in the 1970's a group in California began to revisit the premises of established documentary photography, seeking to revitalize the genre in light of the extensive but simplistic news coverage of the Vietnam War while avoiding falling back into "victim photography." Some of the major figures in this documentary movement, called New Social Documentary, include Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, and Fred Lonidier. The movement represented a greater critical awareness of the instrumentalization of documentary photography by governmental and corporate actors, and gave extensive thought to how photographs construct their objects and viewers, how they are viewed and consumed by subjects. They sought to alter the reception of photographs by mixing in other media, foregrounding narrative text, or using ironic disjunctions. As Rosler stated,

we wanted to be documentarians in a way that documentarians hadn't been. As readers of Brecht, we wanted to use obviously theatrical or dramatized sequences or performance elements together with more traditional documentary strategies, to use text, irony, absurdity, mixed forms of all types. (Marien 417)

The New Social Documentary artists both employed documentary practices and actively pointed out its limits. The social critique they practiced was more radical than the documentarians of the FSA (especially since they were not in the employ of the United States government) and more self-aware of their own status as representations which had to be presented carefully.

Around the same time as the New Social Documentary, in the Southern Cone in the 70's and 80's much attention was being paid to the crafting and representation of visual images, especially through photography and identity documents, because of the repressive force of the dictatorships. In Chile avant-garde artists such as Eugenio

Dittborn and others creatively incorporated identity photographs into their works, thus stripping them of the ideological power invested in them by the dictatorship. In Argentina the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in cooperation with local artists, carefully deployed campaigns in which the public display of photographic images and silhouettes of their disappeared sons and daughters played a prominent role. Such campaigns inverted the documentary value of identity photographs, revealing them not as neutral images but as ideological weapons that could be turned against the junta. While Jaar's work pertains to a younger generation than Dittborn or the New Social Documentary, and his work is largely composed of installation art rather than documentary photography strictly speaking, his major themes and techniques are in keeping with their tactics.

Though the discussion here has centered largely on documentary photography and film, the concerns expressed by the artists in these fields and the general progression that is being highlighted (in which there is a greater interest in understanding and manipulating the role of the frame in documentary representations) are also applicable, as will be shown, to the writings of Bolaño.

Roberto Bolaño and Alfredo Jaar

Both Bolaño and Jaar are interlopers. They are both Chileans who lived outside Chile most of their lives (Bolaño lived in Mexico from 1968 to 1977, and then in Europe from 1977 onward; Jaar lived in Martinique for most of his childhood and adolescence and has lived in the United States since 1982). Bolaño is caught between the Boom generation of writers and the younger generations clustered around *la nueva narrativa chilena* of the

early 90's or the slightly younger schools of McOndo or Crack.* While Jaar's work demonstrates affinities with some of the conceptual and visual art in Chile from the 70's (such as the avant-garde group Colectivo de Acciones de Arte, and Eugenio Dittborn), his move to New York precluded the development of further ties; as a Chilean in New York he felt similarly isolated from his contemporaries. Though he is primarily a visual and installation artist, his training is in architecture and film and he approaches his work with that perspective in mind. As a result, the works of Bolaño and Jaar reflect the internationalism of their background, sometimes putting equal if not disproportionate weight on events outside Chile.

Most of Bolaño's well-known works revolve around political crises central to the Chilean and Latin American conscience over the last forty years. These crises are usually viewed through the filter of a literary imagination. Literature and the literary world are the *topos par excellence* of Bolaño's oeuvre, the gravitational field around which everything orbits. The literary scene appears as both perpetually in crisis, an exhausted form, and yet nevertheless as the essential field of experience for the characters who populate his novels and short stories. These characters run the gamut from bad poets, to groupies, to literary critics, to beloved but mysterious and quasi-mythical writers. The obsession with literature, and with the discussion of its past and future, seems inextricably linked to the signature political catastrophes that shaped Bolaño's generation (those born in the 50's) in its youth: the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, Pinochet's coup in 1973, the military junta in Argentina. The obsession can be seen as a reaction formation, or as a diverted mourning for the political possibilities of a better future shut down by

* Franklin Rodríguez situates Bolaño closer to "César Aira (Argentina 1949), Fernando Vallejo (Colombia 1942), Juan Villoro (Mexico 1956), Rodrigo Rey Rosa (Guatemala 1958), and Alan Pauls (Argentina 1959)," all of whom also have very loose ties to general groupings into different generations (8).

these catastrophic events. Whatever the motivation, the literary field takes on a pugilistic character (almost as if internalizing the battle that could not take place on a political level), with warring camps and philosophies, an attitude that Bolaño carried out in his own life, whether in jest or seriously.

The relationship between politics and literature becomes the main subject of two of Bolaño's early novels: *Estrella distante* and *La literatura nazi en América*. In chapter two, I focus on how the form of the anthology of fascist writers in *La literatura nazi en América* generates a meaning which is later responded to in its sister-novella, *Estrella distante* (both texts are published in the same year, 1996). In the novella we are offered an alternative mode of understanding and narrating identity and community that counters the biopolitical reduction of identity in the fake anthology. This narration works through the doubling and reflecting of identity in multiple instances and along multiple axes; the foregrounding of intertextual allusions (which reflects the differential nature of identity); and the creative linking of seemingly unrelated stories and identities (which stands in contrast to the anthology's careful categorization of superficial influence and relation). These multiple and palimpsestic connections between characters and stories create a network of relations which defy anthological compartmentalization and trace the outlines of a literary and figurative imagination of Nancy's inoperative community, in which finitude itself forms the basis of sharing and is the product of sharing.

In chapter three, I investigate how Bolaño reimagines the list of the dead through the vast "catalogue" of murdered and raped maquiladoras workers he produces in the fourth chapter of *2666*. In that reimagination, he combines the more familiar list of the dead and disappeared that we have come to know through current-day reports on mass

crimes, with the catalogue form found in epic poetry; the result is not a list of names, but a long series of stories which narrate the discovery of a corpse, its condition and its backstory. The catalogue in *2666* is placed at the unstable limit between the discourses of “documentary” and “aesthetic;” this liminal structure enables us to ask what can be said about things that can never be fully represented.

The catalogue is an ancient poetic form, but one that is perhaps in need of rehabilitation, not just as a poetics but as a practice of reading, given that the list of the names of the dead has become a prominent form in the second half of the twentieth century through the documentation of genocidal acts during that period. The list of names, typically of victims but sometimes of perpetrators, has become a trope of increasing prevalence and significance, and can be employed in ways that either break with its potentially reductive view of identity and loss or that reinforce it. An example of the latter can be seen in a book by Marcia Merino, a Chilean leftist who provided the DINA (the Chilean state intelligence service) with names and information when she was arrested, and later worked for the military police. Her divulgence of names resulted in the detention of other citizens by the police. After the end of the dictatorship, she published a book called *Mi verdad* (1993) in which she tells her story and asks for forgiveness. She concludes the book by providing a list of names of perpetrators of violence and torture during the dictatorship, thus offering a set of names intended to offset her earlier naming of fellow leftists. The problem is that these names were already widely known and thus have no political effect. What do they accomplish, then? Brett Levinson theorizes that “los nombres escenificaron, en su cabal monotonía, la justicia y la restitución como el rito vacío de la transición. La divulgación de nombres simula el proceso de justicia... de la

cual ellos pudieron haber formado parte en el pasado” (“Pos-transición y poética” 52).

The act of naming becomes a non-act, becomes a representation that finds meaning only within its act of inscription and not as a step within a judicial process.

Her deployment of a documentary form, the list of names, does not provoke a questioning of the form or take into consideration the fact that similar lists of names were already circulating. In mimicking them, her list merely reinforces the notion of documentation as an ineffectual form and practice of representation. The symmetry of the mirroring between lists of names (the first set of names Merino gives to the DINA, the lists published in the Informe Rettig, the names Merino gives in her book) precludes a greater consideration of its aesthetic value as form and the ideology of identity it presupposes.

The gesture of documentation, the list of names and crimes, is taken up and reimagined within the frame of the older poesis of the catalogue form in *2666*. The catalogue predates even the Homeric epic as a form.* The typical content of catalogues were genealogies of mythological heroes and kings, but their subject could also be more mundane (the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*; the catalogue of dogs in Ovid’s poem “Apollo and Daphne”). Within such genealogies, the catalogue could break out of its form to present a narrative of an event or feat, before falling back into the recitation of other descendants or relations. Contrary to the attitude most modern readers have of them, in the oral cultures of antiquity the recitation of genealogies were highly valued, and provided an important function: they put things in their place (8), gave an order to the past, the present, and the foreseeable future. They memorialized the real and imagined

* The catalogue, which originates in the Near East, also has a powerful role in the Hebrew Bible, where “the whole narrative of Genesis is suspended on a framework of genealogy” (West 15).

events of the past, the ancestry of their forefathers, to which different city-states attached themselves. They provided a frame not just for storytelling but for the narration of political and social identities.*

What, then, does this form have to teach us today? Being able to read and represent mass crimes was both the central challenge of the second half of the twentieth century and its central aesthetic concern. While Bolaño's rendition of the catalogue form does take elements from its usage in antiquity, he also brings new richness to it. In my reading of the catalogue in chapter three, I draw out different aesthetic facets which contribute to its overall effect. Through its rhythm and form, the catalogue generates a vision whose significance exceeds the scope of the individual names and stories that make it up; as a long-form incantation, it summons visions not just of the dead but of the political and social conditions that allow for these murders to prosper and proliferate. In the fictional city of Santa Teresa (modeled on Ciudad Juárez) the state no longer functions as the organizing political force, a function which has been superseded by neoliberal capital, in the form of the maquiladoras. This erasure of political power is made manifest in the catalogue's ritualized and highly-specific descriptions of corpses, and I argue that with each description we return to that moment symbolized by Polyneices's corpse in *Antigone*, where Creon's act of sovereign desubjectification is both actualized and contested by Antigone. Using Jacques Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible, I will show how the "accounting" of the dead achieved by the catalogue simultaneously speaks to the "miscount" (the way the maquiladora workers are not included within the count of the human) on which the neoliberal political order (or

* In fact, these genealogies were so invested in the generation of meaning for local communities that powerful families would bribe traveling poets to insert their family names into the genealogies of heroes (West 8, 11).

disorder) is founded. The difference between Merino's list of names and Bolaño's catalogue give us a way of thinking about the difference between the two regimes of visibility and (ac)counting constructed through each representation. Rancière's theory of aesthetics as politics and politics as aesthetics proves helpful, and will be drawn upon in my reading of the catalogue in chapter three. The theory, elaborated in works such as *Mésentente* and *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, argues that politics is at its core the crafting and framing of the space in which different political identities arise; politics only happens in certain circumstances ("Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part." (*Dis-agreement* 11)), and in other circumstances, there is simply domination or disorder. But when there is politics it does not revolve around the battle between the rich and the poor, because such social division is "the constitutive wrong or torsion of politics as such. The party of the poor embodies nothing other than politics itself as the setting-up of a part of those who have no part" (14). The poor are the result of a miscount, a wrong, in that they form a part of the community in which they have no part.

The political order is set up in part as a way of hiding the fact of the void behind politics, that no social order is to be found in nature and thus that any order is a contingent one ("the foundation of politics is... the lack of a foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order. Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society" (*Dis-agreement* 16)). Maintaining the appearance of necessity, rather than contingency, is vital to the survival of the political order. Thus aesthetics can play a role insofar as it provides alternative modes of accounting for who is countable within politics, who is capable of being a subject.

Aesthetics can disrupt the “partition of the sensible” both by proposing alternatives and by revealing the contingency of the current order: “artistic practices take part in the partition of the perceptible insofar as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular” (“The Politics of Aesthetics”).

My contention is that the catalogue in *2666* performs precisely this kind of disruption vis-à-vis the neoliberal political order in Santa Teresa. It does so through its militant egalitarianism in its textual descriptions of the corpses, a treatment which might be mistaken for a mechanical documentary representation, but whose claim for the equality of the murdered maquiladora workers as subjects resonates strongly in an overall reading of the catalogue. At the same time, as my reading will show, the catalogue insists equally both on continuing to render an account of the victims and on its continual failure to adequately render such an account – it does not aspire to a state of documentary totality.

The installations and visual art of Jaar continue this effort of disrupting the dominant partition of the sensible through a reconfiguration of discourses of truth, most specifically the documentary photograph and the identity document. Jaar undermines the expectations and norms of documentary, and in doing so redirects the viewer’s gaze onto the form of the document and on their own role in the documentary experience. Like the New Social Documentary movement of the 1980’s, Jaar views documentary photography as both tainted in its traditional implementation and past usages (as “victim photography” as Martha Rosler once put it) yet still latent with the capacity to teach us new ways of seeing when deployed in a carefully contextualized way, or in interesting juxtapositions

with textual material or other forms. This is of particular importance considering that the subject of his works is precisely those marginalized subjects who most resist (and sometimes most attract) photographic representation: victims of genocide, Vietnamese boat people, marginalized populations, mining workers, economic migrants and others. Jaar's carefully forecloses our documentary access to these subjects, but by extending in space and time that foreclosure and dramatizing it, he shifts the vanishing point of representation to include both the viewer and the viewed within the same field, however briefly. The viewer experiences the other as an excess, that which irrevocably escapes the frame of representation, but even that escape is a relation which can be built upon to fulfill partially the traditional imperative of documentary work, that of raising awareness of distant situations.

Though Jaar left Chile in 1981, his work can be seen as building on the use of photographs during and after the Southern Cone dictatorships, especially the way identity photographs were employed by relatives of the disappeared. In Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a collective of women who shared in common the kidnapping of their adult children by the state, mobilized the use of both family photographs and identity photographs as a way of protesting these state crimes. "The Mothers inaugurated a prolific genealogy for the public use of photography in the struggle of the human rights movement against the official denial of the killings" (Longoni 6). This public use of photography is predicated on the play of appearance and disappearance; the display of photographs both reflects back on the subject's actual existence and on the fact of their disappearance. The Mothers' display of family photographs undermined the claims of the state that these men and women were subverting the public order and thus a threat to the

nation. But the photographs drawn from identity documents had additional ramifications, as Ana Longoni notes:

[the use of identity photographs had] the unexpected effect of interpolating the very state that ordered the disappearances, for it was the same state that had earlier fulfilled an identifying function, registering those individuals whose disappearance was later arranged and whose existence was now denied. The fact that the relatives used those photographs as evidence served to reveal and dramatise the paradoxical overlap between the state's control machinery and the state's machinery for the extermination and disappearance of its subjects, between identification and destruction, control and denial. (7)

These photographs not only insist on the visibility of the victims of state violence as capable and equal subjects, the cumulative effect is a delegitimization of the state's claims to registering identity. And if the state cannot control identity, then it has lost control of the political field. Rancière, who has written on Jaar's work, is again useful here for thinking through the consequences of this loss of control of the realm of the visible, of the means by which the political field is crafted and framed (the "delimitation of space and time, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 13)). Confronted with these identity photographs, issued by the state, and the conflicting fact of the state's disappearance and murder of these same citizens, the public glimpses the contingency of the political order, the void on which the political is founded (again, Rancière: "the sudden revelation of the ultimate *anarchy* on which any hierarchy rests" (*Dis-agreement* 16)). This simultaneous invocation of both existence and disappearance, and the disruptive effect it has on structures of legitimation and political power, carries over into the work Jaar does.

In Chile, a similar employment and undermining of the value and place of identity photographs is performed through the art of Eugenio Dittborn. Jaar's oeuvre can be seen

as an extension and development of the tactic underlying Dittborn's Aeropostal paintings, and their deployment of state-issued identity photographs in an aesthetic context. Jaar offers a sustained engagement along this line of subverting the discourse of truth encoded in documentary forms, and carries it over into contexts that are both outside of Latin American experience and yet still reflective of it. Through these interventions, the documentary mode can begin to circulate outside of the structure of power, becoming one form among others; the documentary apparatus is divorced from the ideology which traditionally sustains the validity of the documentary mode or form.

An inoperative or suspended documentation takes place when the gesture of documenting is estranged up from its typical context. This appropriative and gestural logic is what constitutes the documentary aesthetic. Through the documentary aesthetic, the photograph or the document becomes a self-aware gesture toward the limits of representation rather than an unthinking indication of a distant reality existing outside its frame. The "gesture" as such is the figure par excellence of an insufficient representation since its very condition is insufficiency and incompleteness (the gesture is never fulfilled or completed but neither does it dwell under the expectation of fulfillment and completeness). The documentary aesthetic always points to back to the insufficiency which is its condition.

This experience of incapacity and insufficiency opens us up to an imagining of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the inoperative community. Nancy's notion of community does not claim itself as a collectivity of subjects, whether divided or not, visible or invisible, having a part or not – it "exceeds the resources of the metaphysics of the subject" (*The Inoperative Community* 14). The model for his idea of community is not

communion of individuals, but a sharing that takes place through a common exposure to finitude. “A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth... It is the presentation of the finitude and irredeemable excess that make up finite being” (15). This finitude or singularity is not simply shared but *produced* through this sharing:

A singular being does not emerge or rise up against the background of a chaotic, undifferentiated identity of beings... A singular being *appears*, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the *same* singularity that is, as such, always *other*, always shared, always exposed... Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being (27-28)

At the same that such “co-appearing” (*com-parait*) generates the inoperative community, it also describes communication which “consists before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (*com-parution*) of finitude” (29). In being exposed to the limit of being, to our own exteriority to our selves (as singularities not as individuals) we simultaneously touch upon the limit of an other singular being. The inoperative community does not perform a work or aim for a goal (otherwise it would not be inoperative) but it is coterminous with this act of communication or compearance which is a “mutual interpellation of singularities.” Though Rancière and Nancy are both invested in the idea of how a subject appears within a political field or how a singularity is recognized, this idea of a co-constitution is particular to Nancy, and is helpful in conceptualizing a relationship between a subject and an other that is neither reductive nor imperialist.

This leads to the question of what role, then, is there for the political and the aesthetic in this idea of community which is so different from a “society” of individual subjects? Nancy writes that

“Political” would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication... a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing. To attain such a signification of the “political”... implies being already

engaged in the community, that is to say, undergoing, in whatever manner, the experience of community as communication: it implies writing. We must not stop writing, or letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself. (40-41)

As with Rancière, the political and aesthetic have a shared constitution, even if they open out into different directions. It is important to recognize, however, that when Nancy refers to writing he means something different from writing as representation or transmission: “what communication writes, what writing communicates, is in no way a truth possessed, appropriated or transmitted—even though it is, absolutely, the truth of being-in-common” (40). It is along these lines that I argue that the documentary aesthetic produces a limit-experience that “exposes us to our finitude”; we confront our own exteriority to ourselves through the “unframing” of the other in the documentary (the projection of the other onto the exterior of the documentary frame, as an unrepresentable excess).

Though I discuss very different texts and artworks, my conclusion does share an affinity with what Lazzara has to say about memory texts. Lazzara concludes his discussion of the role of more “literary” or “open” memory texts in post-dictatorship Chile by giving literature the function of placing us “*in relation to the void*; it permits us to probe silences and examine our very ability to know” (156; emphasis in the original). This might be true, but it also true that literature is not exempt from the void, nor does it save us entirely from it. Similarly, where traditional documentary seeks to orient us, the documentary aesthetic scrambles the coordinates by which we seek to place ourselves and others. This failure to orient us, whether in relation to the void or in relation to others, is part of literature’s critical negative power, and forms a powerful undercurrent in Bolaño’s work. In discussing the role literature plays in Bolaño’s work (and it is

commonly interpreted to be in decline or failing outright) Rory O'Bryen says that "Poetry will not *lose* its power but instead become a 'non-power': a way of seeing which, while ostensibly marked by defeat, will continue to carry within it a critical negativity that tugs forever at the ankles of power, inhabiting that power in its interstices and haunting it from within" (13).

A defeat that is not a defeat. The same can be said for the documentary aesthetics' relation to traditional documentary work. Documentary photography as traditionally implemented, although well-meaning in its ameliorative intent to bridge social, political, and international divisions, because of its form (which implied subjects and objects on opposite sides of a dividing line) ended up perpetuating and recreating divisions. Documentary aesthetic gives up that intent, but that acknowledgment of failure and of the unbridgeable abyss beyond and within the documentary frame, also allows for a recognition of a common state of exposure and finitude.

Chapter Two: The Encyclopedia and The Story: Political and Literary Identity in Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante* and *La literatura nazi en América*

Roberto Bolaño's novella *Estrella distante* (1996) stages different possible relationships between art and politics and this chapter investigates two principal forms in which this relationship takes place. The first such relationship is the one attempted by the Chilean Air Force pilot Carlos Wieder through his skywritings and photographs of victims of the Chilean military. Wieder's works seek to interpellate forcefully a national community and provide the cultural revolution which would be the aesthetic parallel to the political upheaval of the Chile's military coup in 1973. His artwork, and the intentionality which animates it, depends on certain notions of community (as homogenous, as transcendent) and art (as immediate and nonmaterial, as capable of expressing a totality and of subsuming death within it). The novella depicts both the development and exposition of Wieder's art and the way it falters in achieving its goals.

A second relationship between art and politics is to be found in the reaction to Wieder's art as embodied in the aesthetic of the novella itself and its mapping of the relations between the victims and survivors of the coup. This aesthetic is also developed in response to the form of *Estrella distante*'s sister-work, *La literatura nazi en América*, published in the same year. The latter work takes the form of an encyclopedia or anthology of writers with fascist tendencies and ideologies in the Americas. The anthology begins each entry with biographical data much like a real one and is replete

with three different appendices that provide an exhaustive index of the writers and works covered by the anthology. The entire story of *Estrella distante* is to be found in the last entry of this fake anthology, but there are significant changes between the two versions which will be explored in depth.

This second relationship presents us with a different view of how politics and art interact, but more importantly, with a vision of community and identity that valorizes the possible and the lost as much as the actual and the historical. Such a vision is made necessary by the fracturing force of the coup within the realm of the social and the historical. This is not the transcendent community imagined by Wieder, but a community that can sustain and work through absence and loss, and which understands individuals of the community as identified not merely by who they are, but by their lost possible lives and by their relations (whether imaginary, real or even simply literary) with others. This vision thus also stands in opposition to the documentary view expressed in the anthology of *La literatura nazi en América* which reduces a person's identity to their biographical and historical circumstances.

An emphasis is placed in this second relationship on the importance of stories and of storytelling itself as the means by which we can understand the relations between people and thus understand those people themselves. No story is unrelated to the other or to another, and thus there can be no easy cataloguing of names, dates, and texts as there is in the fake anthology. My contention is that this idea (of the story as a binding between people but also as the differential basis of identity) is an expression of what is at stake in the literary as such: the figuration of absence or otherness as a limit. In this definition I am drawing on Brett Levinson's sense of poiesis as

the creation of a language for the boundary or intersection between domains of sense, hence for the limit of established meanings, forms of knowledge, and signifiers... no such common sense can capture or account for the line of demarcation which opens it to contamination by another sense or community, but which at the same time defines it. This, rather, is the charge of literature: the invention of an articulation for the relationality of beings which no existing semiotics or common sense can supply. (*Ends* 26)

The literary as understood here figures the border between presence and absence, identity and difference, the common and that which exceeds its borders, and it serves as the basis for understanding the “literary” community’s sense of identity that evolves within *Estrella distante*; and as a result, it places in doubt the capacity of the anthology in *La literatura nazi en América* to conceptualize the limit or border of identity.

In *Estrella distante* a Chilean Air Force pilot by the name of Carlos Wieder goes undercover in the months leading up to the 1973 coup, adopting the pseudonym of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, and joining two poetry workshops in the city of Concepción. Wieder befriends the most popular girls in the workshops, the twin sisters Verónica and Angélica Garmendia, but stays aloof from the men in the workshops. At the moment of the coup, Wieder sheds his false identity and proceeds to kidnap and kill these same twins and other women in the city. He later rises to become a figure of national prominence when he begins to perform skywritings with his Air Force plane all over Chile. The skywritings at first quote passages from Genesis in Latin concerning the creation of the world, intending to link that founding moment and its absolute divisions of day and night, land and sky, with the new order inaugurated by the coup. In other performances he writes obscure *lettriste*-like poetry which refers cryptically to the murder of the Garmendia sisters; in his last show his verses revolve around the idea of “La muerte” as the passageway to a better future for the nation.

His meteoric rise as a “poet” of the skies comes to an abrupt end when he hosts a photography exhibition that is shut down by the authorities. The photographs in the exhibition alarm his military superiors because they depict numerous women tortured and killed by Wieder. Afterwards Wieder is expelled from the military, fades into obscurity, and eventually goes into exile. He adopts various pseudonyms and contributes poems and articles on poetry to far-right magazines. During the time of the transition in the early 1990’s, after the end of the dictatorship, his name is brought up at trials as a suspected torturer and murderer, but he is never actually tracked down or prosecuted. His eventual fate is not discovered until the end of the novella.

The story of Wieder’s exile is interwoven with the stories of the poetry workshop leaders, Juan Stein and Diego Soto, who are forced to flee and hide after the coup. The three characters melt away into the weeds of history, their fates seemingly lost in a blur of myths, obscurity, disappearance, and loss. The stories of Stein and Soto are an addition that makes up the bulk of the quantitative difference between the version of the story we first read in the last chapter of *La literatura nazi en América* and what we read in *Estrella distante*. It is not inconsequential that in *La literatura nazi*, it is the entry describing Wieder (in that version known as Carlos Ramírez Hoffman) where the anthologist begins to lose his footing and the careful ordering of the fascist writers begins to unravel. Just as the encyclopedic humanism of the anthologist cannot grasp hold of Wieder, so Stein and Soto’s stories escape easy categorization. The difficulty with which these three identities are documented (in his amorphousness, Wieder sheds identities and pseudonyms left and right; Stein and Soto’s identities are fractured from within because of the coup) offers us

an opening to see the limits of a purely biographical and historical understanding of identity.

The novella is narrated from the perspective of one of the participants in the workshops from the time before the coup, a young poet who had fallen in love with the Garmendia sisters, only to see them swept off their feet by the taciturn yet debonair Ruiz-Tagle. After the coup he and his friend Bibiano O’Ryan are left to put together the pieces of what happened to the Garmendia sisters and the other women from the workshops who were also disappeared. They finally connect Ruiz-Tagle with the figure of Wieder through photographs and video provided by news coverage of the skywritings, and the realization of the depth of their deception dawns on them. After the narrator leaves Chile, their private epistolary correspondence becomes an extension, and survival, of the workshop atmosphere with which the novella opens. Bibiano remains in Chile and persists in his inquiry into the identity and whereabouts of Wieder, and also attempts to keep track of Stein and Soto.

More than two decades later the narrator, now living in Spain, is contacted by a private investigator, Abel Romero, who is looking for Wieder and was told by Bibiano to contact the narrator. In the intervening years Bibiano has grown even more obsessed with tracking Wieder and keeps tabs on him by visiting an archive in the Biblioteca Nacional where Wieder’s father stores his writings, but never manages to locate Wieder precisely. Bibiano does, however, publish a book, *El nuevo retorno de los brujos*, which recounts the exploits of fascist literary movements in the Southern Cone between 1972 and 1989. In the book, he dedicates the longest chapter to a retelling of Wieder’s story. Bibiano’s

book is, of course, a mirror-image of Bolaño's own Borgesian, fictional encyclopedia of fascist writers in North and South America, *La literatura nazi en América*.

The presence of this metafictional playfulness returns us back to the principal relations between art and politics mentioned at the outset of this chapter. As I said there, the novella stages various possible relations between art and politics which are colored by the cataclysm of the coup and the subsequent disintegration of democratic structures and free expression. The figure of Wieder offers one such staging: his art calls to mind some of the tactics associated with the Chilean neovanguardia in the 70's and 80's, as will be seen shortly, but combined with the discourse and political outlook of the regime; the aim of these performances was to interpellate a pure community from post-coup Chilean society. In the narrator's rendering of the stories of Stein and Soto we see the beginning of the reconstruction of a broken community, but a reconstruction done in a literary manner and as a result of a communal effort reminiscent of the work done in the literary workshops (Bibiano's and the narrator's epistolary correspondence builds the groundwork for this effort). The image of the community and individuals which results is incomplete, partial, fragmented, uncertain, but for all those reasons also a more accurate portrayal of the roles of loss and possibility within the communal and individual identity. This perspective on identity is also manifested at the level of the narrative itself, which functions as a "mirror and explosion" of the encyclopedia from which it originally emerged and thus performs a deconstruction of humanistic ways of knowing and being. This deconstructive gesture largely appears in the relations between the interpolated stories of the poetry workshop leaders, which split and double their identities in ways that

elude the historical specificity and biographical precision that an encyclopedic epistemology seeks to fashion.

Art Interpellating the Community

The character Wieder is complicated by the fact that he does not just represent the regime and its use of spectacle and Manichean discourse to create a façade around its violent core. By constructing a character whose dream of the “New Chilean poetry” includes skywritings, Bolaño overtly refers to the work of Raúl Zurita, a poet and artist associated with the Chilean neovanguardia in the 70’s and 80’s who performed skywritings over New York, similar to Wieder’s performances in tone, style, and in its allusions to the Bible, among other art actions.* The neovanguardia or the “escena de avanzada,” composed of artists such as Zurita, Diamela Eltit, Eugenio Dittborn, Carlos Leppe, and Lotty Rosenfeld, continually sought to work with new forms of art that would break with establishment art and that would help to mold new solidarities between artists, the poor and the working class.† The actions and the interventions of the neovanguardia were firmly rooted in the desire to raise social awareness and to combat the official discourse of the regime. But as an avant-garde that came rather late in the history of avant-gardes, the neovanguardia also had to contend with a large inheritance, mainly European, and with the rise of deconstruction, which began to put into question the strident oppositionality so attached to previous manifestations of the avant-garde. With these concerns weighing heavily, the neovanguardia’s manifestations became more and

* Photographs of Zurita’s skywritings are printed in his book *Anteparaiso*.

† Nelly Richard became a principal theorist of the movement with her articles in the 80’s.

more fragmented and abstract, and less oriented to constructing social and political coalitions or carrying out a programmatic agenda (Richard, *Insubordination* 28).

That Zurita's skywritings are co-opted in *Estrella distante* by a character associated with the absolute brutality of the regime suggests a critique of the neovanguardia that highlights the capacity for their experimental gestures and art actions to be coopted by an ideology fundamentally opposed to that of the neovanguardia.* As an exile Bolaño did not necessarily share many of the same concerns as the writers and artists who stayed in Chile and had to contend with issues of censorship and with the regime's deployment of a firm narrative that positioned a clear distinction between "good" and evil," "order" and "anarchy," "center" and "margin." Such distinctions and the moral dichotomy that underlay them had a profound impact on the thinking of cultural workers searching for a place from which to speak that would not collude with this discourse. For them the question of narrativity and the place of enunciation was a profound one with undercurrents that led to questions of history, teleology, and progress. Their engagement with the thought of Walter Benjamin demonstrates their worries about inadvertently falling into the regime's representations of history. In response to this distrust of oppositional or linear discourse, the neovanguardia's sought ever more radical forms of expression.

[The artists of the *avanzada*] frequently employed techniques such as fragmentation, montage, and collage as ways of contravening the dictatorial state's rigid surveillance of language. Contrary to Pinochet's discourse of "order," coherence, and intelligibility, the *avanzada* rebelled against hegemonic discursive

* For a thorough reading of the significance of Bolaño's references to the "escena de avanzada" in both *Estrella distante* and *La literatura nazi en América*, see Ina Jennerhahn's "Escritos en los cielos y fotografías del infierno. Las 'acciones de arte' de Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, según Roberto Bolaño." For an interpretation of the specific allusions to Zurita, see Gareth Williams' "Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño."

configurations and focused instead on those marginalized subjects and fragments of experience that fell outside the scope of the regime's official line. (Lazzara 43)

But following this direction also led to accusations of obscurantism, a charge worsened by the fact that the neovanguardia desired to reach out to sectors of the population unschooled in art.*

Again, Bolaño enters into this debate as an exile and thus as someone with a different set of concerns both during the time of the *avanzada's* heyday and later. Bolaño has commented more directly on Zurita's work and his judgment is less than wholly favorable. His ambivalence toward Zurita is palpable in one essay:

Zurita crea una obra magnífica, que descuella entre los de su generación y que marca un punto de no retorno con la poética de la generación precedente, pero su escatología, su mesianismo, son también los puntales de un mausoleo o de una pira funeraria hacia la que se encaminaron, en los años ochenta, casi todos los poetas chilenos. Ese *dolce stil novo* pretendió ser renovador y épico y en algunos aspectos lo fue, aunque sus flecos fueron amargos y patéticos. (*Entre paréntesis* 88-89)[†]

Zurita's greatest accomplishment, in Bolaño's estimation, is to have served as a clear waypoint between generations, even though aspects of his work did not escape the

* The quandary in which the neovanguardia found itself, and its response to the situation, would occasionally elicit a reaction of wry amusement from Bolaño, as can be read in the essay in which he recounts a dinner he had in the 90's, during the time of the return to democracy, at the house of Diamela Eltit, one of the most well-known figures of the neovanguardia. The account is mostly one of befuddlement at Eltit's living arrangement with a government minister (the spokesperson of the government, in fact). The anecdote that ends the essay recounts the true story of a couple who held literary salons or workshops in their home during the dictatorship, despite the fact that the husband worked for the C.I.A. and tortured prisoners at the behest of the Chilean intelligence agency in the basement of the house even while the salons were in session. The anecdote appears in fictional form in a pivotal passage of Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile*, and it serves as a powerful indictment of the potential collusion between political terror and the cultural actors who purport to act as a resistance to such terror through their work. The proximity of the telling of this anecdote to the story of the dinner at Eltit's house does not appear to be accidental, and the fact that Eltit was also living with a government official (like the couple in *Nocturno*) provokes the reader into comparisons between the dinner during the time of consensus and the salon during the dictatorship, and reads like an indictment of the neovanguardia. The essay managed to stir up a certain amount of controversy in Chile (*Entre paréntesis* 9).

[†] "Zurita creates a magnificent body of work, that distinguishes itself from others of his generation and marks a point of no return with respect to the poetry of the previous generation, but his eschatology, his messianism, are also the props for a mausoleum or funeral pyre toward which almost all the Chilean poets of the eighties marched. That *dolce stil novo* [sweet new style] pretended to be reinvigorating and epic and in some aspects it was, but its fringes were bitter and pathetic." (my translation)

“mausoleum” or “funeral pyre” into which many of the Chilean poets of the 80’s apparently entered. This statement of praise is ambiguous at best.

Doubts about the neovanguardia extend further, however, than what might be encompassed in Bolaño’s brief remarks on Zurita in an interview and his association of Zurita with the character of Wieder, nor has Bolaño been the only one to question the movement. In reviewing the work and impact of the neovanguardia from the perspective of the early 2000’s, two Chilean critics, Nelly Richard and Willy Thayer, debated the extent to which the *escena de avanzada*’s program and formal innovations played an oppositional role in postcoup Chilean society, or whether it inadvertently, through its disruptive and provocative interventions in daily life, subsumed into its own operations the violent logic of disruption contained within the coup itself.* The juxtaposition of Zurita and Wieder should be taken as an extension of this debate on the place and value of the avant-garde in postcoup Chilean society, and its possible overlapping with or echoing of the disruptive nature of the military coup.

The other contemporary reference present in the character of Wieder is the rhetoric of the military regime during the coup and in the years following it. The regime’s ideology was structured around the creation of absolute divisions within society, which the generals of the junta demarcated with semi-divine prescience, including an opposition between the pure “spirituality” that animated the plotters of the coup and the base “materiality” (incarnated in the Allende administration) which had “despoiled” the

* This debate plays out in an exchange across revistas. Thayer’s article “El Golpe como Consumación de la Vanguardia” in *Revista Extremoccidente* No. 2 prompted a response by Nelly Richard in *Revista de Crítica Cultural* entitled “Campo y acontecimiento: la neovanguardia artística chilena de los 80.” A version of exchange is also available in the collection of essays *Arte y Política*, edited by Pablo Oyarzún, Nelly Richard, and Claudia Zaldívar. Thayer’s position is also elaborated in his contribution *Pensar en/la postdictadura* (2001), entitled “Vanguardia, dictadura, globalización.” Gareth Williams offers a brief recap of the debate in “Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño” (135-6).

country before the coup. With this ideological background, we can better understand the disturbing ways in which Wieder's skywritings and photographs invoke death and the body.

The publication of the junta's *Declaration of Principles of the Chilean Government* in March 1974, seven months after the coup, provided an opportunity for the junta to express to the country and to the world its intent in undertaking the coup. The pamphlet was published in four languages and distributed widely to governments, businesses, and academics around the world.* On the domestic level, the *Declaration* laid out the guiding principles of the junta and their vision of the past, present, and future of the country. On an international scale, the *Declaration* was meant to assuage foreign investors and assure them that their investments would be safeguarded and protected. In this respect, the *Declaration* acted as a kind of financial prospectus inviting future investors to consider Chile as a potentially profitable source of investment income.

The bulk of the *Declaration*, though, was directed at the domestic audience, and the junta's vision of the country's history and future, which it presented as originating from an objective, quasi-divine viewpoint. It was in fact a large-scale rewriting of Chile's history along the lines of a very conservative ideology. The text both idealized the country's founding, aligning its greatness closely with its Hispanic heritage, and demonized the country's recent past under the Allende administration. Claiming that they were saving the country from an impending Communist takeover, the generals offered a vision of the future in which a combination of free enterprise, Western values, and the unique "Chilean spirit," would once again lead the country to its deserved greatness and

* See Thomas C. Wright, *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights*, p.53 and p.86.

high standing among the Westernized and European countries of the world. While embracing free enterprise, however, the generals also simultaneously disparaged consumer societies, citing rampant materialism (ironically) as the source of the movement within Chile toward socialism.

Despite the contradictions inherent in the ideological and socioeconomic positions of the *Declaration* (desiring equally the profitable dynamic upheaval of capitalism and foreign investment, the avoidance of rampant consumerism, and the putative stability of an idealized Chilean spirit of traditional values), the *Declaration* nevertheless presented itself as a studious consideration of the country's needs that marked out the way forward to "make Chile a nation of owners, not proletariats." And in spite of the fact that the coup was undertaken by a small cabal of generals in the military, the *Declaration* is careful to paint the work that lies ahead as a "gran tarea colectiva" (7).

Analysis of the rhetoric and general language of the *Declaration* reveals, however, perhaps more of the ideology that animated the junta's motivations than the junta wished to disclose. Two strands in particular are to be remarked upon: the spiritualism of the text, its careful avoidance of considering the role of labor and the material basis of the economy; and secondly a profound dependence on constructing absolute divisions within society from a suprasocial perspective uniquely inhabited by the generals of the junta. Concerning the former strand, Hernán Vidal's analysis of the *Declaration* laid bare the multiple ways in which the text founds its idealist vision on a resolute avoidance of the body. In his analysis, Vidal notes the ways in which the *Declaration* obscures and overlooks the corporeality of the body in favor of emphasizing the high-minded ideals which guided and inspired the coup's plotters (Vidal 106). By

eliding any mention of the corporeality of the body, the junta both obscures its own torture of human bodies and frees itself to idealize and pursue Western notions of the human body, and by extension the Westernized body-as-nation, without reference to the specific historical and social conditions of Chilean bodies – erasing the material body performs an elision of material conditions and of local history itself.

The spiritualism of the *Declaration*, Vidal remarks, is situated within a Christian-like history of fall and redemption. In the document's view, the socialist-leaning government of Allende pushed the country to the brink of a Communist revolution, an outcome only avoided by the self-sacrifice of the military which stepped out of its bounds for the benefit of the country. In this attachment to a spiritual and metaphorical view of social relations, and the delineation of a history of disgrace and decline infused by Christian theology, we can see an approximation to the highly allegorical nature of the text of Wieder's skywritings and its representations of new beginnings made possible by self-sacrifice and the passage through a purifying encounter with "Death." It makes sense, then, that these skywritings are endorsed by the regime in the novella, as they share a common avoidance of the corporeal and of the local. Likewise, it becomes clear why the photography exhibition, which ultimately results in Wieder's dismissal from the military, will be so anathema to the regime: because it visualizes precisely what the regime's *Declaration* seeks to hide, the nationwide repression and depoliticization of the social body through the torture and disappearance of individuals.

For Vidal, what is remarkable about the avoidance within the *Declaration* of the corporeal and thus of the material is not just the fact that it reveals an important facet of the regime's ideology; it also provides an opening for literature to resist the regime by

concentrating on the body. He cites two texts, *Tejas Verdes* (1974) by Hernán Valdés, an autobiographical account of Valdés' two-month long detention in a concentration camp in early 1974, and *En este lugar sagrado* (1977) by Poli Délano, (a work of fiction in which the protagonist escapes the first round-up of prisoners by the military just before the coup because he accidentally locks himself inside a public bathroom), whose foregrounding of the body and its corporeal functions acts as a counterweight to the erasure of the body in the *Declaration* and allows for the emergence of a materialist ethics and poetics.* Valdés' memoir forswears any meditation on the human spirit or condition, a normal expectation in the "Liberal" genre of the prisoner's memoir. Instead, he grounds his ethical and political commitment on a direct and frontal communication of the bodily experience of the camp. In Vidal's Marxist-inflected view, through a metonymic operation the emphasis on the body's corporeality leads the reader to a correct view of the materialism which is the true engine of reality in contrast to the idealism espoused by the regime.

Vidal's heavy-handed deployment of Marxist categories notwithstanding, his reading does provide a way for understanding what happens in the wake of Wieder's photography exhibition. Wieder's photographs of tortured female bodies inadvertently activate the potential for resistance to the regime which resides in representations of actual bodies, thus the almost allergic response of the military in shutting down his exhibition immediately. But there is more to the figure of Wieder and his artwork than this interpretation would lead us to believe, as a closer reading of the skywriting performances and the photograph exhibition reveals.

* Interestingly, the plot device of escaping a military crackdown through a fortuitous visit to the restroom recurs in Bolaño's *Amuleto*.

Wieder's skywritings and photographs are notable for their striking fixation, both allegorically and literally, on death, and for their inability to represent and utilize death in the way that he would clearly like them to. Wieder's skywritings alternate between citing Biblical passages in Latin and verses of his own making which center on death. The Biblical language of commandment from Genesis, whose content concerns what comes before life, leads into poetic verses which reduce everything to "la muerte." This reduction attempts to reshape the character of the nation to the ideological perspective of the junta by subsuming all qualities to the blank slate of death. The photographs of the private exhibition in Wieder's bedroom similarly revolve around a reduction to death, in this case the visual depiction of women in a state close to death or actually dead after prolonged torture. To the ire of the regime, the photographs make clear exactly how the junta enforces its power on the population. But Wieder's intent is not denunciatory, but rather the opposite, verging on the celebratory. His desire, though it remains enigmatic, appears to be the mobilization of his fellow Air Force officers in the cult of death he is promoting as the way forward for the nation to become a pure and whole community.

The fascination with the representation of death, both in the skywritings and the photographs, manifests the desire to give death meaning and to speak from a position that transcends everyday politics, i.e. with the voice of an all-creating God. Death is made to signify in a form that could galvanize the national community around the military's project of achieving communal immanence. This contrasts sharply, for instance, with the photographic work of Eugenio Dittborn, which employed identity photographs precisely to reveal the contingent nature of photography, rendering identity documents as something others could manipulate and thus not solely the prerogative of the government.

This approach denies any notion of a photograph, whether taken by the government or not, as inhabiting a non-embodied, transcendent viewpoint. Wieder, however, is interested in pursuing this view of art both in his skywritings and in his photography – both forms need to be seen as being nonmaterial and emerging from an unearthly perspective.

Wieder's art unfolds in two dimensions: public (the skywriting over the city of Santiago and elsewhere in the country) and private (the photography exhibition in the bedroom of his apartment) and thus expresses a desire to appeal simultaneously to the masses and to the elite.* In both aspects his work involves an exposure to representation that is forced upon an unsuspecting audience: written words composed of smoke in the skies over a city, and photographs in a bedroom to which the audience is admitted one at a time without knowing what the content of the photographs will reveal. At one point Wieder himself smugly notes the symmetry of these appositions (“[Wieder] Dijo que después de la escritura en el cielo era adecuado – y además encantadoramente paradójico – que el epílogo de la poesía aérea se circunscribiera al cubil del poeta.” (87)).† These spatial symmetries cast the two works as two sides of the same coin, but each produces vastly different responses. The skywritings are generally embraced with a certain amount of benign amusement from members of the military establishment who witness them, and indifference from the general public.‡ The photographs, on the other hand, produce a

* The public character of the skywritings mimics that of the neovanguardia's art actions in the skies, one of which included the dropping of pamphlets from an airplane.

† He [Wieder] said that after writing in the sky it would be appropriate – as well as charmingly paradoxical – to circumscribe the epilogue to his aerial poem within the bounds of the poet's den (*Distant Star* 78).

‡ The first performance, over a camp of prisoners arrested after the coup, and the prisoners' response to the performance, will be examined separately.

visceral response that leads to the immediate end of Wieder's regime-endorsed political career.

The different formats carve out different kinds of audiences: for the skywriting, the general public of the city who happen to be outside on the streets and watching the sky; for the photography exhibition, a small band of Air Force officers and a small coterie of society people. The former is an uncontrolled and general audience of citizens who happen to be going about their daily business; the latter is very selective:

Las invitaciones... fueron restringidas, selectivas: algunos pilotos, algunos militares jóvenes (el más viejo no llegaba a comandante) y cultos o al menos con fundadas sospechas de serlo, un trío de periodistas, dos artistas plásticos, un viejo poeta de derechas que había sido vanguardista y que tras el Golpe de Estado parecía haber recuperado los ímpetus de su juventud, alguna dama joven y distinguida (que se sepa a la exposición sólo acudió *una* mujer, Tatiana von Beck Iraola) y el padre de Carlos Wieder, que vivía en Viña del Mar y cuya salud era delicada. (86-87)*

In both cases, as is commonly the case with avant-garde art, the performances are forced upon an audience that, with a few exceptions, would be shocked or surprised by the spectacle. In the first iteration of the skywriting performance, taking place in the skies over a prisoner camp in Concepción, the text is written entirely in Latin except for the last word (“APRENDAN” (39)) and the verses come entirely from Genesis.[†] While Latin might be aurally familiar to a population that grew up with masses conducted in the language, reading the language is another question, as is humorously suggested when the

* Naturally the invitations to the party in Providencia were limited to a select group: various pilots and young army officers (the oldest of them had not reached the rank of commander) who could reasonably be supposed to have a certain degree of aesthetic sensibility, a trio of journalists, two artists, an old right-wing, ex-avant-garde poet who seemed to have recovered his youthful vigor since the coup, a young society belle called Tatiana von Beck Iraola (apparently the only woman to attend the exhibition) and Carlos Wieder's father, who lived in Vina del Mar and was in delicate health (*Distant Star* 78-79)

[†] The full text of this first performance reads as follows: “IN PRINCIPIO... CREAVIT DEUS... COELUM ET TERRAM... TERRA AUTEM ERAT INANIS... ET VACUA... ET TENEBRAE ERANT... SUPER FACIEM ABYSSI... ET SPIRITUS DEI... FEREBATUR SUPER AQUAS... DIXITQUE DEUS... FIAT LUX... ET FACT EST LUX... ET VIDIT DEUS... LUCEM QUOD... ESSET BONA... ET DIVISIT... LUCEM A TENEBRIS... APRENDAN” (36-39).

nineteen-year old version of the narrator thinks of the Italian car company upon reading “Fiat lux.” Future performances switch to various Spanish translations of the Bible, perhaps in response to these confusions.

Besides borrowing from scripture, the skywriting performances also emulate Baroque-era Catholicism in seeking to awe and overwhelm the masses, to place them in a position of receivership that allows for no individual agency. In this effort, however, Wieder misreads the public's capacity for attention and awe, and the effect falls flat. People on the street are busily going about their lives, the weather gets in the way, and some viewers mistake the whole performance for a commercial advertisement. Wieder similarly misreads how his photography exhibition will play out with the Air Force officers who form the main group of those who attend the exhibition.

In subsequent airshows Wieder repeats this tactic of using verses from the Bible, but also mixes in other content, including depictions of the Chilean flag (or of just the star from the flag) and disturbing allusions to the women he has kidnapped and killed. Some of the higher-level military observers think the names of the women he writes in the sky belong to girlfriends of his, but others closer to Wieder knew that they were women he had killed (43). The same women will later reappear in the photographs Wieder displays in his apartment. Both the skywritings and the photographs contain a representation of, and exposure to, “death” that is both highly allegorical and very real. The encounter with death is interpreted as a purifying one (in one airshow Wieder calls the women “Aprendices del fuego” (43) but it also has the intent of causing death to signify in intelligible forms, to give death a meaning that would be deployed in the construction of a “pure” national community. The verses that Wieder marks in the skies

of Santiago during his last air show attempt to perform exactly this maneuver, of causing death to act as a signifying space in which a communal identity can be written.

La muerte es amistad.
La muerte es Chile.
La muerte es responsabilidad.
La muerte es amor.
La muerte es crecimiento.
La muerte es comunión.
La muerte es limpieza.
La muerte es mi corazón.
Toma mi corazón.
Carlos Wieder
La muerte es resurrección. (*Estrella distante* 89-91)*

The poem is similar in style to the verses he wrote in a previous flight over the skies of the Antarctic in its simple verb structure and use of absolute terms, and in the series of equivalences that he sets up. Rather than covertly alluding, as he has done in previous airshows, to the women he has tortured and killed as part of the coup, now the emphasis on death becomes allegorical and bland, a receptacle for all the attributes used in each verse. The dull repetition empties “la muerte” of meaning as each new tautology piles up on top of the previous one. The only verses that assume a different sentence form are the third to last and penultimate lines, where the imperative “Toma mi corazón” is followed by the signature of the artist.

Though he is no longer citing the Bible nor speaking of the women he has killed, a logic of self-sacrifice leading to redemption permeates the imagery, most notably in the last verse, but also in the line “La muerte es comunión.” Since they follow his citations from Genesis, these verses are set up as the “next chapter,” so to speak, in the theological text or “conversation” that Wieder is engaging the public with. Wieder positions himself

* Death is friendship. / Death is Chile. / Death is responsibility. / Death is love. / Death is growth. / Death is communion. / Death is cleansing. / Death is my heart. / Take my heart. / Carlos Wieder / Death is resurrection (80-82).

both as the creator God of Genesis, through his earlier citations in the sky, and as the self-sacrificing Christ figure of the New Testament, through the sacrifice of his heart. But if it is Wieder who sacrifices his heart, he is also the one who is later resurrected. The language remains lofty and free of particularity, but the undertone is nevertheless quite clear: a new society is being born, and this transition requires the elimination of certain sectors of society, which have no possibility of “resurrection.” The poem enacts the process of purification and consolidation by emphasizing the purity of the subject (“la muerte”) at the same time as the attributes blur together.

The list of attributes taken together (amistad, Chile, responsabilidad, amor, crecimiento, comunión, limpieza, corazón) form a series that ties together the nation with the moral qualities of a just, utopian community, one that is redeemed through a Christ-like sacrifice. The complicity of the Catholic Church in the coup and the military regime that followed is clearly being invoked here, and Christian imagery and narrative are being deployed as a cover for the mass murders committed in the name of a purification of society.*

That death should serve as the substance that subsumes all modifiers and through which a new national community emerges is not incidental, nor should it be viewed as just one “perversion” out of the many to be expected in the representations of a fascist aesthetic. Rather this choice must be seen in the light of the fact that the space of death and its significance was prime territory in the battle to preserve power in the military dictatorships of Chile, Argentina, and other Latin American countries in the 70’s and 80’s, though there is some daylight here separating the regime’s and Wieder’s approaches

* While at first complacent with the actions of the military, the Church became increasingly critical of the military as the dictatorship became established.

to the issue of death. For the regime what was most important was emptying or whitewashing death of public significance. This attitude pertained both to the deaths that resulted directly from the coup itself (such as the death of President Allende, who did not have a proper burial until 1990) and also the deaths that took place in the concentration camps (such as in the National Stadium). What mattered most was hiding death and preventing remembrance and legacy from sprouting up. For these reasons, disappearance became the preferred method of social control. As Jean Franco put it, “Death was to be not a form of continuity [through martyrdom, family shrines, historical memory] but an extirpation”; the anonymity of death in the concentration camps and the trauma caused by mock executions produced “a devaluation of death and hence of human identity which affect[ed] the whole of society” (Franco, *Critical Passions* 31). Such a “desacralization” of death meant that the regime could use it as an effective means of social control.

Yet later on sectors of the population in the military dictatorships of both Chile and Argentina contested the power of their rulers by engaging them precisely on the grounds of death, through the angle of remembrance and religious burial. As Franco notes, citing Michael Taussig,

[The] space of death (which is the space also of immortality, communal memory, of connection between generations) is particularly important as a site of struggle in the colonized areas of the world... [it] is not, however, only a struggle over the appearance and disappearance of mutilated bodies, but rather a struggle to retrieve the dead, to give them back their names and identities, and restore meaning to those lost lives. (31)

In this struggle mothers and grandmothers occupied an important social position, given the way that the regime’s discourse had structured society in gendered terms. In the regime’s gendered schema, the mothers retained control within the domestic household, while outside of the home the military governed the “children” of society (i.e. the

working class, leftists) (Nelson 29). Eventually, however, the military's many violent incursions into the private world through its strategy of disappearance left it in a position of exposure to criticism, an exposure that many working class mothers organized themselves to take advantage of. As Alice Nelson explains,

At the same time that official discourse had strictly reinforced the separate and gender-associated public and private spheres, the violence employed by agents of the state overtly and systematically violated the boundaries between them. Thus, while the notion of public and private continued to exist as a social construct, the military's agents routinely penetrated homes, bodies, and psyches, politicizing private life. (Nelson 29)

Mothers were able to criticize the regime from a position of relative security (in the beginning, though, they suffered a great deal of repressive force), and they did so in a way that "resacralized the body" and thus death as well (Franco 33). For instance, in Argentina the "mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" demonstrated in the plaza in front of the Presidential palace while holding up photographs of their disappeared children, not as memento mori, but as documents that insisted on their existence despite official denials to the contrary. And in Chile "the major demonstration after the discovery of bodies in Longquén... took the form of a pilgrimage and mass." (Franco 32). In both instances, social actors mobilize personal and religious modes of reclaiming death in order to counter the regime's desire to draw a veil over it.

The regime in real life and Wieder in this novella utilized death in different ways, a difference which is notable in the skywritings and becomes unavoidable in the photography exhibition. Where the regime desacralized and obscured death (and most especially individual acts of murder), Wieder places it front and center, allegorizing it and foregrounding it as the only way through which a new national community can emerge. In the skywritings Wieder both empties death of significance, by ascribing to it

so many qualities, and attempts to charge it with absolute significance, to give it a positive meaning. In doing so, Wieder betrays a different conception of the coming reconfiguration of society he imagined taking place, one rooted in a typical fascist model of a pure community anchored in an essentialist identity. To do so, it must be able to construct an ideology that can account for everything pertaining to that community in absolute terms – including death, which, if it can be assigned meaning, can be used to structure the rest of society. Wieder’s “poem” is exactly this, an attempt to cause death to signify, to unbind it from its inextricable meaninglessness; but what happens is that this meaningless becomes attached to everything, hollowing out all of its attributes in turn.

The poem itself, however, does not acknowledge this failure and inversion of its purpose either in its content or in its form. This disavowal is palpable in the very way that Wieder “performs” the text, using trails of smoke from his plane, under conditions that simultaneously erase the text as it is being written. Frequently the words he spells out vanish quickly or are hard to read because of meteorological conditions, not to mention the fact that his intended audience is often unaware of his performance or too far away to see it. The skywritings, contrary to what Vidal noted in the texts of Valdés and Délano, ignore the material basis of the poem (smoke in the sky) in favor of the spiritual dimension of its power of interpellation (as a divine command or sign descending from the sky). As a result of this failure to account for the material nature of the work, Wieder’s audience is oblivious to his attempt to impose upon them an inscription which would leave them without any possible agency.

Earlier in the novella, the performative angle to Wieder’s work is seen by la Gorda, a woman from the poetry workshops and friend to the narrator and Bibiano who

befriends Ruiz-Tagle (and survives), as his great innovation, what would separate him from other would-be poets. La Gorda is enamored by this fact, that he will perform his poems, not just write them. Yet because there is no acknowledgement or consideration of the material basis of his writings, and thus of its performative nature, it becomes clear that what Wieder truly valorizes about the skywritings is its putative power of interpellation, a mimicry of the divine commandment or sign descending from the heavens.

This insistence on interpellation continues in the photography exhibition, which takes place immediately after his final air show in Santiago. Wieder is methodical in his selective and deliberate disclosure of the photographs: he chooses his rented bedroom as the antithesis of the public and open space of the skies, and carefully selects who is invited to the exhibition. Moreover, he keeps his bedroom locked up, preventing the apartment owner from discovering the true nature of the photographs and reporting Wieder to the authorities. The only description that Wieder gives to the landlord is that the exhibition “se trataba de poesía visual, experimental, quintaesenciada, arte puro, algo que iba a divertirlos a todos” (87).^{*} The impression he gives is that the exhibition will be experimental and visual, potentially even anodyne, and thus a sort of continuation of the airshows which, despite their cryptic allusions, proved to be not all that provocative to the general public. What he means by “arte puro” is unclear, whether it is pure in the sense of a “wholesome” art or pure in the sense of breaking with the supposed compromises of traditional art.

^{*} “concerned visual, experimental, quintessential poetry, pure art, something that would entertain everyone” (my translation)

At some point in the evening, Wieder has the attendants at the party line up in single file to gain admittance to the bedroom; he shouts out jokingly, “Uno por uno, señores, el arte de Chile no admite aglomeraciones” (93), a statement that makes the exclusive exhibition appear to be the hidden “truth” of the skywritings, which had been directed at the public at large, and clearly here he is no longer interested in mobilizing the masses (or immobilizing them, as it were, by having them gawk up at the sky).^{*} The first person to enter is also the only woman in attendance at the party, Tatiana von Beck Iraola. She exits but a minute later, briefly stares angrily at Wieder, and vomits before she can get to the bathroom. She leaves the party and the other attendants assume, in a misogynist manner, that she was merely drunk, not that there was something severely wrong with the exhibition. Her exit means that only men are left in attendance, and the comments of the partygoers betray a homophobic sense of nervousness that this is the case.

The next person in line enters the bedroom, shuts the door and stays in there for a long period of time. The orderliness of the event unravels shortly afterward as Wieder’s father passes to the front of the line and enters the room, followed by the owner of the apartment. The latter then quickly exits and wordlessly confronts Wieder, grabbing at his lapels. Interestingly, no one is able to verbalize their disgust or their outrage in response to viewing the photographs.

Curious, the rest of the people in line proceed to enter the room, which they discover to be set up as a normal bedroom, with no special lighting for the exhibition. On the walls and ceiling are hundreds of photographs described by Muñoz Cano:

^{*} One at a time gentlemen; the art of Chile is not for herds. (84)

Según Muñoz Cano, en algunas de las fotos reconoció a las hermanas Garmendia y a otros desaparecidos. La mayoría eran mujeres. El escenario de las fotos casi no variaba de una a otra por lo que deduce es el mismo lugar. Las mujeres parecen maniqués, en algunos casos maniqués desmembrados, destrozados, aunque Muñoz Cano no descarta que en un treinta por ciento de los casos estuvieran vivas en el momento de hacerles la instantánea. Las fotos, en general (según Muñoz Cano), son de mala calidad aunque la impresión que provocan en quienes las contemplan es vivísima. El orden en que están expuestas no es casual: siguen una línea, una argumentación, una historia (cronológica, espiritual...), un plan. Las que están pegadas en el cielorraso son semejantes (según Muñoz Cano) al infierno, pero un infierno vacío. Las que están pegadas (con chinchetas) en las cuatro esquinas semejan una epifanía. Una epifanía de la locura. En otros grupos de fotos predomina un tono elegiaco (¿pero cómo puede haber *nostalgia* y *melancolía* en esas fotos?, se pregunta Muñoz Cano). Los símbolos son escasos pero elocuentes. La foto de la portada de un libro de François-Xavier Maistre (el hermano menor de Joseph de Maistre): *Las veladas de San Petersburgo*. La foto de la foto de una joven rubia que parece desvanecerse en el aire. La foto de un dedo cortado, tirado en el suelo gris, poroso, de cemento. (97-98)*

Clearly these photographs were taken while Wieder and his men went about their covert operations of sequestrations, interrogations, and sessions of torture and murder. As such they are images of a masculine state power made visible by its actions on female bodies. These actions are so violent and distorting that they begin to turn flesh into its semblance: the bodies begin to look like their simulation, mannequins. The photographs are repetitive, of poor quality, and they vaguely suggest a visual sphere marked by Christian iconography. According to Muñoz Cano some pictures evoke hell (though “empty”) and

* Muñoz Cano claims to have recognized the photos. Most of them were women. The background hardly varied from one photo to another, so it seemed they had all been taken in the same place. The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures, although Muñoz Cano could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken. In general (according to Muñoz Cano) the photos were of poor quality, although they made an extremely vivid impression on all who saw them. The order in which they were exhibited was not haphazard: there was a progression, an argument, a story (literal and allegorical), a plan. The images stuck to the ceiling (says Muñoz Cano) depicted a kind of hell, but empty. Those pinned up in the four corners seemed to be an epiphany. An epiphany of madness. In other groups of photos the dominant mood was elegiac (but how asks Muñoz Cano, could there be anything “nostalgic” or “melancholy” about them?) The symbols were few but telling. A photo showing the cover of a book by Joseph de Maistre: *St. Petersburg Dialogues*. A photo of a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement. (88-89) (Note that the English mistranslates the second to last sentence, which should read: “A photo of a photo of a young blond woman...” (emphasis mine))

other pictures assimilate an epiphany “de la locura.”* As with the skywritings, a divine image or message is being transmitted from above (the pictures that give an impression of hell are stuck to the ceiling), though here an inversion takes place since hell is usually located below. If hell is empty, it is because it has invaded the temporal world, a step prior to Wieder’s expected resurrection of a new world order that is nevertheless grounded in an idealized vision of Chile’s past. The epiphany of “madness” is equally fitting in this context of an inversion of the temporal and the divine. The references to the Maistre brothers is in keeping with Wieder’s ideology since the two were counter-revolutionaries who thought it fit for the Church to have absolute temporal powers.†

The Dantesque motif of woman-as-muse, or of the feminine ministering angel, appears here in the most perverted and distorted fashion. The penultimate photograph described by Muñoz Cano, of a “young blond woman who seems to disappear into the air,” most strikingly takes up this trope through its depiction of what is most likely a woman being “disappeared” by being dropped from an aircraft into the ocean. That women make up the majority of the victims in Wieder’s photographs is not happenstance as the discourse of the regime specifically mobilized metaphors of the family and engaged in a gendering of the relations between the military and society. The proper place of women was the private sphere, to which women brought order, much as the regime thought of itself as bringing order to a chaotic public sphere. But Wieder’s photography reveals precisely the opposite: the regime’s violent and destructive intrusion into the public sphere is coterminous with an equally violent one into the private sphere.

* “of madness”

† The reference in the original text is mistaken in the attribution of the book *St. Petersburg Dialogues* to the younger brother when it was actually a work by Joseph; the mistake is stealthily corrected in the English translation.

Wieder's visceral depiction of the torture of women will end up incurring the wrath of the regime because it breaks the careful gendering of society between the masculine public realm and the private feminine realm and we see how the victimization of women enhances and highlights the virile power of the state. Fascist state power and the aestheticizing male gaze are made to coincide.

This combination proves to be disconcerting, but to different degrees, to the men who are now the audience for these photographs and must confront the destructive male gaze that the photographs embody. What the participants believed was going to be an art exhibition turns out to be closer in appearance to the rituals through which solidarity was built among the torturers in the military and police of Chile and Argentina during the time of dictatorship. Such rituals frequently culminated in a "pacto de sangre" [blood pact] in which new recruits had either to view or to participate in the torture of detainees and thus become "bonded" to the group through mutual culpability (Franco 26). Bolaño's spatial juxtaposition of an art gallery and a torture cell thus once again brings into contact the spaces of art and political violence, as he did in *Nocturno de Chile* with the literary salon above a basement where torture was being conducted.

But this experience of exposure to aestheticized torture does not produce the same solidarity as the "pacto de sangre," perhaps in part because of the filter of representation which inhibits the immediacy and intimacy of an actual torture cell. The photography exhibition becomes, as with the skywritings, a case of failed interpellation. Seeking once again to represent death, in this case through photographs, and use that representation as a means of organizing and galvanizing a political will, Wieder fails once more to note or

react to the fact that the representation of death is a highly volatile effort that exceeds the capacity of art to capture and utilize for political purposes.

The reaction of the men at the party to the photographs is informative. One young cadet breaks out in tears and has to be dragged out of the room; others leave without saying anything to the host or the other guests. Muñoz Cano describes the atmosphere among those who remain:

Tras el estruendo inicial de pronto todos se callaron. Parecía como si una corriente de alto voltaje hubiera atravesado la casa dejándonos demudados, dice Muñoz Cano en uno de los pocos momentos de lucidez de su libro. Nos mirábamos y nos reconocíamos, pero en realidad era como si no nos reconociéramos, parecíamos diferentes, parecíamos iguales, odiábamos nuestros rostros, nuestros gestos eran los propios de los sonámbulos o de los idiotas. Mientras algunos se iban sin despedirse una extraña sensación de fraternidad quedó flotando en el piso entre los que optaron por quedarse. (98)*

The sense of fraternity that Muñoz Cano evokes is odd in that it is transmitted in silent looks that are the opposite of conspiratorial – instead they seem conflicted, full of self-loathing and disgust, trapped between self-recognition and self-delusion. The men become self-reflective but at a distance, as if they were removed from their own consciousness and could see their gestures and thoughts from the vantage point of some other consciousness. In this light, Muñoz Cano says, their gestures seem like those of sleepwalkers or idiots. This exhibition of photographs that so vividly depicts the violence of state power on the female form has somehow shorn them of their conscious selves and left them at a remove from themselves.

* After the initial hubbub, suddenly everyone fell silent. It was if a high voltage current had run through the flat leaving us dumbstruck, says Muñoz Cano in a rare moment of lucidity. We stared at each other as if at strangers; our faces were still recognizable, of course, but different somehow, despicable and expressionless like the faces of sleepwalkers or idiots. Some guests left without saying good-bye, but among those who remained in the flat a peculiar atmosphere of camaraderie developed. (89)

What is transmitted to the viewers is not the experience of the torturers or their sense of solidarity through guilt and fear, but rather the experience of the tortured (“como si una corriente de alto voltaje hubiera atravesado la casa dejándonos demudados”). The photographs, meant to objectify the “other” and enforce a separation that would reinforce a power dynamic, go in the reverse direction, causing the distorted poses of the victims to be taken up psychically by the Air Force officers who observe them. Rather than aligning the spectator with the gaze of the torturer and thus with power of state violence (as in “el pacto de sangre”), the viewers immediately sense their alienation from that gaze and their potential to become its next victims. Wieder wants to conjoin the political and military victory of the junta with a correspondent cultural revolution, but here representation induces self-consciousness rather than ideological solidarity. What the viewers respond to is the void presented in the photographs of power for the sake of power, destruction for the sake of destruction. This void empties them of their personal delusions about the reality of the coup and its aftermath, leaving them staring at one another as if at strangers, alien even to their own bodies and faces.

If a type of communion is achieved through this exposure to images of torture and death, it is more of a communion of alienation-in-common or non-community than the total enclosure of self-presence that fascist art strives for. The difference between this result and the group solidarity of the “pacto de sangre” results from the *distance* and *lack* of immediacy afforded by photography, precisely the opposite aspects of photography that Wieder aims for. As was the case with the skywritings and their easy dissolution in the sky, Wieder does not pay sufficient attention to the form or material of his work so much as the content. His consideration of form ends at the selection of a medium

(skywriting or photography) that offers the illusion of a representation constructed by natural and nonhuman elements (light and shadow) despite being produced by the most modern of industrial inventions (an airplane and a camera).

The strange effects of the photographs also derive from the particular relationship between photography and death. Wieder presents photographs of corpses and people on the verge of death in order to control death itself, to establish a stable relationship with death, just as he strives in his skywritings to give death the adequate attribute, the attribute that will tie death down to an intelligible concept that makes it employable and totalizable within a fascist framework. Yet as Maurice Blanchot puts it, “Death suspends the relation to place... The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere” (*The Space of Literature* 256). Put another way, this means that a corpse is not simply one object among others that fall under the camera’s lens, but an object that embodies a non-relation. The photograph of the woman disappearing into the air exemplifies the conundrum involved in representing death, as Blanchot sees it. The photograph in question is itself a photograph of a photograph: “*La foto de la foto* de una joven rubia que parece desvanecerse en el aire” (“*The photo of a photo* of a young blond woman who seems to disappear into the air” (98; translation and emphasis mine). This self-referential recursion places the medium of photography into the very content of the photograph, but it also parallels another type of double exposure that is taking place. In Blanchot’s terms, an “image” concerns not a representation made *of* an object, which exists before the image, but the image as something integral to the object, which exists in a sense “before” or “beneath” the object. Blanchot’s image exists beneath the normal level of perception, as if down below the object, and the image functions as a connection

to the nothingness from which the object emerged, to the bland level of materiality that it had to overcome in order to become an object. And there are cases where the image overcomes or supersedes the object. Blanchot gives two examples of this: a broken tool and a cadaver, because both of those objects no longer fit into the coordinates of our normal perception of them, they have begun slipping back into nothingness.

The photograph within the photograph is of a literal disappearance: a young woman disappearing into the air, which immediately connotes the overseas flights conducted by the militaries of Chile and Argentina to dispose of the bodies of their victims. If the cadaver is itself an image, as Blanchot proposes, then its visual capture in the moment of its disappearance brings to the fore its nature as a slow dissolution back into nothingness. This disappearance of a disappearing image embodies what art can and cannot achieve in its depiction of death. At best, art underscores the inherent impossibility of representing death as anything but a vanishing point in a scene of infinite dissolution. This impossibility exposes us to our finitude, just as it closes off the possibility of a totalizing representation of death.

The knowledge this photograph imparts is not a welcome one because it implodes the exhibition's intent to serve up a transcendent world of death that could anchor the nationalist and fascist community that Wieder believes is sure to come. As an aim of art, this effort is bound to fail since art can no more perfectly suture death to life than can religion, though religion can at least cope with this failure, since it is the community's encoded and ritualized acceptance of this failure. Wieder invokes religion in both the skywritings and the photography exhibition as a means of appropriating Christian ideology and iconography and melding it to the regime's needs and desires. Though the

Catholic Church hierarchy was complicit in Pinochet's rule, Wieder goes a step further in seeking out an avant-garde artistic agenda that could fuse all these values into one aesthetic. In this he is mistaken, for the regime does not have the will to embark on the cultural revolution Wieder is leading them toward, as the story of *Estrella distante* shows, and the history of Chile corroborates.

In Christopher Fynsk's introduction to the English translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, he remarks on both the centrality and difficulty of the position of death in the conceptualization of community.

Death is an experience that a collectivity cannot make its work or its property, in the sense of something that would find its meaning in a value or cause transcending the individual. A society may well use it (in the celebrations of heroes or the sacrificial victims), but there is a point at which death exposes a radical meaninglessness that cannot be subsumed. And when death presents itself as not ours, the very impossibility of representing its meaning suspends or breaches the possibility of self-presentation and exposes us to our finitude. (Nancy xvi)

If the viewers of Wieder's photographs begin to act, however briefly, as if they existed at a remove from their own selves, we could say that it is an effect of this exposure to the impossible signification of death, which in turn provokes a breakdown in "self"-presentation. The seamless presentation of the "self" in the social setting of a party is disrupted by these images, just as fascism's drive toward totality cannot subsume death and give it more than symbolic significance.

This same exposure to finitude caused by death's impossible representation is, however, as Fynsk argues in his interpretation of Nancy, also an opening for a different sense of community. Thus far I have been examining the representation of Wieder's own aesthetic philosophy within the novella: its recurrent attempts to represent and instrumentalize death, its effects or lack thereof on its audience, and its inability to

acknowledge its failures within its own self-presentation. The depiction of this aesthetic philosophy is, however, nested within and countered by the overall aesthetic of the novella. In analyzing this aesthetic, we can see a different response to finitude, one that does not aim for a pure interpellation of a community but that works at reconstructing community, however partial or incomplete, through literary mediation.

Deconstructing the Encyclopedia: Figuring Absence and Alterity

Wieder's skywritings and the photography exhibition both put forward aesthetic notions that reinforced fascist ideological principles: the strict separation of subject and object, the language of command, the misogynous gendering of power relations, the gaze as tool for social control. Wieder's art serves as a powerful symbol for a certain way of thinking about art and its capacity (or lack thereof) for a direct instrumentalization in the political sphere and its use as a means of directly interpellating a community. As such, he functions as a site for critiquing both the Chilean neovanguardia's attitudes about the role of art, and the regime's self-fashioning discourse.

Another powerful aesthetic current in the novella takes form in the interactions between Bibiano and the narrator and then again on a narrative-level in the juxtaposition of the stories of Stein, Soto, and Wieder, and the deconstructive gestures these stories perform with regard to the encyclopedic form. These other representations assume a highly critical role for literature and art vis-à-vis the political world, in which literature cites and deconstructs political and epistemological discourses and structures. They also propose a view of identity and community decidedly different from that found in the encyclopedia of *La literatura nazi en América* and by the artist Wieder. The stories of the

characters in *Estrella distante* flow out from the destabilization of the anthology form of the prior work. The structure of each entry in the anthology presumes an equivalence between identity and self-presence, whereas the intertwined stories of the novella can better capture how identity is haunted and partially constituted by absences and losses, a fact made all the more relevant after the coup's foreclosure of a different future for Chile. The same narrative techniques in *Estrella distante* (such as doubling, splitting, and a high level of intertextuality) which destabilize the uniform and self-present identities of the encyclopedia entries also undermine the notion of an integral, objectively-written text (i.e. the encyclopedia itself).*

This alternative view of identity, as essentially mediated by loss and absence, is figuratively embodied in literary processes that take place in the novella, such as reading, citation, writing, allusion, workshopping, epistolary correspondence, and naming. These processes become, in the context of the novella, ways of dealing with and interacting with otherness, with the traumatic exposure to finitude incurred by the coup. The fracturing force of the coup requires an acknowledgment of the fact that after 1973, the lives narrated in the novella could not be understood solely on biographical or historical grounds, but are haunted by the other possibilities cut off by the coup, that these identities exist in tension with doubles or opposites that incarnate possibilities no longer available by force of the military dictatorship. These literary forms and processes open new pathways for constructing and connecting identities across biographically disparate and

* I use the terms anthology and encyclopedia interchangeably. *La literatura nazi en América* never gives an account of itself nor names itself, though the back cover of the first edition does make reference to "manuales y diccionarios de literatura." The book is organized by sections with each section containing one or more authors. Some sections are organized thematically, by genre or by geography. Each "entry" in the pseudo-encyclopedia produces a short biographical sketch of the fascist writer or artist and a brief summary of their work and their dominant themes and styles. An "epilogue for monsters" contains three indices listing writers, books, publishing houses, magazines and places.

temporally distant grounds, by invoking literary processes such as citation and allusion not only in the construction of the text of the novella, but in the narration of the individuals therein.

In the prologue of *Estrella distante* we are reminded that the story we read here is not just its own self-contained story but a doubling and reworking of the last and longest encyclopedia entry entitled “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame.” In this original version the character Wieder goes by the name Carlos Ramírez Hoffman and other characters from the novella likewise reappear with different names. In “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” the ground underneath the encyclopedic template begins to shift, as the “narrator” of the novel (i.e. the encyclopedist or anthologist) begins to express himself in personal pronouns.

The narrator’s emergence as not simply an anthologist but a character entails for the reader a wholesale reevaluation of the motivation for the encyclopedia. Instead of being a humanist exercise in expanding knowledge in a certain area, the last entry reveals the encyclopedia to be a weapon, a type of mapping out of relations that would help to pinpoint and locate Ramírez Hoffman’s present whereabouts. What was thought to be an encyclopedia, turns out rather to be potentially the product of a literary detective who reads the works of fascist writers as evidence that could lead to the discovery of a criminal.

The retelling of “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” in *Estrella distante*, however, is not exact. One major difference is that the pretension to encyclopedic totality is discarded in *Estrella distante*, and instead of beginning with the narrator as an “encyclopedist” who later emerges as a literary detective and avenger, we get the personal pronouns from the

first sentence: “La primera vez que vi a Carlos Wieder fue en 1971 o tal vez en 1972, cuando Salvador Allende era presidente de Chile” (13), stands in stark contrast to the technical cataloguing language of the beginning of the encyclopedia entry, “Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, Santiago de Chile, 1950 - Lloret de Mar, España, 1998; La carrera del infame Ramírez Hoffman debió comenzar en 1970 o 1971, cuando Salvador Allende era presidente de Chile” (181).*

Another important difference between “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” and *Estrella distante* is the inclusion of the stories of the literary workshop leaders and their fate after the coup, which only received a passing mention in “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame.” The narrator himself is now a participant in the literary workshops, whereas before his first exposure to Ramírez Hoffman was as a prisoner in the camp over which he flies in his first skywriting show. And the relationship between Bibiano (who goes by the name Cecilio Macaduck in the earlier version) and the narrator is much more intimate and developed; in *La literatura nazi* Macaduck is simply another member of the poetry workshop who is talked about later as someone who tracks Hoffman through archival research. The mere fact of the inclusion and greater development of these subplots is noteworthy, but so is the way these stories relate to each other. Rather than the biopolitical isolation entailed by the cataloguing nature of the encyclopedia, in *Estrella distante* the stories of individuals are not determined solely on biographical or historical grounds. The text calls for a different kind of reader, one who can read connections between individuals that remain unavailable to the encyclopedist, and can see how

* “I saw Carlos Wieder for the first time in 1971, or perhaps in 1972, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile.” (3); “Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, Santiago de Chile, 1950 – Lloret de Mar, Spain, 1998; The beginning of the career of the infamous Ramírez Hoffman must have taken place in 1970 or 1971, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile.”

identities emerge not only through contact with the actual or the material, but with the possible and the lost.

These haunting connections break down the sense of distance which an encyclopedia creates, the rigid barrier between the reader and the outside world, and the isolation of the individual entries. They perform a shift between the historical and biographical as the sole grounds of form and organization in the encyclopedia, and the literary as a mode of connecting the seemingly distant and unrelated. Moreover, these breakdowns mark an important function for literature in Bolaño's work, which does not operate around representations that are realist, surrealist, historical, fictional, objective, subjective, etc.. Rather his work is characterized by representations that alternate between bringing the distant closer, and defamiliarizing what is close by, creating an oscillation between the two that structures his narratives. This mode of oscillation between alternate genres and styles, between proximity and distance, is in dialogue not just with the ideology of the humanist encyclopedia, but also with the ideology of Wieder's art. If the skywritings and photography exhibition (and the humanist encyclopedia, for that matter) sought to maintain an unassailable sense of distance and hierarchy (between viewer and artwork, between spectator and creator), of certainty and finality (the beginning of a new absolute through the coup and the creation of "*la nueva narrativa chilena*," as Wieder describes it), of closure (through real and metaphorical murder) – then this oscillating aesthetic produces contrary effects: of uncertainty and instability, and of openness to new relations of identity and difference.

The literary workshops, the stories of Juan Stein and Diego Soto, and Bibiano's research in the archive and through epistolary correspondence, express and enact this

aesthetic. In place of the distance created through the language of command of the skywritings, the workshops bring both reader and writer, spectator and creator, into a participatory circuit that disarms authorial reserve and power. If Wieder sought to force his story to coincide with the national history of Chile through his murderous acts and his narration of them in the skies and in photographs, then the stories of loss, defeat, and uncertainty embodied in the fates of Juan Stein and Diego Soto, and their doubled narration, offer an alternative vision of the history of Chile, one that allows for a sense of elasticity and uncertainty in the yoking together of a narrative, and that has no pretension of assuming the universality of a national narrative.

If the universalizing language invoked in the skywritings and the direct, brutal visualization of corpses in the photographs brought about a sense of *fait accompli*, of a historical path that is fixed and absolutely knowable, then the personal archive built up by Bibiano through his research and his network of epistolary contacts, demonstrates that, while the past cannot be redeemed or changed, language and writing can effectively create new connections between the past and the present, between the distant and the local, that descramble and put in doubt stories crafted by power. And if Wieder continually sought to cast his own artistic production as “la nueva narrativa chilena”^{*} i.e. as a complete break with the past, then the possibility of achieving such totality and isolation from other texts and artists is called into question through the recurrent turn to a technique of doubling and splitting of stories, discourses, and characters in *Estrella distante*.

* Another ironic reference by Bolaño. He juxtaposes the reprehensible Wieder, this time not with the *avanzada*, but with an actual literary movement or group from the 90's.

Estrella distante opens amidst a state of catastrophe, and its narrative coalesces around the allegory of the “distant star” in the title, the primary allegorical referent being the nation of Chile itself, via the star in Chile’s flag. The motif of the distant star is invoked again in the novella’s epigraph drawn from Faulkner (“¿Que estrella cae sin que nadie la mire?”*), transforming the star into a symbol and omen both of catastrophe and katabasis. The falling star ineluctably catches the gaze, it is an irresistible object of voyeurism, much as the 1973 coup itself draws all into its vortex. The catastrophe of the coup permeates the narrative, causing the democratic Chile of the past to recede further and further into the distance like a distant star, becoming a nation and an idea that existed only in the distant past.

The falling star motif also applies to the fates of Stein and Soto and, in a different sense, Wieder. The coup splits into two the lives of everyone it touches, into a before and an after, creating a sense of distance both within and without. Yet that state of disarray and lack of cohesion marked by the coup is mediated by techniques within the narrative. Almost as immediately as the motif of the distant, falling star announces itself, the novella enters into an operation that will be continually performed on different levels throughout: the narrative consciously links itself with other stories and asks that we read it through the differential lenses provided by these links. *Estrella distante* is an offspring of the encyclopedic novel *La literatura nazi en América*, but this lineage also opens up other links. The adoption of the encyclopedic form as a structure in Bolaño’s *La literatura nazi en América* calls to mind Jorge Luis Borges, for whom the book, the encyclopedia, the library and other literary forms and literature-related institutions constituted an important theme in his modernist short stories. Those stories frequently

* “What star falls unseen?”

featured a fantastic leap from the representative capacity of a text to its productive potential, a leap which is performed in the deconstruction of the encyclopedic discourse in “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” and *Estrella distante*.*

The intertextual references to Borges in *Estrella distante* do not stop there, however. In the prologue, the author positions himself as having written the novella in conjunction with “Arturo B.” after this latter person had felt that the first version of the story, in *La literatura nazi en América*, was too schematic. The author circumscribes his contribution to the process, saying that his tasks were limited to “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” (11).[†] A number of intertextual references take place here, beyond the quite obvious allusion to Pierre Menard from Borges’ “Pierre Menard, el autor del Quijote.” The dialogue between the author and his alter ego (“Arturo B”) is quite the Borgesian opening gambit. Arturo B. (or Arturo Belano) was a frequent alter ego of Bolaño’s in his fictional works, appearing as a character but more frequently as a narrator who conformed biographically to Bolaño’s own personal history. In the prologue of *Estrella distante*, the author, that is, Bolaño himself, writes that the story of Ramírez Hoffman in his book *La literatura nazi en América*, was told to him by Arturo B.. Yet in the actual text of “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” the narrator’s name is pronounced on multiple occasions by other characters, and that name is “Bolaño.”[‡] In *Estrella distante* the narrator’s name is completely elided.

* The title of “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” contains yet another nod to Borges, specifically to his *Historia universal de la infamia*, as Ina Jennerjahn points out (70).

[†] “preparing drinks, consulting some books, and discussing, with [Arturo] and the ever more lively ghost of Pierre Ménard, the validity of many repeated paragraphs” (my translation)

[‡] Even the last line of the story has his name in it: “Cuídate, Bolaño, dijo finalmente y se marchó” (204).

What was a consolidated, uniform and even largely autobiographical identity for the narrator of *La literatura nazi en América*, then, splits between Bolaño and his alter ego Belano in *Estrella distante*.^{*} The split within narrative identity, between writer and listener, is then redoubled in the text itself, in the relationship between the now-unnamed narrator of the novella and Bibiano, the communication between whom structures the whole novella. Within the novella it is *Bibiano* who writes the pseudo-encyclopedia on Nazi writers, a metafictional gesture that further reinforces the uncanny mirroring taking place in the novella. The phonetic variables that at once connect and differentiate the three names (Bolaño, Belano, Bibiano) simultaneously consolidate and disperse authorial identity in the same manner that Borges' short stories "Pierre Menard, el autor del Quijote" and "Borges y yo" do. The merging between the autobiographical and the fictional echoes the fictionalization of the historical that frequently recurs in Bolaño's work. Each time this occurs, however, there are slight kinks in that process of fictionalization that prevent it from being entirely the case of "copying" or pure repetition. For instance, in *2666* the city of Santa Teresa is obviously modeled on Ciudad Juárez, such that it seems absurd to change its name. But that minor change in name reasserts the importance of the literary difference, by emphasizing that the literary does not map onto the historical in a one-to-one correspondence, and that its form of being and organization depart significantly from the given of history.

Replacing "Roberto Bolaño" with "Arturo Belano" follows the same pattern, by invoking the autobiographical yet frustrating any reading that would read the text

^{*} Arturo B. is described in the prologue as a "veterano de las guerras floridas y suicida en África" which is the Romantic opposite of the very writerly, bourgeois existence that Bolaño himself led. Such a stark contrast will recur in the narration of the stories of two characters in *Estrella distante*, Juan Stein and Diego Soto.

autobiographically. These gestures register an insistence on the “literary” as figuring difference, even when minor and inconsequential, and combined with the abundant intertextual references in the text, they resist a simple reduction to the biographical and the historical. But the texts do not thus cease being “political” in the sense with which Jacques Rancière understands the term, as a profoundly alternative “distribution of the sensible” that can compete with the forms of distribution of everyday politics.* The identities of the characters and cities in the text do not “repeat” the extratextual, no more than Pierre Menard’s copying of Don Quijote is truly a repetition of the original text. The extratextual is cited but also differentiated through this process of “literaturization.” This process marks a difference between the instrumentalization of art or literature for political purposes, and that greater battle over the terrain of the organizing discourse itself.

The doubling and splitting of authorial identity produces another intertextual echo, for Bolaño’s reference to two writers working on a text in isolation in a house (“nos encerramos durante un mes y medio en mi casa de Blanes”)[†], and working in particular with the idea of a text mirroring and exploding another text (“Arturo deseaba una historia más larga, no espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en sí misma”)[‡], bears a more than passing resemblance to the beginning of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in which Borges, narrating from his “own” perspective without naming himself (much as Bolaño does here in *Estrella distante* and elsewhere[§]), and the Argentine writer

* See Ángeles Donoso Macaya’s “Estética, política y el posible territorio de la ficción en 2666 de Roberto Bolaño” for a similar use of Rancière in interpreting Bolaño.

† “[we] shut ourselves up for a month and a half in my house in Blanes” (1)

‡ “Arturo would have preferred a longer story that, rather than mirror or explode others, would be, in itself, a mirror and an explosion” (1)

§ For example, in an afterward from Bolaño’s editor at the end of 2666, he claims to have found a note from Bolaño in which the narrator of the novel acknowledges his name: Arturo Belano.

Adolfo Bioy Casares are staying in a house in the country contemplating the fantastic results of the “conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia” (Borges 3).*

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” through a technique of allegorical *mise en abyme*, sets in opposition and then conjoins three allegorical notions of literature and art: literature as the mirror, as mimesis which reflects and doubles reality but not without a modicum of subtle distortion that can be destabilizing; literature as copulation, as a force that takes existing elements and fuses them to create something new; and thirdly, literature as the encyclopedia, as a cataloguing and indexing of the world which presents itself as the objective and humanist path toward greater and more stable knowledge of an empirically-stable outside world. The discovery in the short story of a secret encyclopedia that has creative properties, that creates new realities that surreally mirror the real world through its written entries, mixes together these notions of literature and gives literal expression to the power of the textual to alter the real.

The Borgesian encyclopedia becomes, through these intertextual allusions, a necessary backdrop for understanding what Bolaño does with his encyclopedia of “Nazi writers.” As with Borges, Bolaño invokes the humanist project of the encyclopedia, but then later undermines the strictly representative nature of the encyclopedia as traditionally understood. The explosion of the encyclopedia as a humanist form of knowledge becomes apparent in the way in which the last “entry” of *La literatura nazi en*

* “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is a story of two writers writing before a mirror and pondering the effects of an encyclopedia which literally re-presents and recreates a world and a universe. It is again echoed later in the novella, in the description of Wieder’s post-coup, post-military expulsion activities, one of which includes creating and marketing “wargames,” board games that simulate moments in Chilean military history. In these board games we can see a similar logic at work as was found in Borges’ fantastic encyclopedia, in which a material representation of the world embodies the desire to recreate and control the world. Another of Bolaño’s posthumous novels, *El tercer Reich* (2010), immerses itself in the world of board games, its communities of players and its competitive tournaments, posing that world as an analogue to the literary sphere’s communal networks, and its alliances and rivalries.

América (i.e. “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame”) departs significantly from the encyclopedic form. As was noted earlier, in “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” the encyclopedist steps out from behind the curtain of objectivity and reveals his subjective motivations. The eruption of the personal pronoun in this last entry breaks with the encyclopedic voice, despite the fact that the entry begins, like all the others, with biographical details of its subject. The personal pronoun signals the revelation of the encyclopedist as a literary detective, another Borgesian character type. The deconstructive intent of “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” is noted in retrospect in the prologue to *Estrella distante*. As the authorial voice says in the prologue, “Arturo deseaba una historia más larga, no espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en sí misma” (11).^{*} The relationship between the Ramírez Hoffman story and the encyclopedia entries that preceded it, a relationship of mirroring and explosion, becomes internalized in *Estrella distante*.

To understand that sense of internalization, one must first understand how the sense of mirroring and explosion functions in *La literatura nazi en América*. Gareth Williams has characterized Bolaño’s encyclopedia in *La literatura nazi en América* as a “fictional canonization – and therefore fake biopolitical regularization – of Nazi ways of being, thinking and doing” (138), while also pointing to the fact that the “specific languages of Nazi literature have no place in the novel... for the narrator/literary critic/detective who strives to recuperate them via humanist encyclopedism... Nazi literature per se has no language, no presence, and no essence in the novel (130).” In other words, a catalogue of the names and texts of the practitioners of “Nazi literature” does not of itself build an understanding of its essential moves, themes, and languages.

^{*} “Arturo would have preferred a longer story that, rather than mirror or explode others, would be, in itself, a mirror and an explosion” (1)

The novel's deployment of the encyclopedia as a form within it is "nothing more than the inscription of its own unproductive cataloguing system (130)." What the novel does do is "foreground the philological drive for genealogical recuperation, cataloguing, and order" (131) and this drive is later argued by Williams to be an expression of the narrator's melancholy, which continually strives to recuperate the efficacy of a lost desire, and in this striving he returns again and again to the identification of enemies and friends.*

The failure of the encyclopedic mode can most clearly be seen in the case of the character Ramírez Hoffman/Wieder, whose last entry in *La literatura nazi en América* is described in the prologue to *Estrella distante* as being "como contrapunto, acaso como anticlímax del grotesco literario que lo procedía" (11). Biographical facts as a stable ground of identity is parodied in the abundance of names and pseudonyms which are associated with Wieder. As with the series, "Bolaño-Belano-Bibiano" something escapes the process of identification through names. In *La literatura nazi en América* Wieder/Hoffman first appears under the pseudonym Emilio Stevens, whereas in *Estrella distante* he appears with the pseudonym Alberto Ruiz-Tagle.† In each instance, the narrator deciphers this masking of identity, but after each decipherment a new name appears. After the coup, Wieder adopts a number of other pseudonyms. The incessant iteration of names and the way Wieder appears in so many different places and media, traces and reinscribes the very liquidity of "fascist art" as a possible descriptor and its

* A point which I will take up later.

† See Williams' "Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño" for an interpretation of how the name Alberto Ruiz-Tagle links up with the name of the Chilean President (Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle) during the time of democratic transition in the 1990's. "In the relation of immediacy between Ruiz-Tagle and Wieder the name of neoliberal democracy (Ruiz-Tagle) is in fact the monstrous and violent inscription of the military coup of 1973 (Wieder), and vice versa, without any form of mediating the relation between the two" (135-136).

ability to emerge in seemingly any context and place. It is this quality of nominal liquidity that the encyclopedia cannot get a handle on.

This slippery quality emerges again through etymology. Wieder's name, Bibiano reveals, means "again": "*Wieder*, según Bibiano nos contó, quería decir «otra vez», «de nuevo», «nuevamente», «por segunda vez», «de vuelta», en algunos contextos «una y otra vez», «la próxima vez» en frases que apuntan al futuro" (50).^{*} Inscribed within Wieder's very name, when viewed through a literary rather than biographical lens, lies the very iteration which defines him, and by association, fascist literature.[†] This iteration frustrates the intentions of an encyclopedic documentation of the canon.

In Williams' argument, the canon of "Nazi literature" is ultimately revealed as empty of essence; the encyclopedia is only capable of cataloguing its multiple manifestations. Yet this is not an isolated instance but also has repercussions for other literary canons, the cumulative effect being that the lettered city is itself revealed in its dependence on "the nihilism that underlies its epistemological models and biopolitical mechanisms of production" (131). The accumulation of names, texts, motifs and descriptions proposes a way of identifying Nazi literature, but since that identity is never explicitly formulated, all similar canons become suspect, and because there "can be no truth without presence the novel is, quite simply, the suspension of its own project."

Yet neither *La literatura nazi en América* nor the novella *Estrella distante* can be reduced to the encyclopedic form which is being responded to within their borders, and

^{*} "*Wieder*, Bibiano informed us, meant "once more," "again," "a second time," and in some contexts "over and over"; or "the next time," in sentences referring to future events.

[†] The association of Wieder with the resurgence of fascism is made in his very first air show when one of the prisoners in a concentration camp (one of many set up after the coup, and above which Wieder is flying) identifies his plane as a *Messerschmitt 109*, a Nazi war plane, which causes the prisoner, already mentally imbalanced, to shout out that the second World War was returning to Chile. In his first appearance as a pilot, Wieder is already emblematic of the perennial threat of fascism in twentieth-century politics.

while I am in agreement with the notion that the encyclopedia is unproductive, I read that failure differently in the light of what can be gained from analyzing “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” and *Estrella distante* as a “mirroring and explosion” of the encyclopedia. Because the novel and the encyclopedia do not coincide entirely, the novel’s potential for breaking free of encyclopedic humanism lies in that gap of difference, and this is why the narration of the lives of Juan Stein and Diego Soto is so crucial. While the fake anthology found in *La literatura nazi en América* might be “the schematization of the authoritative drive of the lettered intellectual’s attempts to catalogue, order, and rationalize the lives and works characteristic of human beings constituted as a phantasm-like hostile population” (Williams 131), *Estrella distante* begins to counter this schematization and drive, and institute a different mode of narration and understanding of the lives of individuals, one which exceeds the merely biographical and historical. In this other schema, identity becomes an unstable property, one essentially mediated by stories that are often conflicting. These stories link together individuals through an alternate form of literary organization, and situate them as neither present or absence; equal weight is given to possibility and reality. This is a perspective on identity that is not limited to lives marked (and thus split) by the coup. It models a concept of identity in which absence and possibility (both realizable and lost) play important roles in defining a character. Instead of the concrete definitions of the encyclopedia entries, we can expect the recounting of stories which might at first appear irrelevant, but then become intricately related; and these stories frequently produce aporetic moments, allowing for spots of uncertainty to emerge and for absence to play a role. This literary schema is modeled both in the

structure of the narrative in *Estrella distante* and in the recounting of the stories of Juan Stein and Diego Soto, which occupies two chapters.

The first component of this schema is the mediated nature of the narrative. Almost no fact or event is told without first being mediated by one or multiple texts (as we have already seen, albeit on a different level, in the hyperintertextuality of *Estrella distante*). The process of relaying and mediating other texts recurs frequently in the narration of *Estrella distante*: when the narrator recounts the possible fate of Juan Stein, he is not creating a story, but *relaying* a story constructed by Bibiano after his search for and investigation of Stein; the initial identification of Ruiz-Tagle as Wieder takes place through a reading of newspapers articles and photographs; the narration of the photography exhibition is possible through the mediation of the memoir written by one of the attendees; Bibiano follows Stein's adventures abroad by parsing through television accounts of various wars and reports from attendees at literary conferences; the stories of Stein, Soto, and Lorenzo, are linked together through the reading of one common text, a psychology book by Frederick Perls; and the discovery of Wieder in Spain is a result of a careful reading of contributions he makes to obscure magazines under various pseudonyms.

At every point in the narrative, then, we must be mindful of the relays and links between texts that allow for storytelling to take place. These relays do not "authenticate" or "authorize" their subsequent retelling, giving that retelling an aura of definition and certainty, in the way that Wieder's skywritings sought to cite the Bible in order to acquire its interpellative power. The mediated nature of the novella emphasizes the distance involved in representation, and thus resists the immediacy invoked in Wieder's

skywritings and his photographs.* The relays also render indistinct the voice of the narrator, as the difference between what he relates of his own accord and what is provided by other sources, is obscured and unverifiable. The univocal, singular storyteller is displaced by a model of storytelling that looks more like a textual extension of the poetry workshops the narrator and Bibiano attended before the coup. A reading of *Estrella distante* is also remarkable for the many instances in which statements of uncertainty lace the retelling of these stories of the past.† The relays and statements of uncertainty, like the allusions and invocations of Borges, destabilize the text's standing as a singular entity that would unequivocally communicate a definitive meaning for the historical events and personages that appear within it. The precarious status of the text creates a space for a non-encyclopedic/non-humanist imagination to roam, reflecting the precarity of identity's existence as a differential relation haunted by multiple possibilities in the post-coup era. Unlike the encyclopedia, which is intended to stabilize and consecrate knowledge's grip upon the world, the stories of Stein and Soto loosen that grip and foreground aporias, not as obstacles to greater knowledge but as necessary components of the aforementioned view of identity.

Two chapters separate the initial account of Wieder's exploits from the account of his final air show in Santiago and his photography exhibition. Those two chapters form

* The immediacy here is not just the immediacy of Wieder's "presentations" but also the immediacy of the neoliberal market, as Brett Levinson exposes in *The Ends of Literature*: "The dream of the market – and its most obvious agent, information technology – is a total sense that arrives before it is processed (circulation without circulation time), hence does not require communication, interpretation, or even costly propaganda. The dream is immediacy. The Latin American consenso neoliberal, in other words, hinges on the total eradication of both language and knowledge, hence also of the literary that exposes *that there is language*: an erasure whose emergence the "it goes without saying" evokes" (29).

† This is the case when the narrator describes Wieder's night assault of the Garmendia household ("A partir de aquí mi relato se nutrirá básicamente de conjeturas" (29)); in the transition between the description of the last skywriting show and the photography exhibition, an odd passage tells us that everything we just read about the skywriting might or might not have happened in that manner, but that the photography exhibition (about to be narrated) occurred exactly as the narrator describes it (92); and similar statements of uncertainty or ambiguity occur in the narration of the fates of Stein and Soto.

an interlude in which the post-coup stories of Juan Stein and Diego Soto are recounted, and they account for the majority of the quantitative difference between “Ramírez Hoffmann, el infame” and *Estrella distante*, a fact that charges them with significance in any comparison of the two texts. Stein and Soto are the leaders of the poetry workshops that the young narrator and Bibiano attended before the coup. From the beginning of the novella, the narrator paints the portrait of Stein and Soto as a study in contrasts that verges on a caricature:

Siempre estaban juntos (aunque nunca vimos a uno en el taller del otro), siempre discutiendo de poesía aunque el cielo de Chile se cayera a pedazos, Stein alto y rubio, Soto bajito y moreno, Stein atlético y fuerte, Soto de huesos delicados, con un cuerpo en donde ya se intuían redondeces y blanduras futuras, Stein en la órbita de la poesía latinoamericana y Diego Soto traduciendo a poetas franceses que en Chile nadie conocía. (75)*

In spite of the differences in physical appearance, dress, (Soto “siempre correctamente vestido (al contrario que Stein, que vestía como un vagabundo)”[†] (76), and reading preferences, Stein and Soto were “amigos del alma”[‡] (20). But because of the differences in the “ethics and aesthetics” of the two writers, their workshops attracted different kinds of students and poets to their individual workshops. Only Bibiano and the narrator (and later Wieder) attended both workshops. The earlier rendition of this story, in *La literatura nazi en América*, does not emphasize this duality, but includes it mainly as an afterthought, after the murder of the Garmendia sisters. In fact, it is mainly Stein, under the name Juan Cherniakovski, who figures as the leader of the workshops. Soto, named Martín García, is only mentioned in passing. But in *Estrella distante* the pairing of

* “[Stein and Soto] were always together (except at their respective workshops) and always talking about poetry. If the sky over Chile had begun to crumble and fall, they would have gone on talking about poetry: the tall, fair-haired Stein and the short, dark Soto; one strong and well built, the other’s fine-boned body hinting at future plumpness. Stein was mainly interested in Latin American poetry, while Soto was translating French poets who were at the time... unknown in Chile.” (65)

[†] “always neatly dressed (as opposed to Stein, who looked like a tramp)” (66)

[‡] “soul mates” (10)

Stein and Soto as unlikely friends precedes a rather complicated process of twinning and splitting that occurs in the course of the narration of their post-coup stories, in which each character becomes doubled yet again.

The story of Juan Stein is not a single story, but a story split into two possibilities with no clear indication of the final status of either. His story, like the mirror in Borges' fiction, not only doubles reality (reflecting eerily the inverse of the life circumstances of Soto), but creates fissures within itself. In one version of Stein's story, he flees Chile after the coup and becomes an international guerilla fighter, taking part in armed revolutionary movements in Central and South America and in Africa. His seeming ease in traveling between these hotspots and his adoption of fake names parallels Wieder's own mysterious activities after his expulsion from the military. The idea of Stein as poet-turned-warrior obviously has great appeal to both Bibiano and the narrator, and plays to their youthful Romantic expectations. In *La literatura nazi en América*, this is the only version of Stein's story. In *Estrella distante* another version emerges as a result of Bibiano seeking out Stein's mother to tell her of her son's supposed death while fighting in San Salvador. When he finally finds her last known address, a new occupant of the house informs him that she passed away a couple of years before. Bibiano says that he only came to let her know of her son's death, to which the woman responds that that would be impossible, since she knew her son (Juan Stein) personally and he had died before his own mother's death. According to this woman, Stein was a professor at the local university, and he spent most of his free time fixing motors and applying himself to similar mechanical activities. This description of Stein, his seeming isolation from political life and his concern for fixing mechanical objects and not broken systems of

political representation, stands in stark contrast to Stein the revolutionary fighter. Seeking out proof in the form of a gravestone (that is, a physical *text* to validate this story), Bibiano searches a local cemetery but finds nothing. Instead, the juxtaposition of the two stories is allowed to stand without mediation, permitting the reader to sense the uncertainty involved in trying to parse through the conflicting stories of exile.

The story of Diego Soto, the leader of the other poetry workshop in Concepción, replicates this situation. Bibiano's story of Soto's post-coup life seems to be much more definitive than that of Stein's because Bibiano corresponded with Soto after the coup. Soto pursues the comfortable, bourgeois life of a professor living in France and appears to have dealt fairly well with the aftermath of the coup, having left the country and pursued a respectable career, married, had children, and traveled extensively within Europe and to the Americas for conferences on poetry, literature and Chilean writers. The coup seemingly leaves no trace on his life, and like Stein the professor and mechanic, he does not involve himself in the political scene. In the opinion of the narrator, Soto appears to have achieved something like happiness, almost miraculously, and to have thus escaped the "curse" of the coup.

But a second story complicates the picture drawn of Soto's life. Bibiano relates the story in a long letter to the narrator, his last, a letter that takes the form of a detective's report rather than a letter to a friend, according to the narrator. The narrator recounts Bibiano's story, all the while reiterating the fact that the absolute truth of the circumstances surrounding Soto's death remain tenuous. What is known is that following a conference in Spain, Soto waits for a connecting train to Paris at the station in Perpignan. While waiting, he simultaneously reads three different texts: a newspaper (*Le*

Monde), a book by an avant-garde French-Catalan poet, and a pulp detective novel. The narrator imagines Soto exploring the train station in the spirit of Dalí's famous inspired thoughts on the station, but then concludes that in reality he was just another Latin American tourist, thus suggesting that despite appearances he was still defined by his origin and his experiences in Concepción: "En realidad, como un turista. Como el turista que Soto siempre fue desde que dejó Concepción. Turista latinoamericano, perplejo y desesperado a partes iguales... pero turista al fin y al cabo" (79-80).^{*} Then in a remote area of the station he comes upon three neo-Nazis beating up a vagrant woman. According to the narrator, Soto, upon witnessing this scene, is aroused with indignation and charges at the attackers, cursing them rapidly in Chilean slang. He does not survive the encounter.

The fact that Soto reads three texts so different from one another speaks to the fluency between languages, cultures, and countries that Soto enjoyed and benefitted from in exile after the coup in Chile. And yet, the manner of his death, the result of careless wandering like any other tourist, and his courageous but foolhardy attempt to intervene at the scene of a crime, suggests that such fluency belied a naïveté and idealism that exceeded the limits of his cultured lifestyle. At the moment of his death he re-enters a state of political and physical opposition which he thought he had left behind, and which his bourgeois surroundings had shielded him from, but which he now embraces ecstatically: "Tal vez a Soto se le llenan los ojos de lágrimas, lágrimas de autocompasión, pues intuye que ha hallado su destino. Entre Tel Quel y el OULIPO la vida ha decidido y ha escogido la página de sucesos. En cualquier caso deja caer en el umbral su bolso de

^{*} "To be a tourist, in other words. The tourist Soto had always been since he left Concepción. A Latin American tourist, perplexed and desperate in equal parts... but a tourist nevertheless." (70)

viaje, los libros, y avanza hacia los jóvenes” (80).^{*} The narrator suggests that Soto could never completely shed his Latin American identity, that he remained a tourist, despite all the trappings of French literary culture, and here he is finally able to fulfill his destiny by confronting the group of neo-Nazi youths.

Just as with Stein, we are left with two versions of Soto’s identity: one, as a cultured professor of literature, and then another as a fighter of reactionary violence. Though the case of Soto seems more definitive (his ultimate fate is not a mystery as it is with Stein), the doubling of his life does not end there. The narrator consciously doubles Soto’s fate by coupling it with the story of Petra, another Chilean expatriate, a story which the narrator wishes he could tell Bibiano about because “la historia de Petra... de alguna manera es a Soto lo que la historia del doble de Juan Stein es a nuestro Juan Stein” (81).[†] Which Stein is “nuestro” (ours) and which Stein is the “doble” (double) is left unclear here, but can be deciphered after reading the story of Petra.

The story of Petra, whose real name is Lorenzo, is bizarre and fantastic enough that the narrator suggests reciting it in the form of fairy tale. “La historia de Petra la debería contar como un cuento: Érase una vez un niño pobre de Chile...”[‡] And as in a fable, Lorenzo ably overcomes many obstacles, both as a child and as an adult. While still very young, both of his arms are amputated after he climbs up a power pole. As an adolescent he discovers that he is gay. The narrator comments sarcastically on the dire straits of his situation:

^{*} “Perhaps his eyes filled with tears, tears of self-pity, because something told him he had met his destiny. Now he wouldn’t have to choose between *Tel Quel* and the OuLiPo. For him, life had chosen the crime reports. In any case, he dropped his bag and the books at the door and approached the youths.” (71)

[†] “It was the story of Petra, and, in a way, Petra is to Soto what Juan Stein’s double is to the Juan Stein we knew.” (72)

[‡] “Petra’s story should be told like a fairy tale: Once upon a time in Chile there was a poor little boy...” (72)

Así que Lorenzo creció en Chile y sin brazos, lo que de por sí hacía su situación bastante desventajosa, pero encima creció en el Chile de Pinochet, lo que convertía cualquier situación desventajosa en desesperada, pero esto no era todo, pues pronto descubrió que era homosexual, lo que convertía la situación desesperada en inconcebible e inenarrable. (81)*

After an aborted suicide attempt, Lorenzo decides to become a poet and saves up enough money while working as a street artist to leave for Europe. In Germany, Lorenzo acquires prosthetic arms, which he enjoys primarily for the cyberkinetic sensation that they give him. An unrepentant Romantic, he endures heartbreak at the hands of many lovers, and ends up frequently living alone, which engenders curiosity among his friends as to how he can get by without arms. Despite his disabilities, Lorenzo becomes a very competent musician and dancer on the streets of Europe, so much so that he is selected to play the part of “Petra” the mascot for the 1992 Paralympic Games in Barcelona, designed by Javier Mariscal. Within three years of the Games, Lorenzo dies of AIDS.

The narrator only mentions once how he discovered the story of Petra. Around the time of the Olympic Games in Barcelona he was hospitalized for treatment of his liver (a fact which links the narrator once more to the real-life Bolaño and his own liver disease). In the hospital, the narrator finds the story of Petra to be an inexhaustible source of pleasure, reading all the interviews with Lorenzo that he can get his hands on in the two to three newspapers he reads everyday. The narrator then posits rather enigmatically the following thoughts on the relationship between Lorenzo, Soto and Stein:

A veces, cuando pienso en Stein y en Soto no puedo evitar pensar también en Lorenzo.

A veces creo que Lorenzo fue mejor poeta que Stein y Soto. Pero usualmente cuando pienso en ellos los veo juntos.

* “So Lorenzo grew up in Chile without arms, an unfortunate situation for any child, but he also grew up in Pinochet’s Chile, which turned unfortunate situations into desperate ones, on top of which he soon discovered that he was homosexual, which made his already desperate situation inconceivable and indescribable.” (72)

Aunque lo único que los une fue la circunstancia de nacer en Chile. Y un libro que tal vez leyó Stein, que seguro leyó Soto (habla de él en un largo artículo sobre el exilio y la errancia publicado en México) y que también leyó, entusiasta como casi siempre que leía algo (¿cómo daba vuelta las hojas?: ¡con la lengua, como deberíamos hacerlo todos!), Lorenzo. El libro se titula *Ma gestalt-thérapie* y su autor es el doctor Frederick Perls, psiquiatra, fugitivo de la Alemania nazi y vagabundo por tres continentes. En España, que yo sepa, no se ha traducido. (85)*

On a superficial level, the narrator notes two contingencies that cause him to think of these three Chileans together: their common birth in Chile and their common reading of a single text. Previously, though, the narrator considered Lorenzo's story as a good pairing with Soto's story, that it occupied the same position to Soto's story as the story of the "double" of Juan Stein did in relation to the story of "our" Juan Stein. Having read Lorenzo's story we can now identify which Stein is the "double" and which Stein is "ours." Lorenzo's life as a disabled, gay artist making his way through life by performing on the street serves as the polar opposite to the settled, bourgeois lifestyle of Soto, just as the story of Stein the international revolutionary fighter runs counter in every sense to the true fate of "our" Stein, the professor who returns home and dedicates his time to the repair of machines.

These pairs of stories mark an oscillation between exposure and withdrawal in the aftermath of the coup. The truth of each version does not matter so much as the oscillation between possibilities created by weaving together these stories, a weaving which stands as a counterpoint to the encyclopedic form's cataloguing and siloing of lives, its firm charting of individual lives along a historical timeline. The coup is the

* "Sometimes, when I think of Stein and Soto, I can't help thinking of Lorenzo too. Sometimes I think he was the best poet of the three. But usually I see them all together. Although the only thing they had in common was having been born in Chile. And possibly a book: Stein may have read it; Soto certainly did (he mentioned it in a long article on exile and rootlessness published in Mexico), and Lorenzo devoured it enthusiastically, like almost every book he read. (How did turn the pages? With his tongue: an example to us all!) The book was called *Ma Gestalt-thérapie*, and its author, Dr. Frederick S. Perls, was a psychiatrist, a fugitive from Nazi Germany and a wanderer on three continents. As far as I know, it hasn't been published in Spain." (76)

moment of cleavage that both sunders and ties together the multiple possibilities of the alternating stories., and each story reflects the different opportunities opened and closed by the coup. To understand who Stein was, thus, means being able to hold in balance the two versions of his fate, since neither story in isolation contains the truth of his entire existence; just as to understand who Soto was means being able to see something of Soto reflected in the fate of Lorenzo. Soto lived his life within the corridors of a bourgeois, European life opened up to him by his knowledge of French, French poetry, and Latin American poetry. In the last moment of Soto's life, he retreats from the comforts of his bourgeois life and exposes his own body and mortality to danger in order to defend his principles. That moment of exposure appears throughout Lorenzo's life, is quite literally incarnated in his life. From the moment when as a child he climbed the utility pole, through his life as a street artist, and then up to his death from AIDS, Lorenzo's life defined itself as exposure to the elements, to social traffic on the street, and to the bodies of lovers. The coup exposed the three to the violence of political and military power, but only one, Lorenzo, answered this exposure with a similar gesture of self-exposure; Stein and Soto withdrew within. This appears to be the basis for the narrator's judgment that sometimes he thought Lorenzo was the best poet of the three. Poetry, here, does not refer to a written text, but life performed as a text.

A fourth "poet" haunts the story of these three Chileans. Wieder goes unspoken in the narrator's comparisons, though the reference to Perls, a refugee of the Nazi state, brings him back to mind. The immediate return to Wieder in the sentence that follows the above quoted passage, however, thrusts Wieder back out of the shadows: "Pero volvamos

al origen, volvamos a Carlos Wieder y al año de gracia de 1974” (86).^{*} Positioning Wieder as the “origin” leads to the conclusion that the stories of Stein, Soto, and Lorenzo relate to Wieder in a fundamental way. These preceding stories structure how we understand the story of Wieder, and the connection resides in the character of Lorenzo. Like Wieder, Lorenzo has a fundamental relationship with the sky, for it is the act of climbing up toward the sky, either on trees or power poles, that will mark him forever through the amputation of his two arms. Similar to but also fundamentally opposed to Wieder’s photographs, Lorenzo’s art will be intrinsically tied to the public display of the mutilated body and its exposure, the key difference being that it is his *own* body, not the bodies of tortured prisoners.[†] Lorenzo, again like Wieder, adopts a new name (Petra) in order to reach a new market. And finally, Lorenzo’s highpoint as an artist comes in the service of performing for a city, Barcelona, and adopting a character that suits that function. Lorenzo’s story thus acts as a conduit connecting Wieder to Soto and to Stein. The joint task of storytelling by Bibiano and the narrator, fueled by their research and network of epistolary contacts, allows for these connections to emerge.

The dilution of the single voice and text does not evolve only from the deconstruction of the encyclopedic form that has been elucidated here. The mediated and joint effort at storytelling reveals that the narration of *Estrella distante* embodies an extension of the atmosphere and dynamic of the literary workshops brought to an end by the coup. The joint construction of these stories by the narrator and Bibiano is also about the construction of a community, or the evocation of a lost community; it is not, as Wieder would have imagined his own work, the expression of a singular individual. The

^{*} “But let us return to the beginning, to Carlos Wieder and the year of grace 1974.” (77)

[†] Even after Lorenzo buys prosthetic arms in Germany, the narrator remarks that he would remove them when performing in the street and in the company of his lovers.

reading of the relationship between literature and community gathers strength when placed in the specific historical context of Chile in the early seventies, and especially the importance of the *taller* in Chile's literary culture. The central significance of the *taller* is signaled at the beginning of *Estrella distante*, when the first appearance of Wieder is discussed in the context of the narrator's participation in a poetry workshop, or *taller literario*. The workshop, ostensibly dedicated to refining and critiquing the poetry of its members, nevertheless provided a platform for a wide-ranging set of topics, not the least of which was politics, as the narrator makes clear:

La mayoría de los que íbamos [al taller] hablábamos mucho: no sólo de poesía, sino de política, de viajes (que por entonces ninguno imaginaba que iban a ser lo que después fueron), de pintura, de arquitectura, de fotografía, de revolución y lucha armada; la lucha armada que nos iba a traer una nueva vida y una nueva época, pero que para la mayoría de nosotros era como un sueño o, más apropiadamente, como la llave que nos abriría la puerta de los sueños, los únicos por los cuales merecía la pena vivir. (13)*

The youthfulness of the participants (all between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three; the leader of the group, Juan Stein, in his late twenties, barely older than them) combined with the headiness of the times made for plentiful discussion along utopian and revolutionary lines. And yet for all the idealism of their conversations, the importance of the *taller* as a generator of literary culture and community perspective cannot be overstated.

From an outsider's point of view, the relevance of *talleres literarios* or "literary workshops" to the national production of literary culture in Chile might seem marginal. But in fact *talleres* were instrumental in the formation of many writers in Chile before

* "Most of us there talked a lot, not just about poetry, but politics, travel (little did we know what our travels would be like), painting, architecture, photography, revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought, but which, for most of us, was like a dream, or rather the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for." (3)

and after the coup. As Alice Nelson has noted, “one of the primary ways that literary activity continued after the coup was through the proliferation of *talleres literarios*, which provided a collective space for both the defense and the development of literary craftspeople (predominately in poetry and narrative)” (253-254). *Talleres* provided a forum for the discussion of everyday life, a conduit through which knowledge could be passed between writers of different generations, and a space in which a simulation of democratic practices could take root in the open sharing of criticism and differing opinions. Many of Chile’s major writers in the 80’s, such as Pía Barros, Ana María del Río, Sonia Montecino, Ramón Díaz Eterovic, Diego Muñoz, Carlos Franz, and Diamela Eltit, would emerge from such *talleres* (118, 254). Moreover, *talleres* offered a base from which publishing efforts were launched, resulting in the publication of “handcrafted magazines, photocopied editions, and leaflets” (254). Although books were censored by the regime until 1983, and prohibitively expensive to publish in any case, the effect of the coup on literary production was such that, rather perversely, “literature became a more collective enterprise because of (and despite) the pressures of postcoup Chilean society” (Nelson).

In the novella, not surprisingly, Carlos Wieder, then going under the name of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, does not fully participate in the *taller*, and this is evident in the fact that Ruiz-Tagle “no hablaba demasiado”: precisely what everyone else was doing, talking about every last thing that could come up related to literature or politics. Wieder resists literary culture’s modeling of democratic practices in his hesitancy to speak or to communicate, and moreover in his willingness to lie outright about his own intentions and ideas. Even the poems he submits are said to be so wooden and distant as to appear

not to be his. His ultimate stance on how the production of literature should relate to forms of community-building reveals itself most fully in the form taken by the skywritings: there is no possibility for two-way communication nor dissent with poetry that fashions itself simultaneously after the model of aerial bombardment and the image of a god writing out his commandments to a population that lies prone and defenseless.

In the novella the *taller* no longer embodies the paradigm of literary transmission and community after the coup.* Because of the general state of fear and because the two leaders of the *talleres*, Juan Stein and Diego Soto, have disappeared, the *talleres* in Concepción come to an end. The community function of the *talleres* shifts to the epistolary exchange between Bibiano, who remains in Chile working as a shoe salesman, and the narrator who moves abroad and eventually settles in Spain. Instead of gathering together poems from his peers for his annual anthology, Bibiano now busies himself with tracking Wieder, figuring out what happened to Stein, and corresponding with Soto, the narrator, and many other contacts throughout Latin America. The degree to which Bibiano serves as a clearinghouse for information within Latin American letters is given metaphorical expression: his contacts are described as “las incontables antenas epistolares que desde su zapatería de Concepción tenía Bibiano con el mundo” (68). Bibiano’s epistolary network serves as a substitute, to a degree, for the loss of community and literary sharing that results from the dissolution of the *talleres*. For though the coup has led to the kidnapping and murder of some of its members, and the fleeing and forced exile of others, through Bibiano’s epistolary contacts and archival research he nevertheless manages to maintain a sense of shared community through the creation and

* Though in real-life Chile the *talleres* continued meeting after the coup, at first clandestinely then more openly after 1976. See Nelson, 254. That the *talleres* in *Estrella distante* stop meeting, parallels more closely Bolaño’s own experience after 1973, rather than the actual situation in Chile.

sharing of stories. The very text of the novella *Estrella distante* constitutes itself as both the narrator's rejoinder to Bibiano's research and correspondence, and his addition to and amendment of Bibiano's stories (Stein, Soto, Wieder).

The narrator's contribution to writing the story of Wieder takes on a physical dimension when Abel Romero, a private detective contracted by an unknown Chilean, appears and asks him to help track Wieder down in the flesh. He needs the narrator's help because, being a poet, he can help find Wieder, also a poet, a description the narrator disputes, saying he considers him a criminal, not a poet. After agreeing to terms, Romero brings the narrator a suitcase full of right-wing magazines of a wide-variety and from multiple nationalities. The narrator is told to sort them through to find traces of Wieder, a task which the narrator finds invigorating after a long period of poor health and lack of writing: "Las revistas de Romero... obraron en mí con el efecto de antídoto" (130).

After the narrator identifies "Jules Defoe" as a potential pseudonym for Wieder, Romero disappears for a while before turning up again at the narrator's apartment, saying he has located Wieder and all this time he has been very close by. That same day they take a train out of Barcelona to Lloret-de-mar, where Romero hopes the narrator will be able to identify Wieder. Romero leaves the narrator at a bar where he expects Wieder will show up later that evening.

Sitting in the bar for a while, trying to read a book and intermittently gazing out at the shoreline, the narrator nervously waits. The book is specified as being the collected works of the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz, translated by Juan Carlos Vidal. Romero had advised him that a magazine would be more suitable reading material so as to remain inconspicuous. The narrator had retorted that it's "ok," he really likes reading this author,

misunderstanding why Romero would want him to be reading something else. The selection of this precise author is not fortuitous: if Wieder is earlier seen as a resurgence of Nazism from the very outset of his skywritings, then Schulz's victimization and murder at the hands of the Nazis does not seem coincidental. The narrator struggles to read the book and in his nervousness at the idea of possibly meeting Wieder, and possibly being recognized by him, the text transforms into "escarabajos incomprensibles, atareados en un mundo enigmático" (151). The text's transformation into physical beings prefigures Wieder stepping out of his place in the oral and written legends told about him and into a physical dimension. The narrator's thoughts uncontrollably reach back into the past, as he thinks about Bibiano and the Garmendia sisters and other victims of Wieder. He notes how clear the sky is and calculates that he is only a five minute walk from the shore, both potential references to Wieder's skywritings and the airdrops of bodies conducted by the Chilean military.

Upon Wieder's entrance, a feeling of nausea overcomes the narrator and when Wieder sits down near him a vision strikes him: he imagines himself as a Siamese twin of Wieder, pegged to his side and looking over his shoulder to see what Wieder is reading. The vision reinforces the notion of doubling that has been developed among the characters of the novella. This feeling of similarity is reinforced when the narrator notices how their postures reflect one another almost perfectly, both seated three tables apart before windows looking out at the ocean, both reading a book and smoking, a recognitions that causes the narrator to stab out his cigarette in a motion of disgust. The identification *of* Wieder (requested by Romero) cannot take place except through an identification *with* Wieder. Throughout his exile the narrator has, wittingly or

unwittingly, sought to distance himself from his past and the people of his past. Though Bibiano reaches out to him through his letters, and brings him news of his discoveries, the narrator does not write back frequently to Bibiano and the correspondence between them eventually dries up. Here, however, in the bar in Lloret, the narrator cannot escape his past and he realizes how closely his own life has paralleled the life of the most abhorred figure of his past (both are now exiled from Chile and both subsist as writers on the margin).

With this conscious realization of similarity, the narrator continues to compare himself to Wieder. The narrator observes how Wieder has aged more rapidly than himself and has developed a “hard look,” a look particular to Latin American men his age. For the narrator, Wieder appears to be passing through a bad moment and is waiting patiently for his luck to turn. Most of all, Wieder does not look in the slightest like either a poet, or a legendary assassin, or even a former Air Force pilot who had taken to the skies to write poems. All of the attributes which had marked Wieder in the stories told of him fall away in his physical presence, revealing only a hardened survivor reading a book on global warming who leaves a measly tip for the waitress, someone who looks like any number of “Latin Americans” of that age – Wieder is demythified and historicized. Sapped of his aura, Wieder occupies the simple position of a customer in a café, both to the narrator and to all those around him. He may be a mass murderer, but his appearance as a customer in a café enters him into a relationship of exchangeability with every other customer in the café – the only signifier that matters to the commercial system is the ability of the customers to pay their bill.

Denied a tragic ending or a dramatic encounter, the ordinariness of the situation nevertheless occludes another sense of exchangeability that subsists just beneath the surface and gives the encounter a greater significance. In a particularly Bolaño-esque move, the scene can be interpreted and understood through the mediations performed by the individual texts that the narrator and Wieder are reading: the collected works of Schulz and the book on global warming, respectively. Each text points to a disaster or catastrophe, in the past (the Holocaust) and in the future (climate change), which themselves had a complicated relationship with visibility (the concentration camps were hidden; the evidence of climate change is subtle and gradual rather than overt and sudden) which turn them into events that can be denied, much as the appearances in the café can belie the truth of the situation (a serial murderer is in the café).

Recoiling from the vision of himself as the Siamese twin of Wieder, the narrator seeks refuge in the safety of his book, trying even harder to keep on reading. The text transforms once more, morphing from beetles scurrying across the page, to the eyes of Bruno Schulz, slowly blinking at the narrator from within the dark grey interior of a cloud. At the same time that he imagines Wieder's "turned off" eyes staring at him, the narrator is confronted with Schulz's eyes:

Las palabras de Bruno Schulz adquirieron por un instante una dimensión monstruosa, casi insoportable. Sentí que los apagados ojos de Wieder me estaban escrutando y al mismo tiempo, en las páginas que daba vueltas (tal vez demasiado aprisa), los escarabajos que antes eran las letras se convertían en ojos, en los ojos de Bruno Schulz, y se abrían y se cerraban una y otra vez, unos ojos claros como el cielo, brillantes como el lomo del mar, que se abrían y parpadeaban, una y otra vez, en medio de la oscuridad total. No, total no, en medio de una oscuridad lechosa, como en el interior de una nube negra. (152)

The monstrosity of Wieder's character becomes absorbed and reflected in the pages of the book, and the nonfunctioning eyes of Wieder, the perpetrator of fascist violence, find

their echo in the blinking eyes of Schulz, the victim of fascist violence. The narrator is the subject of both gazes, and yet he is the only one of the three with the agency to serve as witness, to Wieder's crimes and to Schulz's suffering. Literature, allegorically incarnated in a book in this scene, offers no escape from either the historical or the actual – the “distance” noted in the title of the novella has been abrogated. Wieder, for so long a mythic figure, someone who “siempre ha sido una figura ausente” (119), is both made present and demythologized. But the experience of the recognition is still mediated by the literary, by the book and the surrealist vision it inspires.*

The narrator expresses great relief once Wieder leaves the bar without having noticed anyone watching him, along with newfound feelings of liberty and happiness. By virtue of this demythologization of Wieder, the narrator too is brought back into the stream of history, he is able to resituate himself within and as part of Chilean national life, even as an exile. But when Romero comes back, the narrator quickly realizes that the job is not yet done, and that Romero intends to kill Wieder. He pleads with him not to, but Romero overrules his objections. He leaves the narrator by himself in a park, goes to Wieder's apartment, and returns with a folder of papers. Though the scene of the killing is not described nor narrated, and the death of Wieder is not even announced, one presumes that the former policeman, Romero, has killed Wieder in his apartment.†

* The understated surrealism of this moment is a hallmark of Bolaño, as are the pervasive links to literary culture, including the selection of Schulz (an author also noted for his surrealist style) for the narrator's reading material.

† Moreover, in the first iteration of the story in *La literatura nazi en América*, Wieder's date and place of death (or rather, Carlos Ramírez Hoffman's) is noted as “Lloret de Mar, España – 1998,” which would indicate that Romero does indeed kill Wieder. This is further evidence of how *La literatura nazi en América* offers a closed model to the open and ambiguous one of *Estrella distante*, as is the fact that the index in *La literatura nazi* presents an entry that gives definitive closure to the life of Juan Cherniakovski (*Estrella distante*'s Juan Stein): “Juan Cherniakovski, Valdivia, 1943-El Salvador, 1984. Poeta y guerrillero panamericano. Sobrino en segundo grado del general soviético Iván Cherniakovski” (209).

Wieder, having been reduced from the mythical to the historical, has been reduced even further, the remainder of his life expressed in the folder of papers Romero carries. This reduction to the material or the textual means he is no longer an absent figure (“siempre ha sido una figura ausente” (113)) haunting the narrator and his friend, but a figure *of* absence.

In killing Wieder, the narrator and Romero follow the same structural pattern as the coup, in the sense that their private (and privatized) vengeance once again subordinates the public to the private, as Williams points out (Williams 138). Delivered from the myth of Wieder, the narrator faces once more the horror of history. In this, however, they do not escape the larger forces of history, which in the guise of neoliberalism still favors private interests over public ones, and thus if it is to be argued that the narrator suffers from melancholy due to the withdrawal of a lost desire, this melancholy is also a societal one. But rather than seeing the narrator trapped in the melancholic reconstruction of the enemy’s face, the narrator seems to have moved on, even if he still remains in a transitional state. Romero certainly remains trapped in the past, which can be seen in the description of his eyes after the killing, a description which strongly resembles what is said about Wieder’s eyes on numerous occasions: “Ojos que saben. Ojos que creen en todas las posibilidades pero que al mismo tiempo *saben* que nada tiene remedio” (156). This position is emblematic of a strictly historical outlook, one that can only think of possibility through its impossibility, as the imagination of an impossible deviation from the actual.

This attitude is countered not only by the narrator’s deftness with possibility as a poet, but his ability to work through his imaginary identification with Wieder (this

identification is present even before the encounter in the bar; earlier in the novella the narrator recounts a dream in which he and Wieder both find themselves floating on the sea, survivors of a shipwreck) and to come out from underneath the shadow Wieder cast on his life (after the encounter he is able to see Wieder in a historicized light, and thus as contingent and not an evil force). The narrator's ultimate self-conscious recognition of his identification with Wieder allows him to move forward with his own life (after reading the right-wing magazines he (humorously?) promises himself that "En adelante escribiré mis poemas con humildad y trabajaré para no morirme de hambre" (138)).

If the narrator can be seen as stepping out of the abyss, even if it is uncertain where it will lead him, another character in the novella (in yet another parallel to the character of the narrator) helps us to understand what it means to speak from the abyss and to move beyond it.* This is Amalia Maluenda, the Mapuche employee of the Garmendia family (and also a character who is not in the original story in *La literatura nazi en América*) who vanishes the night that Wieder kidnaps the sisters and kills their aunt. Her sudden disappearance enrages Wieder momentarily, but then she is forgotten. Bibiano will later analyze a poem, one he thinks is written by Wieder under a pseudonym, that he believes makes cryptic references to her. At that point in the text we are told that members of the Catholic Church, who are making investigations into the disappearances, have spotted her living in the countryside, protected by her family "con el firme propósito de no hablar jamás con ningún chileno" (112). Like the narrator, she

* Bibiano most strongly doubles the narrator, especially since it is he who writes the equivalent of *La literatura nazi en América* within the world of *Estrella distante*; but Stein and Soto could be seen as well as alternate egos, in addition to Wieder who is the evil twin. For a psychoanalytical-Marxist reading of the many symbolic and imaginary identifications made by the narrator, see Adolfo Cacheiro's "The Force Field of the Real: Imaginary and Symbolic Identification in Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante*." Interestingly, his thoughts on the political significance of the ending of the novella is that, rather than ending in a melancholic state of disenchantment, "what takes place in the political development of the narrator in ED is a turn to Stalinism" (132).

runs away and wants to have no part in Chilean national life. But finally at some moment post-1994, Maluenda makes an appearance to testify before a judge who is investigating the murder of the Garmendia sisters and their aunt. Having withdrawn into the Mapuche community for such a long time, she has partially lost her ability to speak Spanish (it is said to have been “volatilizado”) and she mixes in Mapuche phrases frequently. But what is especially noticeable is her highly figurative use of language as well as the description given of the story she recounts: “Su historia está hilada a través de un verso heroico (*épos*), cíclico, que quienes asombrados la escuchan entienden que en parte es su historia, la historia de la ciudadana Amalia Maluenda, antigua empleada de las Garmendia, y en parte la historia de Chile. Una historia de terror.” Her story is not simply one story, but is woven into a national story through the form of epic verse, which is heroic and cyclical. What does this mean? Certainly not that she has become a poet, but that her mixed and corrupted language and her style of storytelling exceed the confines of her individual situation, instead cycling back and forth between the individual and national. Her language is “broken,” but its brokenness speaks with greater eloquence of the violence she has witnessed. Speaking at the edge of language and two different cultures, she gives voice to the figuration of that limit as both constitutive and alien. This is perhaps clarified by the way she describes Wieder and the Garmendia sisters, and finally the night of their kidnapping:

cuando habla de Wieder, el teniente parece ser muchas personas a la vez: un intruso, un enamorado, un guerrero, un demonio. Cuando habla de las hermanas Garmendia las compara con el aire, con las buenas plantas, con cachorros de perro. Cuando recuerda la noche aciaga del crimen dice que escuchó una música de españoles. Al ser requerida a especificar la frase «música de españoles», contesta: *la pura rabia, señor, la pura inutilidad.* (119)

Maluenda's descriptions accumulate descriptors, similes, and clichés, and then she makes a metaphor that ties that night of terror with an aesthetic experience that is also a colonial one. The "música de españoles" provides a parallel between the violence of the military coup and the violence of colonization. The violence of the coup itself dissembles the fact that it does violence to a nation founded on colonial violence, and thus her comments link the events of that night to a larger history of injustice.

Maluenda's speech invokes the voice of testimonio but it is imagined as compatible rather than opposed to literary form or figurative speech. Her remarks bring us back to the conception of the literary provided by Levinson near the beginning of this chapter. Elaborating on those earlier thoughts, Levinson writes that

the trope or figurative language is the very signature of literariness... The trope, after all, is a phrase that does not fall to the listener's or reader's common or familiar sense, on the one hand; and on the other, it is the analogy, the bearer of the relation or likeness between (at least) two fields or concepts, one that neither concept can represent or disclose. (27)

The possible confluence between the literary and the testimonial begins with the trope as the figuration of a link or border between two cultures. This mixing of testimonio and figurative language (épos – which means "to say") is the counterpart to the intermingling of documentary form and catalogue poetry that I will examine in my chapter on 2666 and it is not dissimilar to the undermining of the encyclopedic form that has been discussed here. This should not be confused with a reduction *to* the literary, but an imagination of the literary as capable of absorbing the testimonial voice or the documentary form as a gesture (extrapolated from its typical frame of reference) and thus imbuing it with a capacity that is fundamental to the literary or the figurative: the figuration of absence or of an other. *Estrella distante*'s aesthetic and its interweaving of stories allows us to

appreciate characters such as the narrator, Bibiano, Stein and Soto both as absent figures and figurations of absence, caught in a liminal world, in between multiple fields of sense.

Chapter Three: The Catalogue of Femicides in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*: A Failure of Witnessing, the Beginnings of an Account

The reception of Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel *2666* in the popular and academic presses was marked by particular attention to the long recitation of murdered maquiladora workers which occupies much of the fourth chapter in the book. The listing of "femicides" or "feminicidios" has been described alternatively as a "mausoleo" (Muniz 38), a "censo" (Fourez, qtd. in Franco, "Questions" 214), a chronicling of the real-life murders of Ciudad Juárez (Levinson, "Case Closed" 177), a "surplus" which "produce[s] an effect of exhaustion in the reader" (Reinhardt 79), a work of writing that "demands from the reader a kind of abject submission" (Kirsch). As hard as it is to name, the murders have come to occupy a place of central importance to the novel and perhaps to Bolaño's oeuvre as a whole. The representation of the murders poses a challenge to readers and critics alike, and its epic scope and character add force to the question: just what kind of representation is it and what is its significance? In this chapter I propose to read the chronicling of the murders in two senses, as an aesthetic form and as a political representation, both of which mutually inform each other. As an aesthetic form, the list-like appearance of the murders in the novel masks a deeper literary richness: in employing an array of poetical tropes, it evokes the poetic form of the "catalogue," a form which precedes even Homer within Western culture. As a political representation, the catalogue both mimics and differs substantially from the type of "catalogues" of

victims published in official reports of state crimes in various countries of Latin America in the past two decades. The listing of the dead and disappeared in official reports function within liberalism and as such within a model that equates writing and naming with presence and plenitude. Such accounting for the dead primarily serves the purpose of restoring balance to the ledgers of the state rather than memorializing the dead or opening up to view the political structure through which these crimes took place and which persists today in its erasure of labor. The catalogue in *2666* attempts to name the dead and furnish as much information as possible about the place and manner of death, much like those official reports of the dead; yet the catalogue distinguishes itself by aesthetically foregrounding its inadequacy in giving an account of those who, even before their death, were of no account – in Jacques Rancière’s sense of the term – within the dominant political and economic systems. The catalogue operates within a model of writing structured on the inescapable pairing of presence and absence. It reads a double erasure in the murder of the maquiladora workers, first political then physical, and in a sense the reading of this erasure supersedes the writing of identity, because it allows for the visible emergence of two objects of representation: not only the dead but the structures of neoliberal power which enabled their death and which erased their identity *avant la lettre*.

The murders detailed in the catalogue of *2666* are based on the real-life serial murder of women in Ciudad Juárez, which began in the early nineties. The majority of the victims worked in the maquiladoras and industrial parks that are clustered around the Mexico – United States border.* The list-like repetitiveness of the narration of the

* Maquiladoras are factories that import materials and then export the manufactured products without being subject to tariffs or restrictions on the movement of commodities, and they are frequently exempt from

murders in the novel recalls some of the most well-known iterations of catalogues of antiquity (the catalogue of ships in *The Iliad*, the catalogue of famous dead women in *The Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*). These catalogues served as a structure for listing a large quantity of men, women, animals, ships, or other items, but they could also function as a platform from which to launch narratives, as in Hesiod, or it could set the stage and provide a sense of the size and scope of an unprecedented historical event, as it did in *The Iliad*.*

Despite its antiquated form, in the hands of Bolaño the catalogue is not a relic of the past unsuited to the political realities underlying the femicides taking place in Santa Teresa, the fictionalized version of Ciudad Juárez. Its implementation in *2666* proves remarkably versatile and multifaceted, and it becomes especially powerful as it accumulates momentum and rhetorical force from its individual entries. The catalogue voices the disempowerment of the maquiladora workers and other victims of masculinized power in a similar sense to that of Antigone's cry in response to the prohibition of burial imposed on her brother's corpse: her voice emerges from a position of disempowerment to criticize Creon's act of posthumous desubjectification by decree of Polyneices. Despite their weakness both of social position and voice, Antigone's cry

labor union requirements. They first appeared in Mexico in 1965, but later exploded in growth after Mexico's debt was restructured in the early 1980's in return for the institution of neoliberal reforms, and accelerated even more in the nineties with the passage of NAFTA and the "tequila crisis" of 1995. The maquiladoras operate in a zone of exclusion and invisibility: excluded from having to pay local taxes, and not bound by the law to acknowledge the legal representation of workers by unions. The maquiladoras primarily hire women workers because they are socially and politically disempowered and thus less likely to fight for even the meager work protections allowed to them by law (men still occupy the managerial positions in the maquiladoras). The explosion in the number of maquiladoras tracks closely with, and is a product of, the spread and influence of neoliberal policies in Mexico.

* Catalogues also served a concrete political function. Oral poets would frequently be paid to insert the names of powerful families into their genealogies, in order to establish on firmer footing the rights and privileges of an aristocratic power structure which over time might have become weakened or contested. In Bolaño's use of the catalogue, the reverse takes place: the disempowered are the subject of his catalogue and the political process of their disempowerment underlies this representation.

and Bolaño's catalogue acquire a certain kind of power that exceeds the rhetorical and becomes "political." The catalogue gathers together the remnants of the lives of the maquiladora workers and constructs a vivid representation of the absence at the center of neoliberalism and its power of desubjectification.

Late twentieth-century Mexico presents a scenario in which the corporatist state managed by the PRI has slowly ceded ground, from the 80's until the end of the century, to the neoliberal power of foreign capital. Neoliberalism controls directly the relationship between first-world capital and third-world labor, between visible subjects (the consumers) and invisible subjects (the workers), with little to no interference from the state of Mexico or countries in similar positions. Neoliberalism, which relies on a policy of political-economic exceptionalism, set the groundwork for the creation of the maquiladoras.* The maquiladoras are largely exempt from local regulations and taxes, the assumption being that the mere presence of the maquiladoras will provide enough of an economic boost to the city of Santa Teresa to void the necessity of paying taxes. Under this exceptionalism, maquiladoras workers are largely dispensable and replaceable (having no possibility of union representation), a perspective reinforced by their serial murder, which occur without judicial repercussions. The ubiquity and seriality of the exposed corpses discovered on the edges of the city over many years (a fact given vivid expression in the catalogue) metonymize the essential dispensability and replaceability of

* In Mexico the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 80's undermined the welfare provisions of the corporatist state, laid waste to what few peasant land rights still existed, and led to the unsustainable massing of populations in urban centers and on the border. These poor conditions were exacerbated by the explosion in new maquiladoras following the signing of NAFTA. The dispossession involved in this war between two forms of capitalism (embedded versus neoliberal) can be read in the excess symbolized by the mass murder of women maquiladora workers. The exposure of the corpse is simultaneously the exposure of the city, itself rendered corpse-like through the disempowerment effected by neoliberal policies.

the maquiladora workers within neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is blind to death, as Grant Farred has put it, because it inhabits the position of death:

It is precisely because of neoliberal capital's indifference to life that the... the deaths of the women in Ciudad Juárez... could not be more irrelevant... Neoliberalism, nowhere more evident for Bolaño than in the exploitative conditions that obtain for the Third World women who work in the maquiladoras, does more than name the ontological conditions that govern the deployment of death in the postcolonial state. It is ironic that neoliberalism—an economic force so intent on the destruction of postcolonial resources, labor, the environment, and social structures not least among them, and so indifferent to the life or death of the state in which it operates (as long as it continues to be profitable)- is so singularly incapable of speaking to the event of death. In its most reductive formulation, neoliberalism is unable to speak—let alone speak (un)ethically, that is, to name itself as working programmatically against the common good—to that which it constitutively is (692).

The catalogue reveals the blindness of neoliberalism with regards to death while also countering the sense of dispensability of the victims. The accounting of these deaths accomplished by the catalogue in *2666* is one way in which the effects of the erasure performed by neoliberal capital can become legible. The catalogue, I will argue in this chapter, mediates the relationship between the murders of maquiladora workers and the socioeconomic effects of neoliberalism in the city. The catalogue does not resolve the crimes by connecting victims with criminals, it offers no judicial solution to the femicides. On a superficial reading, it seemingly only divulges what the police investigations are able to ascertain about the victims, which is often little, and frequently nothing. Yet through its form, as will be analyzed later, the catalogue manages to draw these individual reports and investigations into a larger frame and political context that becomes vividly perceptible to the reader. A closer reading of the catalogue as an aesthetic device allows one to attend to diverse facets of the catalogue that may otherwise go unremarked, in particular its rhythm. By combining this reading of the form of the

catalogue with sustained attention to its political implications as a mode of documenting socioeconomic changes in Ciudad Juárez and Mexico as a whole, one can see how the catalogue's insistent accounting of bodies, much like Antigone's implacable defense of the burial rites for her brother's exposed body outside the city of Thebes, traces the erosion of a previous political order, the one party monopolistic state of the PRI, and the ascension of a new one: the stateless order of neoliberal capital.

Turning to the theories of Rancière helps to illuminate this intersection of aesthetics and politics. For Rancière, art's political power emerges from its ability to disturb "the sensible order of perception" by asserting "the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone" as speaking subjects (*Dis-Agreement* 17). The unfettered and uncontested administration of power is what Rancière calls the "police" (in contrast to the "political") and it governs the dominant order of perception. In the city of Santa Teresa, the police order would be the rule of neoliberal capital in the form of the maquiladoras, which have superseded the state. The police order views the maquiladora workers, and indeed the citizens of Santa Teresa itself, as dispensable and largely invisible; for neoliberalism to profit, they must necessarily be dispensable and invisible. One could say that the catalogue's aesthetic force produces a political effect by repeatedly rehearsing a rupture within "the partition of the perceptible" in Santa Teresa. The catalogue's even-handed and equal descriptive treatment of each victim incites a recognition of the equality of each discovered corpse, and thus to the equality of the life that once animated it – and thus inaugurates the political by being "a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the

day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being” (30). The systematic assumption of the equality of those who do not have a share in the police order – in this case, the maquiladora workers – reveals the contingency of the police (30).

The catalogue also recuperates a certain stamp of specificity and identity for the victims, which may, in the aggregate, form the beginning of an opposition to the logic of substitution and dispensability which dominates the treatment of the maquiladora workforce. This effort at recuperation is necessarily partial, faltering, and limited, and indeed what distinguishes the catalogue is how it frequently points, in various ways, to the gap between its account and what actually happened (which remains unknowable) – it points, in other words, to erasure, whether physical, political, or aesthetic. The catalogue insists equally both on continuing to render an account of the victims and on its continual failure to do so. Within the confines of the novel the catalogue performs an act of contestation which I argue would fit Rancière’s definition of the “political.”

Other critics have also used Rancière’s analysis of the relationship between the aesthetic and the political as a framework for reading the narrative force of the catalogue. In “Estética, política y el posible territorio de la ficción en *2666* de Roberto Bolaño,” Ángeles Donoso Macaya argues that the most potent political force in his work is found in an aesthetic “wager” that Bolaño takes through his engagement with form. Invoking Rancière and the Chilean critic Nelly Richard, Donoso Macaya views a formal move (or “risk,” “wager”) as political since art and politics essentially share common ground: an aesthetic concern with crafting the form and appearance of the visible and the sayable,

what Rancière calls alternatively the “distribution of the sensible” or the “partition of the perceptible.”

Politics is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as “common” and of subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and discuss about them. Politics first is the conflict about the very existence of that sphere of experience, the reality of those common objects and the capacity of those subjects. (“The Politics of Aesthetics”)

For both Rancière and Richard, what can be achieved through formal innovation is an eruption of uncertainty with respect to ordinary forms of sensory experience, what Richard calls “el desacomodo de la imagen” (discomfiture of the image) (Richard “Arte y Política”, qtd. in Donoso Macaya 126-127).^{*} Viewing aesthetics as the political, and vice-versa, involves the construction of unestablished links between the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsaid, which change our everyday perspective. “[A]rtistic practices take part in the partition of the perceptible insofar as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular” (Rancière “The Politics of Aesthetics”). Art’s intervention into the field of discursive perception acts as a counterweight to the certainty offered by the dominant ordering of the world – by “the police.”[†]

Even within a Rancierian model of the relations between aesthetic and politics, however, there are differing paths that can be taken on how those relations are viewed,

^{*} All quotes in English from Donoso Macaya are my translation.

[†] What makes Rancière’s approach particularly useful is that it breaks with the referential model popular in the 60’s and 70’s for thinking about art and politics, in which there must be a direct link between historical realities and their aesthetic representation. The so-called novel of denunciation operates on such a referential model of literature: it demonstrates its political commitment through explicit representation of state violence, through unmediated critique of social structures, or in a direct engagement with historical realities involving political catastrophes, such as the 1973 Chilean coup or the Tlatelolco massacre. With Bolaño, the political content of his novels is certainly notable, but the political valence of his work functions most interestingly on the level of the aesthetic.

and these paths can tilt toward a more aesthetic or political conclusion. In Donoso Macaya's reading of *2666* the connections drawn (in a referential way, reminiscent of the novel of denunciation) between the maquiladoras and the femicides, and additional connections between the police, gangs and drug trafficking, are important moments of political critique. But he considers, in the spirit of Rancière, the most important political stance of *2666* to be its simultaneously aesthetic and political openness: "la novela no plantea ningún tipo de solución ni cierre" (the novel offers no type of solution or closure) (Donoso Macaya 139). He compares this political inconclusiveness to the formal fluidity of the novel itself: the way the different "parts" (chapters) do not have a necessarily fixed order and could be easily rearranged, and the lack of a clear beginning or ending to the novel. The openness of the narrative leads Donoso Macaya to cite the surrealist Marcel Duchamp, who declared "la figuración de un posible" (the figuration of a possible) to be the absolute essence of all art ("toda novela, todo relato, todo poema" (all novels, all stories, all poems)). The fact that the novel's formal structure opens out into the realm of the possible allows it to escape what could otherwise be read as the novel's dismal outlook on the situation in Santa Teresa.

Another reading, that still remains within a roughly Rancierian fold, of the loose ordering and inconclusive conclusion of the novel ties its significance more closely to the specific nature of neoliberal power:

The "story" is denied its termination because Bolaño, as a novelist writing at once within and against the postcolonial as a political modality, refuses the postcolonial paradigm—except insofar as he figures it as neoliberal violence – and delights in exploding it... Writing neoliberalism, Bolaño's work insists that if the postcolonial will not speak directly, (un)ethically, its relation to the neoliberal, then all that there is left to do is to dramatize, in a horrible fashion (in its Kurtzian articulation) the constitutive presence of death in the everyday functioning of the maquiladoras. Death, moreover, not as metaphoric or symbolic, but as a brutal,

inexplicable, fact of the neoliberal postcolonial state: the death of the maquiladora women that derives its political effect from its unremarkable, and therefore consequential, regularity. (Farred 693)

In Farred's reading, Bolaño reverses the expectations of postcolonial fiction, which Farred interprets as being founded in the death of the Other. Where postcolonial literature takes upon itself the duty to redress this violence toward the Other, Bolaño systematically and realistically dramatizes neoliberalism's essential dependency on death. But he does so without a redemptive narrative arc that restores the humanity of the Other and brings closure to a historical trauma. The open-endedness of the narrative in the novel thus symbolizes the openness of a gaping wound in Farred's reading, reflecting the emptiness of neoliberalism.

The essential openness underlying the novel can operate on two levels. It can signal an opening onto possibility that Donoso Macaya sees as the political capacity of the aesthetic form of the novel, and that Duchamp sees as the core of art. The openness of the novel can also be a negative one more closely resembling a lack: the vacuum at the center of neoliberalism's capacity to render every place in Santa Teresa a potential scene of death (Farred 699). I will argue that the catalogue anchors the otherwise aesthetically and politically open nature of the novel in a very concrete foundation by bringing us back again and again to the corporeality of the corpse and to the life it once contained. With the textual description of each corpse we are returned to that moment symbolized by Polyneices, where the act of sovereign desubjectification is both actualized and contested around the site of a corpse. The catalogue carefully reads the marks of writing on the body (injuries and mutilations) and the attempt at the erasure of identity (sometimes successful and sometimes not), and by making the discovery of the corpse a site of

reading, the catalogue transforms the crime scene into a site of potential contestation against neoliberal power. By listing these deaths one after the other, the catalogue traces the physical erasure of the individual murders back to the political erasure of neoliberalism.

Thus my reading will follow Rancière's idea of aesthetics as politics, while grounding that reading in the historical, political realities which gave rise to the maquiladoras. To understand the relationship between the catalogue, the workers, the maquiladoras, and neoliberalism, requires a detailed look at how political power has changed and how it now expresses itself. Power no longer makes itself available in the form of a centralized entity, such as the state or the military. The diffusion of power, the disabling of local control, and the very absence of a centralized power structure, all hallmarks of contemporary neoliberalism, enable both the maquiladoras to continue operating and the femicides to keep proliferating.* My reading will track these changes in political power and how they are represented in the catalogue.

2666 and The Catalogue

To think of *2666* as one whole book means having to hold together conceptually what was originally intended to be five separate novels which would have been published individually. According to a prefatory note in the novel from his heirs, Bolaño's main

* While neoliberalism in Mexico might be symbolized in the operation of the maquiladoras, its destructive capacity is not restricted to those factories, no less than for Brecht a photograph of a factory could capture the totality of the human relations which it embodied. The key aspect of neoliberalism as such is its viral ability to escape any reified structure of containment. While at first dependent on the state, through the institution of binding trade treaties such as NAFTA, neoliberal capital is no longer accountable, either at the state-level or within the city of Ciudad Juárez. Today, this virulence has adapted an even more aggressive form: the violence (and profitability) of the maquiladoras have been eclipsed by the violence (and profitability) of the drug trade and the reciprocal violence of the military (the last remnant of the state).

concern in wanting the novels published individually was to provide for his family's economic well-being after his then-imminent death (2666 11). After his death, his heirs and his editor decided to publish these five novels together, out of "respect for the literary value of the work" (my translation). This decision, grounded in aesthetic considerations, is taken as if it were self-evident that the novels belong together, and that their aesthetic integrity would only be enhanced by being placed together. Given the nature of the most unique narrative technique of the novel, the catalogue, and its aspiration to enumerate the femicides without homogenizing them, the merits of the decision to publish all the parts together becomes less than self-evident.

From the beginning of the novel we already encounter multiple struggles: how to find an aesthetic and structural center; how to understand the relationship between a collective and its various parts; and how to interpret how members of different socioeconomic groups can participate in the same reality when each group interprets that reality very differently. It is instructive that the chapters themselves are called "parts": "La parte de los críticos," "La parte de Amalfitano," "La parte de Fate," "La parte de los crímenes," "La parte de Archimboldi." This naming of the chapters as parts suggests a number of interpretations: a more flexible sense of order than that offered by typical "chapters"; a sense of interchangeability and partiality that does not *necessarily* lead to a totality; and finally, a "part" also can be understood as a "role," especially given that, excepting "La parte de los crímenes," all the parts refer to an individual or set of individuals. Could this mean the characters are also actors or agents in a historical sense? That they do not simply observe but contribute (through their witnessing or through their ignorance) to the situation in Santa Teresa?

The first three chapters are more or less self-contained stories that have a tangential relation to the femicides occurring in the city of Santa Teresa. The first chapter, "La parte de los críticos," concerns four European academics in search of a mysterious German author named Archimboldi; they happen to travel to Santa Teresa because of a lead that places the author in the city. The first mention of the femicides in the novel occurs in this chapter, but it only flits by in the form of a newspaper headline read by one of the academics. The second chapter follows the life of Amalfitano, a university professor from Chile who has moved to Santa Teresa and appears to be slowly descending into insanity, as he frequently engages in extensive dialogues with voices in his head. He is the single parent of a teenage daughter and he crosses paths with the European academics because of his position at the university. Chapter three centers on the African-American sports reporter Quincy Williams, referred to throughout the chapter as Oscar Fate. He travels to Santa Teresa from Detroit to cover a boxing match and becomes aware of the femicides through conversations with other reporters in the city. After the fourth chapter containing the catalogue, the last chapter moves away, at least on a geographical and historical level, from Santa Teresa and the femicides, exploring the life of the writer Archimboldi in Germany. The chapter depicts Archimboldi, whose real name is Hans Reiter, from his birth, to his service as a soldier in World War II, and then through his career as a writer. Most of these events occur in Europe in the heart of the twentieth century, far from the femicides in Ciudad Juárez at the tail end of the century. Yet, as Donoso Macaya notes, Reiter's exposure to genocide during the war, and his revenge killing of a former mayor in Poland who aided in the extermination of Jews, furnishes a more direct and formal connection to the femicides in Santa Teresa, one that

exceeds the bounds of biography or history as a mode of organization. The most direct connection between Archiboldi and Santa Teresa appears only at the end of the novel, when it is discovered that the tall German man arrested by the Santa Teresa police in connection with the femicides, is in fact Archiboldi's nephew.

These four chapters stage the viewing of the femicides from multiple foreign perspectives, though this often involves a complete or partial ignorance of the femicides on the part of the individual characters. The academics for the most part remain oblivious, though one of them begins to read more and more about the killings in the paper. Amalfitano, who is also a transplanted foreigner, is obsessed with the crimes to the point where he begins to break down mentally. Oscar Fate gradually becomes absorbed by the crimes and wants to make them a subject of his journalism. To his sports editor in New York he proposes to write “Un retrato del mundo industrial en el Tercer Mundo – dijo Fate–, un aide-mémoire de la situación actual de México, una panorámica de la frontera, un relato policial de primera magnitud, joder” (373).^{*} The editor, expecting Fate to continue with his sports journalism, is taken aback by this request. Fate ends up fleeing the city with Amalfitano's daughter after they feel they have become a potential target of criminal elements in the city.

The graduated perspectives on the femicides, from ignorance to fear to obsession and fascination, offer a stark contrast with the fourth chapter, “La parte de los crímenes,” in which the murders of maquiladora workers cease to be merely background noise and take center-stage via the mechanism of the catalogue. Several disparate narrative threads in this chapter weave themselves around the central strand of the catalogue. These

^{*} “‘A sketch of the industrial landscape in the Third World,’ said Fate, ‘a piece of reportage about the current situation in Mexico, a panorama of the border, a serious crime story, for fuck’s sake.’” (294-5)

secondary threads feature storylines based on characters who are all investigators of one sort or another, intent on deciphering the mystery of the murdered women workers: detectives, policemen, journalists and even a psychic on local television. These characters are working-class but not in the same category as the maquiladora workers; socioeconomically, they are closer to the middle-class characters who provide the perspective of the other chapters.

The lives and deaths of the maquiladora workers are represented and related almost exclusively through the individual entries of the catalogue, whereas the lives of the middle-class characters in other chapters of the novel receive a highly novelesque treatment in which we, as readers, inhabit their perspective. Not applying the same representational form to the femicide victims means that their lives are not made accessible to the reader in the same way that the lives of the European critics or the Detroit sports journalist are. We do not get their perspective or outlook on life before their death. All we know about the victims is what the autopsy of their corpse reveals and how their family members and friends react to the discovery of their body. Bolaño's approach grapples with the presence of an insoluble opacity when the gaze of the novel turns on the femicide victims. That opacity is not simply an obstacle to representation. In a way, it is the point of the representation: the reification of an unknown which the other characters along with the reader must react to. The catalogue presents an alternative narrative structure to the novelesque form, one which has to cope with this opacity in representing the lives of the maquiladora workers.

Seemingly compensating for this pervasive and dreadful sense of unknowability, the catalogue places a heavy emphasis on corporeal details. In a language that is detailed

to the point of achieving an impression of forensic accuracy, the catalogue produces a clinical description of sexual violations, bodily dismemberment and violent means of death. The catalogue is unremitting in its descriptions of dozens and dozens of women who are raped and murdered. Each murder receives a precise treatment concerning the location of the body, its state of abuse and decay, how the body was discovered and by whom. If the identity of the woman is known, the catalogue “entry” might include a description of how the victim was reported missing by family members or others close to her.*

Yet for as many grisly, visual details as the catalogue provides of each murdered body, the catalogue is equally notable for what goes undescribed: the act of murder itself. The narrative provides no build-up to the act and no gripping scene of encounter. The catalogue features the victims of murders, but does not approximate the form of the thriller in the chapter containing the catalogue. This narrative decision substitutes the engrossing style of the mystery novel or the tabloid report with the detachment of bureaucratic reports. The sheer repetitiveness of the accounts of wounds and violations further serves to make the content as unpalatable as possible, draining it of sensationalism. The catalogue continually reiterates its limited scope by attaching itself insistently to the reading of the corpses, and thus avoids descending into the genre of “magical realism.”† The reader occupies a midpoint somewhere between Fate’s

* The clinical tone of the catalogue, it has been speculated, carries over from the fact that Bolaño received most of his information about the murders from Sergio Rodríguez, a Mexico City reporter who read many of the autopsy and crime scene reports for his own investigation (Levinson, “Case Closed” 177). His published findings on the femicides have been recently translated into English by Semiotext(e).

† The continual focus on describing in details the corpses that are discovered while only gesturing minimally toward what goes undiscovered, is similar to the move in *Jaar* which Rancière describes as invoking the poetic figure of litotes. In *Jaar*, the figure of litotes applies to a series of postcards called “Signs of Life” (part of *The Rwanda Project*), in which a postcard for tourists (with a picture of wildlife or the Rwandan landscape) is addressed to a stranger in the United States or elsewhere and has only one

investigative curiosity (his desire to decipher the meaning of the femicides) and Amalfitano's paralyzing inability to process his outrage and fear.

The catalogue begins with a gap between the countable and the real: in the very first entry of the catalogue, the narrator notes that a complete accounting of the femicides cannot possibly be achieved. The chapter opens with the first corpse found in 1993 that is associated with, or *counted* as part of, the maquiladora killings. The narrator makes clear that this "first" corpse is simply the first one to be counted, and that there may have been many others that were murdered before and were never discovered. A distinction is made between the countable deaths of the catalogue and the (uncountable) real victims, between which stands a potentially immense gulf. As the chapter progresses, the catalogue will re-emphasize the prevalence of this discrepancy, among other gaps, as a way of resisting a reading of the catalogue as a panoramic, omnipresent documentation of the femicides. The political-economic condition of Santa Teresa is seen and interpreted primarily, albeit partially, through these corpses in the catalogue, but it is also represented in the gaps of the catalogue. For the fact of absence and the act of erasure are constitutive of two aspects of neoliberalism: the way it depends on being external to the local economy, and its will to extract profit by reducing labor, if not by eliminating the laborer herself. The textual attention to the discovered corpses, the gaps of the catalogue, and the catalogue's performance of failure are all equally important in understanding how it represents the actions and ideology of neoliberalism.

The corpse acts as a narrative crystal that refracts into multiple perspectives on the life and circumstances of the victim. When a name is known, the entry can open up

sentence "Canisius Nzayisenga is still alive" for example ("Theater of Images" 74). This dramatic understatement echoes that of the catalogue in 2666.

and include some details of her life, work schedule, family, friends, and lovers. The catalogue brings the lives of the maquiladora workers closer to us while mitigating the risk of assimilation or appropriation by maintaining a sense of distance – taken all together, the entries of the catalogue never give us the perspective of the victim before her death nor do they presume to furnish a view of the totality of the maquiladora worker’s life experience. The entries form fragments that do not add up to a whole; the narrative light refracted by the corpse dissipates quickly, and the police investigations taper off inconclusively. The limited nature of each entry keeps the catalogue within finite, evidentiary bounds. But the limited perspective of each individual entry is compensated and amplified by the serial nature of the catalogue, which connects and extends the significance of the individual entries, as each entry’s minimalism reverberates with the ones that came before and those that follow. A tension exists between the repetitiveness of the catalogue’s seriality, and the singular variations offered within each entry. Thus a careful reading of the catalogue requires equal attention to its overall character and to its individual entries: How does the structure of the catalogue affect the individual entries that make it up? Do the individual entries end up having a cumulative effect in the end that differs from a reading of individual entries?

One year after the date of the first catalogue entry, the entry below marks the death of the first victim of the year 1994.

La primera mujer muerta del año 1994 fue encontrada por unos camioneros en un desvío de la carretera a Nogales, en medio del desierto. Los camioneros, ambos mexicanos, trabajaban para la maquiladora Key Corp y esa tarde, pese a llevar los camiones cargados, decidieron ir a comer y beber a un local llamado El Ajo, en donde uno de los camioneros, Antonio Villas Martínez, era conocido. Mientras se dirigían al local en cuestión, el otro camionero, Rigoberto Reséndiz, notó un resplandor en el desierto que lo dejó cegado durante unos instantes. Pensando que se trataba de una broma se comunicó por radio con su compañero Villas Martínez

y los camiones se detuvieron. La carretera estaba vacía. Villas Martínez intentó convencer a Reséndiz de que probablemente lo había cegado el reflejo del sol sobre una botella o unos trozos de cristales rotos, pero entonces el otro vio un bulto a unos trescientos metros de la carretera y se dirigió hacia él. Al cabo de un rato Villas Martínez vio que Reséndiz lo llamaba con un silbido y también abandonó la carretera, no sin asegurarse de que ambos camiones quedaban perfectamente cerrados. Cuando llegó a donde lo esperaba su compañero vio el cadáver, que pese a tener la cara completamente destrozada no dejaba lugar a dudas de que se trataba de una mujer. Curiosamente, en lo primero que se fijó fue en el calzado, llevaba unas sandalias de cuero labrado, de buena manufactura. Villas Martínez se persignó. ¿Qué hacemos, compadre?, oyó que le decía Reséndiz. Por el tono de voz de su amigo comprendió que la pregunta era solamente retórica. Avisar a la policía, dijo. Ésa es una buena idea, dijo Reséndiz. En la cintura de la muerta vio un cinturón con una gran hebilla de metal. Eso fue lo que lo deslumbró, compadre, dijo. Sí, ya me he dado cuenta, dijo Reséndiz. La muerta iba vestida con hot-pants y una blusa amarilla, de imitación de seda, con una gran flor negra estampada en el pecho y otra, de color rojo, en la espalda. Cuando llegó a las dependencias del forense éste se percató, asombrado, de que debajo de los hot-pants conservaba unas bragas blancas con lacitos en los costados. Por lo demás, había sido violada anal y vaginalmente, y la muerte había sido provocada por politraumatismo craneoencefálico, aunque también había recibido dos cuchilladas, una en el tórax y otra en la espalda, que la habían hecho perder sangre pero que no eran mortales de necesidad. El rostro, tal como habían comprobado los camioneros, era irreconocible. La fecha de la muerte se situó, a modo orientativo, entre el 1 de enero de 1994 y el 6 de enero, aunque sin descartar de modo alguno la posibilidad de que aquel cadáver hubiera sido abandonado en el desierto el 25 o el 26 de diciembre del año que ya había felizmente terminado. (499-500)*

* The first dead woman of 1994 was found by some truck drivers on a road off the Nogales highway, in the middle of the desert. The truckers, both Mexican, worked for the maquiladora Key Corp., and that afternoon, despite having full loads, they decided to stop for food and drinks at a bar called El Ajo, where one of the truck drivers, Antonio Villas Martínez was a regular. On their way to the bar in question, the other truck driver, Rigoberto Reséndiz, was dazzled for a few seconds by a flash in the desert. Thinking it was a joke, he radioed his friend Villas Martínez and the trucks pulled over. The road was deserted. Villas Martínez tried to convince Reséndiz that it had probably been the reflection of the sun off a bottle or some broken glass, but then Reséndiz saw a shape about three hundred yards from the highway and strode toward it. After a while, Villas Martínez heard Reséndiz whistle and he set off after him, not without first checking that both trucks were locked. When he got to where his friend was waiting he saw the body, which was clearly a woman's, though her face was a bloody mess. Oddly, the first thing he noticed were the woman's shoes. She was wearing nice tooled-leather sandals. Villas Martínez crossed himself. What do we do, *compadre*? he heard Reséndiz ask. By the tone of his friend's voice he understood that the question was rhetorical. Call the police, he said. Good idea, said Reséndiz. Villas Martínez spotted a belt with a big metal buckle around the dead woman's waist. That's what was flashing, *compadre*, he said. Yes, I saw, said Reséndiz. The dead woman was wearing hot pants and a silky yellow shirt with a big black flower stamped on the chest and a red flower on the back. When the body reached the medical examiner, he discovered, in astonishment, that under the hot pants the woman still had on white underpants with little bows on the sides. He also noted that she had been anally and vaginally raped, and that the cause of death was massive craniocerebral trauma, although she had been stabbed twice too, once in the chest and once in the back, wounds that had caused her to lose blood but weren't necessarily fatal. Her face, as the truck drivers had

Like most entries in the catalogue, this entry follows a certain, and eventually predictable, order, forming a cut-off narrative arc that repeats and restarts indefinitely, each time lacking a satisfying denouement. The entry begins with the narrative seed of each entry: the inadvertent discovery of the body in a remote or secluded place, followed by a description of the state of the body and the clothes; the police are alerted, after which follows a brief, technical discussion of the causes of the death as determined by the coroner. Two important components of the murder go missing in these entries: the act of murder itself and any scene of juridical resolution. Many entries end by noting that the case was either closed, or that evidence from the crime scene was mishandled, tampered with, or misplaced, thus eliminating the possibility of bringing suspects to trial. For Brett Levinson, it is the rhythmic appearance of that phrase “se cerró el caso” (the case was closed) which provides a collective link for the series of murders (“Case Closed” 190).

The identity of the narrator (seemingly third-person but not omniscient) is left unknown, as in the other chapters.* A reportorial style predominates in the catalogue, but it is not the exclusive mode of description. Within the entry cited above one notes the temporary eruption of a narrative style evoking a more novelesque depiction of the lower classes, primarily felt in the way that the Mexican truck drivers speak to each other: “¿Qué hacemos, compadre?” (“What do we do, compadre?”). The entry then returns to a tone which approximates that of the forensic specialists on the scene, their clinical description of the wounds and their calculation of the cause and time of death. The

observed, was unrecognizable. The date of death was fixed, in a general way, between January 1 and January 6, 1994, although there was some possibility that the body had been dumped in the desert on December 25 or 26 of the previous year, now fortunately past (399-400).

* Supposedly an unpublished note by Bolaño indicates that the narrator of the whole book is Arturo Belano, a pseudo-autobiographical character found in his other books (see the Afterword to *2666*, written by Bolaño’s editor Ignacio Echevarría, p.1125).

oscillation between a novelesque style and the tone of forensic observation reminds the reader of the catalogue's implicit narrative distance to the femicides; the alternating discourses mutually reveal their limits and blindspots.

The completeness and objectivity putatively associated with the clinical language of the autopsy report is further undone in the above example by the inconclusive determinations with regards to the manner and time of death of the victim. The entry concludes by not concluding – there is no precise determination of a date, just a reference to the inability to calculate one. The clinical language cannot mediate and resolve the multiple possibilities of what happened. Despite the pervasive clinical tone, many of the entries of the catalogue end up emphasizing the complete unknowability of the real cause or time of death. The clash of precise language with the dearth of actual conclusions suggests that such precise information is pointless in the context of a non-functioning judicial system that would be unable to follow through with an evidence-based prosecution. It also points to the limits of a purely “empirical” approach to the crimes; forensic evidence is “made to speak” but its speaking reveals its unspeaking. The “body of evidence” figures forth an ultimate lack or muteness at its center.

The entry ends on a sarcastic reference to “[el] año que ya había felizmente terminado.” Through similar discrete moments of irony, and through the alternating discourses identified above, the perspective of the catalogue achieves a measure of separation from the rhetoric of forensic precision which the catalogue deploys so frequently. This measure of separation allows for the catalogue to have a critical force which operates beyond the technicity of the seemingly dominant forensic discourse.

To get a view of how the catalogue works as a whole, of the force it accumulates through its incessant repetition throughout the chapter, we can turn to a comparison to historical examples of catalogue poetry. The catalogue in *2666* is heavily inflected, formally and thematically, by its antecedents in antiquity. The catalogue form originated in Near Eastern oral poetry and carried on in ancient Greek epic poetry. Unlike Homer's poems, which follow the narrative arc of a principal character's development, catalogue poetry typically organizes itself around genealogies. An "entry" in a catalogue could inspire a recounting of a heroic exploit associated with the character named therein, or it could just as well move on the next descendant or the next lineage. Alternately, events or exploits in *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* could give rise to the recitation of genealogies, such as happens in Book Two of *The Iliad* with the Catalogue of Ships, or in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus recites a catalogue of the famous dead women he has seen in Hades.*

Interestingly, in at least two of the most well-known cases of catalogues in antiquity (that of *The Odyssey* mentioned above and Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*) women form the primary subject, in part because the reproductive role of women has to be acknowledged for genealogical poetry to function. Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, which dates roughly to the sixth century BCE (West 136) recounts the stories of the famous women of Greek mythology, but it does so through the lens of their sexual relations with the gods (forced or consensual) because those relations gave birth to lines of heroes. The catalogue's proem calls for help from the muses in singing "the women...

* The catalogue as a form has both aesthetic and political relevance in antiquity, since it was frequently used to narrate the genealogies of heroes. The device of the catalogue showed off the memory and skill of the poet, but it also served as an instrument of social power. Powerful families, or families who aspired to greater social standing, would use poets to embed their private histories into the public history of the state and into mythology itself. For more, see M.L. West's *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women: Its Nature, Structure, and Origins*.

who were the finest in those times... and unfastened their waistbands... in union with gods” (2). M.L. West writes that “the poem could be considered as being about those celebrated women, or more broadly as being about the genealogy of heroes” (2). He also notes that the ancestries of these famous women are also accounted for, which makes the women both progenitors of future heroes and a link to the earliest generations. Thus these famous women are explicitly sexualized and valued for the offspring of heroes they produce. But in the textual structure of the poem, the women of the *Catalogue* form the essential syntax between past and future while also giving content to the genealogical intent of the catalogue.

The catalogue of 2666 both invokes the form and subject matter of the catalogue and reverses it. Instead of the glorious stories of the women of mythology and the heroes they gave birth to, the catalogue recites the fates of the murdered maquiladora workers of Santa Teresa. Instead of the beginning of genealogies, Bolaño’s catalogue collects the ends of human life. In place of being a narrative platform for launching individual stories, the catalogue entries lead to narrative dead-ends that mirror the dead-ends of the police investigations. The tropes of sexual conquest and labor, which align the reproduction of heroes with the production of stories in the catalogue poetry of antiquity, fall apart in the catalogue of 2666.

The catalogue in antiquity memorializes heroes through genealogies but more generally it also gives a sense of order to the past and to the world at large. As West states, “genealogies put things in their place” (8) and such an ordering of time and space is particularly necessary in a time of upheaval and war. The Catalogue of Ships in Book Two of *The Iliad* lists the plethora of ships and clans of warriors who are contributing to

the war effort, detailing their place of origin and the names of their ancestors. Before they enter into war and possibly die, the families and clans of the warriors are enumerated, and thus their family lines become a part of this hitherto greatest of all public efforts. The catalogue of 2666 has a commemorative and ordering function, but these functions are most notable in their failure, in their incapacity to give us a sense of order in Santa Teresa. The catalogue's inadequacy attests most powerfully to the disorder of Santa Teresa, and especially to the blurring of distinctions between public and private. In Santa Teresa there is no longer private history and identity, only private loss, and the public sphere itself is in the hands of private, commercial interests. Order cannot be found because divisions between the public and the private, between politics and commerce, between war and peace, have collapsed. Bolaño's catalogue instead renders every place in Santa Teresa a potential place of violence, as Farred observes:

In the maquiladora murders the place of discovery is not the place—or the time, for that matter—of death. The death scene is, for all intents and purposes, unknowable... The unknown place is the place of violence, the place that may be near or far away, the place that is everywhere, that makes every place the no place of violence... death becomes the ubiquitous condition of being. (698)

Death permeates being, every site is haunted by its potential of being a site of violence, and knowledge comes to a halt. The names of the femicide victims exist alongside a ghostly, parallel catalogue of the multilingual names of the maquiladoras: Multizone-West, El Progreso, Arsenio Farrell, K&T, WS-Inc., Nip-Mex, Aiwo, Key Corp., File-Sis, Interzone Berny, Maderas de México, Holmes and West, EastWest, Horizon W&E, EMSA TECNOSA, Rem & Co., NewMarkets, Overworld, Country & SeaTech, Aguilar & Lennox, Dutch & Rhodes, General Sepúlveda, Dun-Corp, MachenCorp, Cal & Son, City Keys, Kusai. These names form an unreal language that simultaneously indicates and occludes the destructive presence of neoliberal capital in the city.

In terms of an aesthetic definition, the catalogues of antiquity and of Bolaño's novel involve more than a mere listing of names or stories. The list form belies a deeper rhetorical structure. The catalogue contains a rhetorical gap between its denotative meaning (the content of the list itself) and its connotations. It can be employed not only to enumerate and name members of a group, but also as a rhetorical means of conveying the enormous scale and power of collectives. The length, repetitiveness, and momentum of the *Iliad's* Catalogue of Ships, rather than the details of the individual clans, carries the greater rhetorical punch and conveys the extent of the sacrifice that has been made in the nine year long war and will continue to be made. The Catalogue of Ships, and other catalogues, frequently turn to figures of speech that express the impossibility of their own task, while nevertheless performing it.

Such is the case as well in *2666*, where the details of each entry begin to blur and the rhythmic force of the catalogue's insistence impresses itself upon the reader. The most powerful aesthetic facet of Bolaño's catalogue is its rhythm, which expresses, in an understated yet eloquent way, the dire nature of Santa Teresa's ordeal. The rhythmic, excessive listing of a catalogue can generate a formal violence on par with its subject matter, whether it be the violence, rape and death of antiquity or the violence, rape and death in Santa Teresa. In Ovid's telling of the myth of Diana and Actaeon, the catalogue device is used to count off and name the numerous hunting dogs who are about to attack their owner, Actaeon, after his transformation into a stag by Diana when he saw her bathing naked. The catalogue's iterative force builds up to the moment of violence when they will latch on to Actaeon, and the enumeration of the multitude of dogs prefigures the

violent and bloody fragmentation of Actaeon's body.* In Ovid's characteristic turn to poetic justice, violence both perpetuates and resolves violence. Though Actaeon's most flagrant violation seems to be his glimpse of Diana bathing, earlier in the poem we read how the "woodland coverts/Were stained with many a kill of varied game," and of his hunting nets dripping with blood (Ovid 55). The long list of dogs gives evidence of the excessiveness and inequality of Actaeon's hunting expeditions. Actaeon's overly violent hunting in the woods is paid back by the excessive violence of his death, just as the male gaze's optical violation of feminine space and female form is avenged by a female gesture and voice that reverse the relations of hunter and hunted in the male-dominated sphere of hunting for sport. As the catalogue of dogs progresses and more and more of its members are enumerated, the details begin to fall away and in their place emerges a notion of the collective pack being depicted, and the violent end to which this collective is aimed. If the catalogue's denotative content at times wanders into the banal, its connotation of quantitative enormity and imminent violence grows stronger with each iteration. Details pile upon details, feeding the catalogue's force of accumulation and building up the anticipated dispersion through violence.

In both the catalogue of ships and dogs discussed above, the catalogue of antiquity strongly connotes the immensity of an effort that leads toward a bloody and violent conclusion. Bolaño's catalogue begins with those bloody and violent conclusions, in the forms of the bodies of murdered maquiladora workers. The catastrophe in *2666* is ongoing and endless, as unerring and relentless as the finality signified by each murdered body. The catalogue, then, is a multi-faceted aesthetic form, which can creatively deploy a variety of features (enumeration, rhythm, litotes or dramatic understatement, a formal

* An idea that emerges in Nancy Vicker's "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme."

violence generated by its momentum and excess, a figuration of the fragmentation of subjects and of the fractured state of the city) and has a long history in Western culture.

The traditional themes and subject matter of catalogues (violence, rape, death, excess) resonate with those present in *2666*, but it is the common focus on women and rape that offers the strongest connection between the ancient and contemporary version of the catalogue. The view of women in sexualized and reproductive terms in the catalogue of antiquity almost foreshadows the sexualized nature of the crimes in *2666*. The episodes of seduction and rape sometimes playfully recounted in the catalogues of antiquity are no more, and in their stead we read technical descriptions of every type of rape. The importance of the element of rape to the femicides is further underscored by situating it within Mexico's history and its cultural mythology, particularly in the light of the role of "La Malinche" in the story of the Spanish conquest. As Cortés's mistress and interpreter, La Malinche, also known by her indigenous name Malinalli and her baptismal name Doña Marina, has served as a figure through which Mexican identity has been negotiated and contested. Her role in helping the Spaniards in their conquest, and her seemingly willing participation in the Spanish strategy of *mestizaje*, has produced conflicted feelings. She is simultaneously a traitor and a victim. As a victim she symbolizes the nation as a whole under the Spanish conquest; as a traitor she magnetizes feelings of self-loathing and self-hatred caused by that defeat and subsequent miscegenation. This is particularly evident in Octavio Paz's reading of her in *El laberinto de la soledad*, in which she becomes associated with "La Chingada" (Franco *Critical Passions* 77). In Paz's rendition, her consensual relations become rape, and that rape stands in for the rape of the land itself. The proliferation of the motif of rape in *2666*

leads one to connect the rape endured by the victims of femicide with the history and myth of La Malinche, and thus with the history of the nation-state itself and its disintegration under a new form of “conquest,” that of neoliberalism.

But the depravity of the femicides in 2006 extends beyond rape and descends into the fetishistic mutilation of women’s bodies. The bodies are usually discovered fully dressed despite having been raped, stabbed or burned, meaning that the perpetrators dressed up their victims, often in sexualized garments, after raping and killing them. The perversity of this arrangement frequently puzzles the forensic specialists, who do not expect murderers and rapists to re-clothe their victims. The wounds that the bodies suffer – and it is unclear at times whether the victims were alive or not at the moment the injuries were inflicted – are not always simply lethal wounds or wounds inflicted amid a struggle; they are intentional mutilations. The mutilations can be of an overtly sexual nature (breasts cut off, for instance) or they can be the damage inflicted by torture. The intensive and incessant description of rape and the wounds of the bodies constantly remind us of the gendered power relation enacted through the brutalization of each victim. Bolaño’s novels frequently stage the reduction to a bare materiality performed by the murder and rape of the female body. These stagings form links in the history of the manifestations of neoliberal power, from the military regime in Chile – as seen in the Air Force pilot Carlos Wieder’s photographs of tortured women in Bolaño’s *Estrella distante* – to the vacuum of local power in northern Mexico effected by neoliberal commercial interests.* In both cases, the bodies of women are the canvas on which patriarchal state

* Wieder’s photographs in *Estrella Distante* featured tortured bodies and gruesome images of bodily mutilation and amputation, such as a detached finger on the concrete floor. The torture of the women is so extreme that the narrator of the book-within-the-novel remarks that “Las mujeres parecían maniqués, en

power (in Chile), or the absence of state power in the political vacuum created by foreign, commercial interests (in Mexico), express their domination.*

Through these different manifestations of neoliberalism, in both Chile and Mexico the minimal social and familial fabric which bonded together and protected those most likely to be subjected to violence was destroyed, increasing the possibility for criminal acts to occur with impunity. A highly patriarchal culture's worst tendencies toward machismo and misogynist violence were given free rein by the changes in the structure of power. These changes occurred either through overt changes, such as the military coup in Chile, or through more subtle changes, such as the implementation of structural reforms for the purpose of receiving monetary assistance from the IMF and the World Bank (Harvey 100). The feminization of society in Chile (Nelson 29) and the positioning of the military as the paternal preserver of order, exposed whole swaths of the population to ideologically-justified state violence. In Mexico the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 80's weakened the corporatist state, and degraded social safety networks by exacerbating already poor economic conditions for the urban and rural poor. Violent oppression on a social and gendered axis in turn helped to solidify these political changes, and aided in muting resistance from the population at large.

The femicides in Ciudad Juárez are a continuation and an intensification of the pattern of violence against women in Latin America, and are also concomitant with the destruction of private spaces traditionally considered immune to political and economic violence. The disintegration and violation of certain "feminine" spaces of sanctuary (the

algunos casos maniqués desmembrados, destrozados" (*Estrella distante* 98) ("The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins" (*Distant Star* 88))

* Some commentators on the crimes in Ciudad Juárez have theorized that the femicide victims may be mutilated as a means of transmitting cryptic messages between criminal gangs.

home, the convent, the parish) noted by Jean Franco in the early 80's has reached its peak in the situation to be found in Ciudad Juárez. That imaginary topography is now completely gone, both because the economic and social role of women has changed – the maquiladoras primarily hire women, in part because they are seen to be less likely to organize and fight for greater protections in the workplace due to their weaker position in Mexican society– and because those remaining feminine spaces noted highlighted by Franco have been weakened or dissolved. As portrayed in the *Santa Teresa of 2666*, the home no longer offers sanctuary from violence, physical or economic – in the novel domestic abuse continues and increases in spite of, and perhaps because of, the fact that women are now breadwinners and more likely to be hired in the maquiladoras. The femicides extend that domestic abuse to the street, and the police themselves exhibit misogynist attitudes at the crime scene. The convent is not an economically or socially viable option because women have to work to support their families. Though the workers in Santa Teresa are now more likely to be women than men, when they are killed they are confused by the authorities with prostitutes. The sanctuary of the church offers no protection to the workers, and is largely irrelevant in their lives.

Not only have these feminized spaces of sanctuary disappeared, the role of the state as a mediator between different sectors of the economy, an important component of its function in embedded liberalism, has diminished to an insignificant level. Whereas during the dictatorship in Chile the state was instrumentalized to shape the economy to the military's will and to the will of its foreign benefactors, including U.S. companies, in Mexico a more advanced form of neoliberalism derives advantages from the dissolution of the state and the economic and political chaos that ensues. The latter version of

neoliberalism avoids leaving intact a functioning state which can be petitioned by the public and eventually pressured by public opinion to change. The Mexican neoliberal reforms of the 80's and 90's not only prioritized economic development over social welfare, they systematically undermined the state apparatus itself as an inefficient, overly centralized, and easily identifiable vehicle of repression. In effect, during the 80's and 90's a change occurred in the way in which the state was instrumentalized by conservative political and neoliberal economic actors: from a thorough military assault on society, to one in which the state has been hollowed out to keep the population in a state of fear and vulnerability. Such a transition is notable for the changes in the preferred method of repression: from the state-conducted disappearing of people and torturing of bodies in Chile, to the "privatized" but state-sanctioned disappearing of people and torturing of bodies in Mexico.

Another factor in this development particular to Mexico is the PRI's loss of an absolute congressional majority in 1997 and the loss of the presidency in 2000. This resulted in the fracturing of the political field, which in turn resulted in the severing of ties of patronage between the PRI and the drug cartels. Without a single dominant political party in place, the cartels have turned to fashioning their own social systems and networks of patronage, effecting a form of state capture in the process. The Mexican state, weakened by neoliberal reforms, can no longer provide an adequate level of governance and relies solely on the military to attempt to combat the full-fledged drug war taking place in the country. The excessive dependence on the military, and the violence it entails, then turns the public further and further away from the government and into the hands of the cartels' patronage systems. The issue of the femicides has since

been effaced by these drug wars, which are also a byproduct of advanced neoliberalism's strategic dismantling of the state.

The political transition described here, Mexico's journey from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism, brings us back once again to the moment of protest against sovereign power symbolized by Antigone's unyielding stance against Creon's decree to let her brother's corpse go unburied. A long history of criticism has sought to bind this conflict to an understanding of the development of the polis and sovereign power.

Antigone's adamant call for the burial of her brother has been interpreted, by Hegel and others, as a last stand in the defense of laws and rules bound by relations of kinship in the face of the encroaching power of the state, concretely symbolized by Creon's decree. In this reading, Antigone represents an extrapolitical resistance to the encroachment of sovereign power onto the territory of kinship; and Creon, by leaving Polyneices exposed and unburied, seeks to erase both his familial and political identity.*

Conversely, in Santa Teresa the very absence of the state means that the bodies of the maquiladora workers are exposed to political and physical violence, and are placed under (political) erasure even before their death – and they only regain visibility in the eyes of the law, if briefly, as corpses at a crime scene. The maquiladora workers are, by definition, already invisible to numerous laws, local regulations and civic institutions.

* An interesting recent reinterpretation brings the conflict back *within* the fold of the political: the struggle between Antigone and Creon registers as a shift in power internal to politics. In "Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception" Bonnie Honig reverses the typical correlation of Antigone's extrapolitical resistance with democratic values and Creon's sovereign decree with the power of the state. In her inversion of the normally accepted view of Antigone, Honig sees Antigone's protestations as originating in a defense of aristocratic values and funereal practices that were under attack by democratic reforms in fifth-century Athens. And in opposition to Antigone, Creon hyperbolically represents an ascendant democracy's unsure efforts to impose restrictions on the place and scope of lamentation, which aristocratic families were prone to drive to excess, using the occasion of mourning as an opportunity for the overzealous display of wealth. Such excessive mourning posed a risk to the city and new restrictions would redirect funereal practices toward the needs and priorities of the city. The city's interests resided in the praising of the actions of the dead *for* their city, but also wanted to see the dead as ultimately replaceable by other citizens who could also take up arms.

Maquiladoras only function at a profit through their immunity to the protections that should normally apply to the workforce and through the reduced wages they can give to the (largely female) workforce. Thus, for example, unionization is illegal, and factory managers can fire any worker for any or no cause; the workers have neither rights nor representation. As corpses at a crime scene do the maquiladora workers regain minimal visibility within the legal realm, and that visibility only remains until their case is conveniently closed without being solved.* Though many catalogue entries end by noting the inconclusive end of the investigation, by narrowing in on the encounter of the corpse with the state apparatus of the police, the catalogue reemphasizes the importance of this brief moment of visibility. The scene of the discovery of the corpse becomes a site for reading political erasure.

In the city of Santa Teresa there is no centralized power embodied in one person or one entity, there are only figureheads. Such decentralization is part and parcel of the neoliberal changes transforming the city into a non-city open to and dependent upon market-based interests. As becomes clear in the rest of the novel outside the catalogue, the mayor and other city officials are effectively undermined (supposing they were independent to begin with) by other sources of power, be it the foreign owners of the maquiladoras, the rich families of Santa Teresa, or the leaders of drug gangs. This is made possible by neoliberal policies that have weakened the city's power and its ability to collect tax revenue, such as from the maquiladoras, which operate from a site of legal exclusion. If the battle between Antigone and Creon marked the transition from the rule of kinship-based systems to the rule of the state and the law, in Santa Teresa, the massive

* They will not regain sustained political visibility until the femicides become a cause célèbre around the world. But a few years later the issue of the femicides will once again be buried, this time behind the eruption of the drug wars.

and ongoing femicide marks the dismantlement and hollowing out of a public sphere as such.

Though no single character can be said to occupy the same allegorical position of resistance as Antigone does, the catalogue's insistent return to the corpses could be read as performing a similar gesture of resistance. The catalogue, however, does not move beyond this gesturing to assume a position of actual political resistance, or even of full representation of the dead. Like Antigone, it speaks from a powerless position, and yet draws political force from that weakness. This can be seen in the way it foregrounds its own inadequacy, especially when it notes the gap between its account and the reality of the situation taking place in Santa Teresa. Similarly, the catalogue evidences a gap in its language: it summons up a rhetoric of forensic precision, yet this same rhetoric is intensified to a hyperbolic degree that ultimately betrays its inutility. In the absence of a legitimate judicial structure that could take the evidence gathered from the crime scene into a trial that would lead to a conviction, the precision with which the crime scene and the corpse are described goes nowhere. These gaps, along with the various other aesthetic facets of the catalogue mentioned previously, differentiate the catalogue from the numerous bureaucratic reports which have come to represent the conclusions of investigations into state-conducted crimes in numerous countries in Latin America and elsewhere. Like Antigone, the catalogue exists on a threshold between voice and language, rhythm and significance; while its appearance suggests a resemblance to a documentary form, beyond that appearance we see a complicated aesthetic form which does not equate its rhetoric or its signs with reality on the one-to-one basis which we associate with the style and self-representation of bureaucratic reports. Yet the catalogue

does speak to the actual political situation in Ciudad Juárez, as we have also seen. The rape and murder of women, the violation and destruction of the private and public spheres, and the neoliberal dissolution of state power, are shown to be coterminous through the catalogue beyond the simple repetitive pairing of a corpse and the institutional inability to resolve the crimes. The catalogue-within-the-catalogue of the names of the maquiladoras, mentioned previously, signals the pervasive presence of foreign capital in Santa Teresa; the continual recurrence of these names acts as an insistent reminder of the neoliberal policies which created the maquiladoras and of their foreign origin. The mirroring of the maquiladora names and the names of femicide victims forms an acknowledgment of the relationship between the femicides and the maquiladoras, while also tying together the destruction of the female body with the maquiladora's internal dissolution of the city's sovereignty.*

There is a second way in which the catalogue portrays the femicides as a crime integrally linked to neoliberalism. The murders of the catalogue are compared within the novel to another series of crimes which are distinct from the femicides, especially in terms of class, but also in terms of the political visibility granted to each series. And in this comparison of the femicides and these other crimes, we can see what Rancière means by differentiating between those who are relegated by the partition of the perceptible to making noise like animals and those who are granted the recognition of possessing human speech.

Months after the beginning of the femicides, a “sensational” series of crimes takes place in which an unknown visitor to churches in Santa Teresa urinates and defecates in

* Some of the names of the maquiladoras seem to coyly hint at this relation of political dominance: City Keys, Overworld, NewMarkets. Another name, MachenCorp, has even darker connotations since it can literally be read as “body-maker” when read as a combination of German and French.

churches and destroys church symbols. In two of these instances the intruder attacks the church officials who try to intervene, resulting in grave injuries to one and the deaths of two others. These crimes instantly attract the attention of the city police and the media, which begin to call him El Penitente, or The Penitent. The narrator is careful to note the amount of press attention the case receives: the dramatic name given to the perpetrator, the way the national press swoops in on the story, and the pressure put on the police to capture the perpetrator. All this despite the fact that the femicides have been going on for months without attracting any sustained attention from the media or from the police. The differences in the location of the crimes and their nature partially account for this level of attention. In the case of El Penitente, his intrusions and his violent behavior occur in spaces that still matter to the bourgeois citizenry of Santa Teresa (and of Mexico as a whole), and importantly these spaces reflect an idealized lineage to Spanish colonial culture and to Western Europe (through Catholicism) as a whole. The maquiladoras, on the other hand, occupy a space under erasure, a space whose industrial capacity at once sustains the city and destroys it from within by eroding local control. This space on the edge of the city reflects Santa Teresa's contemporary dependence on neoliberal capital, whereas the traditional spaces of the city center seek to link Santa Teresa to its colonial heritage. El Penitente's destruction of the symbols and statues of saints and the Virgin Mary far exceeds, in their social valorization for the bourgeoisie, the murder of women who work in the maquiladoras.

The distinction in the narrative description of the murders, between those of the catalogue and those of "The Penitent," is significant because it reproduces the standing division in the partition of the perceptible present throughout the novel. This partition of

the perceptible is the aesthetic analogue of the political division which structures the city's social hierarchy: those who count and those who are of no (ac)count, and who as a result have no speech, to use the terminology of Rancière. What allows for this division to remain in place in Santa Teresa is the absence of "politics" as defined by Rancière: that is, a true state of contention. In lieu of politics, there is simply "policing," namely the rule of administration, which is only the minimal management required for domination to function.

A similar theory of the social differences between the crimes of El Penitente and the femicides is espoused within the text by a detective from the United States, Albert Kessler, who is hired by Santa Teresa to investigate after the femicides finally begin to attract national and international attention. He recounts examples from the past of deaths by the thousands that passed by unnoticed (such as the deaths that surrounded the Paris Commune of 1871) while other lethal crimes that involved a member of the bourgeoisie received unending attention in the press. His conclusion is that some deaths simply "no pertenecían a la sociedad" ("did not belong to society") while others did, and as a result those crimes were "escribible, legible" ("writable, readable") (339). In a sense, his conclusion is similar to Rancière's: political power is essentially an aesthetic power, the ability to determine what is writeable and what is readable, who is a subject and who is not. The media, controlled by bourgeois interests, will cover crimes against the bourgeoisie, while other crimes will have to find other outlets.

In Santa Teresa the detective's conclusions on the femicides are threefold: "A: esa sociedad está fuera de la sociedad, todos, absolutamente todos son como los antiguos cristianos en el circo. B: los crímenes tienen firmas diferentes. C: esa ciudad parece

pujante, parece progresar de alguna manera, pero lo mejor que podrían hacer es salir una noche al desierto y cruzar la frontera, todos sin excepción, todos, todos” (339)*. The detective’s conclusions, though certainly applicable to the situation in Santa Teresa, miss the political and economic context which allowed this situation to develop. Like a caricature of the U.S. perspective, the detective’s notions lack an awareness that what is happening in Mexico is intimately related to what is happening in the United States and elsewhere. His diagnosis, though accurate in describing the crimes that take place there as not “writable” or “readable” to a bourgeois sensibility, fetishizes and localizes the problem to such a degree (“the best thing would be for every last one of the people *there* to head out into the desert some night and cross the border” [emphasis mine]) that it disconnects the problems of northern Mexico from the nexus of political and economic relations of neoliberalism – many of which originate in the U.S. – which produced, and are embodied by, the maquiladoras.†

Kessler’s mythologizing view of the city as an irrepressible and expansive Other proves to be a useful way of obscuring the political and economic underpinnings of the

*“(a) everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus; (b) the crimes have different signatures; (c) the city seems to be booming, it seems to be moving ahead in some ineffable way, but the best thing would be for every last one of the people there to head out into the desert some night and cross the border.” (266)

† Kessler’s remarks are similar to those of Joan Didion, whom Jean Franco criticized for representing the violence she witnessed in El Salvador as “ineffable” and thus making it appear as a “purely local aberration.” Franco notes that in a comparison between violence in the first-world and elsewhere, “it is not that state violence in Argentina in 1976, for example, had any parallel in the United States but rather that, from the point of view of the metropolis, real Third World cadavers have fueled the ‘mobilized privatization’ of contemporary society” (Franco, *Critical Passions* 22). Franco reasserts the primacy of a direct connection between the state violence of third-world countries and the economic aspirations of first-world countries. Kessler of course is not the only foreign perspective on to the Third World: the four European academics, the sports reporter from Detroit, offer other examples of foreign gazes overwhelmed by the “sublime” spectacle of Santa Teresa. Bolaño himself, and the way his attention to the city became magnetized through his correspondence with the journalist Sergio Rodríguez, could not be said to escape this predicament in which the catastrophic condition of the city both attracts the gaze and deters it from reading the politico-economic clues of its origin.

catastrophe unfolding in Santa Teresa.* The catalogue's incessant drumbeat of crime scenes along with the detached narration of bloodied corpses serves as an anchor against these views; Kessler's sociological analysis and its shortcomings are countered and put into perspective by the catalogue. The catalogue localizes the crimes with an intensive focus but does not thereby obscure a larger view of the situation: by replicating within itself an inverse catalogue, a catalogue of the maquiladoras in Santa Teresa, it illuminates the foreign neoliberal forces animating the changes in Santa Teresa.

One can notice the idiosyncratic character of the catalogue as a representation of the dead by considering the representation of the dead performed by Wieder in *Estrella distante* that was discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, many formal aspects of the catalogue in 2666 seem to stand in direct contrast to the brutal aestheticization of tortured and dead bodies we read about in a photography exposition put on by Wieder. For instance, the order and arrangement of the photographs of women's bodies in Wieder's apartment in *Estrella distante* explicitly follows a theological template:

El orden en que están expuestas no es casual: siguen una línea, una argumentación, una historia (cronológica, espiritual...), un plan. Las que están pegadas en el cielorraso son semejantes (según Muñoz Cano) al infierno, pero un infierno vacío. Las que están pegadas (con chinchetas) en las cuatro esquinas semejan una epifanía. Una epifanía de la locura. En otros grupos de fotos predomina un tono elegíaco. (*Estrella distante* 97)[†]

* Kessler's view of the city of Santa Teresa is echoed by other characters, notably the academics from the first chapter. Donoso Macaya notes how the first-world visitors see Santa Teresa as a "ciudad inagotable" – "refieren constantemente a la inconmensurabilidad de la ciudad y a la sensación de caos que les produce" (139).

[†] "The order in which they were exhibited was not haphazard: there was a progression, an argument, a story (literal and allegorical), a plan. The images stuck to the ceiling (says Muñoz Cano) depicted a kind of hell, but empty. Those pinned up in the four corners seemed to be an epiphany. An epiphany of madness. In other groups of photos the dominant mood was elegiac" (89). Note that the translator's version changes quite dramatically the sense of the first line. For "una historia (cronológica, espiritual...)" we read "a story (literal and allegorical)"; in the original, however, "story" can also be "history," and the text says it could be a chronological, spiritual story. Thus the translation loses some of the theological dimension of the passage.

Compare this to the catalogue of 2666 where there is no otherworldly schema: the non-hierarchical and spontaneous approach of the catalogue is reflected in the equality of the narrative treatment of each victim in each entry, in terms of style, quantitative length, and order. Each entry varies in length depending on the amount of information available about the victim, not depending on the brutality of the murder or the manner of discovery. The chronology of the discovery of the corpses acts as the only organizing principal, both of the catalogue itself and of its individual entries.

Furthermore, the catalogue's careful attention to names and locations replaces the erasure that marked Wieder's photographs. Wieder's photographs function as an added layer of objectification above that achieved by the torture and murder of the women depicted in them, making the bodies appear like contorted mannequins. The only sense of place is given by a concrete floor and the "air" into which a woman is disappearing, which ultimately means the elimination of any sense of place in this world. The photographs act as a barrier to further understanding by de-framing and decontextualizing the bodies. Such a profound delocalization goes hand-in-hand with a fascist aesthetic and ideology obsessed with the absolute and the pure.

The forensic description of the injuries in the catalogue of 2666 replaces the purely visual aestheticization to be found in the photography exhibition, which provided neither captions nor a narrative, and led to a sensationalist experience that could produce no informative understanding but only shock. The same cannot be said of the catalogue and the way the accumulation of entries slowly leads to a greater understanding of how this violence occurred (if also a greater sense of terror as well), what it destroyed, how the deaths are connected to the *maquiladoras*, and the political and economic decisions

which made this environment of non-governance in Santa Teresa possible. Wieder's art obscured actual social relations, suppressing them in favor of metaphorical or allegorical relations, and violently imposed its perception on others without regard to its own subjective origin. The catalogue in *2666* reveals relations between the social and the politico-economic and does so in a way that reflects its own awareness of its limitations in presenting such a picture.

One site within Santa Teresa shows us the extreme degree to which the economic and political violence of neoliberalism can produce a sense of denaturalization and desocialization among the poor of Santa Teresa. If the case of the El Penitente murders provided a highly-visible foil to the femicides, this particular recurring location in the city of Santa Teresa demonstrates the oblivion that many in the city are liable to fall into. Outside the city limits there is an illegal trash dump known as "El Chile." The maquiladoras dispose of their waste here, but so does the municipality itself, since the city's official trash dumps are overwhelmed with the amount of waste produced by the growing city. Some residents of the city live in such desperate conditions that they have resorted to living in the dump and scrounging around in it in search of subsistence; unable to even get a job at the maquiladoras, they must turn to the trash of the maquiladoras in order to survive. According to the narrator, the dump is so toxic and hostile to human life that its inhabitants always number between three and twenty, and they usually die within seven months of arriving. The language of the inhabitants is impossible to understand, all of them are sick and they have forgotten how to eat and fornicate, bodily processes which for them are now "fuera de la acción y la

verbalización” (467).^{*} Their clothing has degraded so much that “sacarle la ropa a un cadáver de El Chile equivale a despellejarlo.”[†] This image is an apt metaphor for how the social and the natural in El Chile have dissolved into each other, resulting in an amorphous layer that is neither social nor natural, neither protective nor sensual. Their trash dump is a Garden of Eden in reverse, where they slowly unlearn their relationship to nature and lose the capacity to name things or to relate to one another. The inhabitants of El Chile exist outside society and outside nature, caught in a liminal moment that will end with their death in short order. This zone in which the human is no longer human, in which language disintegrates into voice, and where bodily functions are no longer remembered or acted on, represents the ground zero of the dehumanization and the erasure of the political that has taken place in Santa Teresa.

It is against this site of total desubjectivation, both outside and central to the existence of the city of Santa Teresa, that the catalogue seems to act and resist. The catalogue seeks to mitigate the desubjectification symbolized by El Chile, desiring to give definition and identity to the victims of neoliberal labor, to make “what the system confuses into an indistinct mass stand out, giving new powers to the singular to stand for the many” (Rancière “Theater of Politics” 74). The catalogue’s careful textual attention to the discovery of each corpse functions as a way of reaffirming the integrity of each victim as an individual by turning the scene of discovery into a scene of reading. Reading acts as a counterweight to the force of erasure which is present everywhere in Santa Teresa. The ground zero of that force of erasure is El Chile, which embodies the extreme distillation of the breakdown of sovereignty, of familial, social, and natural relations,

^{*} “beyond action and expression” (373)

[†] “To strip the clothes from a body in El Chile was to skin it” (373).

performed by neoliberalism. El Chile is the closest approximation to that place and time of oblivion and forgetting that is signaled by the title of the novel, 2666, a date which only appears in *Amuleto*, another book by Bolaño:

luego empezamos a caminar por la avenida Guerrero... la 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 de 2666, un cementerio olvidado debajo de un párpado muerto o nonato, las acuosidades desapasionadas de un ojo que por querer olvidar algo ha terminado por olvidarlo todo. (76-77)*

The little snippet here is classic Bolaño: the disturbing undertow of a seemingly ordinary moment is elevated and encapsulated in a surreal simile. In the simile a city street in Mexico City is compared to a cemetery in the year 2666, and precisely not a cemetery from the years 1968, 1974, or 1975. Haunting happens at the juncture of multiple temporalities, and this idea connects the cemetery from the year 2666 with El Chile, which itself is figured as the breaking point of multiple temporalities and localities.

The cemetery's problematic status as a site within and without time is paralleled on the level of location. As Blanchot notes,

We do not cohabit with the dead for fear of seeing *here* collapse into the unfathomable *nowhere*... the here of the *here lies*, filled in by names, well-formed phrases and affirmations of identity, is the anonymous and impersonable place par excellence. And it as though, within the limits which have been traced for it and in the vain guise of a will capable of surviving everything, the monotony of an infinite disintegration were at work to efface the living truth proper to every place and make it equivalent to the absolute neutrality of death. (259)

Cemeteries function as an institutionalized attempt to ascribe identity and locality to something that no longer possesses either. Cemeteries, then, also replicate a memorial structure that strives (but necessarily fails) to order the losses of the past and that inflects

* Then we walked down the Avenida Guerrero... Guerrero, at that time of night, is more like a cemetery than an avenue, not a cemetery in 1974 or in 1968, or 1975, but a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else. (897)

our imagining of the present and future. In both the quotation from Blanchot and the passage from *Amuleto*, that desire to remember and order is juxtaposed with a will or force that seeks to forget and neutralize a traumatic event or even life itself. The cemetery from the year 2666 is described as a forgotten cemetery that once existed as an image under the eyelid of a dead person or a fetus that, in seeking to forget one thing, forgets everything. The tensions here strain the reading: a human being that lacks agency (a corpse, a fetus) nevertheless possesses the will to forget, a will that *nevertheless* preserves an image from the future. The image of an unseeing eye both within and beyond human passions and agency crystallizes these tensions. Strikingly similar language is used to describe Wieder's gaze in *Estrella distante* when he begins his introductions of his photographs. "Otra vez era el Wieder de siempre, dominante, seguro, con los ojos como separados del cuerpo, como si miraran desde otro planeta" (93).^{*} The dissociation from the body and from the world signaled in that description reiterates the constitutive gap of the unseeing eye: a bodily instrument for gathering knowledge of the world stripped of its very defining capacity and turned to other purposes, that of forgetting and erasing.

That conflict internal to the dynamic of a cemetery is replayed in the tension between the catalogue and El Chile, between the striving for memorialization and recuperation, and the site of unfathomable loss. The image of the unseeing eye encapsulates both processes and embodies the expectation that whatever can be lost (the eye of the corpse closing forever) nevertheless contains the equal potential to be regained

^{*} "Once again he was the usual Wieder: dominant, sure of himself, with eyes separated from his body, as if they gazed down from another planet."

(the closed eye of the fetus that one day will open). In between these two states the “acuosidades” serve to connect the two possibilities in a continual flow.

This surrealist metaphor is anchored in the description of a bloody moment of political history. The actual referent of the simile is avenida Guerrero, a deserted street in Mexico City in 1968 that passes near the site of the Tlatelolco massacre, the historical event around which the novel *Amuleto* takes place. The political significance of that event for Mexican history cannot be overstated. The dream of possibility inspired by the popular movements of the 60’s came to a halt with the state violence unleashed at the Tlatelolco plaza, much as the coup in Chile puts an end to the youthful exuberance of the poetry workshops described by Bolaño in *Estrella distante*. The implicit comparison between the coup in Chile, the massacre in Mexico, and the femicides in Santa Teresa establishes a link between the three temporalities and locations which represent different manifestations of neoliberal power; they also represent catastrophic passages in history which irrevocably altered its course. The forcefulness of those events altered the field of perception on a political and historical level, and in turn affected the possibilities of witnessing and writing history. The catalogue illuminates the force of neoliberalism in Santa Teresa, its ability to covertly undermine liberal structures of governance and erase the representation of the workers at the maquiladoras. At the same time the catalogue voices opposition to the desubjectification of the maquiladora workers by making present the corpse of each victim, and elevating each discovery of a corpse to an equalized moment of significance. In this process, the catalogue acknowledges its inability to render a full account, but it is precisely this acknowledgement of partiality which distinguishes it and adds force to its efforts. It is at once both the opening and closing of

the eye onto the situation in Santa Teresa, a failure of witnessing that nevertheless ignites the beginning of an accounting. A surreal turn toward an ancient literary device, the catalogue, forms part of Bolaño's effort to capture the historical reality of the situation in Ciudad Juárez, to begin a count of those gone uncounted.

Chapter Four: The Burial of the Image: Alfredo Jaar's Inoperative Documentation

Alfredo Jaar is an artist from Chile whose work spans four decades. He left Chile in the early 80's and has been based in New York since 1982. His work includes installations, film, performance art and public interventions, though he is most recognized for his installations and interventions. The subjects of his pieces vary tremendously as they usually respond to localized situations or crises around the globe, to which he is drawn either out of his own interest or by invitation. His most intriguing work is characterized by the simultaneous invocation and disruption of documentary expectations, which is done in a way reminiscent of how Roberto Bolaño responds to documentary forms (encyclopedia, lists, catalogues) and counters their notions of identity, community, and their selective crafting of the appearance of reality.

As was mentioned in the introduction, Jaar's work has an affinity with the movement within documentary known as New Social Documentary, though their focus was mainly on photography rather than installation art. Works by these artists nevertheless blurred the line between traditional documentary work and visual art, allowing for the emergence of the genre of "documentary art."* The continued growth of

* The legacy of documentary photography, in particular the fetishization and subjugation of impoverished people of the first-world and the otherization of colonized peoples, does not go overlooked in the transition to the art world. The danger of possible implication in the very schemas of domination which authorized the documentary in the past continues to be a real possibility. As Hito Steyerl notes, "documentary production has taken on forensic duties for a long time, and has functioned in the service of a large-scale

documentary art in the 1990's and 2000's has been motivated by a number of elements according to various theorists. Stefan Jonsson sees the surge in documentary art as a return to a self-aware realism inspired by the standardization and self-censorship of mainstreams news, in which "One might even say that the Arts are compensating for the 'blind spots' of journalism" ("Facts of Aesthetics" 60). Hito Steyerl cites a number of factors both within and without the art world, including the influence of contextual art and cultural studies, both of which helped to turn attention to the politics of representation and the power hierarchies which authorize certain forms of representation over others. Dominique Baqué views the turn to documentary art as a reaction to postmodernism and the cultural exhaustion which has followed in its wake (Jonsson, "Realism and the Documentary Turn" 27).

For Jonsson, documentary art "increasingly... give[s] expression to 'the political', that is to say, the implicit preconditions and consequences of the political and economic policies that dominate in the world" ("Facts of Aesthetics" 61). Steyerl characterizes Jonsson's view of art as forming something like an "alternative CNN" which compensates for the decline and stultification of the news media (Steyerl). But Steyerl proposes that documentary art fosters a different goal: not only to communicate the issues which the global media suppresses, but to express the generalized uncertainty of the globalized present. The contemporary world, in her view, is marked by "widespread anxieties, of precarious living conditions, of general uncertainties and media-provoked hysteria and panic" and in viewing documentary images "viewers are torn between false certainties and feelings of passivity and exposure, between agitation and boredom,

epistemological enterprise that is closely linked with the project of Western colonialism. Reporting the so-called truth about remote people and locations has been closely linked to their domination."

between their role as citizens and their role as consumers.” Documentary is suited to express this uncertainty of the present because “the constant doubt about whether what we see is consistent with reality is not a shameful lack, which has to be disavowed, but on the contrary is the decisive quality of contemporary documentary forms.” According to Steyerl, the post-representational nature of contemporary politics is reflected in a new breed of post-representational documentary. In this theory, documentary, in order to correspond to reality, must become (in its form and in its content) as uncertain as the status of the globalized present.

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Jaar’s work navigates this difficulty carefully by employing documentary modes where useful while deconstructing the ideological frame implied in the documentary gaze when necessary. As Jonsson notes in his discussions of both Jaar and Alan Sekula, the act of framing (on an aesthetic *and* ideological level) becomes the center of attention (*A Brief History* 149; “Realism” 28). This emphasis on the issue of framing within documentary is what makes Jaar’s work escape the fate of “tièrmondisme” and “victim photography.”

In this chapter I seek to examine in detail the various forms through which Jaar invokes the documentary as a mode, and how he gestures toward a practice of documentary poetics and aesthetics by playing with the documentary frame. At the center of this practice is the creative burial of images as a pathway toward reengaging our imaginative capacities in relationship to others who remain invisible and unknowable. As with Bolaño, Jaar's engagement with the documentary leads to a way of imagining the inoperative community through an experience of finitude that occurs with the disruption of the framing gesture intrinsic to the document. I proceed through close readings of Jaar's most important works and then close the chapter with a discussion of one of Jaar's latest works, a permanent installation and memorial in the Museum of Memories and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, and consider its significance both in the light of Jaar's career and as a return to Chile after nearly thirty years abroad.

Alfredo Jaar

Born in 1958 and trained as an architect, Jaar received little critical attention for his artwork before leaving Chile in 1981. While he had a handful of works under his belt, he had only completed one major work, *Studies on Happiness* (1979-1981), a series of seven public interventions.* One of these interventions involved polling people on the street to ask them if they were happy or unhappy and to explain why, an approach inspired by the work of German-born, U.S.-based artist Hans Haacke (who was himself

* *Opus 1981 / Andante Desesperato* (1981), completed before he left Chile, was much smaller in scale than *Studies on Happiness* but did gain enough attention to win an art prize in Santiago. The work was comprised of a video of Jaar blowing wildly on a clarinet almost to the point of exhaustion, which formed a response to a Susan Meiselas photograph of the Nicaraguan Revolution in which a soldier is playing a clarinet. Another work entitled *Chile, 1981, Before Leaving* was kept secret until its photographic documentation was revealed as part of Jaar's first retrospective in Chile in 2007 an exhibition featuring an overview of Jaar's work for the first time in Chile, in 2006.

indebted to the Argentine artist David Lamelas (*SCL* 70)). The intention of “Studies on Happiness” was to take on the military establishment, and particularly the political censorship operating at the time, through the oblique angle of naïve and superficially non-political questions. As a result, the political significance of his work remained unspoken but evident, as the simple question “are you happy?” prompts the kind of self-reflection and self-questioning that happens in a political system where citizens do have a say in the matters of their own governance. The citizens on the street who were asked this question were also documented in photographic images and on video explaining why they were happy or unhappy, giving them a chance to express themselves in a public manner. The results of the poll along with the hours of footage were later shown in an exhibition. Another intervention in the series manifested itself in billboards across the city asking the same question in large block letters.

In these interventions Jaar’s approach resembled that of the contemporary Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA) and others in the “escena de avanzada,” who similarly sought to break out of the museum and bring art into the urban space and the social realm. Yet Jaar did not receive anywhere near the same amount of attention for his efforts and he remained distant from artists and writers associated with the *escena*.*

Adriana Valdés wrote the first critical essay on his Jaar’s work in Chile in the early 80’s and encouraged him to go abroad. His departure from Chile reinforced his outsider status within the Chilean art scene, a status which Jaar himself embraced, both in

* In an interview, Jaar expresses both resentment and relief at not being included in Nelly Richard’s seminal book, *Margenes e Instituciones*. While he does express an affinity for the work of CADA, he also agrees with an assessment that notes a sense of orthodoxy and exclusion in the collective (*SCL* 69). He has, however, appeared with them at at least one conference, though in forced circumstances. As with his entry to the New York art scene, Jaar strives to retain a sense of detachment and aloofness from other artists and groups, potentially because he sees that liminal status as a useful way of retaining his creative vision.

Chile and New York, where he ended up living. Because he was trained as an architect, Jaar saw himself as someone who could escape the insular tendencies of the art world. He frequently cites his architectural training as underlying his approach to a “site” for which he develops a “program” (SCL 71) Each work he does responds to a specific place and a specific situation or problem, and the work is not tied to any particular medium or material (SCL 74). For the inspiration for this flexible approach he cites Duchamp, whose audacity in naming whatever he wanted to name as art Jaar found very freeing.

Jaar believes this non-art background, as well as his foreign origin, accounted for some of the resistance he faced in the early days of his career when he first arrived in New York. He started to get traction and began to make his name with installation works that shrewdly combined lightboxes, mirrors and images. Early works of his that followed this method include *Gold in the Morning*, *Welcome to the Third World*, *1+1+1*, and *Frame of Mind*, among others. *Gold in the Morning* (1985) was the first such work that both gained prominence in the art world and made a connection back to Latin America. The work featured photographs of workers emerging from a gold mine in Serra Pelada, Brazil. These workers appeared as if they were literally emerging out of the muddy earth of the mine, the whites of their eyes contrasting sharply with their mud-covered faces. These photographs generated a number of works in which Jaar would place the images in lightboxes, often with just the profile of one worker placed on one end of the lightbox, with only a vast expanse of brilliant whiteness filling up the rest of the lightbox. One series of these lightboxes ended up in the subway station that serves Wall Street, and the image of the worker was juxtaposed against a fake running ticker of gold prices.

By his own account, Jaar's most reproduced work is *A Logo for America* (1987), a public intervention staged on the huge screen overlooking Times Square (*SCL* 66). Once every six minutes (between the commercials and other typical fare broadcasted on the screen) a sixty second sequence of images created by Jaar would be shown. These images were simple but provocative to many of the spectators at Times Square: an image of the geographic outline of the United States overlaid with the text "This is not America"; an image of the United States flag placed underneath the sentence "This is not the American flag." For some observers, their thoughts captured in interviews with a National Public Radio reporter on the scene, such combinations of text and image proved repugnant and some wondered if they were even legal. But in time photographs of these broadcast images were reproduced in eighteen different K-12 textbooks, and Jaar is proud of their inclusion there.

Through the rest of the eighties and into the mid-nineties, Jaar's signature work involved the lightboxes mentioned before, and persisting throughout his career is the strategic use of lighting and darkness, combined with the careful deployment of photographs and images. Such works typically performed a trompe l'oeil effect, in which framed mirrors on the wall would catch and reflect images from the back of the lightboxes, which themselves contained another image on their front. Such was the case in *Untitled (Water)* in which five lightboxes, each placed on the ground a few feet from the wall, contained images of water on the side that faced out into the room. A series of small, square mirrors (25 in total) hanging on the wall would reflect back another image from the backside of the lightboxes, namely images of Vietnamese behind bars in a refugee camp in Hong Kong or still on the boat that they had been using to emigrate.

Coyote is another series of works utilizing the lightbox motif, and in this case the marginalized, third-world subjects in question are undocumented immigrants along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The seemingly haphazard selection of third-world issues in Jaar's work from this time period, along with his propensity for deploying photographs in contexts normally reserved for the display of advertisements (the Times Square Jumbotron screen, lightboxes), have led some to the conclusion that Jaar is "not so much elucidating political problems as simply making advertisements for them" (Roberta Smith). But his installations also usually attempt to inoculate themselves against such judgments by the inclusion of self-reflexive features. Thus, for instance the mirrors on the wall in *Untitled (Water)* can also capture the image of the viewer, depending on the angle at which they are seen, momentarily placing the first-world museum visitor in the same plane as the third-world migrant worker. Olivier Chow reads this technique as expanding the dimensions of the document itself, which is not so much a text as a point of encounter between subjects and objects. Manipulated correctly, however, the encounter undoes the traditional relations between subjects and objects:

The viewer is not external to the work of art or to the fabric of history but integrated within the frame of the image, often through the use of mirrors where the viewer becomes a participant within the historical frame of the event staged by the artist. Alfredo Jaar thus expands the double surface of the 'document' by expanding time as well as space in order to set up a spatio-temporal armature specific to the historical event captured in the frame of the image. In the 'document', the event becomes an architectural space which can be experienced and visited by the viewer. (Chow)

According to Chow, the lightboxes and mirrors triangulate the viewer within a network of reflections and position the viewer as an essential participant in the documentation of atrocities and other human catastrophes. This does not mean the viewer is transported

into the represented world of the artwork, but that the consideration of the document is spatialized and retemporalized into an experience of its own. I propose that this process of slowing down and opening the time and space of the document allows Jaar to misdirect the referential illusion so that the nature of the object of representation becomes not a third-world subject but our own ethical relationship to these problems, and our own embeddedness in the problems and their possible solution. This effort prompts a contemplation of the world as it is, i.e. structured in subject-object relations that benefit global capital (First World vs. Third World), and the imagination of a world that could exceed such relations.

Within such a context the document can become weaponized as part of an “art of counter-information” which Jaar wages against the established “reality of information” (Chow).^{*} Such “counter-information” functions in part by bringing attention to the framing and selection of information rather to the explicit content. This is the emphasis in another reading of Jaar’s work from the early 90’s, by David Levi Strauss:

The effectiveness of Jaar’s work is due precisely to his skillful *aestheticization* (transformation) of documentary images. He very purposefully manipulates aesthetic *distance* and aesthetic *framing* in order to *materialize* the distance between viewer and subject. When it works, this can cause sudden jolts of recognition in viewers of their position in relation to the subjects of Jaar’s photographs. (Strauss, “The Documentary Debate” 9)

These characteristics would be necessary when Jaar’s career took on a new direction and valence with the work he did in response to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, an atrocity whose aftermath he witnessed personally, once the killings had stopped in August of that year. With the Rwandan genocide, his work was no longer dealing with one of many Third World humanitarian emergencies, but a genocide that had continued unabated for

^{*} Chow picks up the term “art of counter-information” from Didi-Huberman’s essay “Emotion Does Not Say ‘I’” and Didi-Huberman picks up the term from Gilles Deleuze.

months despite taking place in full view of Western world powers and humanitarian relief agencies.^{*} Genocide as a subject for aesthetic representation in the late twentieth century, especially if done through photographs,[†] is a task fraught with tensions and complications to a degree much larger than the works that Jaar had so far executed. Yet in spite of this, and despite the fact that Jaar had had no relationship with Rwanda prior to the genocide, and only visited Rwanda twice for a total time of one month[‡], he generated twenty-plus works in response to the genocide over the course of several years (together known as *The Rwanda Project*), which were then exhibited across the world and subsequently became one of his best-known works. This fact, in conjunction with the work done prior to the Rwanda projects, has led some critics to call him the UNESCO artist or the UN artist, a label which does not faze Jaar but that he sees as a challenge (*SCL* 85). For Jaar, the typical UNESCO media campaign features an “insulting and exploitative use of photography” and were he given the task of overhauling such a campaign, he would “radically alter their use of photography, the way they portray children” (85). In these criticisms of Jaar there is the latent idea that a concern for aesthetic representation is antithetical to sincere efforts to communicate to the world about humanitarian crises; the conclusion left to be drawn is that a “sincere” documentation would avoid any possible figuration and simply portray the realities of the situation as they are. But as we have seen, such a portrayal is impossible and plays into the idea that Western observers can

* A discussion of the origins and cause of the genocide are beyond the scope of this chapter. But it should be noted that Western countries were not simply observers of the genocide. France, for instance, served as an enabler to the atrocities by turning a blind eye to the sale of weapons to Hutu soldiers. The enmity between the Hutus and Tutsis derives in large part from before Rwanda’s independence and the way one ethnic group was favored over the other because of their supposed greater racial proximity to white Europeans.

† Didi-Huberman on photographs from Auschwitz.

‡ At the request of his psychiatrist he did not go again to Rwanda (*SCL* 82).

access the truth simply by the use of raw photographs which putatively provide no frame, either aesthetic or ideological.

Jaar would probably agree with Rancière's position, written in the context of an analysis of Jaar's *Rwanda Project*, that aestheticization is instead intimately tied with the human:

People tend to say that figures of speech should not be used in the presence of mass crimes... But this way of safeguarding the "victims" of mass crimes from linguistic subtleties is in fact a way of running them down, of designating them as a herd, fit to be slaughtered, consisting of people who do not have a name and are outside linguistic word-play. (Rancière, "Theater of Images" 74)

To exclude from representation, then, in this view, means to perform again the exclusion which allowed the victims of genocide to become, in the perception of the perpetrators, non-human and thus fit for slaughter. Though Jaar sees the genocide victims as possible subjects of representation, even through the use of photographs, he does negotiate such representation carefully, avoiding the typical pitfalls of "victim photography" and the routine documentation of third-world misery. We never see, for instance, a direct photograph of a corpse in any of the works that Jaar produces, since he realizes that the power and effect of such an image is questionable. Rather, in line with Rancière's idea that the image is not a *piece* of the visible, but the *staging* of the visible (74), Jaar places the onus of the work art does on the frame rather than on the content.

As will be seen in the analysis of a few examples of his Rwanda projects and other, the focus on materializing both distance and proximity, seen in his prior works, continues. But there is also a more direct engagement with the nature of the document and the nature of the photograph, and with each analysis of a work I will focus on one aspect of either the document or the photograph that Jaar puts into play. Through this

engagement, Jaar enters into the documentary mode itself, deconstructs its conventions and expectations, and expands our conception of what documentary work can do, especially in the circumstances of mass murder and its aftermath.

The Photograph: *Real Pictures*

Real Pictures is one of the series of works, collectively called *The Rwanda Project*, that Jaar created after his trip to Rwanda in August 1994, shortly after the massacre of Tutsis by Hutus that began in April of that year. It was first exhibited in January 1995 at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago (Strauss, “A Sea of Griefs” 41). Like many of his works from *The Rwanda Project*, *Real Pictures* is an attempt to navigate the treacherous waters of creating art in the wake of mass murder: remembrance without reducing people to their status as a victim; communication that does not slide into simple consumption; truth-telling but with respect for the victims; the avoidance of the solipsism that characterizes much of the art world; the production of understanding and the interpellation of the viewer without merely provoking shock and hopelessness and their ultimate result, indifference.

In this piece Jaar places photographs he took upon his arrival in Rwanda into archival boxes of a dark velvet color. All of the photographs were taken in the Nyagazambu Camp and Ntarama Church in Rwanda, and the Kashusha and Katale refugee camps and the Ruzizi 2 bridge in Zaire (van Tijen). Inscribed on each box is a silkscreened caption in white text that describes the photograph inside the box. These boxes are then stacked upon each other to create stacked piles that, according to one

critic, resemble funeral pyres, and are spread out around the room. The stacks are configured in eight different ways and visitors are not allowed to open the boxes.

In total there are sixty images in the installation, and for each image there is one box, yet each box may appear multiple times within the exhibition. However, there are over five hundred and fifty photographic prints of those sixty images in the exhibition, meaning that within the sixty boxes the image is duplicated many times over (according to Jane Blocker, there are 18 to 120 prints within each box (Blocker 55; Strauss, “A Sea of Griefs” 41)). This play with multiplicity and duplication occurs in the background since most viewers would not know about the multiple prints within the boxes; but it is notable nevertheless since it signals a slippage within the installation between numbering and witnessing to be discussed shortly.

In a lecture at a conference in Italy Jaar described his rationale in creating this piece:

The logic behind this piece is as follows: I feel we are bombarded by too many images, we don't see them anymore. The media gives us the impression of being present somewhere but when we turn off the TV or close our newspapers we are left with an incredible sentiment of absence. So here I wanted to work in reverse, I wanted to start with an absence in the hope of provoking a presence. The logic was to say, let's forget everything for a second and let's start from scratch. Let's start from the beginning and think about the meaning of one life and one death. The logic was that we were bombarded by images of Rwanda but we obviously didn't see them because we didn't do anything. So I thought maybe now that I will enclose them in boxes maybe we will see them better. (Jaar “La Generazione delle Immagini”)

In invoking the idea of an overwhelming flood of images seen by contemporary Western spectators, Jaar is far from being alone among critics of popular media culture. Yet Jacques Rancière, for one, though in multiple places an admiring reader of Jaar's works,

sees an anti-democratic basis to this view of the dilemma.* The fear of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, that democracy would signal the future overrunning of society by the multitude, is for Rancière the origin of the trope of an excess of images. “Lamentation over the excess of images was at first a picture of democracy as a society in which there are too many individuals, too many consumers of words and images, all crowded together, preventing our gaze and thought from assimilating broader perspectives” (Rancière “Theater of Images” 73). We can see a similar anti-democratic sentiment in the Grierson’s description of the cinema as a means of taming the unruly passions of the mob.

Elsewhere, however, Jaar’s work does speak to the profound *loss* of images through political and corporate censorship rather than our bombardment by images. Ultimately this recognition of loss plus Jaar’s innovative strategies of countering the manipulation of images in the media, is what Rancière finds redeeming in Jaar’s work. “The political artist’s strategy is not to reduce the number of images, but to oppose one method of reducing it to another, one way of counting to another” (72). Again, what matters is the frame (the counting) rather than the content or the proliferation of the images.

In an interview, Jaar doesn’t focus on the flood of contemporary images so much as the nature of photographic representation itself, as being a target of his artistic energies in *The Rwanda Project*. “The camera never manages to record what your eyes see, or what you feel at that moment. The camera always creates a new reality. I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded

* Rancière contributed a chapter to a book (*La politique des images*) documenting a retrospective of Jaar’s work at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland. He also discusses Jaar in his collection of essays *Le spectateur émancipé*.

photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable” (Gallo; qtd. in Blocker 54). On the one hand, the camera is deficient, because it supplants reality, instead of transmitting it. On the other hand, it is this “disjunction,” as Jaar says, which allows for creative witnessing. “There is no way to translate what I see as an artist... The challenge is enormous, and it forces me to come up with different strategies of representation... How do we translate this lived experience? I’ve always thought that we cannot represent this reality. Instead, you create a new reality with the work” (Phillips 14). The photograph is additive not substitutive, though it offers the dangerous illusion of being substitutive. What is needed is the acknowledgement of this additive character and the conscious awareness of a new reality being created. Jaar’s manipulation of the frame is what allows for the document to be seen as a creative form of witnessing rather than as a window onto reality.

In his lecture in Italy, Jaar appeals to a few mechanisms by which the representations furnished by the popular media can be countered: a metaphorical *tabula rasa*, wiping away the detrimental influence of too many images acting as stimuli; a focus on a single life and a single death; and by focusing on the frame of the picture (i.e. by obscuring entirely the images). In even proposing that something must be done with regards to how images are viewed because of the unsatisfactory outcomes that they produce (e.g. there is no foreign intervention to prevent genocide), Jaar endorses the connection between viewing and action as a cause-and-effect relationship. In this logic, if action does not take place, then something must have gone “wrong” within the act of viewing. Or more accurately, images needed to be invisible (but still present as an object and as a “text” of sorts) in order to be better understood and better used as the impetus for

action, and to correct our inability to properly read photographs. The following analysis attempts to parse through the implications of Jaar's strategy in *Real Pictures* and how it affects our consideration of photography.

The primary formal feature of *Real Pictures*, in Rancièrian terms, is the partition made within the realm of the visible. By enveloping photographs in darkness they are both displayed and not viewable, seemingly rendering them futile. As with his lightbox work, Jaar's technique questions the very basis of the process of photography. A photograph requires light on many levels: in the initial capture of the image on the negative, in the exposure to light in the printing process, and in the viewing of the photograph. Light gives the photograph life, but can also take it away: underexposure or overexposure can fundamentally alter or eliminate the final image. What a photograph needs is variable light, a mixture of light levels, of shadow and light, for distinction to emerge. To take a photographic print and store it in a box means to have gone through a long process of working with light and then to have ended it in darkness. The photograph is not erased in doing so, but put on hold, in reserve. As Didi-Huberman puts it, the pictures are "not inaccessible, as some art critics thought, but *in suspense*, awaiting a possible, future legibility" (61). The visitor is led to believe, by the captions and the title of the piece, that there is a photograph in there that was created and viewed by the eyes of its maker and by the lens of a camera, and that may again in the future be exposed to human sight. But for now it is rendered blocked from sight by the box. The photograph travels from its origin as a negative hidden in the camera to a print hidden in the box. In either case, the possibility of a future exposure, and legibility, remains.

The caption on the box turns the photograph from a hidden object into a textual representation. Placing the caption “before” the picture (not simply replacing it or standing alongside it) reorders the relationship between photography and narrative. For Susan Sontag, a photograph, because it presents only a segment of time and space, cannot narrate on its own power and thus cannot, of itself, produce understanding (*On Photography* 23); thus a photograph provokes speculation but cannot by itself deliver a greater understanding of the moment pictured *any more or less* than other media that do not develop over an extended period of time. Jaar’s replacement of the photograph with text would seem to be a nod toward Sontag’s idea, that a photograph is extremely limited in its narrative power and its ability to produce an adequate understanding of the historical situation it represents. Yet it also seems to be the case that his work equally responds to the challenge posed by Judith Butler when she values “visual culture” precisely for helping us to recognize and read the ideological frames that “narrate” everyday life:

To learn to see the frame that binds us to what we see is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be. (Butler, *Frames of War* 100; qtd. in Birkin 2)

In *Real Pictures* we see not the photograph but the photograph’s frame, which is manifested in the box, the caption and the piles composed of the boxes. Jaar defamiliarizes the consumption of photographs by suppressing the visual content of the photograph and letting the visitor both experience its non-visible presence, and imagine (with the help of the captions) the absent image. This might not be exactly the “tabula

rasa” that Jaar was aiming for, but it is an innovative way of reengaging with the photograph as an object and as a presence.

The veiled presence of the photograph also gives the photograph a decisively different character than a readily-viewable photograph. Like Parrhasius’ painting of a curtain that fools Zeuxis into asking him to reveal what lies behind the curtain, the archival box is a frame with no visible object at its core, only the object imagined by the visitor with the help of the caption. The boxes thus function as a type of veil, both partially revealing (through the text) and partially occluding (by the box) what is inside. A Lacanian reading of *Real Pictures* would see the box as the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire that provokes the desire of the visitor to project her vision onto the hidden photograph, but is not itself the object of desire. The box serves as a lure for the imagination while the caption guides the imagination of the photograph. But in this scenario, what *would* be the object of desire? Not the viewing of the images of atrocities that are described in the texts, but perhaps the sense of perspectival mastery, of secure and fixed relations between subject and object, that accompanies the viewing of atrocity photographs (or normal photographs).*

The structure of *Real Pictures* presents us with an invitation into a game, the game we play each time we view a photograph: the supposition that the photographic

* Abigail Solomon-Godeau elaborates further on the optical system of cameras (which are monocular) and how this system has become embedded into our way of thinking of human vision (which is naturally binocular) and its attendant sense of mastery: “A further structuring instance lies in the perspective system of representation built into camera optics in photography’s infancy. Modeled on the classical system of single point monocular perspective invented in the Renaissance, camera optics were designed to yield an analogous pictorial structure. While natural vision and perception have no vanishing point, are binocular, unbounded, in constant motion and marked by loss of clarity in the periphery, the camera image, like the Renaissance painting, offers a static, uniform field in which orthogonals converge at a single vanishing point. Such a system of pictorial organization, by now so imbued in western consciousness as to appear altogether natural, has certain ramifications. Chief among these is the way in which it confers a position of visual mastery upon the spectator whose ideal, all-seeing eye becomes the commanding locus of the pictorial field. This spectatorial position of perspectival and pictorial mastery has been theorized as being an inherently ideological construction” (“Who Is Speaking Thus?” 209).

image corresponds to an exterior reality is analogous to the supposition that the text of the caption refers to a real image inside the box. Where the analogy breaks down is that *Real Pictures* reserves a larger and more important role for the imagination. The imaginative power generated by the photograph-objects in *Real Pictures* is different from the imaginative power generated by the illusion of depth of a regular photograph. The caption informs us about the photographer but also provokes us to imagine actively what the photograph in the box may look like. The visitor is asked to be an active *imager* of the image, rather than an interpreter of the image. Imagination draws upon our past experience, not to dismiss or consume the image easily, but to envision it, to put it before our eyes. As such we cannot easily establish a relationship with the image, one way or another, because it is so tenuously in our grasp. The viewer is neither a receptacle for an image experienced affectively, nor is she an analytical interpreter of a pre-existing image. She is asked to be a co-creator, to be, in a sense, responsible for the image, and this task overrides the inclination, common in regular photographs of atrocity, to see the contents of the image as desubjectified objects.

Real Pictures frustrates and undoes the sense of visual mastery that documentary photography can develop in a viewer, not only by occluding the photograph but also in the nature of its two frames, the caption and the box. The whiteness of the text, and the strictly ordered and regimented nature of typed text, stand in stark contrast to the chaotic scenes the captions describe as being the subject of some of the hidden photographs. The desire for separation, between the chaos of the real and the order of representation, is also seen at the level of journalistic representation, between the mainstream media and Jaar. This desire can be felt in the following caption from one of the boxes in *Real Pictures*:

Nyagazambu Camp
48 Kilometers South of Kigali, Rwanda
Friday, August 26, 1994

This camp holds 10,000 displaced persons who have been forced to leave their homes and villages. This is only one of dozens of camps set up all over Rwandan Territory to receive the displaced population that has reached two million. There are also two million outside Rwanda in neighboring countries of Tanzania, Burundi, Zaire and Uganda. The Red Cross visits these camps periodically and distributes basic foods to every registered displaced person.

This photograph shows a large crowd of people waiting under a heavy sun for their names to be called by the Red Cross official. A Swiss journalist stands on his right with a microphone recording the sounds of the names being called. Engaged in an image of pathos instead of the complexity of the notion of genocide, the media has voraciously descended on the camps with cameras and microphones. (Morrison)

We have here both a description of the context and of the photograph, allowing the reader to develop a narrative timeline that extends beyond the temporal scope of a single image. A precise date and location are given. As before, Jaar provokes a comparison between his strategy of representation and that of the mainstream media. Jaar characterizes the journalists at the refugee camp as animalistic (“voraciously”) and even as scavengers (“descended”), captured within “an image of pathos instead of the complexity of the notion of genocide.”* Where before we were dealing with a polarity between the flood of images in the media and the absence of visual images in *Real Pictures*, here the opposition is between the *image* of pathos and the *notion* of genocide. Perhaps this was the very thought that later served as a seed for the conception of the installation itself,

* This distinction between himself and the other journalists seems facile and self-serving, not to mention somewhat ironic – after all, Jaar himself “descended” upon Rwanda for the first time in his life just after the end of the genocide and ended up taking some 3000 photographs (Chow). And here we might find, without too much psychologizing of Jaar, further rationale for the occlusion of photographs in “Real Pictures”: namely, the very desire to set himself apart from other representations of genocide and political catastrophe.

since it is the breakdown of this opposition (between image and thought, between figuration and documentation) that underlies much of *The Rwanda Project*.*

In some cases the captions might not describe very thoroughly the individual photograph. Instead, they provide an extended description of the context, leaving much of the actual content of the photograph open to speculation. Here is another caption from *Real Pictures*:

Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of the church. Dressed in modest, worn clothing, her hair is hidden in faded pink cotton kerchief. She was attending mass in the church when the massacre began. Killed with machetes, in front of her eyes, were her husband Tito Kahinamura (40) and her two sons Muhoza (10) and Matirigari (7). Somehow, she managed to escape with her daughter Marie-Louise Unamararunga (12), and hid in a swamp for three weeks, only coming out at night for food. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun. (qtd. in Chow)

The caption avoids entirely a direct description of the photograph, opting instead to profile one of the living victims of the genocide. In opposition to the text we just read, the caption gives us directly a (textual) portrait of profound pathos, filled with the sense of loss suffered by Gutete Emerita and the silent eloquence of her gesture at the corpses at her feet. While it might not contain entirely the notion of genocide, the text certainly gives us a sense of the damage and loss incurred in Rwanda on an individual level.

Would the photograph within the box do more or less, whether in terms of pathos or cognition, than this description if it were available to be viewed? Just as Gutete Emerita speaks *and* gestures, thus representing an interiority and pointing to an exteriority, so the

* Jaar's characterization of the journalists at the scene in the above-quoted caption is rather reductive, and the installation follows a different line of thought. After all, what would it mean to contemplate the notion of genocide in such a way that it excludes images of pathos? Can the image of pathos not be a way of educating oneself and absorbing the reality of genocide rather than a Medusa-head which freezes thought in its tracks? If there is an ideal image that produced both cognition and action, what would it look like and would it avoid pathos entirely? Jaar's stated intention in *Real Pictures* is to step back from the larger picture and give a view of the individual experience of genocide, while this caption would seem to contradict that intention in favor of a conceptual approach to the genocide.

caption and the box want to point at reality while also disclosing their incapacity to do so. The gesture as such is the figure par excellence of an insufficient representation since its very condition is insufficiency and incompleteness (the gesture is never fulfilled or completed but neither does it dwell under the expectation of fulfillment and completeness).

When Jaar first exhibited the work, he furnished an attached room with magazines and newspapers that gave a broader look at the causes and progress of the massacre. “Next to the exhibition we had a small resource room where we showed what the press did with this information. There were books about Africa, there was NGO literature for people to take with them, to help the NGOs working in Rwanda, and there were many magazines. We offered a place for people to comment on the exhibition” (“La Generazione delle Immagini”). Though one stated reason is to inform the public, Jaar again focuses on his criticism of the press through this resource room, ridiculing a piece by Sebastiao Salgado by drawing attention to the overly dramatic title of his article: “The Killer in the Next Tent: The Surreal Horror of the Rwanda Refugees.” In response to this title, Jaar states blankly, “It is not surreal” and the title of his installation (*Real Pictures*) also seems to form a rebuttal of this characterization of the genocide.

The overall impact of the installation cannot be measured only by reading the boxes individually, but also in the context of their configuration and placement. The boxes are carefully stacked throughout the space of the installation, and according to one account, there are eight different configurations in which these boxes are stacked (Blocker 55). The stacking of the boxes in piles both adds to the visual information of the installation and subtracts from the legible information of the installation. It adds to the

installation by giving it a certain shape, and by the suggestion that this shape represents figural forms and objects – one suggestion has been that it represents the form of a funeral pyre (55). But the stacking also subtracts from the installation by causing a severe reduction in the amount of text available to a potential viewer. The initial “burial” of the photograph in the box is thus replicated multiple times over by the stacking of the boxes, which renders the text of the captions as inaccessible as the photographs themselves. The viewer is left to speculate on what other atrocities might be described in the captions and pictured in the photographs of the boxes beneath the first level. As Jane Blocker puts it, “In Jaar’s work the ritual burying of the photograph acts to blind us, and in our blindness we imagine ourselves as witnesses” (56-57). We are placed yet again at another remove from the content of the installation. but this remove (again like the placement of the photograph in the archival box) is a creative one, not an incapacitating one.

Real Pictures presents a careful and thoughtful intervention into the fraught relationship between first-world witnessing and third-world genocide. If Jaar’s *Real Pictures* subverts the mission and characteristics of traditional documentary photography, it also enables other relations between the viewer and the installation while acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the form and history of the documentary photograph in the twentieth-century experience of viewing images of atrocity.

The Document: *One Million Finnish Passports*

If *Real Pictures* performs a critique of the value of a documentary photograph, the installation *One Million Finnish Passports* similarly calls into question the value of the document itself. As noted earlier, the photograph and the document (and even the

commodity) share structural similarities. Like the photograph, the document is a representation of reality that has been fetishized as objective and ahistorical. Like the commodity, the document is imbued with a significance beyond its actual qualities by its insertion into a network of exchange. Like the photograph and the commodity, the document aspires to universally-recognized value and communicability.

The document and the photograph have a shared history over the past two centuries. The concomitant rise of photography and modern bureaucracies in the 19th century supports the idea that the document's validity as an official representation of reality and identity (its "documentary" value so to speak) was bolstered and amplified by the advent of the photograph. Photography aided modern states in monitoring and policing their populations, and as such became a useful partner in the bureaucratic mission of the document.* The putative indexical quality of the photograph melded with the referential quality of the document – the identity document with a photograph within it absorbed a portion of photography's indexicality and strengthened its ideological force as a representation of reality. Just as ancient bureaucracies inspired and motivated the use of a key technology (writing) for its utility in tracking quantities of grain and facilitating the trade of grains, so modern bureaucracies grew equally attached to documentary photography for its utility in controlling the most important commodity of the industrial age: labor and the populations which supply it.†

The document, or the way documents are used by governments and corporations, shares several features with the photograph, especially in terms of verification and duplication. A document is something whose authenticity and correctness can be verified

* references to be added: John Tagg: Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State.

† Indeed the rise of civilization itself could be argued to correlate with the rise of bureaucracy (Smith 28).

through a “master copy” existing in the databases and archives of governments or corporations. The referential nature of the document is thus twofold: in terms of content, it refers to the legal status of someone or something; and in terms of material, it also refers to its archived, master copy. This is similar to the model of referentiality in photography: a photographic print refers to a negative as much as it refers to the view of reality it represents. The archived copy of the document is thus the “negative” version of the document. In terms of duplication, photographs and documents can both be duplicated infinitely, and in the case of discrepancies between copies, it is the negative of the photograph and its equivalent in documentary terms, the archived copy of the document, which retain ultimate authority.

The document is simultaneously a form, a content, a symbol and a performative act (receipt of an official document can change the legal status of something or someone). But unlike representation of an artistic variety, documentation will not admit its own failure to communicate or document, it cannot be self-reflective in the way a work of art or photograph could be. In the installation by Jaar to be discussed here (*One Million Finnish Passports*), however, we are dealing with documents that have failed by virtue of their extraction from the ideological networks in which they circulate, and have thus been transformed into a work of art. The document alienated from its bureaucratic context carries some of the same allure for the artworld as the commodity removed from the circulation of exchange.*

Jaar’s installation *One Million Finnish Passports* (1995; Fig. 2) was created in response to a contradiction between two facts: Finland’s desire to enter the European

* One thinks of Andy Warhol’s 1962 painting “200 One Dollar Bills,” Damien Hirst’s diamond-encrusted skull, or the more recent installation of Hans-Peter Feldmann at the Guggenheim which features 100,000 one dollar bills posted on the wall.

Union at the time and its own very restrictive immigration policies. Such immigration policies stood in stark contrast to the policies of Finland's fellow Scandinavian countries, a discrepancy which shocked Jaar ("La Generazione delle Immagini"). As a way of symbolizing this discrepancy and the irony of Finland's attempt to join the E.U., Jaar created *One Million Finnish Passports*. The installation features one million blank replicas of a Finnish passport, neatly stacked up in a locked room with a glass barricade between the viewer and the work. The replicas were of slightly different dimensions from a regular passport so that they could not be used as a legitimate passport (Phillips). The number of a million is intended to symbolize the number of immigrants and refugees who would be living in Finland if its immigration and asylum policies were roughly the same as other European Union nations. Jaar points out that the glass barrier, placed there at the request of the authorities, has the added effect of reflecting upon the viewer: "The lighting was such that you could see yourself reflected slightly on the glass, so you would see the passports through your own image. I like very much this image, it's a kind of sea of identity waiting to be filled" ("La Generazione delle Immagini").

The stack of passports is impressive and imposing, measuring ten meters wide by ten meters long and eighty centimeters high. The orderly arrangement of the passports reduces the heated issue of immigration policies to something tangible and containable. The orderliness stands in stark contrast to the chaotic lives of the immigrants and refugees who could have benefitted from possession of a Finnish passport.* The placement of the monumental stack of passports behind a glass wall lends the documents an air of sterility and emptiness. As Jaar mentions, the glass wall makes the exhibit a self-

* As with *Real Pictures*, an orderly arrangement of materials betrays the immense chaos of the actual world.

reflective one, causing the image of the viewer to be projected onto the passports, which are emptied of images and identities. The passports metonymically refer to the absent refugees to whom they could have belonged and symbolized. The viewer's reflected image hovers over the passports and symbolically, temporarily, inhabits the same imaginary plane as the anonymous mass of immigrants and refugees. The documents are denatured and yet also animated by their new setting; they are empty and withdrawn from circulation, but also filled in passing by the mirrored identities of the museum visitors. Once again, as Chow previously stated, Jaar expands the dimensions of the document and allows the viewer to inhabit and experience that space.

The large stacks remind us of the piles of archival boxes in *Real Pictures* said to resemble funereal pyres. Both installations were created in the same year (1995) and the similarities between the two cannot help but be noticed as the two works appear to be in dialogue with each other. In both we witness a stacking which in effect serves as a burial, forming an unproductive archive that is nevertheless a creative representation. There is also the facet of replication: one million blank passports contrasted with the photographs, which are themselves replicated within the archival boxes of *Real Pictures*. The number of one million passports, though perhaps incidental, has added resonance since the commonly acknowledged number of lives lost in the Rwandan genocides is around a million. On the one hand, there is the very real possibility that possession of a Finnish passport could have led to the asylum of many victims of the conflict in Rwanda, which demonstrates how documents can literally have the power of life or death. On the other hand, the isolated pile of passports reveals the contingent value of documents, how they are everyday materials imbued with ideological powers through their status as official,

sovereign documents, and thus become devalued and transformed in the absence of the bureaucratic systems which produce and authorize documents.

In both installations we are unable or restricted from seeing within the box or within the document, thus defamiliarizing objects which normally generate meaning through viewing. Removed from the context and practices which give them meaning and purpose, the photographs and documents acquire a mute and mournful presence that reverberates with their estranged status. By extracting documents from their usual context, the Finnish passport installation also draws out several characteristics of the identity document. The identity document simultaneously signifies the unique identity of an individual and reduces identity to one of an infinite multiplicity, and here the installation tilts that equation to the side of multiplicity without difference, since the documents are blank inside and inaccessible. The multiplicity of the passports echoes the infinite replication of the photograph, but this multiplicity pertains to the form of the photograph and not the contingent bit of reality which makes up its unique content. A photograph with only form to sustain it would be similar to a blank identity document.

Jaar's key gesture is both to show the power of the document while equally emphasizing its contingent, fragile nature. The massive stack of copies of Finnish passports both validates the power of the document (in the sense that the potential possession of the document enables its possessor to residency and citizenship) and invalidates it (by being blank and locked up in a room with glass walls, thus underlining how the document's power and status are contingent upon its inclusion in the appropriate ideological and political frameworks). This gesture is made possible by two motifs which usually appear in pairs in Jaar's work, and they both come out strongly in *One Million*

Finnish Passports: enumeration and stacking. On the one hand, enumeration (the million passports) expresses the effort to represent the totality of a given situation, and on the other hand, stacking (and the resultant burial) keeps enumeration from ever reaching that point, from fully disclosing that totality. We see this dynamic take place in *Real Pictures*, *A Hundred Times Nguyen* (Fig. 5), and the twin installations *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (Fig. 3, 4) and *The Silence of Nduwayezu*, among others. The pairing of these motifs perhaps responds to the difficulties in representing situations or events whose scale challenges our capacity for understanding or imagination. The dynamic of enumeration and stacking mimics a process internal to our own contemplation of something as overwhelming as genocide: the more one reaches for a view of the totality of the event, the more one loses the details that make up that totality of loss. In this sense, Jaar's work reflects another intervention in the dilemma, rooted in the aesthetic philosophies of the 18th century, of the representation of the sublime. In the classical rendering, the moment of the natural sublime overpowers the ratiocinative capabilities of the artist, thus reminding the artist of his diminutive and inconsequential role in the universe. When faced with a catastrophe with the dimensions of the Rwandan genocide, the observer must cope with the idea of the scope and character of human agency, its destructive power echoing the destructive power of nature itself. The artist who witnesses this enactment of the political sublime, who sees the human catastrophe and the catastrophe *of* the human, struggles to communicate both the reality of the events, its consequences, and his own emotional response to the catastrophe. Documentation has its role in transmitting information about what has been done, but such information falters in conveying the

experience of the event or in engaging the observer in meaningful ways beyond that of pure information.

The importance of failure in the task of representation is present in every step, from the creation of the artwork to the viewer's consideration of it. Jaar himself sees failure as a meaningful and essential component of his artistic process: "Each project [in *The Rwanda Project*] was a new exercise, a new strategy, and a new failure. I would learn and move on to the next exercise that also would fail and so on" (Phillips 16-18). Judith Butler does not see such failure stemming from the means of representation or the dimensions of the catastrophe that is the object of representation. It comes from the very nature of representing humanity: "For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 144; qtd. in Schweizer 7). Finally, the burden of the "failure" of representation carries over to the viewer as well.

The uncomfortable viewer is left with the impossible task of searching for traces of a horrifying event which was once there but is no longer present. The traumatic gesture is a returning and a revisiting of the event; this is what the viewer both attempts and fails to do. There are no visible traces. Here lies the cruelty of Jaar's 'document' which refuses to show us the special affects and effects of the traumatic event, only the failure of the Real, which is in the end, as Lacan suggests, a missed encounter. (Chow)

But this is a productive failure since it signals the breakdown in the dualism of subject-object relations associated with the "successful" photograph of atrocity. Failure has a role in every step of the process, but the interest in failure in Jaar's work is not a generalized one; it is specifically invested in the failure of documentary modes. By making the document or photograph "fail" it becomes capable of doing more, not less; the failure of

the photograph or the document discloses its own foreclosure of other possibilities and perspectives. This productive dynamic of failure is the objective of *Real Pictures* and *One Million Finnish Passports*.

Photography and Multiplicity: *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* and *The Silence of Nduwayezu*

In these two works by Jaar, which share the same formal logic, the ideas of multiplicity, replication, enumeration, burial and the photographic form come together even more strongly than they do in *Real Pictures* and *One Million Finnish Passports*. In *Real Pictures* photographs were buried and reduced to non-visual-yet-still-legible objects as the primary formal gesture of the installation, and those boxes themselves were reproduced numerous times over within the installation. In *One Million Finnish Passports* enumeration, replication and burial reprise their roles and form the core logic of the installation's critique of the document.

With *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* and *The Silence of Nduwayezu* the focus shifts to the photographic form rather than the document. The two works are so similar in appearance that one can be confused for the other, a confusion which seems deliberate. The installation *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* itself also appears in three different versions, further confusing the boundaries of separation between the different iterations of this installation. In its first iteration, at the City Gallery of Contemporary Art in Raleigh, North Carolina in June 1996, the installation forms a rudimentary version of cinematic representation using two "quadvision light-boxes" that are placed side-by-side on a wall (Strauss, *Between the Eyes* 96). On each light-box a text appears, in white letters on

black, narrating the story of Jaar's encounter with Gutete Emerita, a woman who also figures as the subject of one of the suppressed photographs in *Real Pictures*, though in that instance the caption describes a different photograph from the one eventually revealed in *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*. The following text is projected from within the light-box for forty-five seconds:

Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of a church where 400 Tutsi men, women and children were systematically slaughtered by a Hutu death squad during Sunday mass. She was attending the mass with her family when the massacre began. Killed with machetes in front of her eyes were her husband Tito Kahinamura, 40, and her two sons, Muhoza, 10, and Matirigari, 7. Somehow she managed to escape with her daughter Marie Louise Unumarunga, 12. They hid in a swamp for three weeks, only coming out at night for food.*

This text then disappears and is replaced by the following text, which occupies only five lines above the bottom of the two light-boxes:

Her eyes look lost and incredulous. Her face is the face of someone who has witnessed an unbelievable tragedy and now wears it. She has returned to this place in the woods because she has nowhere else to go. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun.

This text lasts thirty seconds before another line of text appears, each in its own box:

I remember her eyes.

The eyes of Gutete Emerita.

These two lines are visible for fifteen seconds before a photographic image flashes: the eyes of Gutete Emerita fill up the entirety of the light-boxes and then just as quickly disappear. This flash obviously mimics the moment in which the photograph itself was created, as if seeking to return us to that initial moment of technological capture and the encounter with Western witnessing. But in reality it upends the sedate, meditative

* The text is almost the same as the caption from *Real Pictures*, perhaps describing the same picture.

sensibility of the textual narrative preceding it and exposes us to the rapid violence of what it means to be photographed.*

The cycle of text and image then repeats itself. Earlier I described the installation as a rudimentary form of cinema (David Levi Strauss notes that its “method is cinema even if the form is not” (*Between the Eyes* 96)), but after describing the installation, one notices how the work also performs an inversion of the silent film: instead of film interrupted by intertitles that represent narration or dialogue, we watch as a series of intertitles is briefly interrupted by a photographic image. Once again, as in *Real Pictures* the act of viewing a photograph is defamiliarized and rendered less accessible by being staged in a different form, in this case that of cinema and reading. The experience is dominated temporally and spatially by the act of reading, and the photograph is exposed only for a brief moment. The staging of the photograph in this manner positions the textual narrative as both a protective barrier between the viewer and the photograph, and as a way of including the image in a controlled, narrative movement. The image is thus both privileged as the site of contact with the other and constructed as an irrelevant afterthought.

The second iteration of the installation retains many of the defining characteristics of the first (a textual prelude to a viewing experience; a narrative crafting of the reception of an image) and also inverts some: rather than changing intertitles and images watched by a viewer occupying a fixed space, it is the viewer who moves through space in order to read a text and view photographs; rather than a brief exposure to an image, the viewer is afforded greater access to a close examination of the photos; rather than one huge

* This effect is amplified to an even greater degree in a later work by Jaar, called *The Sound of Silence* (2006) in which the viewer is literally placed inside a camera-like room and is subjected to a similar reenactment of photographic capture, complete with flash.

photograph filling up the two light-boxes, a light-table filled with one million slides of the same image. The second version, exhibited in February 1996 at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, begins in a darkened room where a single line of white, illuminated text progresses along a black wall. The text is the same narrative about Gutete Emerita and it physically leads the viewer into another room where around the corner they confront a 16-by-16 foot light-table on which lies a tremendous pile of 35mm slides, numbering one million in all, to signify the million deaths of the genocide. In addition to the slides, there are loupes positioned around the table to give viewers an intimate look at the slides. Each slide is a repetition of the same photograph of the eyes of Gutete Emerita which flashed by in less than second in the first version of the installation. Jaar has said that the intimate encounter between the eyes of the spectator and the eyes of Gutete Emerita at such a close range is one objective of the work: “People could take a slide and look at the slide with a loupe... I'm interested in the eyes of the audience being only one centimeter away from the eyes of Gutete Emerita. I am suggesting here that her eyes acted as a camera who saw something that we could not see” (“La Generazione delle Immagini”). Again, it is worth noting the representative value attributed to an *inoperative* documentation: a camera whose images are hidden from us. The alignment of human vision with the vision of the camera is also repeated elsewhere in Jaar’s work.*

Interestingly, as Levi Strauss points out, this second version is architectural where the previous one is cinematic (*Between the Eyes* 98). Viewers are drawn into a theatrical space that asks for their physical participation. As before there is an important temporal dimension to the work, but now the time invested in viewing the work is controlled by the viewer. The different treatment of the photograph, however, is of the greatest interest.

* *Sound of Silence* for instance, as noted in the previous footnote.

Before, the photograph was almost entirely obscured by the controlled temporal cycling of the light-box; now, the photograph is completely available for extended viewing by many people at a time. Where before there was only one image, the million slides of the photograph foregrounds the fact of its reproducibility, a fact that does not subtract from its significance as a singular representation when the slide is viewed individually through the loupe. The placement of the slides in a large pile draws the photograph away from its nature as a visual representation and, as in *Real Pictures*, reduces it once more to a photograph-object: one piece of a pile that itself can be interpreted as representational. Jaar notes that the pile takes shape spontaneously as they unwrap the slides and pour them onto the table when setting up the installation. Despite the spontaneity of the creation of the pile, there is an invitation in the work to see it as a (non-photographic) representation, whether it be allegorical or figurative: “I wanted to create a volume that represented approximately one million slides in reference to the one million dead in Rwanda. Some people interpret it as a body, others see a country’s landscape. But basically it’s just sheer accumulation that in every place takes a different shape. And people will make different associations” (Jaar interview, “Art 21”). The interlaced figures of enumeration (one million slides), accumulation and burial work in tandem to create an installation that again uses photographs in a non-representational way.

If viewing the pile from a distance pulls us away from an experience of photographic viewing, the loupes on the table counter that motion and bring us back to an intimate experience of the photograph. Viewing the slide through the loupe causes the photographic image to occupy the whole of the frame of vision. As a result, the photograph itself becomes frameless since the viewer can see nothing else besides it and

is immersed inside it. This is a reversal of *Real Pictures* where the frame (the box) became total and blocked the viewing of the photograph. But Jaar, as he mentions above, is also interested in the physical proximity in this action of viewing at close range, as if this action could allegorically cut against the distance inherent in the experience of viewing an installation at a museum in Canberra, Australia about a genocide in Rwanda. The temporary removal of the physical frame becomes possible with the physical proximity offered by the loupe, but the ideological frame embedded within the viewing of a photograph persists. In discussing a different piece by Jaar, *Gold in the Morning*, Stefan Jonsson alights on the fact that Jaar uses the frame to indicate an exclusion rather than an inclusion, to demonstrate a condition of exteriority.

These portraits differ from all others: the frame does not serve to hold the subjects together and present them to the viewer but rather to split them up. The relationship between the figure and the frame is not one of inclusion, but of exclusion; that is the figures are not framed in but framed out. In Jaar's art we do not see the motif placed within the frame, but the frame placed within the motif – not a piece of the world mounted inside a frame, but a frame that cuts the world to pieces. (*A Brief History* 152)

So similarly, despite the fact that the physical frame drops away when looking through the loupe, the eyes of Gutete Emerita remain cut off from her body. This disembodied nature of her eyes shows us that she is prefigured as cut/framed before we can even see her; while we gaze directly into her eyes what we see is her exclusion, and not her interior life. The photograph loses its frame, but the image reveals Gutete Emerita as “framed out,” as partialized by our vision.

Of course, stepping away from the loupe returns the image to the frame of the slide, and the white borders of the slide occupy as much space as the image itself. Stepping even further back, we find that the slides piled upon each other block out the

light emitted from the light-table and thus become opaque, the image lost to darkness – as in *Real Pictures* framed out of visibility. Going further back, it becomes difficult to even recognize that the mountain of material on the table is constituted by slides, much less images. The work enacts a sliding scale of visibility, which is inversely related to the extent of the framing.

As noted previously, Jaar describes the eyes of Gutete Emerita as being like a camera that captured images of atrocity we ourselves cannot see. This figurative camera is only partially operative, however: it lets in light but does not release a negative through which a third-party could see what she had seen. We are once again, as in *Real Pictures*, in the presence of non-viewable images and confronted this time by the apparatus of witnessing but not the product in the form of an viewable image. In making this comparison between her eyes and a partially-functioning camera, Jaar displaces his own act of witnessing on to her: his act of photographic capture is supposed to disappear in the interface between museum visitor and genocide victim/witness, even though it is through his memory (“I remember her eyes. The eyes of Gutete Emerita”) and his actions that we are led to this photograph. Such a notion of immediate directness, however, can only be gestural, never actual. This is why we need the narrative that precedes the viewing of the photograph to learn what she has seen.

The idea of eyes acting like a camera also appear in one box from *Real Pictures* as can be read in this caption:

Benjamin Musisi
Ntarama Church, Nyamata, Rwanda.
40 kilometers south of Kigali
Monday, August 29, 1994

This photograph shows Benjamin Musisi, 50, crouched low in the doorway of the church amongst scattered bodies spilling out into the daylight. Four hundred Tutsi men, women and children who had come here seeking refuge, were slaughtered during Sunday mass.

Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw. He asked to be photographed amongst the dead. He wanted to prove to his friends in Kampala, Uganda, that the atrocities were real and that he had seen the aftermath.

Benjamin Musisi was Jaar's Ugandan driver during his visit to Rwanda (a fact revealed in interviews but not within the context of the installation) and as such he is, like Jaar, a foreign witness to the genocide in Rwanda. The description of his gaze and presence in the caption reveals two notions of witnessing. For Musisi, it is his presence within the photograph and among the bodies of the dead which guarantees the proof of his claim. For Jaar, it is his gaze into the camera which takes over the recording function, but what do his eyes record that is not recorded by the camera itself? According to Jane Blocker, "His eyes are devices for seeing the fact that the camera sees. They bear witness to the eyes of the photographer, to the eyes of the West. And the photograph in turn sees that Musisi has seen; it testifies to his witnessing" (56-57). The gaze is not merely one object among others within the photograph but a "device" for recording that reflects back and equals the power of the camera lens. Certainly, the power of the gaze within photographs is nothing new; Jaar's emphasis on photographing subjects who are gazing directly back at the camera seems to be a pointed rejoinder to the work of early documentarians such as Jacob Riis, among others, who purposely avoided capturing such images.* In this case, however, the photograph is not even viewable and the gaze is textually represented. A further step is taken in that "testifying" is aligned not with the positive transmission of an image or the communication of a story but with the exchange of gazes. Behind the gaze is

* See Sally Stein, "Making Connections with The Camera" in *Afterimage*.

a lack, a failure of representation, a broken camera that takes in images but reproduces none.

Unlike Emerita, though, the object of witnessing in the concealed photograph featuring Musisi is the aftermath of the genocide, not the actions of killing itself, and the witness is not also a victim. These lines of distinction become blurry in the installation and in the commentary over the installation: who is a witness, what is being witnessed, who is a victim, who is local, who is foreign, who is remembering, who or what is recording.

To confuse matters further, *The Silence of Nduwayezu* is an installation which mimics almost completely the second version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, replacing her story and her photograph with that of a young boy named Nduwayezu, but maintaining the same form of the installation (see text in Appendix). Jaar says of the two works “[*The Silence of Nduwayezu*] is equivalent and uses the same formal strategy” as that of *Gutete Emerita* (SCL 66). The story of Jaar’s encounter with Nduwayezu is prefaced by a two-paragraph historical overview of the events in Rwanda, but then the anecdote ends with a line eerily similar to the last line of *Gutete Emerita*: “I remember his eyes. And I will never forget his silence. The silence of Nduwayezu.”

Such a close replication of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* both in the text and in the form of the installation challenges our desire to see the suffering of Gutete Emerita or Nduwayezu as singular. It also amplifies the issue of enumeration and reproducibility signaled by the production and placement of the million slides on the light-table. The tension between the singularity of each genocide victim and the unimaginable scale of one million deaths is present within the very nature of photography: the singular image of

the photographic print can be reproduced infinitely. Jaar calls attention to this tension through this work by focusing on the singular gaze of Gutete Emerita or Nduwayezu and simultaneously burying that gaze beneath a million slides. The polarity between singularity and its generic replication is also enacted in the juxtaposition between the large, blown-up images of the eyes on the mounted light-boxes in the first version of *Gutete Emerita* and their million-fold replication and miniaturization in the form of slides on the light table. Gutete Emerita and Nduwayezu are presented both as singular *and* exchangeable, just as documents and photographs both cohabit the singular and the reproducible. Neither concept is containable within the other, but through repetition Jaar gestures at the necessity and impossibility of contemplating both equally.

Jaar's Chilean Works: *Estudios sobre la felicidad (Studies on Happiness) (1979-1981)*, *Chile 1981, Before Leaving (1981)*, *The Geometry of Conscience (2010)*

Having seen the various maneuvers Jaar performs with documents and photographs in the works that comprise most of his career, I want to close with a brief reading of four works with significance for Chile. Though Jaar has completed a number of works relevant to Latin America, only three of his major works of his explicitly refer to Chile, and a fourth one, about gold miners in Brazil, resonates with the situation in Chile because of the economic importance of mining. Of the three works with explicit ties to Chile, two early works, *Studies on Happiness* and *Chile, 1981, Before Leaving*, are significant insofar as they informed the pieces Jaar would later produce. The third work, *The Geometry of Conscience*, a 2010 installation, is a permanent feature of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, and reflects motifs from the entirety of Jaar's career.

The trope of documentation subverted for other means is present from the beginning of Jaar's career in *Studies on Happiness* with Jaar himself figuring prominently as the human documenter. This work, described briefly earlier in this chapter, functioned as a kind of mock polling of the city residents of Santiago. Though the questions were simple ones ("Estime un porcentaje de gente feliz en el mundo"; "Estime un porcentaje de gente feliz en Chile"; "¿Es Ud. feliz?")* the simplicity belied the political edge to the work, including the subtle comparison between the artifice of the public intervention and the artificiality of the military regime's efforts at maintaining an appearance of concern for popular opinion. The intervention dramatized the basic referendum at the core of all voting: are you content with the current political status quo or not? By masking this referendum under the much simpler version of this question ("are you happy?") and avoiding a direct reference to politics, Jaar was able to stage and enact one essential function of democracy in broad daylight on the streets of Santiago.

The surveys and interviews of people on the street were done in three phases, from June through October 1980. Some of these surveys were documented through photographs, and in the third phase personal interviews were conducted and filmed. When interviewing on the street, Jaar also had an ongoing display of the data, in the form of small transparent squares that filled up with tiny white balls as people voted.

The final display of the polling results and interviews also took place in three phases, but they were located in the more private confines of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes and the Instituto Cultural de Las Condes. In one phase, the data was presented alongside photographic portraits of the respondents, and in a later phase Jaar

* "Estimate the percentage of happy people in the world"; "Estimate the percentage of happy people in Chile"; "Are you happy?"

played the video of the interviews. In the last phase, the conditions of the initial filmed interviews were replicated within the Museo Nacional and visitors could step into a set, sit in front of a camera with their image appearing on a screen and answer the same question, “¿Es Ud. feliz?” This phase was called “Obra abierta y de registro continuo” and the installation literally does open up the process of documentation itself, letting it remain open and continual. In this feature we see a precursor of Jaar’s future attempts to break or enlarge the frame of the work of art so that it includes the viewer as well.

A last piece of this intervention returns it back to the public space of the streets with the posting of billboards and signs throughout Santiago which, against a white background, spelled out in black, block letters, ask the same simple question, “¿ES USTED FELIZ?” These billboard messages are documented in photographs, and their prominence on city streets is rather striking alongside the many commercial advertisements on display. Instead of promising happiness with the purchase of a beer or a cigarette, Jaar’s billboards counter that notion simply through the simple use of a question. Here too we see a foreshadowing of his work *A Logo for America* (displayed on the Times Square screen) and the attraction to the materials and methods normally reserved for commercial marketing purposes.

The last work that Jaar did in Chile before leaving that actually referred to the political situation there was only revealed in 2006 as part of the first overview of Jaar’s work exhibited in Chile, in the exposition spaces of the Fundación Telefónica Chile and the Galería Gabriela Mistral in Santiago.* This work, another public intervention in the

* Although Jaar did a couple more works before leaving Chile, *Telecomunicación* (1981) and *Opus 1981/Andante Desesperato* (1981), neither speak as directly to the situation in Chile as the three works I am commenting on. The former work engages with the situation in Northern Ireland and the death of an IRA

Chilean landscape but this time outside the city, was documented and exists only in photographs that Jaar took of it, and they were published for the first time in the book that commemorates the exhibition. The intervention consisted in a line of small Chilean flags crisscrossing the country from mountains to sea. The flags were only separated by a meter and the photographs show the flags dotting the sand dunes and finally reaching the sea, where they eventually reach the surf and submerge under water. Called *Chile, 1981, Before Leaving* the intervention served both as a personal goodbye and, according to Adriana Valdés, a “shuddering reminder of the bodies thrown into the sea, of those who were exiled and incarcerated in the Pisagua landscape, of so many other images that were emerging then and that were to leave an indelible imprint on the nation’s memory” (*SCL* 17). As Valdés also notes, the intervention succinctly made visible the divided nature of the country.*

The first works by the now New York-based Jaar that received international attention were the cluster of projects concerning the gold miners in the Serra Pelada of Brazil that he photographed. Considering the national and symbolic significance of the mining industry in Chile (though for copper, not for gold), and its intimate relationship with the neoliberalization of the country (the surreptitious re-privatization of the copper mines being a major point of contention for the military regime), these works also speak to the history of mining in Chile as well, and to the way the copper mines came to

hunger striker; the latter is inspired by a Susan Meiselas photograph of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. The geographic disparity of the works again foreshadows Jaar’s future tendencies.

* After leaving Chile, Jaar would only produce one more work with direct reference to Chile. This was a small work called *Colors* done in 1983, again featuring the Chilean flag. In this instance, an outline of the flag devoid of colors is shown against a white background, with a painter’s sample of blue and red to the side. A text underneath these colors states: “You are cordially invited to re-create the Chilean colors.” As an individual work, *Colors* stands out as having none of the signature moves or gestures of Jaar, though there is a connection between *Chile, 1981, Before Leaving* and *A Logo for America* in the focus on reimagining the significance and use of national flags.

symbolize Chile's place within neoliberal networks of economic power and commercial trade. Jaar was already living in New York when he read a newspaper article about the gold mine, which was run by the Brazilian government and employed 100,000 workers who mined for the gold with their bare hands in an immense quarry that had not been touched by a single machine ("La Generazione delle Immagini"). Pipes bring water into the bottom of the quarry as part of the mining process, but as the result of using this method, up to sixty percent of the gold is lost in the runoff. The workers sell what they can mine to the Brazilian government which pays them the market value of the gold minus a commission. The government opted for this approach in lieu of contracting the work out to a multinational corporation for the express purpose of giving jobs to so many workers. This stands in marked contrast to the approach taken by the military regime in Chile, which did contract out the mining of copper to private international companies. Though the regime never completely undid the nationalization of the copper industry effected by the Chilean Congress under Allende in 1971, by the mid-80's over half the copper mined in Chile was done by private corporations rather than Codelco, the state-owned mining enterprise. And ever since that time the percentage of the national output of copper by Codelco has only fallen, even under post-military governments ("Reviving Codelco").

In his work *Gold in the Morning* Jaar seeks to make manifest these connections between Third World labor and neoliberal capital. For this piece Jaar rented out all the advertising space on the Spring Street station, which is on a subway line that services Wall Street, a point he himself has emphasized ("La Generazione delle Immagini"). In every available space he put up photographs of the miners in lightboxes alongside

international gold prices. The work makes visible the complex passage from the laborious extraction of a mineral from the earth to the abstraction of a fluctuating commodity price that designates the mineral's place in the world market. The market price is an inadequate representation that nevertheless presumes a relationship of indexicality with the commodity it is said to represent. Yet it has no essential relation to the mineral itself nor to the value of the labor invested in it, and is determined by changing market forces and the availability or scarcity of the mineral as a whole. But in another sense, the price *does* have a relationship to the mineral, a relationship dependent on the invisibility of the mineral's procurement and the labor that went into it. In this sense, Jaar's work at this early stage is headed toward a guiding idea in his oeuvre, as elucidated by Adriana Valdés: visibilization, by which she means "conferring visibility upon something that does not form part of the viewers' habitual way of thinking, something that disturbs them and throws them off balance... yet at the same time draws them in somehow, drives a wedge of unease into their system of certainties" (*SCL* 50-51)). Valdés is referring to this process as not one of simple aesthetic visualization, but as a process of disrupting the conventional frames through which political recognition is granted or withheld. In the case of *Gold in the Morning*, the image of the market price is juxtaposed to the image of the labor which produces the commodity but which plays little to no role in the calculations that determine the market price. We thus see what the price does not disclose; the price signifies a blindness to, rather than an indexing of, the commodity. Alternatively, as an ideal example of visibilization in Jaar's work, Valdés offers *Lights in the City*, a public intervention done in Montreal in 1999, which "visibilizes homeless men each time they enter a shelter by triggering a red light that illuminates from within a huge

dome visible from many parts of the city” (52). The “red light” here is in the form of a beacon and its use stands in contrast to the operation of a camera and its registration of a lifelike image; the beacon of red light indexes an event in a way that the photograph aims for but falls short of. The point of this indexicality is not to form a representation of its own, but to disturb the everyday representations of the citizen of Montreal, to intrude upon his or her self-representation.

One of Jaar’s most recent projects, *La Geometría de la Conciencia* (2010), marks his return to Chile and to considerations of the current political situation there. This is just one of two works by Jaar which was developed as a permanent installation, the other being a memorial in Rwanda, as of yet incomplete. The installation forms a permanent part of the newly-opened Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) in Santiago, dedicated to the victims of the Pinochet military regime. Jaar’s installation is located beneath the plaza which faces the museum. The entrance is down a flight of thirty-three stairs. The installation properly speaking is preceded by two dark anterooms, each one a five meter square concrete space, which lead to the door of a third room. Admission to the installation is rather strictly controlled, with a guide admitting a maximum of ten people into the third room for a total of three minutes, during which they must remain silent. Upon entrance, the door automatically closes and the room is completely dark for a minute. As the eyes of the visitors adjust to the darkness, it is possible to make out on the wall a large array of silhouettes on one of the walls. Half of these silhouettes belong to victims of the military dictatorship, while the other half belong to anonymous Chilean citizens whose profiles were captured through photographs taken by Jaar on Santiago’s streets. After the initial minute of

darkness is up, the lights in the room begin to turn on slowly, gradually reaching maximum intensity within ninety seconds. The silhouettes are lit up from behind. As the lights turn on, people can see that the side walls in the room are mirrors, which extend the visual effect of the silhouettes infinitely. Then finally the room is plunged back into darkness for thirty seconds, allowing the afterimages of the silhouettes to linger on the retinas of the observers.*

The mixing together of profiles from both known victims of the Pinochet regime and random Chileans on the streets is Jaar's response to the need to memorialize the victims of the military regime while not succumbing to the marginalization of victims that can befall monuments built under similar circumstances. Says Jaar, "This is a monument for all Chileans. Instead of marginalizing the victims like most memorials do, I wanted to integrate them into a collective narrative... This is a monument for seventeen million Chileans alive and dead" (Batista 4). This decision is colored by the fact that Jaar knows that the perpetrators of these crimes still inhabit the country, as do millions of citizens who were supportive of the regime. In an interview, speaking of his work with the small Chilean flags which physically divided the country (*Chile, 1981, Before Leaving*), he says that "At the time half the country wanted the return of democracy, but the other half was perfectly happy with Pinochet" (3). Rather than perpetuating that political divide in this new work, Jaar opts for a radical openness to all who might enter the installation, appealing to the conscience and consciousness of all Chileans.

The conceit of *The Geometry of Conscience* melds together several of Jaar's motifs and tactics from previous works. For one, we have the controlled entry into a

* Description of installation based on Francis Francina's article "'Face to Face': Resistance, Melancholy, and Representations of Atrocity" in *Afterimage* (v. 39 n. 1-2), p.53, and on an interview of Jaar by Kathy Batista in *Art Monthly* 342 (2010).

space that becomes a new “theater of images” as Rancière would have it (Rancière “Theater of Images”). Rancière uses this expression in describing the enclosed viewing space which Jaar constructs to show Kevin Carter’s famous photograph of the starving Sudanese child being stalked by a vulture. In that installation, entitled *The Sound of Silence*, the photograph is flashed at the audience for just a second after an eight-minute long textual narration of how the photograph came into being, including Carter’s experiences growing up in apartheid South Africa and what eventually happened to him (he subsequently won the Pulitzer Prize for this photograph and committed suicide). As with that piece, in *The Geometry of Conscience* the act of viewing is embedded within a structure and process meant to deepen our awareness of that act, and does so precisely by withholding the visual content of the image (Carter’s flashes by in a second; *The Geometry of Conscience* contains silhouettes, not portraits). In his description of *The Sound of Silence* Rancière elaborates on what it signifies to have built such an edifice for visual contemplation:

It is a question of constructing the space where a completely new interweaving of words and forms can give mass death or mass exile its resonance. The power of a means of information is firstly that of a machine for organizing space and time in which words and forms are joined or disjoined, reinforce or cancel one another. The problem does not lie in criticizing television messages, it lies in creating other spatiotemporal arrangements, in opposing to the dominant light box other light boxes. It requires no less—and no more—to lead us to consider the weight of a photograph, to transform a sensational picture into an opportunity for a spiritual exercise over the time spent looking, and for a sensory experience of what the effort to make us see the violence of the world signifies. (“Theater of Images” 79-80)

As with *The Sound of Silence* the concept of opening up the document or the photograph, expanding its dimensions to encompass the viewer (as Chow puts it), is literally performed. It is for such reasons that an architectural approach is required. “I use the

language of architecture – scale, light, movement, space, tension” says Jaar (Batista 2). The theatrical space of *The Geometry of Conscience* evokes the ambience of a religious space, but the space can also be seen in technical terms as a way of putting the viewers inside a camera: there is the careful exposure to a light source, the construction of images through the emanation of light around objects, the mirrors on the side walls taking on the role of the mirrors inside a traditional camera, and finally the registration of the images on the retinas, which are retained ephemerally before being exposed to a new source of light (when the door of the installation opens and the viewers walks out into the light). The point of viewing the installation in this manner is not to suggest that visitors leave with the impartial knowledge associated with the photograph; rather, the experience of being inside the camera reveals how partial and inadequate photographic knowledge is. After all, the room itself could also be seen as prison, in which case the camera analogy suggests we are walled in by the limits of a photographic knowledge. The relationship between singularity and multiplicity we have seen in previous works (*The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* and *The Silence of Nduwayezu*) finds echoes here. While each silhouette belongs to a particular individual, the mirrors on the side walls that extend these silhouettes to infinity.

This installation, however, is also a permanent memorial, which leads to the question of what kind of remembrance is taking place here, since there are no names or stories or photographs. Jaar notes that he felt free to do as he wished in this project because the attached museum would be able to tell “the official story. They have the faces, names, stories, documents – the historical narrative” (Batista 4).^{*} This is in contrast

^{*} Jaar’s use of the term “official story” does not appear to be used ironically, and has potentially unintended associations.

with other exhibitions, notably ones associated with the Rwandan genocide, where Jaar felt obliged to supplement his work with “information rooms” that would give visitors a greater historical context for the work they were viewing. If, however, it is the museum which contains “the historical narrative” with the “faces, names, stories, documents,” what kind of remembrance is taking place in *The Geometry of Conscience*?

To answer this question requires an interrogation of the use of silhouettes rather than photographs, which is something we have not seen in Jaar’s oeuvre up to this point.* Jaar has frequently quoted a line from the Catalan poet Vicenç Altaió: “Images have an advanced religion: they bury history” (“Generazione”); the way Jaar’s works carefully navigate the dangers of images, photographic ones in particular, is clearly a response to this sentiment. As with the hiding of photographs in *Real Pictures*, the non-specificity of the silhouettes frees us to imagine the possibilities shut down or buried by photographic representation. We can escape the burden of the photograph’s searing specificity and its blind reproduction of one viewpoint which is not even a human perspective but a mechanical one. The silhouettes offer a highly reduced and simplified representation of a human identity, but even the outlines of these figures are sufficient to gesture at the singularity that the silhouette traces. Through the mirrors the viewers cohabit the same flat dimension of the silhouettes, a dimension which is neither past, present or future but a mixture of these, the silhouettes being drawn from victims of the military regime but also everyday people on the street. Thus the wall of silhouettes could also be made up of

* Though it is not mentioned in any of the discussions of this permanent installation, it is likely that Jaar is citing the “Siluetazo,” an art-action performed by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in 1983 in which the silhouettes of people in the protest were drawn on to pieces of paper which were then hung up around the plaza. For more on this event see Ana Longoni’s “Photographs and Silhouettes: Visual Politics in the Human Rights Movement of Argentina”, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 25 (Autumn 2010), pp. 5-17.

possible perpetrators; the viewer is made to sit with the unease of that unknowing relation. The vagueness of our relationship to these figures and the lack of a specific, historical narrative, nevertheless allow us to imagine our relationship to the possible, to the absent, to the lost, even to the actual and the historical. If images are said to bury history, this is another way of saying that they can limit our capacity to imagine the historical. But here, in the shadow of the image, the act of imagination connects us back to our own capacity for remembrance and forgetting. In response to the presence of an inoperative or non-representational documentation, the room becomes a space for the constellation of relations that are not epistemological or photographic, but imaginative and ethical. Jaar's creative burial of images makes way for the remembrance of our own capacity to imagine and to remember.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

There is an uncanny parallel between Jaar's *The Geometry of Conscience* and Wieder's room of photographs of the tortured bodies of women in *Estrella distante*. Two rooms, two distinct ways of thinking about how we constitute ourselves in the face of visual representations of the other, of death, and of our own finitude.* In Jaar's room, the experience revolves around a sense of nonknowing before the silhouette of the other, coupled with the expansion of this sense to the viewer's own self through the mirrors on the walls. The two currents of this experience do not collapse upon each other, but pull out infinitely through the mutual reflection of the mirrors. In Wieder's room, a presumption of mastery over the other animates the exhibition, in which the photographs (and the torture they document) serve as both the means and the evidence of this mastery over women's bodies. There is neither self-reflection here nor any awareness of the limits of human conduct. This blatant rejection of failure and of limits expresses itself in the revulsion of the military audience, whose consciences are convulsed by the images, as if they themselves were the subject of torture.

These two scenes also form a link with the image at the core of *2666*: the eye of the corpse which is also the eye of a fetus, in which resides the image of a graveyard from the year 2666. Caught between birth and death, this eye retains a trace of the graveyard despite having wanted to forget everything. It is a witnessing that happens despite itself: an image from a graveyard whose temporality does not exist, registered

* Or belief in infinitude, in the case of Wieder.

within an eye that cannot see: a subjectivity figured at the limits of the subject and a witnessing which is also its unwitnessing.

Figuring the limit returns us to Levinson's definition of poesis as "the creation of a language for the boundary or intersection between domains of sense... the invention of an articulation for the relationality of beings which no existing semiotics or common sense can supply" (*Ends* 26). The topos of this dissertation has been the liminal zone at the edge of the documentary gesture, where presence gives way to absence and the documentary image turns in on itself. In the documentary aesthetic the frame itself becomes the site for a rethinking of the structure of our relation to the other, in which we transition away from the tropes of revelation and access and toward figures of mediation and finitude. The documentary aesthetic facilitates the imagining of the inoperative community through the sharing of such finitude.

In chapter two, this process manifests itself in the interwoven and hypermediated stories of the dispersed exiles in *Estrella distante*. These stories link together the characters with each other, but also mark their relationship with the possible futures foreclosed by the coup. This relationship with possibility is precisely what escapes the purview of the encyclopedic narration of a very different literary community in *La literatura nazi en América*. In chapter three, the catalogue of murders in *2666* is read as a central figure of the documentary aesthetic, in which what escapes the frame of representation becomes as important as what is included. The list of victims becomes reimagined as an aesthetic form in which the act of naming draws attention to its insufficiency while also undoing the order of the police by repeatedly implying the equality of the victims. Lastly, in chapter four, Jaar applies the documentary aesthetic to

photographic works and installations, and in doing so dramatizes the experience of inaccessibility that underlies it. But in that experience the viewer or participant finds possible grounds for imagining the limits of documentary as well as of their own finitude.

I want to close with a reading of the conclusion of another novel by Bolaño, *Los detectives salvajes*. Here too the framing of the visible is essential to the constitution of an identity: in this case, the reader's. In the third and last section of the novel we return to the diary of the protagonist Juan García Madero, who, with his companions, have fled Mexico City because Alberto, the pimp of García Madero's girlfriend Lupe, is chasing after her. After discovering the poetess they have been searching for, Cesárea Tinajero, a fatal encounter in the desert leaves three characters dead: Tinajero, Alberto, and the corrupt police officer who was helping him. García Madero and Lupe split ways with their friends Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima.

What draws me to the conclusion in particular is the role of the line drawings in the text and its instantiation of the dialectic I have been describing as a documentary aesthetic.* Line drawings appear in two earlier instances in the novel. The only known poem of Tinajero, given to the young poets by Amadeo Salvatierro, consists of three lines (one straight, one curvy, one jagged) with a small rectangle attached to the surface (flat on the first line, and inclined according to the curves or jags) and is entitled "Sión." The poets try to help Amadeo understand it by offering him some interpretations, in one interpretation changing the initial rectangle to look like a sailboat. The next instance of

* These line drawings have received attention from numerous commentators. Three particularly interesting takes on them can be found in Pablo Blas Corro Pemjean's "Dispositivos visuales en los relatos de Roberto Bolaño," *Aisthesis* 38 (2005): 121-133; Emilio Sauri's "'A la pinche modernidad': Literary Form and the End of History in Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes*," *MLN* 125 (2010): 406-432; and Antonio Córdoba's "'¿Qué hay detrás de la ventana?': oralidad delirante y el enigma de la voz en *Los detectives salvajes* de Roberto Bolaño," *Vanderbilt e-Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies* 7 (2011).

line drawing occurs when García Madero is killing time during the car trip and draws figures of “Mexicans” in his journal to entertain his friends (the figures are really just a bird’s-eye view of a sombrero, so one larger circle at whose center are two smaller circles where the cone of the hat would be). The caricatures have little additions to the “sombrero” and his companions are supposed to guess what the “Mexican” is doing (“Un mexicano fumando en pipa... Un mexicano en triciclo... Cinco mexicanos meando dentro de un orinal,” etc.). Where the interpretative work for understanding Tinajero’s poem was highly cultured, here lowbrow humor is employed. In both cases, the different characters have a great facility in “reading” these line drawings.

The last set of line drawings, three in number, conclude the book. Again, García Madero is drawing in his journal, but this time it is a solitary activity (he is traveling with Lupe, but these drawings do not form part of a game as with the Mexican figures). There is one line drawing per date: February 13, 14, and 15.* The first drawing is a square with a narrow isosceles triangle entering into the frame from the left side, and it is preceded by the question “¿Qué hay detrás de la ventana?” The answer follows after the image: Una estrella. The second drawing on the second date is just a square with the same question. The answer this time: Una sábana extendida. The last drawing has again the same question; the window is “empty” but its frame is perforated on all sides. No answer is provided.

The line drawings are important both for what they describe and for what they leave unrepresented. They are the simplest frame imaginable: the frame that is its own

* The importance of this date is intriguing: on February 15, 1976, Cubans adopted their Constitution by referendum, sixteen years after the revolution. This is the date the state of exception Cubans had been living finally closed, signaling the transition to a new, normalized political stage. It would be an interesting exercise to read that closure of the revolution against the figure of the window (closed? open?) and against the marking of the end of the poets’ travels together as a collective.

content. Their minimalistic style turns them into the basis of a guessing game or into the material basis for an unlimited number of interpretations. The simplicity of the line drawings not only invite interpretations by the characters and the readers, the simplicity additionally allows for the image to be truly shared by both the characters and the readers. There is a melding of the levels of representation and presentation; it is both a representation (the figures represent a boat or a Mexican, etc.) for us *and* for the characters, and a presentation – unlike anything else in the novel, we experience the line drawings in the exact same way that the characters do. There is the temptation to see these drawings as providing an access not otherwise granted by the text. The line drawings are figured as both documentary and figurative, but they are figured as such very conscientiously and with perhaps a touch of levity to the enterprise.

In Bolaño's one-sentence summary of the novel, which he wrote as part of his entry into the Rómulo Gallegos competition, he states that “En *Los detectives salvajes* hablo de la aventura, que siempre es inesperada” (*Entre paréntesis* 20). The last, “unanswered” line drawing leads us to the truth of this assessment, since it is the *mise-en-scène* of the act of reading itself; not the reading *of* a text or an image, but reading *as* adventure.

We are drawn into the text by our desire to answer the question (what lies beyond the window?), and for a brief moment we coexist in the same frame as the characters.* But of course, turning the page, the illusion is shattered. To think that we enter the text is to be duped, no more and no less than Don Quixote is duped when he smashes the

* In our desire to answer the question of what is beyond the window, we almost merge into and assume the identity that has haunted the reader all this time in the novel: that of the savage detective. This oxymoronic turn of phrase (modernity's figure of rationality par excellence, the detective, juxtaposed with the savage who knows no reason) finds its truth in paradoxical position of the reader, who both is and isn't a character in the novel; an absent presence (the savage detective) is reflected in the present absence of the reader.

scenery and puppets of Master Pedro's puppet theater. But what we do enter into, truly, and to no less a degree than the characters, is the search and the adventure, "que siempre es inesperada." The end is not an end. Even at the end there is a new adventure waiting, there, outside the window. The window itself is porous, its frame perforated all around, which makes it no longer a window but a figure of liminality mediating the exposure to an outside which is itself no longer an outside (there is no window!) but the flat space of an interiority continuous with an exteriority.

The adventure is where the limit of experience is lived. And through the adventure we arrive at the singularity which is both ours and the others', but also belonging to neither. Living the limit, the edge of our finitude that is also edge of an other's finitude, is how we recognize ourselves as singularities in an inoperative community. The adventure is the equivalent of Nancy's notion of communication, which is "the constitutive fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity" (Nancy 29). There, on the outside, beyond the window that is no longer a window, is us. Or what is not yet "us" but what will be "us" when we are exposed to our finitude.

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