

INTRODUCTION: Literature and “Interregnum”: Globalization, War and the Crisis of Sovereignty in Latin America

Literature and “Interregnum” looks at late 20th- and early 21st-century literary responses to neoliberal-administered globalization and its impact on the conceptual vocabularies of political and aesthetic modernity in Latin America’s Southern Cone and Mexico. The book endeavors to establish dialogues between literature and a range of theoretical perspectives, including Continental philosophy (Aristotle, Leibnitz, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy, Agamben, Schürmann, Thayer), political thought (Hobbes, Marx, Benjamin, Schmitt, Gramsci, Jameson, Laclau, Rancière, Virno, Galli), psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan), and sociology of globalization (Harvey, Sassen). Through juxtaposition of the methods and sensibilities proper to these traditions of inquiry I explore two related hypotheses.

The first is that the violent impact of neoliberal-administered globalization in Latin America that begins in the 1980s culminates, at the end of the millennium, in the suspension or exhaustion of certain principles of political and aesthetic modernity, foremost among which are the regulatory state, political sovereignty (that of the national state or the People), and the modern conceptualization of the subject as autonomous, self-conscious origin that assigns itself its own laws. I describe this crisis of the conceptual vocabulary of modernity as an interregnum in which, in the words of the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, “the old [order] is dying and the new cannot be born.” To be perfectly clear, I do not argue that sovereignty and its political manifestations (the state, the nation, the national popular) have disappeared from our contemporary topography. However, what were once the foundations or first principles of modern social organization have more recently been subjugated to new economic and

technological rationales and forces that appear to be incapable of serving as new organizing principles. One of the important consequences of interregnum for this book is found in Galli's meditations on "Global War" (Galli 2010): the conceptual vocabularies of political and aesthetic modernity are no longer capable of explaining or regulating the contradictions produced by capitalist modernization. Thus the modern concepts of sovereignty and subject—to name two central ideas—may well obscure what is going on in our world today rather than shedding light on things.

But if the metaphysics of the subject and the Hobbesian-Schmittian tradition of sovereignty are helpful today primarily to the extent that they illustrate *what does not work* in the world, some explanation is required for the fact that I continue to rely here on a number of modern thinkers whose conceptual vocabularies remain useful in my view: Kant and Hegel (to an extent), as well as Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, and other more recent thinkers who engage with these four. There is no contradiction, as I see it, in asserting that Hobbes and Schmitt have been rendered more or less useless today (they remain or become useful precisely in their uselessness) whereas Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud remain altogether useful. This is because these latter are all antifoundational thinkers whose thought not only interrogates the conditions of possibility for modern forms of experience but which also seeks out the ways in which the forms and structures of modernity have always been more unstable that modern thought would care to acknowledge.

The second hypothesis is that the in-between time of interregnum announces the exhaustion of the modern idea of "literature," or the aesthetic ideology of literature that had prevailed from the Romantics through the rise of *testimonio* literature in Latin America during

the 1980s and 90s. This claim will require considerable explanatory work, since I am by no means suggesting that a clear and definitive break exists between the literary history of modernity and the contemporary novels I study here. On the contrary, it could be said unequivocally that, in terms of literary style or technique, there is nothing (or almost nothing) in these works that has not already been done or said in the time of literary modernism. If there is something different in these works that would distinguish them from literary predecessors it cannot be explained as innovation; indeed, as Brett Levinson has stated with respect to Bolaño, it may be that what these works share is a radical skepticism about the very concept of the new, the novel (Levinson 2009, 178). The exhaustion of “literature” does not mean that the literary simply goes away either. On the contrary, one thing that opens up at the end of the millennium in Latin America has to do with alternative ways of thinking about literature and literary language, or perhaps another side of what we call literary modernity. In the works that I examine this includes different manners of literary confrontation with the loosening of bonds and pacts (social, epistemological, semantic), as well as with what appears today as the absence or impossibility of what Aristotle calls *arkhē*: that philosophical ground or first principle that would provide the solid foundation for thought and action. Each chapter of this book traces a tension at work between endeavors to revitalize the personal and collective projects that make up our world on the one hand, and literary exploration of how the ties that constitute social fabric are prone to coming undone on the other hand—and of what this loosening of principal logic might itself have to say to us.

What I call the crisis of sovereignty takes several forms, but in each case it is defined by the displacement or suspension of modern political forms and concepts together with the fact

that no new principle has emerged to replace them. The experience of economic and technological globalization in late 20th century Latin America is defined specifically by such phenomena as: the retreat of the national-popular and the withering of contestatory and utopian political imaginaries; the privatization of the regulatory and welfare state models; mediatization as technological unification of the planet; the decline of industrial capitalism and the formal subsumption of intellectual work into the capitalist economy in the time of post-Fordism; and the rise of narco-capitalism as post-ideological configuration of power. While each of these contexts contributes to destabilizing the conceptual vocabularies of political and aesthetic modernity, no new ordering principle has risen to fill the empty place once occupied by the sovereign subject of modernity. The formal dynamics of this situation bear some resemblance to what classical juridical thought called *interregnum*: a gap or lag time in between the death of the old sovereign and the coronation of his replacement.

I look at these forms of crisis through selective readings of a series of end-of-millennium Latin American novels by César Aira, Marcelo Cohen and Sergio Chejfec (Argentina), Diamela Eltit (Chile), and Roberto Bolaño (Chile-Mexico-Cataluña). My interest in these works has less to do with how social, economic and political contexts are represented as plot content and more to do with how those contexts and their attendant conflicts are “translated” into the formal dynamics of literary narrative. There is thus a Lukacsian sense to this book even if the works I look at do not belong to the realist tradition. The recoding of history as literary form provides occasions for reconsidering modern conceptualizations of aesthetic experience, mood, temporality, politics, ethical experience, as well as of literature itself as social institution. Allow me now to provide some clarifications about what I am calling the crisis of sovereignty.

The crisis of sovereignty in Latin America can be traced back at least as far as the transitions from military dictatorship to representative democracy during the 1980s and 90s. Those shifts, accompanied by powerful recodifications of earlier histories of political violence and radicalism, seek to provide neoliberal reform with both a sense of necessity and moral legitimacy. During the so-called “Washington Consensus” of the 1980s and 90s, the democratically-elected transitional regimes of the Southern Cone preside over the privatization of public services and industries together with the dismantling of the regulatory state, which served as mediator between the local/national and global capital for much of the 20th century. While the privatization of the Welfare State model may be the most salient landmark for thinking the crisis of sovereignty in Latin America, other contributing factors include: (1) tele-technological mediatization, through which old configurations of space and time according to the parameters of the nation are superseded by transnational mediatic networks and real-time technologies that facilitate the virtual elimination of geographic distance as an obstacle for production and commerce, culminating in the tendential integration of the planet to meet the needs of global capital; (2) new patterns of displacement and migration in response to drug-related violence and changing labor markets, which in turn have the effect of destabilizing national borders and providing a mobile (and often highly vulnerable) labor force for global capital and its preference for flexibility and relocation; (3) the proliferation of narco-trafficking and the drug wars, which in the past half-decade have destabilized the social and political order in Mexico while threatening the state’s traditional role as guarantor of the social pact.

The dismantling of the forms, institutions, and conceptual vocabulary of political modernity today poses urgent problems for our understanding of recent Latin American

history, in part because this understanding remains reliant on epistemological categories and concepts that belong to the history of modernity. For example, the advent of neoliberal hegemony, or what I will call “Consensus,” in Argentina, Chile, and elsewhere in Latin America during the 1980s turns out to be difficult to reconcile with the sociological concept of societal transition, because that concept presupposes a linear and progressive model of history that enables “before” and “after” to be plotted like geometric points on a single, continuous line. The durability of neoliberal hegemony, meanwhile, relies in part on the powerful projection of a new temporality in which history is now inevitably approaching its end—which is to say, both the culmination of its prior stages and its ultimate goal which has mediated all prior stages. Under the bright light of neoliberal hegemony any situation that remains out of adjustment with neoliberal consensus—any and all conflict, dissensus, or disorder—tends to be seen, as Hegel puts it in the *Philosophy of Right*, as a form whose shape of life has grown old. As Derrida shows in *Specters of Marx*, the neoliberal account of the end of history performs a peculiar empirico-theoretical balancing act (Derrida 1994, 62-63). On one hand it turns to empirical history for confirmation of its fundamental thesis: in societies throughout the world today old ideological projects have been discarded in favor of a new social logic according to which decisions over how to allocate limited goods and resources have become increasingly complex and are now best left to experts or to the impersonal mechanisms of the market. Empirical evidence today seems to confirm that the world is finally coming around to the liberal teleology of history, having concluded that any concerted effort to produce a “just” or “equitable” distribution of social and economic resources through political means is ultimately doomed to promote inefficiency—or worse. When ideological conflicts do flare up, meanwhile, neoliberal

apologists tend to explain them as residual forms whose historical actuality has been exhausted and which, having yet to hear the good news, are sadly out of step with the times. Such scenes of conflict and antagonism appear today like ghosts lingering after their time has passed, or like farcical reenactments of tragic scenes.

The German political theorist Carl Schmitt famously defined sovereignty as the right to decide between friend and foe, or between when constitutional law is in effect and when it is suspended. The concept of sovereignty posits a subject who decides as the origin of the sociopolitical order. In recent years Schmitt's account of sovereignty has been challenged by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, who in *Rogues* (2005) argues that the seemingly self-evident distinction between the sovereign state and its improper doubles (i.e., the famous category of "rogue state") has become manifestly unstable in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. On a similar note, the Italian political philosopher and Schmitt scholar Carlo Galli has proposed that, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent US response, the political vocabulary of modernity finds itself unable to account for the ways in which power, force, and security (and thus also insecurity) play out in the world today (Galli 2010). Although Galli coins the term "Global War" to describe this new situation, war today is no longer what it once was: a conflict between sovereign states represented by uniformed armies or, on occasion, between an invading army and a local guerrilla force dedicated to the defense of a homeland. Just as the meaning of war is no longer confined to conflicts between sovereign states over territory it also ceases to be calibrated by temporal parameters of beginning and end, declaration and armistice. Galli's account of global war necessitates a rethinking of strife and insecurity beyond traditional associations with armed conflict organized by sovereign occasionalism.¹ Global war

is synonymous with an ever-expanding array of threats to security and order in our world; but not all of these threats can be assigned a clear bellicose intention, i.e., to capture territory or overthrow a given political order. I propose that what Galli calls global war thus emerges as an improper name for a situation that marks a limit for the political vocabulary of modernity; it brings together various forms of violence, strife and potential disorder arising in the context of (and not infrequently as a reaction to) technological and economic globalization.

For Schmitt the logic of sovereignty presupposes the autonomy of the political as a sphere whose rationale is freed from all external concerns and authorities: morality, economics, culture, religion, nature, etc. Neoliberal-administered globalization, by contrast, is synonymous with the subjugation of the political beneath economy and the logic of the market—the very antithesis of what Schmitt understood as the autonomy of the political. Political sovereignty relinquishes its modern role as undisputed arbiter of social organization for reasons that have everything to do with an array of economic, technological, and geopolitical trends discussed by scholars of globalization such as David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and Saskia Sassen. This is not to say that the state has ceased to matter today or that it has been replaced, for better or worse, by some new organizing principle. Modern forms and figures of sovereignty are still with us today, and in some cases they may be even more repressive than ever. But the state is now obliged to redefine its role in order to accommodate forces and logics that transcend the national arena, and which in many cases are not easily assigned a specific geopolitical location or a clear form of agency—and which thus appear to fall outside of occasionalist accounts of causality. This latter point is crucial, for it clarifies why we cannot speak simply and comfortably of a new configuration of sovereignty in the world today. If the sovereign is the one who

decides on the state of exception (in the juridical domain) or on the friend/enemy distinction (in the external political context), neoliberal-administered globalization inaugurates a new situation in which such determinations are always already mediated by real or perceived economic facticity and technological rationality. By the same token the economic principles of liberalism, predicated on the minimization of political interference in the social, turn out to be equally valid in republican democracy as in authoritarian dictatorship. The specificity of the political—democratic or undemocratic—makes little difference as far as contemporary liberal theory is concerned.

The occasionalist logic of modern political sovereignty experiences a short circuit today. Decisions continue to be made, of course, but they do not refer back to their own principal authority or to an originary decision that could be presumed to have legitimated the terms under which particular phenomenal decisions are made.² The logic of sovereignty may indeed remain in effect within the political and juridical spheres but its hegemony over all spheres of life has been suspended. The secular theology of political sovereignty has been subjugated to the logic and requirements of transnational capital. The essence of the market, meanwhile, is its impersonal, automatic nature; and in the eyes of liberalism that is precisely what makes it the only legitimate arbiter of socioeconomic distribution. But this also means that the market cannot replace the modern sovereign in the same way that the sovereign once stepped in and filled the place of God. The mimetic account that guarantees a certain resemblance between God and man also sustains the occasionalist logic of political sovereignty. But that connection cannot be reproduced in the shift from the sovereign national state to the “invisible hand” of the market, whose legitimacy as decision-making mechanism relies precisely on its being

essentially *unlike* human decision-making.

The subjugation of the political logic of sovereignty to abstract or imperceptible forces that are no longer capable of being regulated by national states leaves a void at the heart of the social today. This void has yet to be filled by some new figure or principle that could carry out the explanatory and ordering operations once performed by the logic of political sovereignty. In writing this book I have been tempted to thematize this subjugation of the political—and of its principal role vis-à-vis the social pact—as interregnum. Interregnum is a juridical concept invented by Roman law to designate a finite interval between the death of the old sovereign and the coronation of his replacement. In such a time between orders, the legal decrees of the old regime were suspended in anticipation of the enactment of new laws. By the same token, and as Giorgio Agamben describes in *State of Exception*, the tradition of interregnum was shaped by the specter of social upheaval, either through invasion by an opportunistic enemy or from inside via insurrection. In the event of the sovereign's death Roman law provided for a temporary strengthening and fuller manifestation of the repressive apparatuses of the state, to be authorized by the Senate under declaration of *iustitium*, for which Agamben offers the translation “when the law stands still, just as [the sun does in] the solstice” (Agamben 2005, 41). Under *iustitium* Roman civic law was suspended, its administrative apparatuses dissolved, and leading officials—and at times even common citizens—were directed to defend the state using whatever means necessary. Over time *iustitium* gradually lost its association with the threat of disorder and came to be associated with public mourning of the deceased monarch: a pause for remembrance and reflection before returning to the business of everyday life. Through this genealogy of interregnum Agamben traces a gradual domestication and

smoothing-over of a crack in the foundation of the political logic of sovereignty. A similar fault line in modern political reason is exposed, in my view, with the global reordering associated with transnational capitalism.

In the late 1920s and early 30s the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci appropriates the term “interregnum” to describe something quite different from the classical Roman political practice of a declared hiatus of juridical order intended to protect the state from external and internal threats. As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out Gramsci’s appropriation of the concept of interregnum provides a name for what Lenin described as a revolutionary situation: a crisis of representation in which the ruling class has become incapable of ruling and the ruled no longer desire to be represented (Bauman 2012, 49). For Gramsci interregnum names the weakening of the power of the ruling class at a time when its ideas and codes have ceased to be hegemonic and when the established social order, if it is to be upheld, must therefore be sustained through force alone. As Gramsci puts it,

That aspect of the modern crisis which is bemoaned as a “wave of materialism” is related to what is called the “crisis of authority.” If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading” but only “dominant,” exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. (Gramsci 1992, 275-76)

If interregnum can provide a viable term for describing the subjugation of political

sovereignty to the logic of the market and the ebbs and flows of global capital, then we would be compelling the term to perform double duty. It would on one hand designate a crisis of the political, a time in which the occasionalist logic of political modernity has been suspended but in which the principal figure of the sovereign has not been replaced by any substitute figure. At the same time interregnum would also name an epistemological problem that arises in the context of this void: today we lack adequate concepts to account for and reckon with the forces that are reshaping our world or tearing it apart. The political reason of modernity appears to be losing its explanatory power and we are in need of new concepts to account for how power is deployed in the world today. Bauman himself proposes that our contemporary situation might be understood as an interregnum:

The old order founded until recently on a...“triune” principle of territory, state, and nation as the key to the planetary distribution of sovereignty, and on power wedded seemingly forever to the politics of the territorial nation-state as its sole operating agency, is now dying. Sovereignty is no longer glued to either of the elements of the triune principle and entities; at the utmost, it is tied to them but loosely and in portions much reduced in size and contents. The allegedly unbreakable marriage of power and politics is, however, ending in separation with a prospect of divorce. Sovereignty is nowadays, so to speak, unanchored and free-floating. Criteria of its allocation tend to be hotly contested, while the customary sequence of the principle of allocation and its application is in a great number of cases reversed. (Bauman 2012, 49-50)

I have no real quarrel with this assessment of the dying nature of the old order or with

the assertion that the phenomenal manifestation of power in the world today tends to invert the traditional sequencing of principial reason and its phenomenal application. To paraphrase a familiar image of frontier law, power today is inclined to shoot first and ask questions (or appeal to principles) later. But it seems to me that the epistemological insufficiency just invoked also strongly implies that “interregnum” would turn out to be an inadequate concept for what Bauman is describing or for what I am attempting to think with this book. Interregnum is a juridical term that serves to designate either a temporary hiatus between orders (in the Roman tradition) or a crisis of representation in which the authority of the ruling class is no longer legitimated through the universal acceptance of its ideas (the revolutionary situations of the 19th and 20th centuries). Although interregnum for Lenin and Gramsci signifies a gap or a crisis that could potentially give rise to revolution, it is a temporal term whose concept projects the eventual closing-up of this gap and the inauguration of a new sovereign order, even if its configuration turns out to be radically different from those of its predecessors. The concept of interregnum thus belongs to the imperial history of sovereignty and serves to guarantee the continuity of that political reason despite its momentary interruptions and crises. The problem I am looking at, however, is not juridical in nature. On the contrary it obtains with the inability of the juridical sphere to guarantee the social pact today. Nor for that matter does the gap produced by the subjugation of political sovereignty today belong within the imperial history of modern political forms in its conservative and radical variations. On the contrary, it marks the exhaustion of that history and announces, as Alberto Moreiras puts it, the need to fashion a new critical and theoretical vocabulary (Moreiras 2012, 10). In light of these complications, I have opted for the imperfect solution of leaving “interregnum” in the title of my book while

placing it, as Derrida would say, under erasure.³

For this book one important consequence of the societal transformation that accompanies neoliberal globalization is that literature has now relinquished the position it occupied during much of the 19th and 20th centuries in Western societies. Today literature no longer embodies and transmits universal truths such as those attributed to it by Matthew Arnold (“the best which has been thought and said in the world”). By the same token, literature is no longer widely regarded as a potential medium for the production of a national subject, as was the case in Latin America from the time of Sarmiento through the popularization of *testimonio* as the staging and production of revolutionary subjectivity.⁴ This decline is not due only to the fact that people today are reading less than ever before and turning instead to other media for entertainment. At a more fundamental level this shift reflects a transformation of the social pact and its organizing logic.

Near the end of the 18th century the concept of political sovereignty was reconfigured in conjunction with the birth of a new political subject called “the People.” The democratic revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th century Europe abolished the old principal of authority, which was grounded in the idea that the monarch’s rule was theologically ordained, and established a new form of legitimacy based on a pair of complementary premises: first, that power has been vested in the state through the will of the people; and second, that the state provides the basis through which the people can cultivate and realize its historical destiny. The first premise postulates an archaic moment of consent of the governed, while the second premise projects a future time in which the people will asymptotically become identical to itself—through education and reflection, and through the self-making of work. In both cases it

is culture—and, as the nineteenth century wore on, increasingly literature—that provides the groundwork for these two premises: in the first case by producing an archive in which the people can see itself as the subject of its own history; and in the second case by providing the foundation for the liberal education through which the essential character of the people can be realized, i.e., by cultivating the good judgment and freedom of thought that are the basic requirements for modern citizenship.

Today we are living out the demise of the aesthetic ideology of modernity that began with the publication of Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* (1795). Aesthetic experience was understood by Schiller and the Jena Romantics in Europe, and by Echeverría and Rodó in Latin America, as a privileged site of reflection that enjoys immunity from any external imperative, such as the imperatives or constraints stemming from other spheres (religion, politics, economics, and so on). If literature has always been more or less detached from everyday realities, that can only be to its benefit as far as Schillerian aesthetic ideology is concerned, because detachment is just another name for the autonomy by virtue of which aesthetic education becomes the site where human freedom is cultivated. Today, meanwhile, it would seem that literature and aesthetic experience are no longer able to sustain this historical claim to autonomy as fields capable of assigning themselves their own laws.

To see why we must consider how capitalist globalization beginning in the 1970s coincides with a momentous shift in the way labor as such is conceptualized and experienced. Labor in the global economy is no longer organized according to the principles of producing durable objects; although such production still happens, manual labor has become increasingly automated has lost its paradigmatic status.⁵ The factory as paradigm of modern capitalism has

been replaced by the office, and manual labor has been supplanted by intellectual work involving the manipulation of symbols and by affective labor whose aim is to provide feelings: “service with a smile,” as Hardt and Negri wryly note. In a global economy dominated by service and information industries labor is increasingly oriented toward producing performances or experiences that constitute an end in themselves.⁶

In her 2007 essay “Literaturas postautónomas” Ludmer begins with the assertion that the formal subsumption of culture within capitalist production thematized by Jameson, Hardt and Negri, and Virno signals the exhaustion of the Schillerian project of grounding political democracy in aesthetic experience. In its place Ludmer proposes a new category that she calls *literatura post-autónoma*. Autonomous literature acquired its specificity through its own self-positing as privileged epistemological lens through which non-literary reality could be seen and assessed critically from a distance. Post-autonomous literature coincides with the awareness that the boundaries between literature and other spheres have become unstable and porous. If literature can no sustain the (in)difference that was its mark of distinction for Schiller, then it is also unable now to deliver on the promise of generating critical knowledge of the social; its own mechanisms have now become part of what drives the organization of social relations and the production of commodities for the market.

Ludmer finds evidence of the shift from autonomy to post-autonomy in what she sees as the diminishing capacity of literary language to generate meaning or insight through tropological innovation. She finds in contemporary Southern Cone literary works an entropic dispersal of the aesthetic tensions, resistances and opacities which once distinguished literary uses of language from other discourses. As she puts it, “el sentido (o el autor, o la escritura)

queda sin densidad, sin paradoja, sin indecibilidad, ‘sin metáfora’, y es ocupado totalmente por la ambivalencia: son y no son literatura al mismo tiempo, son ficción y realidad” (Ludmer 2007, np). Post-autonomous literature has been evacuated of the “density,” the limit and the distance once named by the sublime and metaphor respectively; or else it is a literature that more or less purposively abstains from these aesthetic forms of mediation. Ludmer is not claiming that literary discourse has suddenly become transparent like some idealized Habermasian view of communicative discourse. Post-autonomous literature finds itself without an unsayable, without paradox and without metaphor not because it is more transparent or literal than its predecessors, but because metaphoricity, which Aristotle understood as the essence of intelligence (perceiving likeness in difference), has now been subsumed within the production process as new paradigm. To put this in language that is slightly different from Ludmer’s, it is no longer possible for literature to perform the old task of sublimation, of elevating a common object to the level of the idealized Thing, and thereby filling the gap left by the Thing’s withdrawal. One exemplary instance of sublimation in the Latin American tradition can be found in the concluding pages of Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, in what appears to the dying cacique as the rarified and radiant image of Susana San Juan, in which her “boca abullonada” acts as a placeholder of absence, of the unrepresentable sublime which the cacique is finally unable to dominate.⁷ In post-autonomy, meanwhile, the old tropological toolbox of autonomous literature’s epistemological privilege—fable, symbol, myth, allegory, paradox, metaphors, sublimation, and so on—is for Ludmer no longer capable of creating bridges between representation and the real. This is the case not because the distance between representation and its objects is now too great to be traversed, but because the distance has shrunk and now

asymptotically approaches its own vanishing. In Ludmer's words, "todo lo cultural [y literario] es económico y todo lo económico es cultural [y literario]," while "la realidad [si se la piensa desde los medios, que la constituirían constantemente] es ficción y...la ficción es la realidad" (Ludmer 2007, np).

Ludmer's claims have struck some as too monolithic, either because she appears to lump all contemporary literary phenomena under a single socio-economic rubric, or because the conceptualization of *postautonomía* implies a homogenization of the historical present without accounting for possible distinctions between how the planetary phenomena that define it—globalization, post-industrial capitalism, the crisis of the modern state form, and so on—are experienced in the developed world as opposed to, say, Latin America (or, for that matter, between the Southern Cone and the Andes). Furthermore, insofar as she thematizes a critical turn away from traditional hermeneutic practices of interpretation in favor of attention to affect, Ludmer could be accused of having produced a new critical model that fits all too well with the logic of neoliberalism and the marketplace. As Charles Hatfield, Eugenio di Steffano and Emilio Sauri have argued, the critical abandonment of interpretation and meaning in favor of affect can only lead to affirmations of "difference" as the unquestionable ground on which all affect must be understood insofar as affect is specific to the subject who experiences it. The critical abandonment of interpretation and truth could never yield anything other than a reaffirmation of the logic of the market.⁸

Whatever its flaws, I propose that we tentatively accept Ludmer's concept of *literatura postautónoma* as a working account of at least one dominant tendency in contemporary literary production, one which literary critical practices must account for regardless of location.

However, it seems to me that Ludmer's theory is unable to account for the complexity of what is in play in modern thinking about aesthetic experience, and that her understanding of the literary and its limitations today is derived from the most conservative (Schillerian and Arnoldian) accounts of the aesthetic. One important consequence of her gloss on aesthetic autonomy is that the concept of *post-autonomía* remains incomplete, since it is constitutively unable to ask what it might have in common with modern understandings of the aesthetic. Thus, for example, the distinction between autonomy and post-autonomy would be unable to engage with the distinction that Paul de Man draws between Kant's thinking about the aesthetic and Schiller's appropriation of Kant for his conceptualization of the "aesthetic state."⁹ I return to this discussion in the second chapter.

Literature and "Interregnum" is divided into five chapters that are traversed by a handful of common themes: mediatization and technics as altering our awareness of history and as contributing to the dismantling of the public sphere (Chapters One, Two, Three and Four); post-Fordism or flexible accumulation and the disappearance of the national popular and utopian imaginaries (Chapters One, Three and Four); neoliberal-administered globalization and the emergence of new forms of violence (Chapters One, Three and Five); gender, precariousness and "feminization" of labor (Chapters Three, Four and Five); literary returns to realism (Chapters Three and Four); and literary returns to the (neo) avant garde (Chapters One, Two and Five).

The first two chapters look at debates in Latin Americanist circles concerning literature, mass media, technics, history, and politics. Three general questions help to orient the discussion. The first concerns how mediatization—or the tendential unification of the planet

through increasingly powerful telecommunicational networks—affects our understanding of aesthetic activity and reflection. This question asks not only about how contemporary literary production is affected by globalization but also about how the institutional status and role of literature, qua exemplary form for the modern production of citizenship, is undergoing transformation today. The second question focuses on the well-known idea popularized by Fredric Jameson among others, that globalization and postmodernism contribute to the loss of our capacity to experience history as such. The third question has to do with how mediatization reconfigures the parameters for politics in a time when public discourse is increasingly obliged to adapt itself to an endogenous logic and a temporality defined by brevity and repeatability: the sound bite, the news cycle, and so on. In Chapter One I look at the Argentine writer Marcelo Cohen's 1989 novel *El oído absoluto* as an allegory of post-dictatorship Argentina. Cohen's novel portrays a space in which the utopian imaginaries of prior generations have been supplanted by charismatic pseudo-populist neoliberal reformers, and thereby sets out to explore a situation resembling Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernism: a time in which even those domains previously considered to be beyond the reach of capitalism (nature and the unconscious) have now been colonized by the logic of commodification (Jameson 1991). *El oído absoluto* shares with Jameson and Martin Heidegger an interest in exploring connections between the experience of historicity on the one hand, and mood and the "tonalities" of thought on the other.¹⁰ Cohen's novel portrays the time of neoliberal-administered globalization as something akin to what Heidegger describes as a toneless tone, or "the distress of the absence of distress" (Heidegger 1999, 75). But while the novel identifies a certain range of tonalities as characteristic of the time of late capitalism it also investigates how mood can

give rise to a revitalized experience of history through a confrontation with the absence or impossibility of principal ground or *arkhē*. For Cohen, I propose, it is through literary language that the (non)ground of history has a chance of showing itself to us or making itself heard.

Continuing with the literary thematization of mass media technics, Chapter Two explores a stark contrast between celebratory accounts of mediatization and the emergent economic crisis in Argentina in the work of César Aira. I look at how Aira's 2001 novel *La villa* highlights a disjunction between new forms of accumulation (financial speculation, privatization, intensified production of surplus labor) and the intensification of inequality brought about by neoliberal economic reform. I also take up critical discussions of Aira's poetics and his tendency to incorporate the imagery and rhythm of televisual programming into his prose. Following Sandra Contreras and Graciela Speranza, I explore how this literary incorporation of the temporality of the news cycle and other televisual topoi serves as impetus for the renewal of avant garde artistic procedures that may be akin to Marcel Duchamp's invention of the "Readymade." At a time when all social spheres have been conceived as domains reserved for specialized knowledge, literary appropriation of mass media technics may provide a way of revitalizing literary practice and reestablishing it as a common practice. In the language of the French political philosopher Jacques Rancière, we could say that Aira's turn to mass media technics provides a way of opening the space of literature once again to its fundamentally democratic and impersonal anonymity. I explore how Aira's novel initiates a rethinking of technics while questioning familiar distinctions between the human and technology. Drawing on reflections on technics and humanism by Heidegger, Blanchot, Derrida, Stiegler, and Samuel Weber, I read Aira's novel as an attempt to think both with and against

mediatization understood simultaneously as an ideology of full inclusion/full coverage and as uncanny double of literary language itself.

The third and fourth chapters look at Argentine and Chilean literary responses to the paradigmatic shift from industrial capitalism to post-Fordist service economy. In both contexts I explore novels that participate in a contemporary “return” to the realist tradition in Latin America. This turning back is more akin to citation than to reenactment: these novels engage with the social context of the working poor and their travails, but literary discourse here is characterized by highly self-aware forms of lyricism instead of the detached indexicality characteristic of the 19th century realist novel. In the third chapter I look at the Chilean writer Diamela Eltit’s 2002 novel *Mano de obra*, a literary reflection on post-dictatorship Chile in which new forms of power and subjugation invented by neoliberalism are allegorized through narrative emplotment. The story is set in a mega-supermarket which provides the spatialized metonym of a historical event: the transition from national economy regulated by the state to unregulated free-market economy. Whereas Eltit has become renowned in Chile and beyond during the 1980s and 90s for a self-aware prose reminiscent of neo-avant garde movements, *Mano de obra* is largely devoid of the linguistic play and formal experimentation that characterized her earlier novels. Where literary form does call attention to itself, however, is in the chapter headings drawn from socialist and anarchist journals produced by the Chilean labor movement of the early 20th century. These headings remain somewhat enigmatic, since the text offers no explanation about where the titles come from. Each, however, is accompanied by a place name and a date, and thus it becomes clear that the headings are taken from some historical archive. What is most striking in this formal mechanism is the juxtaposition between,

on the one hand, a series of orphaned signifiers that point to the existence of a forgotten history, and the contemporary scene of the supermarket on the other hand, a space seemingly devoid of history in which everything from produce to the bodily motions of the employees are supervised and commodified under the corporate logic of the (super)market. Following Walter Benjamin and Eric Santner, I propose that the formal composition of Eltit's novel initiates a reflection on natural history understood as the afterlife of culture, or as a residual space in between social history and nature. The concept of natural history helps shed light on Eltit's literary response to the production of precarity in the time of neoliberal-administered globalization; it calls attention to a materiality in language that allows us to catch glimpses of the traces of alternative histories. It does not present us with those histories themselves, as testimonial literature would claim to do, but instead alludes to them in order to illuminate a dawning sense that the present order is *not all*.

In the fourth chapter I turn to the work of Sergio Chejfec, including his 2000 novel *Boca de lobo*. Akin to Eltit's *Mano de obra*, Chejfec's novel enacts a self-consciously anachronistic return to the subject matter of the realist tradition. Chejfec's novel recounts an old romantic relation between the narrator and a female factory worker. Narrated in the historical present, a time tenuously defined by the retreat of radical labor politics and the transformation of industrial capitalism into service economy, Chejfec's and Eltit's works are similarly engaged in the difficulties associated with thinking about history today, at a time defined by the retreat of the national popular and its institutional support (industrial capitalism as paradigmatic form of production, the regulatory state, organized labor movements, etc.) and when social antagonism has been increasingly difficult to articulate. At a formal level Chejfec's *Boca de lobo* has

something important in common with Balzac's project as described by Lukács. Whereas the *Comédie humaine* bore witness to the constructions of industrial capitalism in France during the Second Republic, *Boca de lobo* takes stock of the abandonment of the factory as paradigmatic form of capitalist production.

The fifth and final chapter looks at a number of themes taken up in previous chapters: globalization; the neoliberal dismantling of the regulatory State; the "feminization" of labor and generation of precariousness as element of accumulation and reproduction of capitalist production; and the return to avant garde or neo-avant garde figures and procedures. Turning to Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel *2666* I look at how the geopolitics of globalization along the Mexican-US border interacts with literary modernity and its concerns about history and revolution or rupture. Aira and Eltit take up the idea of the avant garde together with its characteristic gestures in order to revitalize literary poetics at a time when many writers and critics have expressed complaints about megapublishers now dominate the Hispanic literary field, with prospects for artistic innovation thereby subjugated to commercial interests. In Bolaño's case, however, the gesture toward the avant garde proves much more difficult to read. The turn is highly ironic as it ultimately calls into question one of the defining goals of that modern tradition: the use of art or aesthetic experience to interrupt the organizing logic of bourgeois social order. Bolaño's novel diagnoses a new situation in which aesthetic interruption appears to have been rendered ineffective, either because its experimentalism has become uncannily similar to the cultural logic of commodity production or because power is no longer as reliant as it once was on the ability of a ruling class to establish its ideas as universal or hegemonic. In an arguably post-hegemonic or post-ideologically world it is no longer certain

that the avant garde could produce the same explosive, revolutionary awakenings that were its object from the time of the Romantics through the Chilean neo-avant garde (Colectivo Acciones de Arte) of the 1970s and 80s. My reading of Bolaño's posthumous novel is not simply apocalyptic, however, and I propose that his text retains a certain skepticism about the break with modernity that I have just described. Indeed, if matters were clear cut in this regard then we could rightly call attention to the way in which the novel in fact reproduces avant-garde rupturalism on another register while claiming that all rupturalist impetus has been exhausted. Alongside this skepticism about the continued viability of avant-garde generated aesthetic interruption, I locate in *2666* an effort to take seriously the question of literature precisely insofar as it presents something that may prove refractory to (and thereby potentially renders unstable) all ontological modes of inquiry based on the postulation of essence (*ti esti*: "what is it?"). In dialogue with reflections by Derrida on literature and the secret, and by Heidegger and Nancy on ontology, I propose that Bolaño's exploration of the Free Trade Zone along the Mexico/US border gives shape to a new interrogation of the philosophical, ethical, and political question of world. Against standard accounts of globalization as homogenizing all differences and muting of the voice of history, I find in Bolaño's meditations on the "hell" that is Ciudad Juárez an attempt to think the groundless ground that Heidegger calls world, and thereby to open up new ways of hearing the voice of history in our troubled times.

Tonalities of Literature in Post-Dictatorship Argentina: Mood and History in Post-Utopian Times

In a well-known formulation Fredric Jameson defines postmodernity as an epochal shift coinciding with the tendential colonization of the planet by transnational capital.¹¹ The postmodern is what obtains when even those regions previously considered beyond the reach of commodification—nature and the unconscious—are now found to have been assimilated into the equivalential logic of exchange. By the same token, the old nature/culture dichotomy must be reexamined today to account for what Jameson describes as the “dilation of [the cultural] sphere, an immense and historically original acculturation of the Real” (Jameson 1991, x). Whereas nature used to embody the idea of a pure origin or pure difference in contrast to human artifice—an origin of which culture was the copy or emulation—that old opposition has now been destabilized through the deterritorializing drive of capital. Capitalism’s absorption of its putative outside through acculturation constitutes the late modern and cultural analogue of what Marx characterized as the technological subsumption of traditional social forms and practices into capitalist production.

Jameson’s use of “acculturation” to describe the displacement of industry by culture as the driving logic of capitalist production and accumulation covers a wide range of social phenomena. For the purposes of this chapter salient examples can be found in the privatization of public spaces, industries and resources under neoliberalism, and in the capitalization of endangered natural environments in the entertainment industry together with adaptation of commodity production to the environmental movement (theme parks, ecotourism, Fair Trade). Similarly, localities are encouraged to cultivate unique geographical and cultural “identities” to attract flows of transnational capital. By the same token, political discourse in the age of mass

media is obliged to adapt to the technical capabilities and temporality of media coverage (telegenic demeanor, ability to generate and manage sound bites, news cycles, etc.). The growth of cable TV and Internet fosters the emergence of niche markets that enable consumers to choose their source of information about the world based on ideological compatibility. Whereas the media's historical role in modern societies was to present the truth irrespective of its compatibility with power, that mandate is now subjugated to marketing concerns in a context where consumers are predisposed to prefer information sources that will confirm preexisting belief structures. In all of these examples, the line between civic and political life and the entertainment industry has become more blurry than ever.

For Jameson one of the defining features of postmodernity is that time, a primary source of modern preoccupations and desires, is supplanted by space. Our world today is shaped by a prevailing deafness to history and by the waning of affects and intensities, most notably the aspirations associated with utopian social and political projects. We have lost our capacity to experience the present as part of a historical process whose direction remains to be determined; we no longer see the world we live in as a contingent configuration of structures, relations, and meanings that could at some point be susceptible to transformation. Like ideology for Althusser, Jamesonian globalization is a process without subject, which is to say that we experience it as something that "just happens," and which is therefore pointless to oppose. By the same token, we no longer look to the future for the outline of a possible world whose reality we could have a hand in bringing into existence; the utopian imaginary has been consigned to the dustbin of history along with planned economies. In the absence of any substantive challenge to the primacy of the market it is difficult to envision the future as

anything other than a timeless expanse in which the present extends itself ad infinitum.

The thought of newness, together with the aspirations and the uneasiness it evokes, was a formative component of 19th and 20th century modernity from Baudelaire through the 1960s. Postmodernism in turn is synonymous with the sense that, for better or for worse, we have arrived at the end of history and its ideologically driven cycles of destruction and renewal. Newness may not have disappeared entirely from the world, but the capacity to experience or imagine it has been subsumed within the logical circuitry of commodity production and consumer demand, for which novelty is as important—if not more so—than utility. Consumer desire is the desire of the new. Within this reconfiguration of historical temporality as the time of commodity upgrading, newness acts as a simulacrum that promises contemporaneity while also shielding us from the fact that within the timeframe of Jamesonian postmodernity there can be nothing truly new under the sun.

These transformations pose substantial difficulties for critical thought, especially if we still hold to the view that one of thinking's tasks is to grapple with the contingency of the present and of the prevailing logic of social organization. One of the consequences of the ascendancy of transnational capital and neoliberal privatization is that resistance to capital becomes difficult to imagine. The problem is not just that the old forms of opposing the unchecked expansion of capitalism—Marxian-inspired revolution, national populism or even the modern State—have been rendered obsolete or integrated into capitalism. In its relentless expansion, global capital has succeeded in divesting itself of any identifiable point of origin. Its expansive drive can no longer be attributed to the geopolitics of imperialism or the cultural dissemination of the American way of life, as was the case in Latin America from the time of

Sarmiento through the 1970s. Its impulses are now everywhere and thus it emanates from nowhere in particular. In sync with the exhaustive defeat of all political alternatives to free-market capitalism, neoliberalism works to ensure that any conceivable alternative to the market could only come into view at the expense of its own legibility: as anachronism, naïveté or just plain madness.

In Argentina the impact of this epochal reinscription is intensified by the ways in which histories of radical contestatory movements and political violence of the 1960s and 70s are erased or rewritten in the aftermath of the brutal military dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. One of the emergent narratives during the transition to democracy is the “theory of the two devils” (*teoría de los dos demonios*). According to that account, a military takeover was the logical consequence of the misguided calculations of political radicalism of the 1970s. The repressive tactics employed by the junta were excessive and immoral, to be sure, but they were nonetheless a predictable response to the moral failures committed in the name of social transformation. While the extreme Left and far Right were engaged in fratricidal conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the majority of Argentines were innocent civilians who found themselves caught in the crossfire and forced to pay for the poor judgment and crimes committed by the two extremes. This narrative, prevalent in the discourse of the democratically elected government of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-89) as well as the influential 1984 *¡Nunca Más!* Human Rights report produced by National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), enacts a series of powerful erasures and rewritings. First, it supports a problematic moral and tactical equivalence between the armed guerilla movements, the far-right counterinsurgency and the military state, together with their respective forms of violence.¹²

Second, in focusing on political violence and disorder as the sufficient cause that explains dictatorship this narrative renders illegible the question of what interests might have supported and benefitted from the systematic illegal repression—much of which was directed against the Argentine labor movement during the mid-1970s—together with the deregulation of the Argentine banking system under the Minister of Economy José Martínez de Hoz following the 1976 military takeover. This effacement of the question of economic interest and of who benefitted from the “national reorganization” undertaken under military rule, becomes even more complicated in the decades following the transition when it becomes possible to ask how social transformation of 1976-83 (“el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional”) might have contributed to paving the way for the full implementation of neoliberal reform under the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-99). The third erasure at work in the “dos demonios” narrative resides in the ideology of innocence and neutrality, through which many in Argentina sought to rationalize and justify their inaction in the face of state terrorism—based on fear, indifference, or outright complicity with the repressors—is retroactively sanctioned as a moral virtue. The theory of the two devils is the late modern cognate of the fable of “primitive accumulation” through which, according to Marx, political economy produced an idealized account of the origins of modern capitalism. The ultimate moral of the interpretive fable of the warring devils is that any attempt to alter the fundamental coordinates of the capitalist system will inevitably provoke state repression in its primal, indiscriminate fury.¹³

Early experimentation with neoliberal economic theory in Chile and Argentina during 1970s was fully interconnected with the routinization of state of emergency decrees whose ostensible purpose was to put an end to disorder stemming from political violence. The

complex and interrelated histories of political conflict and socio-economic transformation poses significant problems for sociologically-informed understandings of “transition.”¹⁴ During the 1980s and 1990s democracy becomes synonymous with its neoliberal articulation as a transparent electoral process coupled with privatization and unfettered economic opportunity in the private sector. In many cases the democracy-market equivalency is bolstered by the specter of the return of the military should the prevailing order find itself threatened—either by contestatory politics or economic crisis. The myriad of potentially conflicting senses of “freedom” within the democratic tradition is effectively reduced to a strict homology between democracy and economic opportunity for capitalists under the hegemony of consensus.

But does the new configuration of sensibility under the cultural logic of late capitalism and neoliberal-administered globalization truly differ from other moments in the history of ideological struggle for hegemony? Don't *all* ideologies and hegemonic procedures involve some *particular* (a leader, an idea or a name) that is effectively able to minimize its contingency and particularity in order to pass itself off as the truth of the social, as a universal with which all parts can identify and in which each discovers its own freedom?¹⁵ Perhaps a key distinction between the cultural logic of late capitalism and the ideological formations proper to other historical contexts can be found in the specificity of erasures enacted in the time of postdictatorship. The retreat of ideological antagonism under heavy stigmatization together with the widely proclaimed end of history, coincide with the emergence of “Consensus” as the unassailable telos of all politics.¹⁶ Whatever parallels it may evoke with the history of hegemony politics “Consensus” is not just another name for the universal status claimed by all hegemons. For the ideology of consensus, the conception of politics as an open field of engagement and

contention in which the shared lexicon of the community is open to contestation, is closed off and replaced by an administrative rationale in which conflict and disagreement—the very possibility of democratic politics—are recoded as existential threats to the social order. The possibility of politics as such recedes behind the specters of anarchy and war. Consensus is the ideologeme of the end of ideology.

The double inscription that binds democracy with the free market serves as a powerful tool for ideological legitimation today. In Jameson's analysis the modern principle of separation of spheres is eclipsed as culture expands beyond its own particularity to assert itself as the paradigmatic modality of commodity production as well as the driving force behind the incorporation of formerly residual zones into the capitalist global system. To the extent that consensus functions as the new hegemon of neoliberal postdictatorship the sociological concept of transition becomes fraught with an inconsistency that cannot easily be remedied. In principle transition ought to be synonymous with going across or over (*trans-*, *transitio*), with a passage from one order or era to another. But the terms under which Southern Cone transitions to democracy took place were carefully calculated to block any further possibility for transformation.

In Argentina most of the 1976-83 junta leaders were tried and convicted during the historic trials organized by the newly-elected President Raúl Alfonsín in 1985. In the wake of that legal watershed moment, however, the Alfonsín administration was weakened by ongoing battles with inflation, recession and monetary depreciation. In response to growing resentment and pressure from the military, including several barrack mutinies led by lower-ranking military officers, Alfonsín authored two laws intended to curtail future legal prosecutions: the 1986 Ley

de Punto Final [Full Stop Law], which imposed a time limit on legal proceedings; and the 1987 Ley de Obediencia Debida [Law of Due Obedience], which assured that subordinates in the military ranks would not be tried for crimes for which they could reasonably claim to have been “following orders.”¹⁷ In May 1989, six months prior to the end of his term, record-levels of inflation and currency depreciation led Alfonsín to transfer power to his successor, Carlos Menem.

In pointing out how political weakness in the transitional regime curtailed the pursuit of legal redress for wrongs suffered under dictatorship, I do not wish to diminish the symbolic importance of the trials or ignore the fact that this moment would later provide the pretext for a new round of legal prosecutions under the Kirchner administration in the early 2000s. But for the purposes of this chapter it is important to note that for many Argentines during the mid- to late 1980s the symbolic importance of the trials had likely been overshadowed by pragmatic concessions to a still-strong and politically independent military. It would be fair to say that, in view of the patent institutional weakness of its new democratic government, the prevailing mood in Argentina was deeply pessimistic concerning the ability of any democratic regime to guarantee order, not to mention justice.¹⁸ Transition in Argentina coincides with the inscription of new principle that establishes free-market capitalism as the sine qua non for democracy and freedom while imposing ideological barriers against any serious reflection on the processes through which “Consensus” imposed itself in the first place. The transition thus paradoxically coincides with and reinforces the impossibility of any further *trans-*.

This chapter examines matters related to postmodernity, history, mood, and thought through a reading of the Argentine novelist Marcelo Cohen’s *El oído absoluto* (1989).¹⁹ Two

general lines of questioning inform my reading of the text. The first is an exploration of what Jameson's theorization of "the cultural logic" of late capitalism has in common with Cohen's literary reflections on Latin American post-dictatorship societies. Jameson notes that his analyses and conclusions are relevant for a specific cultural context, that of late 20th century North America, and that his findings are not necessarily generalizable. If "culture" could be shown to display a similarly universalizing tendency in the Southern Cone beginning in the 1980s and 90s, would Jameson's conceptual and analytical vocabulary offer a productive toolbox for reading post-dictatorship Southern Cone novels?

The controversial position famously staked out by Jameson just a few years before the publication of Cohen's novel, of Latin American literature (or "Third World literature" in general) as governed by the paradigm of national allegory (Jameson 1986), arguably runs up against its expiration date during the time of neoliberal consensus, when national-popular sovereignty relinquishes its potency as political signifier and organizational principle for the social. Jameson's claims about national allegory depend on the assertion of a fundamental distinction between "First" and "Third" world contexts: whereas in the developed world the public (politics) is now privatized (recoded as stories about inner life, psychology, etc.), in the periphery the private and the political have not yet been decisively separated. The Third World novel thus presents in overt, legible form what can only appear in coded form in the First World; the Third World lays bare the unconscious of the First World. By way of contrast, the time of Consensus would mark the definitive effacement of the First/Third distinction that sustains Jameson's concept of national allegory.

All of this, however, should not lead us to conclude too hastily that the paradigm of

national allegory can simply be relegated to the dustbin of history. On my reading Cohen's novel offers a new approach to allegory, one that could provide the basis for an interesting response to the way in which Jameson's essay has been read—and frequently dismissed—by his critics, i.e., allegory as extended metaphor or as construction of a framework of signification in which personal circumstances reflect national (colonial or postcolonial) realities. Those schemata arguably have some explanatory power for earlier moments in Latin American literary history, but they are incapable of playing anything more than a residual role in post-dictatorship literature. If the concept of national allegory has anything at all to say to *El oído absoluto* it would require us to listen for another sense in the term allegory, a sense first theorized by Walter Benjamin in the context of baroque literary responses to secularization. Allegory in that early modern context provides a name for a certain excess in literary language; it names a tendency for signification to miss its presumptive target, attesting thereby to the way in which classical forms of transcendence have been destabilized. The dystopian theme at work in Cohen's novel provides a critical reassessment of late capitalist modernization in all of its deafening banality, but it also enacts a return to and rewriting of an earlier utopian history of Latin American modernization. In between these two contexts, *El oído absoluto* anticipates the impending epochal foreclosure of modernity together with the inability of a new order to take its place. In other words, it presents itself as an early diagnosis of interregnum in postdictatorship Southern Cone.

The other line of questioning that I alluded to above looks at philosophical considerations of the interrelatedness of history, thought, mood and world. I begin with a short discussion of Heidegger's reflections on mood, historicity, world and facticity in *Being and Time*

(1927) and later works, which together generate an evolving account of the reciprocal determination of being, thinking and feeling. The mutual implication of world and thinking in Heidegger is activated by the rise of particular moods or attunements. I am interested in how a shift in Heidegger's thinking about mood, from the ahistorical *Stimmung* of *Being and Time* to the historicized *Bestimmungen* of later writings, could help to move critical debate about late modernity or postmodernity beyond the commonplace image of the postmodern as a time characterized either by uncritical jubilation, boundless despair, or by the waning of all affect and mood altogether.

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE AND THE DARKENING OF THE WORLD: THINKING, MOOD AND ATTUNEMENT

Ever since Archimedes, Western thought has held to the view that substantive transformation of the world must begin by postulating an external point from which the world could be grasped as totality. The possibility of thinking the world as totality presupposes thought's capacity to posit for itself a locus external to the whole it seeks to grasp. This transcendent point has received various names in the history of Western thought: the One for the pre-Socratics, Nature in the Latin tradition, God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the humanistic idea of Man, Enlightenment notions of progress and emancipation as well as the People and Revolution. To accept Jameson's account of postmodernism as the subsumption of nature and the unconscious within commodity logic is to acknowledge the withdrawal of any possible outside from which the world could be grasped as a whole and/or transformed.

Martin Heidegger would seem to have anticipated this problem when he describes thought and action as always already situated within a prior, constitutively irretrievable understanding of *being*. There can be no thought and no action that is not already framed by a

network of significant relations, a framework of reference with and against which thought and action move. All thinking and action take place within a prior determination of how truth is disclosed and what is to be understood when we say that something *is*. As thinking and speaking beings we are “born” into a specific predetermination of “being,” of what truth in its disclosure must look like. This preontological structure is by no means simply imposed on us. Precomprehension only happens insofar as there is thought and action; it would make no sense, in Heidegger’s terms, to speak of animals as possessing precomprehension. While precomprehension must be posited as the a priori of thought and action, it takes effect only when we think and act in the world. To complicate things further, this a priori structure is itself inaccessible to knowledge; if we can ever catch glimpse of what conditions thought and action, it can only be through what *Being and Time* calls mood [*Stimmung*]. *Stimmung* is not just the specific emotional state of an individual. We come closer to capturing its sense when we speak of what is “in the air” at a given moment or when we distinguish between the respective generational “moods” of, say, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression and the 1980s in the US. In *Being and Time*, however, *Stimmung* is not analyzed as a mood that shifts from one moment to the next but instead names the factual tonality of human experience in general insofar as it is characterized by the temporality of “care” [*Sorge*]. The connection between precomprehension of being and mood is illustrated in Heidegger’s seminar on Hölderlin’s *Germanium* held in winter 1934-35:

A world never allows itself to be opened and then stuck back together beginning from a multitude of perceived objects reassembled after the fact; rather it is that which in advance is most originally and inherently manifest, within which alone

such and such a thing may come to meet us. The world's opening movement comes about in the fundamental mood [*Grundstimmung*]. The power to transport, integrate, and thus open, that a fundamental mood possesses is therefore a power to found, for it places *Dasein* upon its foundations facing its abysses. (Heidegger 1976, 140-41; as quoted in Haar 1992, 163)

Thinking cannot separate itself from the archaic precomprehension of *being* without which no understanding of *beings* would be possible. In concrete terms, there can be no understanding between *Dasein* and world, and no mutual understanding among interlocutors and no grasping of beings as beings, unless there is already axiomatic agreement on the status of certain fundamental terms such as the word *is*. That "we always already move about in an understanding of being" means that thinking, in asking about the being or essence of beings and things, can find no approach to its object that is not already compromised by a certain tilt of thought (Heidegger 1962, 25). By the same token, this a priori structure would seem to be irretrievable to analysis insofar as it conditions every attempt to ask questions about the nature of things. Thinking automatically reproduces the specific form of precomprehension from which it arises whenever and wherever it operates. Precomprehension is thus the shadowy unthought that silently accompanies and shapes thought and its representations at every turn, not unlike the way in which primary repression informs both unconscious and conscious processes in Freud.

Thinking can thus never hope to strip away the predetermination of being from which it emerges in order to gain access to the world "as it truly is." What could better illustrate this point than the fact that the *as such* ("as it truly is") is itself the product of a certain

precomprehension, one that understands truth according to a self-evident distinction between (deceptive) appearances and truth or essence. Thought presupposes and reproduces the precomprehension from which it arises. But this circularity need not lure us to the solipsistic conclusion that thought must give up on the question of truth or that thinking is restricted to reconfirming what it already knows. Whenever and wherever deliberation happens, thinking has already been exposed to what *Being and Time* terms the facticity of existence. Facticity, synonymous with “thrownness” [*Geworfenheit*], refers to existential finitude that both conditions Dasein’s being in the world as a being-with-others while also limiting Dasein’s capacity to master its own existence as subject.

While Heidegger insists that thinking has no access to the primordial determinations that silently shape the configuration of our experience of the world, *Stimmung* [mood, ambiance, climate, sentiment] names an experiential register in which we can gain a liminal awareness of the world in its facticity.²⁰ Certain emotions can prompt us to pause and step back from our routinized, calculating ways of relating to the world. A privileged example in *Being and Time* occurs in the analysis of anxiety, a negative affect characteristically disassociated from any determinate object. Whereas fear and hatred are always fear and hatred of something specific, anxiety has no proper object; or rather, says Heidegger, its “object” is precisely the nothing, or the void around which the world as a network of significant relations is structured. With the onset of anxiety our everyday concerns and responsibilities, whose imperatives we ordinarily obey without question, are suddenly interrupted. With the onset of anxiety we lose our footing in the world and become acutely aware of the fragile contingency lurking beneath everything that we ordinarily accept as possessing the solidity of what is permanent and necessary. Michel

Haar's account of how anxiety prepares an experience of facticity is illuminating:

Mood does not think the totality, but rather makes it come about, emerge more originarily than representation, which proceeding by construction or assemblage, can only think after the fact. Mood makes thought possible as an event of being. When anxiety results in the negation of beings as a whole, the negation is not a thought in the sense of a representation, but rather an experience. Mood initiates into the very principle of thought as the experience of being, an experience which is that of a dispossession or a decentering of Dasein. By itself, thought is incapable of producing essential negation, that is, the principle of all negation, the Nothing. (Haar 153)

Anxiety as Heidegger understands it is not the subjective experience envisioned by existentialism. The extreme negativity of factual dispossession displaces the philosophical conception of subject that has been understood since Descartes as the source or origin of its own representations. As "essential negation" anxiety both bears witness to the negation of the domain of things and their demands, and it clears the way for an experience of the nothing, the structuring void that marks the absence of an *arkhē* or ground for being. As Haar clarifies in the passage just cited, mood differs from thinking in that it discloses as experience whereas thought traffics in the coin of representation. Mood does not think (represent) the world as totality but instead "makes it come about" as a totality of significant relations that in turn provides the framework within which thought and representation take place; and, to be clear, mood makes this totality come about insofar as it brings us to the verge of its collapse qua totality of meaning. Disclosure for Heidegger is not synonymous with production, which

presupposes a producer or subject. The experience of anxiety registers the “factual totality” of being, or the way in which being is *given* before thinking can assume a position of mastery (judgment, understanding) over it. *Stimmung*, Haar adds, “leads back to an already-there, to a past which was never present” (*Song of the Earth*, 14). Whereas the philosophical tradition from the Presocratics onward has tended to understand this radical anteriority as nature, one of the important contributions of Heidegger’s analysis of *Stimmung* is found in his assertion that the “step back” imposed by anxiety constitutes a potential point of departure for thinking, an opportunity for thought to project itself beyond the time and place in which it finds itself and toward the limits of the established coordinates that shape what can be said and thought at a given juncture in the history of being. With the onset of anxiety, the imperatives, truth claims and rhythm imposed by the structures of everyday life show signs of wavering. In bracketing off accustomed ways of looking at and ordering our world, anxiety imposes a step back away from our familiarized forms of interacting with the world. It clears the way for an experience of the world as enigma, as something anterior and irreducible to the sum of beings and objects apprehended by calculative, technoscientific reason.

The suspension of everyday concerns and common sense that is prompted in anxiety may provide a first step in opening up a new path for thought. In order to see why, we must bear in mind that for Heidegger being is not a transcendental substrata for beings, nor is it synonymous with the permanence of presence in any form. In Heidegger’s thought being is to be thought as a *finite* conditioning of what is present; it names an always specific and contingent opening or mode of disclosure through which our world—along with the things and beings in it—becomes present and sensible. Being *is not* prior to the event of disclosure

through which a given epoch or people come to experience the world in a distinctive manner. What we could call, for lack of a better term, the “passive” sense of mood—mood as mark of the irretrievable anteriority of being—is thus already inscribed by a kind of “activity” or *re-mark*: mood as participating in bringing forth a unique way of allowing beings to disclose themselves. Mood names the double *affection* through which being takes hold of thought and action while also remaining in need of human hands and voice in order to come into existence. Being and the historicity of thought, the historicity of modes of revealing, turn out to be inseparable. The effect or the mark participates in bringing about its own cause as projected, finite being.

Being is never quite where or what we think it is, precisely because it “is” the secret origin of thinking itself, the silent call to which thinking will have been a response.²¹ The experience of anteriority that comes to us through anxiety brings about a double awareness: that for thought there is no way into being as such, but neither is there any way out. Thinking cannot grasp what is both prior to and constitutive of its representations. It cannot think its own origin in the world, the call to which it is itself a response. But thinking is likewise unable to disown its debts and separate itself from the specific ways in which it is enjoined to wonder and ask question about things. We are always already within being even when we have turned away from it or forgotten it. This double awareness, which is also a double constraint, does not resolve the problem identified earlier concerning the inaccessibility of an Archimedean point for thought and action today. If anything it intensifies the problem by indicating that it is not simply the product of a particular historical moment.

Following the publication of *Being and Time* and beginning in the 1930s, Heidegger

turns his focus from anxiety to various specific moods that he regards as belonging to a given epoch in the history of being. While the structure of what he calls *Bestimmung* [attunement] is very similar to that of *Stimmung* or mood, and while the law of precomprehension of being remains in effect, the turn to *Bestimmung* facilitates a more far-reaching exploration of the historicity of the relation between thought and being—not according to the discipline of historiography but in relation to what Heidegger had come to view as the historial nature of being. All thought as such has been attuned [*bestimmt*] to its world in a specific way, prepared or tuned in by the “voice” [*Stimme*] of being itself. Certain dispositions or moods seem to belong characteristically to a given time and place and its specific way of experiencing being. Thus the quasi-ahistorical *Stimmung* of which Heidegger speaks in the 1920s becomes *Bestimmung*, the historial determination of an epochal tone, climate or appointment.²² For instance, speechless astonishment before the sheer fact of being was a fundamental characteristic of Greek thinking. Hyperbolic doubt—and its calculated conversion into certainty—in turn sets the prevailing tone for the modern rationalist tradition beginning with Descartes. Meanwhile, the link between wonder and questioning has all but disappeared from our modern, disenchanted world. As the epoch of metaphysics comes to a close with Hegel, Nietzsche and the rise of modern techno-scientific reason, terror attests to a new sense of unease arising with the retreat of old authoritative points of reference (God, the Monarch, even the humanist concept of Man). Alongside terror Heidegger also identifies a strange disposition that he calls the distress of the absence of distress: a flat, almost toneless mood corresponding to our turn away from the vacated site of transcendence and toward the nihilistic certainty that the human subject is the source of all truth in the world. As Haar puts it, “the true distress of

thought is not a localized, ephemeral aporia, but the collapse of established signposts, indetermination taking hold of being in its entirety" (153).

The shift from *Stimmung* to *Bestimmung* helps set the stage for a clarification in Heidegger's thinking regarding the historicity of being. This shift can be located in the *Beitrage Zur Philosophie* (1936-38; translated into English as *Enowning: Contributions to Philosophy* [Heidegger 1999]) and is also evident in many of the collected essays published under the title *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977). As we have already seen, mood, thinking, world-disclosure and the historicity of being are profoundly interrelated themes in Heidegger's thought. Mood brings us to experience a debt that representational thinking can never grasp sufficiently: the silent, radical anteriority of Dasein's exposure to a world. Attunement, meanwhile, names the way in which perception and thought are configured by a given epoch and by the prevailing modes of disclosure that characterize it; at the same time, attunement also participates in constituting a given epoch and its modality of thinking and acting. The Greek experience of being is not only reflected in speechless astonishment; it *is* this wonder that prepares a specific way of asking questions about the world. Mood as hearing, as responding to the voice of being, is also attunement as first orientation toward being.

The tenor of thinking's attunement is wont to fluctuate, not only from one epoch to another but within any given epoch itself. For example, in the modern epoch that is inaugurated with the Cartesian cogito, the introduction of radical skepticism is calculated to culminate dialectically in the certitude of techno-scientific truth. But the self-assuredness of scientific certainty does not define the modern era in univocal fashion. The self-confidence secured by rational scientific certainty is obliged to compete with the uncertainties that stem

from the retreat of old authoritative reference points. Self-certainty is confronted by an emergent feeling of terror that reflects a dawning awareness of crisis or failure within the project of modernity, a sense of unease that modernity with all its resources has proven incapable of dispelling.

A new danger shows itself in the ruins of metaphysical system-thinking, where technics finds itself virtually alone in the world today. We no longer have recourse to “God,” “Reason,” “Man” or any other transcendental point of reference that could check the advance of technology or mediate instrumentalist representations of the world that Heidegger calls *Gestell* [“enframing”]. *Gestell* discloses our world today as the order of “standing reserve” or a totality of objects available for consumption. The unchecked supremacy of technological ordering introduces a new species of intonation into the world today: a vague, nearly accent-less mood for which Heidegger reserves the paradoxical phrase “distress of lack of distress” (Heidegger 1999, 75). Self-assured and unquestioning, this flattened-out tone attests to a world that has already been mapped and calculated in its entirety. This borderline tone is unable to open any new experience of the world as a step back from self-evident everydayness—as enigma, wonder, mystery, surprise. Because it has already disavowed the void, it also has no capacity to disrupt the self-evident necessity of what goes without saying. This distress-of-no-distress is always already mutating into its opposite: self-assured effervescence as the complete absence of distress. Analogous to what Jameson describes as the “exhilaration” that accompanies the cultural subsumption of the real, the “distress of lack of distress” is one mood among others and at the same time it anticipates the anaesthetization of mood as such.

What could provide a better description of the affective climate of neoliberalism than

the tangled web of terror and distress-of-no-distress found in Heidegger? As Wendy Brown argues in a recent interview, critical understanding of neoliberalism should be wary of the standard association of postmodernism with critical and leftist despair. The entrenchment of neoliberal consensus cannot be explained by the idea that, with the retreat of traditional contestatory political imaginaries, utopianism has been replaced by despondency. Would that things were so easy. The pathos of despair is still too modern in its tonality. In its place, Brown proposes that neoliberalism should be understood in terms of a softer and more insidious underlying “quotidian nihilism” (Brown 2010, np). Quotidian nihilism takes root in a general sense of directionlessness and pointlessness that prevail in a world that has been thoroughly disenchanting and purged of any idealizable future. Neoliberalism in turn, argues Brown, wants to be understood as a kind of response to quotidian nihilism. Positioning itself *against* this radically de-idealized image of the world, neoliberalism offers a minimally compensatory message of practical and moral authority by telling us what to do, think and feel. According to neoliberalism we must now finally come around to the pragmatic position of seeing ourselves as specimens of human capital who need to “appreciate [and actualize our] own value by making proper choices and investing in proper things” (Brown, np). The advantage of Brown’s account over standard views of postmodernity as a simple emptying out of all affective capacity is that hers retains an ability to account for the proliferation of neoliberal consensus in terms of the minimal friction it is able to sustain in relation to globalized capital. Even as it presides over the entombment of modern utopian imaginaries, neoliberalism continues to draw interest on resistance to deterritorialization.

In this light it would seem worthwhile to look more closely at how tonality contributes

to Heidegger's meditations on the historicity of thinking. For one, tone is easily misconstrued as the antithesis of content or meaning, as in the commonplace distinction between *what* one says and *how* one says it. According to that view, tone would be mere window dressing for the true concerns of thought, which reside in the domain of ideas. But as we know from experience, *how* a matter is voiced can be just as significant as the meaning of the words, if not more so. Tone is frequently the conduit through which circulates what has not been said, and tenor frequently indicates what is really at stake in a given statement or question. Heidegger's emphasis on tone marks a departure from the hermeneutic tradition for which words are like vessels containing meanings that await interpretation. Tone certainly calls for interpretation too, but not because its significance lies hidden beneath the surface. If thinking owes a debt to tone that it cannot easily repay—because mood is prior to all accounting and all representation—is this not because its sense is to be found in the air rather than in the surface/depth dichotomy to which the hermeneutic tradition is bound?

Attunement for Heidegger designates an opening or receptivity to the anteriority of a call: the call of being in which being is immanent to the call itself. Whereas idealist traditions understand consciousness as self-affective, attunement provides a way to think thought (and action) as deriving from a site that precedes the distinction between self-conscious subject and object. By the same token, whereas philosophy often categorizes thought as an abstract, spiritual domain, consideration of attunement supports attention to material and corporeal registers—the throat, larynx and ear— that as corporeal supplements are irreducible to the abstractions of thought. No doubt the focus on voice and hearing also reflects Heidegger's efforts to distance himself from the traditional privilege accorded to the visual in the

philosophical tradition, a privilege evident both in the etymological roots of the term *theory* and in the colloquial association of knowledge with sight.²³

The turn from *what* to *how*, from content to tone, risks reintroducing erroneous assumptions about the conceptual stability of mood and tone. Tone and mood are not homogeneous entities (*a* tone or mood: astonishment, anxiety, etc.). On the contrary, tone as such is irreducibly multiple. Its multiplicity is evident both in Heidegger's account, where epochal determination typically coincides with multiple *Bestimmungen*, and in the conceptual status of tone in music theory. Not unlike words in post-Saussurean linguistic theory, the sense of any given musical tone is determined not in a vacuum or in a one-to-one relation to an idea, image or meaning. Sense arises through the differential links that a particular intonation sustains with other, contiguous tones. As Peter Fenves (1993) observes, tone, which derives from the Greek *tonos* [chord], implies reverberation—for instance, the vibration of a string or a vocal cord, as well as indistinct noise or din (the Latin *don* and the German *Ton*). The phenomenon that is tone in fact destroys any possibility of a stable core of self-identity. Tone describes an occurrence that is always differing with respect to itself. In that light, no tone could remain in possession of its own sense. It first emerges phenomenally as *differing*, both within itself qua vibration and outside itself as variation on all other possible tones.

In the second part of this chapter I turn to Marcelo Cohen's 1989 novel *El oído absoluto*, using these considerations of mood, thinking and history to illuminate Cohen's reflections on the cultural, economic and political reorganization of Southern Cone societies in the time of post-dictatorship. Written during the author's extended exile in Barcelona (1975-96), the novel registers the exhaustion of a long history of utopian imaginaries in Latin America. The demise of

the utopian tradition was initiated with the interruption of revolutionary projects of the 1960s and 70s under military dictatorship, and was then hastened by new forms of technological and economic globalization in the 1980s and 90s that culminated in neoliberal Consensus. While Cohen's novel was published prior to the neoliberal reforms initiated under Menem it could be said to anticipate privatization in uncannily prescient fashion. Cohen's novel allegorizes this transformation by portraying the formal subsumption of the utopian horizon of modernity within a new social configuration defined by the *mediatization* of the real. The utopian emancipatory promise now appears as its simulacrum: a theme park in which the social order is constituted through mediatic representation. In portraying the dystopian side of this postmodern simulacrum, Cohen's novel also seeks to revitalize the prospects for narrative processes in a world where contestatory politics and struggle against liberal domination have been rendered anachronistic.

While Jameson's theorization of postmodernity offers a helpful point of departure for reading the novel, especially when it comes to questions about how memories and wounds play a role in the formation of post-dictatorship topographies marked by the formal subsumption of the real (nature and the unconscious) within the cultural logic of transnational capitalism, it may be that we reach the limit of Jameson's usefulness at those points where Cohen's novel attests to a certain unease that arises in view of the instability of modern institutions in the time of post-dictatorship. These institutions include the modern state as mediator between the national and the global, the public sphere as domain of collective decision-making and representation, and the national popular as political signifier of emancipation in Latin America. Cohen's novel, written in the years prior to neoliberal reform under Menem, provides an early

assessment of the profound transformation of Argentine society during post-dictatorship, anticipating how neoliberal privatization reforms will facilitate the retreat of the political and the creation of a technocratic order of administration. The void left in the wake of privatization is filled by a mediatic façade of neopopulism, which displays all the characteristic appearances of populism (the charismatic leader, the public spectacle, disdain for intellectual elites in favor of popular sentimentality, and so on) while divesting itself of any social and economic reformist intentions that might threaten neoliberal Consensus.

Before I turn to a detailed discussion of *El oído absoluto*, a brief excursus into Cohen's published reflections on questions having to do with scientific and philosophical approaches to the relation between cognition and what we call reality will help to set the stage for my reading of Cohen's novel. In a more recent collection of essays published under the title *¡Realmente fantástico!* (2003), Cohen develops a sustained consideration of the relation between literature and the unmediated real that can shed additional light on the concerns of this chapter. An interesting tension is woven into that discussion. On one hand Cohen asserts that the distinction between what we call reality and mind has never been less certain. He bases this claim not on the insights found in post-structuralist literary theory and psychoanalysis but on Erwin Schrödinger's contributions to quantum theory in physics (more on that shortly). On the other hand, our contemporary world presents new configurations of power and violence for which the conceptual framework of modern thought does not appear to be helpful in explaining. Thus the internal conflict within Cohen's 2003 essay anthology: one of the key discoveries in twentieth century thought has to do with the fact that traditional distinctions between thinking and being, intellect and world, have turned out to be less clear and stable

than previously understood, while our global situation today exposes a new reality for which old forms of thought lack sufficient explanatory power. Let us look first at a claim by Cohen that would call into question the old philosophical view of the separation between thought and being:

Recordemos un momento a Spinoza—dando un rodeo para evitar a Kant. El mundo se nos da todo de una vez, no uno existente y otro percibido. Es llamativo que muchos de los grandes físicos contemporáneos (Erwin Schrödinger entre otros) hayan insistido, bien en que la mente y la materia están hechas de los mismos elementos. Bien en que la sustancia última de todo lo que existe son elementos infinitivamente divisibles, al borde de lo insubstancial. (Cohen 2003, 134)

The second sentence is taken more or less verbatim from the third chapter of Schrödinger's 1958 book *Mind and Matter* (Schrödinger 1992), designed as a popular presentation of the intricacies of quantum mechanics, in which the physicist calls into question the subject/object distinction on which traditional theories of causality are based: "the world is given to me only once, not one existing and one perceived" (Schrödinger 1992, 126).²⁴ Ever since Plato the metaphysical tradition has conceived of the difference between thought and the external world as a distinction between representation and being. Our perceptions, intuitions and concepts may be near to or far from the truth, but they are never anything more than copies of an original that philosophy calls *being*. For Schrödinger, meanwhile, the distinction between thought and being is a product of the mind itself. To see why, let us recall that the concept of substance understood as *substans/substare* is analogous to the concept of subject

understood as *subyectum*, i.e., that which lies beneath appearances and logically precedes them as a cause precedes an effect. Since Aristotle *substance* has referred to the matter (*hyle*) that is presumed to exist prior to form. The Latin *substantia* (material, being, essence) in turn derives from *substans* and *substare* (to stand firm, to be under or to be present). Substance, in other words, belongs to a conceptual distinction between sensible form and the inert matter that receives this form. But if, as modern theoretical physics has proposed, what metaphysics calls substance should turn out to be composed of elements that occupy an intermediate state between the substantial and the insubstantial—such as the one-dimensional wiggly objects postulated by string theory as the basic building blocks of our universe—then not only must there be a point in the analysis of matter where the material/immaterial or matter/form dichotomy ceases to be valid, but the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible (or, more generally, the non-sensible) likewise becomes unstable. Thus Schrödinger's thesis leads unavoidably to the following paradox: on one hand, the philosophical theme of the originary separation of thinking from being is nothing more than an illusion perpetrated by thought; on the other hand, thinking must therefore possess a capacity for illusion and self-deception that is not present in what we call the world outside of thought.

While Schrödinger's phrase "the world is given to me only once" is meant to dispel the idea of two worlds—the real (unmediated) world and the (mediated) represented world of human perception and thought—Cohen's translation brings us close to the discussion of anxiety and *Stimmung* in the early Heidegger. Heidegger, as we recall from the beginning of this chapter, asserts that "a world never allows itself to be opened and then stuck back together beginning from a multitude of perceived objects reassembled after the fact; rather it is that

which in advance is most originally and inherently manifest.” World disclosure as Heidegger understands it is something that happens all at once and in the manner of a sudden realization that, among the totality of beings and objects at hand, *something more* was also already there shaping our perception and understanding of the totality.

Cohen’s turn to Schrödinger’s popularized account of modern theoretical physics serves rhetorically to bolster and depolemicize the view that traditional conceptual distinctions between intellectual and material processes, the ideal and the real, the internal and the external, and so on, are not as clear cut as they once seemed—and that it is not just the nihilistic purveyors of postmodernist relativism who are saying so. The counterintuitive ideas presented by Schrödinger still have the potential to raise the hackles of self-appointed defenders of reason today. Consider the following excerpt taken from an article on string theory from the Science section of the *New York Times* in 2003:

The suggestion that nature is ultimately composed of tiny strings has led to a revolution in our view of the universe. String theory has led theorists to the idea that space and time are illusions. Nature is like the three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional bank card, a hologram. Physicists hope that in the end string theory will help explain how this picture of multi-dimensional reality we call a universe is constructed. (Overbye 2004, np)

As Louis Menand wryly remarks—and as Jonathan Kandell’s obituary for Jacques Derrida, published in the same newspaper of record just a few months prior to the Overbye article, would seem to confirm—had this popularized discussion of the “illusory” nature of what we call time and space been written by a theoretical humanist instead of a science reporter

summarizing the current state of the field in theoretical physics, the *New York Times* would undoubtedly have had a field day in ridiculing the author, and would surely have capitalized on the opportunity to cast a new round of aspersions on the distressing state of affairs in Humanistic scholarship today (Menand 2005, 10).

In the same 2003 anthology Cohen also proposes that our contemporary world generates phenomena and tendencies for which the conceptual vocabulary and epistemological tools of modernity cannot easily account. While he does not go into detail, one could think of Carlo Galli's account of global war as marking a crisis for the political geometry of modernity or of Etienne Balibar's analysis of globalization as producer of newly differentiated spaces comprising "life zones"—where global capital creates new order and new opportunities for growth, prosperity—in contrast to "death zones," where disorder reigns, atrocities go unsanctioned, and the debilitating effects of inequality and precarity proliferate unchecked. Such divisions can be found between hemispheres or within specific countries or even cities. The "death zones" discussed by Balibar are not simply cut off from global capital. The conditions that prevail there are generated by global capital; capitalist production is not absent but rather transformed, in Balibar's words, into a production for the elimination of bare life (Balibar 2003, 128). One important question raised by Balibar in his discussion of "life zones" and "death zones" concerns the status of new forms of violence that are unleashed in the "death zones": what role, if any, does such violence play in the production and reproduction processes of globalization? Does destruction possess a "rational" or functional capacity vis-à-vis neoliberal administered accumulation? Or are the forms of violence found in the Rwandan genocide, Brazilian favelas, Argentine villas miserias and Ciudad Juárez to be understood simply

as “senseless” byproducts of the reconfiguration of global economies today?

The final, eponymous essay in Cohen’s *¡Realmente fantástico!* raises similar questions about globalization and violence, which in turn generates tension in contrast to his dismantling of the division between thought and being. The passage in question is worth citing at length:

Así es el hoy de buena parte del mundo: una excepcionalidad de la sinrazón, una forma describable pero indefinible: el fracaso de las categorías de la razón, los proyectos de dominio de lo real y las previsiones de las ideologías; la imaginación hecha tumor. Algo sólo accesible a la descripción paciente y detenida o del rodeo por la fantasía. Para siempre reacio a los esfuerzos del relato confiado en las tensiones dramáticas que se resuelven y los cabos atados, este salvajismo letal, suicida, y sin embargo vivo y autoorganizado, esta barbaridad inmanejable pero autogestionada como el cerebro de una especie nueva, desnuda de golpe las falsedades de las estéticas exotistas y el cuento maravilloso, del grotesco colorista, de la comedia negra de costumbres, y la inutilidad de las comprensibles poéticas de denuncia; pero también dice que la literatura prospectiva de nuestro siglo se ha vuelto inadecuada. Una vida sobrenatural para nosotros se gesta en esa vida que nos contiene. La forma que cobre en el futuro sólo podría vislumbrarse en escrituras turbulentas, de combinaciones arrítmicas y sosiegos amenazados. Invenciones humildes, que la habiten aceptando que a poco serán asimiladas y a la larga descartadas, cuando se alcance un nuevo equilibrio. Toda vida tiene la ocasión de procesar el mal con que ha nacido; pero librémonos de eslóganes como *El futuro está aquí* o *Esto es*

el futuro. El futuro empieza ahora, de nuevo, y es infinito. (Cohen 2003, 171)

“Una excepcionalidad de la sinrazón”: the state of exception, as Agamben and others have proclaimed, is rapidly becoming the norm in many parts of the world, generating a proliferation of seemingly irrational violence for which modernity’s juridical structures prove inadequate. By the same token, what Cohen calls “description” takes flight and leaves “definition”—or the conceptual work of the understanding and reason—behind. The problem is not simply that the violence of globalization is more extensive or extreme than violence associated with other epochs (though that may in fact be the case); nor is it simply that the (juridical, political, epistemological, artistic) resources available for mediation prove unable to “do justice” to these new forms of violence. Globalization and its attendant crises also attest to the exhaustion or failure of modern projects for dominating the real, foremost among which is the modern state form. The problem at issue here is at once social and political, epistemological and aesthetic. It cannot be one without being the others, because in the Kantian tradition the aesthetic experience (*description*) ought to lead eventually to a reaffirmation of sense (*definition*) and provide a bridge between the pure reason of conceptual thought and the practical reason of ethics and politics.

We thus encounter a seemingly unresolvable conflict here. On one hand, we are dealing with processes and phenomena of large-scale destruction (not only of traditional social forms but of entire populations that are reduced to the status of disposability) that can only strike the understanding as *una sinrazón*: as senseless, irrational and unjustifiable. On the other hand, Cohen tells us, this process shows clear signs of being self-organized and self-directed, like a pathological fantasy that has begun producing real effects in the world or like an alien organism

reproducing itself without limit in the world. The conflict is similar to the question raised by Balibar concerning the rationality or irrationality of globalization's worst forms of violence. Balibar offers a potential response to the question: violence is irrational in economic terms insofar as it destroys potential sources and producers of wealth; but it is rational (analyzable) when and where it constitutes a local response, albeit a pathological one, to the disorder produced by globalization, or where it provides new opportunities for development and accumulation, as in Naomi Klein's notion of disaster capitalism. Cohen's essay, meanwhile, leaves the contradiction intact, inviting the reader to take it up.

On what basis, then, does Cohen claim that traditional narrative forms are also unable to grasp what is at stake in the violence of globalization?²⁵ How is that the Boom novel, to take one example, generated narrative strategies capable of offering a response to the violence associated with the national state and its modernizing projects but which would be constitutively incapable of registering or diagnosing what is at stake in the violence of globalization or global war? In fact all language proves inadequate when it comes to capturing or conveying the kinds of limit experiences of which Borges (the joy and terror of unmediated relation to the universal in "El Aleph"), García Márquez (the massacre of striking banana workers and subsequent repression and forgetting of the event in *Cien años de soledad*) and Cohen himself write. Indeed, it is precisely the misfit between narrative and the real—and the uncanny return of the real within narrative processes—that becomes the primary object of literary reflection in Borges and the Boom novelists. Cohen is of course well aware of this point, and the distinction he is making should be understood in terms of an emerging epistemological and ethical dissymmetry between literature as institution and interregnum. Just as globalization

and global war name for Galli a break with the conceptual vocabulary of modernity and describe (*without defining*, in Cohen's terms) a new situation in relation to which our conceptual vocabulary is incapable of generating understanding or offering a solution (*dominio sobre lo real*), Cohen is proposing that modern conceptualizations of literature as a privileged vehicle for producing knowledge of the other as well as self-betterment are now incapable of accounting for the forms of violence and other "morbid symptoms" that manifest in our world today, in excess of the restraining capabilities of the modern state and its accompanying concept of sovereignty. In place of the privileged forms of literary modernity, Cohen suggests that the only literary approaches adequate to the task of engaging with the problem of interregnum are turbulent narrative discourses comprised of "arrhythmic combinations" and "threatened calm." The key point is that all narrative practices today must come to terms with their own mortality, their inevitable assimilation by the market and conversion into brand names. As Roberto Bolaño puts it in *Nocturno de Chile*, "la rutina matiza todo horror" (Bolaño 2000, 142).

While I do not wish to conflate what Cohen has to say about the crisis of sovereignty in his 2003 essay with a novel written more than a decade earlier, the seismic shifts experienced in the Southern Cone during the first years of post-dictatorship—of globalization mediated by rapid advancements in digital technology and a growing mass media industry, together with their clear impact on lived experience and the public sphere—were, as a 1993 essay by Beatriz Sarlo confirms, already producing the first disorienting effects of interregnum in the late 1980s. In that light, it may be possible to read *El oído absoluto* as generating what might be termed, following Enrico Mario Santí, a prophetic analysis of its world. In Cohen's novel it is the recourse

to science fiction that serves to diagnoses the invisible or subterranean historical forces that are in the process of reshaping sensibilities—or ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing— together with social relations. The 1989 novel detects what the 2003 essay anthology is now in a position to diagnose: the emergence of a world which the aesthetic and political conceptual vocabularies of modernity no longer possess the explanatory power they once wielded, and in which the organizing structures of modernity have been dismantled or weakened to such a degree that it is no longer easy to distinguish between order and disorder, between war and peace, between criminality and legality, between the smooth functioning of the system and dysfunction, and so on. With that in mind, let us turn now briefly to Sarlo's essay before moving on to *El oído absoluto*.

In her essay "Aesthetics and Post-politics: From Fujimori to the Gulf War" Sarlo discusses the growing sway of mass media throughout Latin America during the 1980s. She reads *El oído absoluto* as a prescient diagnosis of the ways in which mass media accelerates the transformation of the horizons for political activity in post-dictatorship societies. In particular she sees the rise to dominance of television over print media as facilitating the replacement, during the first decade of postdictatorship, of a political tradition grounded in the public sphere (debates, demonstrations, etc.) with a new order.²⁶ In this new order the public sphere has been reduced to a domain of simulacra dominated by sound bites delivered by charismatic neopopulist leaders like Menem and Fujimori, while substantive decisions are entrusted to technocratic specialists working behind the scenes. The Enlightenment idealization of the active citizen who participates in shared deliberations and decision making processes is thereby supplanted in mediatized society by the passive television spectator who participates only in a

simulacrum of politics that is indistinguishable from the entertainment industry and the logic of consumption in which one's decision-making horizon is reduced to a choice between TV channels or brands on the supermarket shelf.

At the same time Sarlo also takes issue with "anti-foundationalist" critical-theoretical traditions whose approaches she views as out of tune with the urgent concerns faced by many in Latin America today. What is needed, in Sarlo's view, is not more skeptical interrogation of first principles but instead a return to the kind of foundations provided by the humanistic tradition, which in her view provide the only sustainable buttress against the corrosive nihilism of the market. A return to humanistic values, perhaps most notably those of aesthetic experience, is the only hope for combating the frenetic replacement of signs with simulacra and the conversion of active citizens into passive consumers.

One potential problem with Sarlo's call for a return to the cultural and aesthetic values of the humanist tradition is that her position presupposes a clear and stable distinction between works that foster critical reflection versus works that are devoid of critical potential. Such normative distinctions, while problematic in and of themselves, can say nothing about a different prospect: that the difference itself between works possessing critical potential and those devoid of it may have been rendered inoperative by our current situation, in which culture has become the paradigmatic form of capitalist production. Assuming one could ever draw a meaningful and stable distinction between those works that possess a certain aesthetic quality and those that do not, it is difficult to see how such a distinction could address the fact that production in the time of late capitalism is now organized precisely around the kinds of critical tools whose development has been associated with aesthetic experience since Schiller.

The distinction between bad and good value, between valuation by the market and critical evaluation conducted by intellectuals and artists, is in the end a false choice. Whether it derives from aesthetic experience or critical thought, cultural value cannot provide an antidote to the forces of commodification because *as value forms* they share the same origin as the system they claim to be combating. Both are grounded in the predication of a subject that is understood as source and foundation for production and/or for judgment. Both, by the same token, remain deaf to whatever might escape the onto-theological determination of essence or being through the question *ti esti* ["What is it?"]. In making a determination about the essence of literature and critical thought as "value," Sarlo abandons any thought of a literary experience that does not originate in a reflective, productive subject.

Cohen's novel, by contrast, invites us to consider how values-thinking engages in a cover-up. The presupposition behind Sarlo's position—that the ability to distinguish between good and bad value forms is a necessary prerequisite for politics and civic life—effectively blocks any exploration into the possibility that both literature and ethical and political life may in fact take place in the absence of any first principle or *arkhé*, or in other words that the absence of *arkhé* might indeed constitute a condition of possibility for political action, ethical responsibility and aesthetic experience. In *El oído absoluto* it is the experience of unease alluded to above, together with the trope of falling—with the accompanying implication of a ground fraught with fissures—that indicate where Cohen's text would part ways with Sarlo's culturalism. Mood and the figure of the misstep—the trope of tripping—together open up a space for an *other thinking* that would interrogate the limits of the two dominant forms of thought today: the representative logic of the state and the equivalential logic of market. This

other thinking would begin with the recognition that both of these logics are governed by a nihilistic core that they seek to evade through appeals to value. Unlike Sarlo, this other thinking would not go so far as to define itself as the overcoming of nihilism. Not only would that be asking too much of thought today, it may well provide a formula for nihilism's further entrenchment—if one accepts the Heideggerian premise that the modern subject in all of its manifestations belongs entirely to the phenomenon that Nietzsche calls European nihilism and therefore that the subject can offer no traction against nihilism's advance. What this other thinking could offer, it seems, would be a new way of looking at the question of ground today. Whereas the philosophical tradition has always held to the necessity of a ground for thinking and acting in the world (and Sarlo's return to aesthetic value is one manifestation of that view), Cohen's novel proposes a thought of being in juxtaposition to the nothing. The nothing, which is not synonymous with nihilism, would comprise the other side of being, which is to say that being is already there in the abyssal non-ground of the nothing. In what follows I further develop this rough outline through a reading of the novel.

The setting of *El oído absoluto* is Lorelei, a fictive city with a literary name situated somewhere in Latin America.²⁷ Cohen's portrait of the city of Lorelei resonates with a long history of utopian thinking about modernization in Latin America. Lorelei was founded by a charismatic Costa Rican crooner named Fulvio Silvio Campomanes, whom the narrator refers to as "nuestro Moises tecnológico."²⁸ True to the utopian tradition, Lorelei's exact location is a closely guarded secret. In a world beset by a plague of insecurity brought about by inequality, bellicose conflict and natural disasters, Lorelei offers the promise of an earthly paradise in which violence, domination and suffering have been eliminated and replaced by harmony and

happiness. For most of the world Lorelei is an idealized destination to which every citizen enjoys the right to visit once in his or her life. For a small minority, however, it serves as a reeducation center for disciplining non-conformists who have been classified under the sinister heading of *indefinición social*. It is their histories of antisocial behavior that have brought the novel's protagonists, Lino and Clarisa, along with their circle of friends to Lorelei, based on pasts that are never fully explained but alluded to through occasional references to mood disorders, drug use, sexual promiscuity, and political dissidence.

Over the course of the novel Lorelei takes shape as a place devoid of history, in which nature has been transformed into a totality of commodities. It is a post-historical world that has been technologically produced in its entirety and where nearly all aspects of life are administered biopolitically by the city council: from the periodic autobiographical reports required of its inhabitants to the popular bracelets that detect and announce the wearer's mood so as to moderate non-productive affective states. By the same token Lorelei provides a setting for a time dominated by the image. While Campomanes's neopopulist kitsch embodies one aspect of this regime of the image, the city's mediatic self-presentation displays another important feature. Through the resources of an always active media machine, Lorelei projects itself—to the world, no doubt, but just as importantly to itself and its residents—as an idyllic island surrounded by a world eternally at war with itself. It presents itself as a post-political space that enjoys immunity from the all-too-apparent politics of the surrounding world, whose invasions, civil wars and natural disasters are reported endlessly by the Lorelei media networks. A giant laser apparatus, the *Columna Fraternal*, remains busy reinscribing the firmament (once seen as register of the transcendent or permanent beyond) with an endless stream of news

stories that serve to juxtapose the harmonic order of the city in contrast to the disorder and antagonism that reign outside Lorelei. This late modern utopian self-projection is a continuation of the Hegelian philosophy of history, for which development [*Entwicklung*] comprises the teleological structure of all history from the infancy of the human race to the emergence of the modern State as testament and tutor of the modern subject in its emergent self-consciousness. In Lorelei this Hegelian narrative appears to reach its completion in a contemporary image that might be found in Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*: utopia signifies the horizontal structure of a world beyond ideological conflict that has freed itself from a long history of flawed mediations by the state into the affairs of individuals. Lorelei as utopia rests on the liberal association of freedom with the absence of interference. By the same token, it is the promise of the market as putting an end to the long history of dependency and underdevelopment that has plagued Latin America since colonial times.

The media stream produced by the *Columna fraterna* is a simulated production process that serves to instill in the residents of Lorelei a sense of being fully contemporary with the surrounding world, as well as being up to date on the ever-efficient administration of the city, while also safe from the unending wars that rage outside the city walls. The mediatic production of space in Lorelei takes on a Hobbesian tenor: the outside is seen by the inside as a savage domain troubled by natural disasters, war and insecurity, which in turn sustains a competing but complementary image of the inside as proper, secure space that is at one with itself. The unchanging climate of Lorelei is dedicated to the ceaseless reproduction of sameness, of technologically administered self-certainty and order as the self-evident ends of all human activity. At the same time, this mediatic inscription process obscures from view the

fact that, in a world that has been entirely produced, the outside is no longer conceivable as anything but the specular reflection of the inside. Politics has not vanished from Lorelei, however; it has simply been reformulated as a biopolitical program for which life stories, moods and states of mind have become new terrain for the expansion of power. The end of history in Cohen's novel thus comes into view as a theme park populated by simulacra and administered biopolitically through the standardization of social conduct, desires and drives.

Meanwhile the sinister side of utopia, or the revelation of utopia as dystopia, is displayed in more ways than one and through a range of intonations. For one, it is disclosed in the relentless production of images, both in the unending stream of "breaking news" inscribed by the Columna fraternal and in Campomanes's saccharine, crooner-like renditions of charismatic populism. The sinister is also manifest in the suppression of any activity perceived as a threat to the vast mirror of harmony and consensus that prevails in Lorelei. While the mediatic apparatus ensures that the (external) threat of disorder is never far from the minds of Lorelei's guests and inhabitants, it is the prospect of the internal enemy that sets the city council and its repressive apparatuses in motion. An element of soft discipline is illustrated in the *pulseras anticóleras* [literally, "anti-anger bracelets"]: trendy, mass-marketed bracelets that train their wearers to block out undesirable moods by emitting an unpleasant, high-pitched whine whenever a certain level of agitation is surpassed. Later in the novel we find the return of the repressive state apparatus following Campomanes's unexplained disappearance and amidst rumors of a conspiracy by his assistants; in the process it becomes increasingly difficult to discern what is real and what imaginary or the product of paranoia. But in Lorelei the mere fact that one is paranoid does not necessarily mean they aren't out to get one.²⁹ Harder forms

of discipline and repression are displayed in the relentless surveillance to which Lorelei's involuntary residents are subjected and in the "Dirty War" style repressive tactics that ensue following the assassination of Campomanes and the state of emergency decree issued by the junta that replaces him. The blurring of boundaries between reason and paranoia, truth and illusion is amplified by the occasional irruption of the old "lexicon of terror" in otherwise innocuous contexts.³⁰ For example, the phrase "darse máquina" (Cohen 1989, 50), formerly a metonym for torture, is used in Cohen's novel to convey something far more banal, synonymous with "to worry." The association of certain moods that according to social norms ought to be repressed (anxiety, etc.) with torture is neither purely allegorical—negative affect or its suppression is not being compared to torture—but nor is it simply arbitrary. What this recycling of the trope illuminates is not historical continuity but displacement: the context of the 1970s, of political radicalism and the repressive state, is substituted by the private concern of mood swings in a time when the available spaces for contestatory politics have all but vanished.

Alongside this parody of celebratory accounts of free market capitalism, Cohen's novel offers a deeper insight into Latin American modernity. As I indicated earlier, a critical vantage point concerning the history of development is brought into focus through an interruption of the traditional association of allegory with the nation and its history. In the old schema the life stories and interactions between individual characters served as mirrors for the nation and its histories. The private was publicized, as Jameson puts it (Jameson 1986, 69), in the sense that there could be no literary exploration of inner life that was not already mediated by the history of social conflict and of political attempts to organize those relations in colonial and

postcolonial contexts. Jameson's claim has the Latin American novel grounded in the structure of allegorical reference up until and including the "Boom" novel, in which the past is defined as national history and the future is mediated by the nation qua promissory structure. Past and future, as seen through the nation, provide explanatory points of reference and temporalizing images for narrative processes, no matter how personal they may have seemed. For *El oído absoluto* the allegorical frame of reference may still be there, but whereas allegory formerly provided a temporalizing image that would unify past, present and future under a single sign, in Cohen's novel allegory opens onto a void of signification. Although the lived experience of the personal and private domains are still mediated by power relations, any attempt to read the novel as allegory must confront the fact that what used to be called the public has now been subsumed within the logic of commodity production and consumption, while the personal registers—moods, affect, "mental health"—have become a primary interface for the expansion and intensification of biopolitical power and its hold on life.

The first part of *El oído absoluto* offers glimpses into the daily routines of Lino and Clarisa—both of whom have been sent to Lorelei as involuntary participants in its "reeducation" program—interspersed with commentaries on their feelings of unease vis-à-vis the governing apparatus of Lorelei. The story is narrated by Lino, and *El oído absoluto* may well represent the novel he claims to be in the process of writing. The lives of these two protagonists are complicated by the unexpected arrival of Clarisa's idiosyncratic father, Lotario, from whom she has been estranged ever since he left her mother when Clarisa was a child. A major portion of the novel is devoted to Lotario's recollections as he divulges key aspects of his past, including his escape from Eastern Europe as a young man just before the start of WWII (the remainder of

his family would die in Nazi concentration camps) and his passionate youthful affair with a stage actress, Eugenia, while living as a refugee in Portugal during the early years of the war, up until he emigrated to Argentina. When the young Lotario (who then went by the name León) finally succeeded in procuring two much-sought safe passages out of WWII Europe, Eugenia surprisingly declined his invitation to join him. After he had established himself in Argentina, married and had a child (Clarisa), Lotario learned belatedly from a mutual friend that Eugenia had committed suicide shortly after the end of the war. Some two decades later, meanwhile, the tranquility of Lotario's family was interrupted by the appearance of a ghost: one day a woman arrived claiming to be Eugenia; not only did she bear a striking physical resemblance to his old lover, she was also familiar with details of his past that he had only revealed to her. The "ghost" turns out to be Eugenia's sister, Margarita, in whom Eugenia had confided everything having to do with León, and who in the process found *herself* falling in love with a man she only knew through her sister's recounting of the stories told to her by León.³¹

Lotario's autobiographical narrative offers an array of important considerations for Cohen's literary concerns. One has to do with memory as both ground and supplementary limit for subjectivity. Lotario/León's recollections of his own history are supplemented by Eugenia in at least two ways. During their time together, Eugenia's presence stimulates León to remember and share aspects of his past in Eastern Europe before the war. In the wake of those conversations Eugenia begins to serve as a kind of prosthetic memory for León, an archive of recollections from his past that he himself represses just as quickly as he recounts them to her.³² She becomes both his memory archive and the symbolic guardian of all that he had lost through displacement, destruction, genocide and forgetting.

Other important thematic connections that emerge from Lotario's narrative include: love, betrayal, and deception ("Toda traición es un a priori," writes Lino, "un suplemento al hecho de nacer y al ámbito del destino" [285]); the uncertain relation between perception and the real (in her farewell letter to León, Eugenia asserted that "percibir un objeto cuesta la exacta pérdida del objeto" [206])³³; and acting as mode of truth disclosure ("Eugenia hacía todos los papeles, a los murmullos de la madrugada se los tragaba el calor y en la ventana se dibujaba el escenario que ella había elegido...Pero ojo, no estoy diciendo que yo me lo imaginara, al escenario. Digo que aparecía ahí...Tangible, ¿eh?" [193]; "lo que me permitía ver las historias en la ventana era el amor y no la persuasión de la actriz" [194]; "una muchacha que dibujaba el mundo en una ventana" [218]). After recounting how he momentarily fell for Margarita's ruse, Lotario follows with an assertion posing the question of whether her action should be understood as *deception* or *apparition*: "para que un fantasma existe basta que alguien lo vea y sea capaz de describirlo, de compararlo con otra cosa, de darle una...configuración" (218).

Interspersed with Lotario's recollections we read of an emerging drama in Lorelei concerning the unexplained disappearance of Campomanes, the city's ever-visible and ebullient neo-populist leader. When he uncharacteristically fails to make a single public appearance over the course of several days, rumors begin to circulate that he is suffering from an illness or has succumbed to some unknown cause. Finally it is revealed that he has been assassinated by his own council, whose members then come together to constitute the ruling junta of a new dictatorship. The final part of the novel is set in the time of another declared state of exception.³⁴ In the midst of this uncertainty, Lotario leaves town in the middle of the night

without so much as an explanation. By all appearances his departure repeats his earlier flight from and abandonment of Clarisa.

Cohen's literary treatment of the utopian tradition comprises a parody of triumphalist accounts of free-market capitalism and neoliberal reform as antidotes to Latin America's long history of inequality, political violence and tyranny. Neoliberal utopia, Cohen's novel suggests, is at best a world that has been entirely produced and more probably the promotion of new, potentially more insidious forms of domination. Within this parody the novel also registers the retreat of the utopian imaginary from the landscape of post-dictatorship Latin America. The traces of this withdrawal are embodied in Lino and Clarisa's friend Tristán, whose involuntary stay in Lorelei is attributed to his former political activity and who, following the declared state of emergency, seeks—albeit unsuccessfully—to foment an uprising among the city's underclass of *socialmente indefinidos*.

In *Postmodernism* Jameson describes the present conjuncture of globalization and post-industrial or cultural capitalism as a time in which our attunement to history is replaced by a certain tonelessness. The historical specificity of the present is defined by an inability to experience its own rootedness in history. We have lost the ability to conceive of history as a contingent process open to transformation, and we have come to experience history not as process without subject (Althusser) but as a set of teleologically programmed developmental stages that culminates in the neoliberal present. By the same token we have lost sight of the reciprocal relation implicating praxis with history. History does not “just happen”; it is the consequence of human practices. As individuals, however, we are not free to choose among an unlimited range of historical projects, because we are shaped a priori—in what we can do, think

and imagine—by the moment into which we are born. Cohen’s novel provides a register of the history of the present (mapping how the experiences of dictatorship shape and continue to resonate in the transformation to neoliberal democracy) while also attempting to think what a revitalized relation to history might look like—or sound like. This literary reactivation of our attunement to history does not place the novel fully within the utopian tradition, but it does give evidence of a literary desire not to be for the present. Cohen’s narrative seeks a step back that would situate its own meter out of sync with the tempo according to which neoliberal Consensus and late capitalist production reinforce one another. Critical focus on historicity and mood or attunement in the novel must therefore be augmented by attention to the trope of falling out of step with the prevailing cadence of our time.

While critical commentaries by Sarlo and others have noted that Cohen’s novel adopts a critical view toward the cultural logic of postmodernity—the proliferation of consumer society, the role of mass media in desensitizing and anaesthetizing its public through overexposure, the rise of neopopulism as simulation of politics—criticism of *El oído absoluto* has yet to deal sufficiently with the fact that the novel is not satisfied with a standard critique of globalization either. The text more or less explicitly rejects a Sarloian project of rescuing modern conceptualizations of art and literature in order to use those traditions as a buttress against the deterritorializing forces of postmodernity. That culturalist dream came and went with Lotario.

THE MOODS OF HISTORY

Cohen’s novel can be read as a collection of anecdotes, images and aphorisms providing points of departure for reflecting on various features of post-dictatorship society. Take, for

example, the dazzling theory of music proposed by Clarisa's father. Lotario, who is something of an autodidact, asserts that music embodies a kind of prosthetic memory in which we find "*la presencia de lo perdido*" (292). For Lotario music provides a substitute for Eugenia, who herself embodied an external memory archive of his familial past and of the losses and displacements that both inform and disrupt his past. Why music? Unlike other arts, its medium is not a substance (metal, stone, paint and canvas, paper, etc.) but the invisible, impalpable play between sound and silence, vacillation and stillness, emergence and retreat. Unlike non-performative arts, the occurrence of music coincides with its fading away; at the moment we first become aware of it, the musical event is already receding into oblivion. It is precisely in light of its ephemerality, ironically, that Lotario can assert that music sustains a quasi-atemporal existence in the minds of the aficionado. Music's freedom from substance places it in the privileged position of being the mode of artistic production in which absence as such can become "present."

These ideas are explored in greater depth through Lotario's musings about the acoustic dynamics of music, and about what in fact constitutes musicality in a particular arrangement of sound images. A distinguishing feature of modern Western music is the presence of chords, which Lotario likens to moods. A chord [*acorde*] is an aesthetic agreement [*acorde*] comprising three or more distinct notes heard simultaneously as if they were components of a single, complex intonation. A succession of chords, to the extent that the ear finds the series to be harmonious, generates what he calls an accord [*acorde*]: a musically harmonious totality that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Creo que todos tenemos algo de la materia de la música. [...] El temperamento

mismo está hecho de acordes. Cada acorde es un estado de ánimo, y uno unido a otro...forman el carácter de una persona.... Pero un acorde...es un conjunto armónico de notas. Do menor es do más mi bemol más sol, y por eso no puede definirse con un solo adjetivo. Y a mí me parece que con los sentimientos pasa lo mismo. (134)

Each chord, again, represents the conjuncture of a multiplicity of singular notes that are articulated simultaneously and harmoniously. While the ear hears the chord as a single intonation each chord in fact contains a multiplicity of notes. The contribution that each note makes to intonation is determined differentially, not unlike the value of the signifier in Saussure's structural linguistics. The sense of a given note—*re*, for instance—is established by the invisible and inaudible differences that locate it within a larger scale—in this example, between *do* and *mi*—while also distinguishing it from all other notes. The event that Lotario calls harmony cannot, then, be accounted for by any individual note nor can it be explained by a conjuncture of notes. The agreement or accord derives also from the inaudible differences, the gaps and silences that define the sense of each note without ever themselves becoming present or audible.

“Realismo es que una obra...cambie con cada grupo que la interpreta, con cada persona que le escucha. Para mí es larga, para Fulano corta, para un violinista acelerada, otro la ralentiza...Siempre es la misma pieza, y siempre distinta...Y también mi vida es distinta ahora que ayer, aunque sea la misma vida (229).” Surprisingly Lotario asserts that music constitutes the only true realism. How so? Clearly he is not claiming that music is more adept than other forms of art at imitating or producing resemblances with the world outside of music. To be

sure, music imitates nothing. Perhaps Lotario's judgment of music as the true realism derives from the idea that music has to do with presentation in its purest sense: presentation of the possibility of presentation itself.³⁵ By the same token music provides a template for thinking the common origin of the sensible and the intelligible, being and thought. Any given performance of a musical piece will by definition differ from all other interpretations of the "same" work; to perform a piece, in contrast to a mere recital, is to interpret it. Moreover, the singular nature of musical performance attests to what we might call a tragic character of its presentation: while every musical act bears the stamp of uniqueness and wants to be heard *as if for the first time*—i.e., there is no "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony" as such, there are only the myriad of interpretations—the price any sound must pay for becoming audible is that it must resign itself to the loss of all singularity, and for several reasons: through the possibility of its technological duplication; through the acoustic law of its immediate dissipation; and because, in making itself recognizable to a listener as music it must adopt the established conventions of a given tradition (even if it also alters those conventions). The singular nature of musical performance is subject to something akin to what Jacques Derrida calls the law of iterability that inscribes repeatability at the origin (Derrida 1988). No event and no singularity without the possibility of being repeated and hence without the possibility of the death of the singular through duplication and routinization. In order to win the chance of a good hearing music must suspend all guarantees of fidelity to an original intention and deliver itself over not only to the possibility of repetition but also to the ear of the other—which just happens to be structured like an echo chamber. What Lotario calls realism is not about imitation or representation but about presentation understood as giving sensible form to the structuring and organization of

experience.

As we might surmise from the title of the novel, the physiology of the ear plays a central role in the aesthetic theory described by Lotario. In Spanish *el oído* refers to the inner ear—and, by extension, to musical sensibility—in contrast to *la oreja* as outer ear or auricle. Nonetheless the questions of hearing and attunement that are interwoven throughout Lotario's long discourse on music clearly resonate with the anatomical structure of both inner ear and auricle. And what is an ear? For one, its structure provides both a conduit and a boundary between inside and outside, amplifying faint sounds while protecting the delicate, sensitive interior structure from sensory extremes. The physiological structure of the ear, with its helixes, folds, canals, anvil and tympanum, comprises an intermediate zone where outside and inside cannot be rigorously distinguished. If the eyes have been construed as the organ of domination through which intelligence masters the sensible, the ear—the only sensory organ that cannot fully close itself off—is a site where perception remains exposed to the world and to the other. The eponymous “absolute ear” (also known as perfect or absolute pitch in English) names an innate ability to detect the exact tone or key of a given sound. In Heideggerian terms an *oído absoluto* would name an immediate attunement to the voice of being.

In describing his musical affinities Lotario confesses that he always wanted not just to possess such an inner ear but to *be* this “germen de la afinación universal” [germ of universal tuning or completion]. His wish coincides with a certain understanding of art that prevails throughout modernity. Lotario embodies an aesthetic imaginary for which art would fill in the gaps and heal the fissures that arise in our interactions with the real. Art apotropically incorporates the terrifying void into its own mechanics—not unlike the physiological structure

of the ear—and it thereby provides a saving passage to solid ground. Aesthetic experience, as Lotario theorizes it, provides a space in which the rifts and wounds that accompany the organization of social life can be sutured and healed through symbolic production and aesthetic experience.

In thematizing this aesthetic ideology through Lotario's discourse the novel also invites us to consider where such a foundation begins to display fissures today. The problem with Lotario's take on music is not that its viewpoint is logically inconsistent or that it engages in self-deception. A highly sophisticated aesthetic ideology, it is keenly aware that what it refers to as the completion of a system (*afinación*) is still inhabited by gaps, silences and excesses. It may be that the distance Cohen's novel puts between itself and the aesthetic ideology it paraphrases through Lotario can be located in the distinction between how each discourse (Lotario's music theory and the novel itself) understands its respective relation to its own limits. The aesthetic theory outlined by Lotario claims to interpret and regulate its gaps and surpluses through its own devices. Lotario understands silence and forgetting as integral moments in the production of rhythm and aesthetic harmony; harmony thereby names the system's capacity to recover those gaps and excesses and to put them to work. His theory of music thus constitutes a total system from which nothing could escape.

In counterpoint to Lotario's account of aesthetic modernity Cohen's novel advances a thought of writing as anti-foundational and anti-systemic practice. The proper task of writing, according to Lino—the ostensible author of the story we are reading—consists in seeking out disparate moments, moods and insights that precisely *do not fit* into the systematic production of harmonious totalities. The point is not to integrate those gaps and excesses into a system but

rather to allow them to occasion an irruption that would disrupt the rhythms through which accumulation and power legitimate themselves in our world. These instances of excess, misfit and disjuncture would thereby momentarily arrest or derail the self-production of such systems. As Lino puts it, “hay momentos, si uno los descubre, que son extraordinarias averías en la red eléctrica que nos alimenta, y en el desconcierto que acúan se puede atisbar la anticuada audacia del vértigo” (11). The difference between the two aesthetic attitudes I am describing—those associated with Lotario and Lino respectively—can be found in a shift in tonality, in which *afinación* as “completion” gives way to *afinación* as the “attunement” conferred by *desconcierto* [disconcertedness, uncertainty].

The important distinction here is not between tonalities but between different understandings of tone as such. The nominal *desconcierto* evokes disorder, confusion, discord, agitation—all of which could well be symptoms of the times in which Lino is living, indicative of the feeling that things are going badly with the world today but without necessarily knowing why or how one would begin to set things right. In *desconcierto* we can also hear the transitive verb *desconcertar* (to upset, to bewilder, to disconcert) and the reflexive verb *desconcertarse* (to dislocate; to suffer a breakdown, as in a mechanism that no longer functions), which might contain one of the names for the task of disruption that counter-foundational literature sets for itself. In the same vein, by breaking the term *desconcierto* down it may be that we find a response to the aesthetic ideology to which Lotario gives voice: *des-concierto* as the antifoundational reply to the *gran concierto* of Lotario’s dream of a total aesthetic system.

The “averías” passage cited above echoes a description found on the preceding page of a misstep and fall suffered by Lino as he is crossing a field with Clarisa:

Entre los mensajes en el cielo y esa música agravante el tiempo se acalabró, agobiado por las perversas simetrías de Lorelei. Yo sentí tal furia que en una decisión impensada pero justa me caí de bruces. Al levantarme estaba encastrado y Clarisa me llevaba cincuenta metros de ventaja; pero mientras echaba a correr pasó algo y supe que ciertas caídas, mejor las más torpes, son sutiles anuncios de regeneración. (10)

Taken from the first pages of the novel, these two scenes set the stage for a literary response to the prevailing rhythm and temporality of life in Lorelei and, by extension, in post-dictatorship Argentina. The possibility of uncovering an alternative to the prevailing social rationality of post-dictatorship resides in a pair of tropes designating something that finds itself out of step with a prevailing rhythm or flow: *avería* [breakdown or short circuit] and *caída* [fall; *caerse de bruces*: to fall flat on one's face]. There is a critical temptation to conclude that this tropology of interruption and misstep can be deployed directly against the logic informing the organization of social relations and the appropriation and administration of time and labor under neoliberalism. Such a conclusion would reconfirm a modern understanding of literature and its capacity to intervene in the social: to affect social consciousness, and hence the possibility of politics, through aesthetic experience. Cohen's novel would thereby provide a template for literary neo-avant garde responses to consumerism, mass media, privatization, the state of exception, and so on. But it seems to me that such a critical extension of credit would ultimately prove difficult to sustain as a reading of this novel, both because it would require us to forget what the text is also telling us about the aesthetic ideology that prevailed from Schiller to the Boom—which has now been fully absorbed within the logic of late capitalism—as well as

for reasons that could just as easily be derived from intuition as from empirical analysis: today there is no longer any good reason to suspect that interruption—of daily patterns, rhythms or sensibilities, for example—should by itself be capable of posing a challenge to global capital or to the neoliberal state and its repressive apparatus.

A more promising approach can be found, I propose, by turning once again to Heidegger's thinking about *Stimmung* and *Bestimmung*. I want to argue that the tropology of the breakdown and the false step in Cohen's novel present alternative possibilities in the interaction between thinking and its attunement to what Heidegger calls "the voice of being" [*die Stimme des Seins*] (Heidegger 1958, 89). Attunement for Heidegger names a radical anteriority that denies reason the possibility that it could constitute its own ground as the rationalist tradition would have it. Reason cannot constitute its own ground because any thinking worthy of the name—that is, any thinking that does more than simply apply logical rules in automatic fashion; or again, any thinking that asks about the nature of what *is*—is by definition already a response to something that precedes it, albeit without making itself known as this or that being. This something is not a thing or an essence but a call whose origin remains shrouded in darkness. Thinking, for Heidegger, is called forth as a response to and engagement with the enigmatic existence of a world. It is something like the structure of this relation between thinking and radical anteriority, which precedes any ontology, that is alluded to in the double trope of the misstep and the fall—in which Lino finds himself suddenly devoid of ground, having lost his footing on what previously seemed to be solid ground.

The motifs of interruption and loss of ground in *El oído absoluto* thus point to the relation between literature and thinking, and not literature and a social or political referent.

Not only do technics and capital jointly preside over the disenchantment of our modern world, they also unleash a powerful operation of reinscription that obscures and naturalizes the traces of their own machinations in the world. As Michel Haar puts it, the time of unrestrained technics marks the accomplishment of “the most radical and most ancient metaphysical project, namely disclosing an immutable presence lacking nothing and revealing the first and ultimate causes” (Haar 1993, 1). Disenchantment is always already re-enchantment through the projection of a self-evident certainty that goes without saying. Anti-foundational writing in *El oído absoluto* aims to expose the gaps covered over by this projected semblance of a harmonious whole that has rid itself of fissures, conflict and dissensus. The aim of such a literary project is not political in any ordinary sense of the term; rather, it is to initiate a *pause* and a *step back* that might in turn give rise to a new way of thinking. This anti-foundational writing would seek to renew the possibility of experiencing the world in its enigmatic emergence—an experience that remains incompatible with the technical and capitalist projection of a world in which nothing and no one would be excluded.

Some clarification is called for here about the status of “tone” in what I am describing as anti-foundational writing. First, tone can never be reduced to a symptom or reflection of the times in which we live. As noted earlier, tonality orients thinking and places it in a position to be able to ask fundamental questions; in this respect tone names the sense of thinking itself. The tonality of thought or writing is not a formal packaging of ideas; it is thought in its inseparability from sense. Second, the disjunctive moments I am discussing cannot be produced and orchestrated in a calculating manner by an author or a reader. Beyond all calculation, these moments of interruption or missteps take place—if and when they happen—through dynamic

processes of relation, exchange and movement. To speak of anti-foundational writing is potentially misleading, then, since the term risks creating a rigid conceptual opposition based on authorial agency, opposing the intentions of writers like Cohen to those of other writers. This is far from what I have in mind. My purpose is to describe a shift in literary experience stemming from a profound and sweeping reorganization of the coordinates for thinking and acting in the world today, a shift that compels us to call into question the very stability of the disciplinary object known as “literature.” Such transformations cannot be understood as the projected accomplishment of a specific writer or work.

As I hinted at in the earlier discussion of mood, and especially the peculiar late modern “distress of the absence of distress,” *El oído absoluto* attests to an experience of radical desublimation in the time of postdictatorship. Old libidinal investments and shared dreams—revolution, social justice, and emancipation of the national popular, for instance—have been cut short by dictatorship and disarticulated through the social, economic and political reconfiguration of Southern Cone societies to meet the demands of global capital. Within the order of post-dictatorship the only sites readily available for new libidinal investment and sublimation appear to be simulacra, devoid of any contestatory political potential and which serve only to bolster neoliberal ideology through the image of a world from which nothing is absent. Tristán’s failed attempt at initiating popular insurrection following the assassination of the charismatic leader seems consistent with the diagnosis of a general desublimation of life in the time of postdictatorship, while Campomanes’s charismatic neopopulism illustrates how desublimation is in turn repackaged as charismatic neopopulism devoid of any political content.

No reading of Cohen’s novel can avoid grappling with the questions of love and the

lovers, which includes Lino and Clarisa as well as the doublings found in the León/Lotario and Eugenia/Margarita pairs. In view of the prevailing desublimation I have been describing, what can be said of love in *El oído absoluto*? Does love survive the desublimating effects of the transitional stigmatization of radical politics and neoliberalism's "quotidian nihilism"? Does it continue to provide the basis for any thought of community? Does it still name the *being* of community as asserted by both the Judeo-Christian ("God is love") and the Latin American Marxian militant traditions? Let us consider for a moment Che Guevara's quasi-messianic portrait of the "new man" that would emerge from the experience of the Cuban revolution as its vanguard subject in his essay on "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba":

Déjeme decirle, a riesgo de parecer ridículo, que el revolucionario verdadero está guiado por grandes sentimientos de amor. Es imposible pensar en un revolucionario auténtico sin esta cualidad. Quizás sea uno de los grandes dramas del dirigente; éste debe unir a un espíritu apasionado una mente fría y tomar decisiones dolorosas sin que se contraiga un músculo. Nuestros revolucionarios de vanguardia tienen que idealizar ese amor a los pueblos, a las causas más sagradas y hacerlo único, indivisible. No pueden descender con su pequeña dosis de cariño cotidiano hacia los lugares donde el hombre común lo ejercita."

(Guevara 2003, 15)

In Guevara's theorization of militant subjectivity love forms the nexus for a series of contradictions.³⁶ Militant subjectivity must know both how to incorporate and find a balance between passionate feeling and cold, detached calculation, both of which have their place and time for militancy. The militant must be capable of idealizing those in whose name it is selflessly

prepared to give its own life, regardless of how abject and dismal their conditions may be. Although it knows itself to occupy the forefront, the position of consciousness of objective conditions, in the struggle against imperialism the militant subject cannot allow its heart to feel that any kind of hierarchy separates the vanguard and the people. Love for the people cannot be dispensed like medicine, a little at a time and only when needed; it must become second nature and flow abundantly beyond the measures of calculative reason. But while absolute love must be the guiding principle of militant subjectivity, this subject must also be prepared to annihilate life in order to accomplish the objective goals of the revolutionary struggle. While love in “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba” is the site where such internal contradictions take shape, the theory of militancy also turns to the vital, unifying force of love in order to disarm these contradictions and reconcile the antagonistic forces at work in them. Love, for Guevara’s theory of militancy, is the promise of reconciliation between passionate spontaneity and detached calculation, amity and enmity, creation and destruction, life and death. And it is in this sense that love constitutes the originary condition of possibility for community for the Latin American militant left.

Can the lovers and love still provide the principle for community in the time of post-dictatorship? Or does Cohen’s novel indicate that the lovers embody features and tendencies that are irreducible to, if not indeed irreconcilable with, the communitarian imaginaries that were disrupted in the decades prior to the writing of *El oído absoluto*? Guevara’s account notwithstanding, wouldn’t love in fact be too rebellious, too fugitive and therefore inassimilable to the disciplinary demands of militant subjectivity or any community conceived in the light of plenitude, wholeness and communion?

The case of Lotario/León helps to illustrate the ambiguities concerning love as a name—perhaps *the* name—for being together or shared existence. As we have already seen, the relation between León and Eugenia takes the form of a radical supplementation prior to any subject. In their example the subject qua unity of self-presence is deferred and differed, its ideal identity ruined by the fact that the very process that ought to symbolize its unity—the reflection on and recounting of one’s past to the other, who in turn recognizes the identity of the “I” who speaks and the “I” who is spoken through remembrance—in fact coincides with the forgetting or expulsion of memory into a prosthetic structure. It is Eugenia’s *hearing*—and, as we learn later, her subsequent *repeating*—that sustains the possibility of subjectivity for León, and it is her “betrayals” that in turn mark its necessary limit.

But would this repetition—and Lotario points out that Eugenia did in fact tell her sister *everything*—truly have been seen as a betrayal of confidence and intimacy? Lotario clarifies to Clarisa and Lino that he could only recount the stories about his past to Eugenia because of their shared love, which according to him presupposed a mutual understanding.

Si se lo conté no fue para que nos entendiéramos sino porque nos entendíamos. En el amor el entendimiento está antes que cualquier otra cosa, en la cabeza y en las manos...Y en el corazón...Todo el resto *se hace*; es un proceso simple, posterior. El entendimiento es una sacudida, verse a uno mismo entero en alguien que está enfrente; pero no verse la cara sino la médula, lo decisivo, lo que no se rompe ni se gasta, lo que uno tiene de milagro. Entonces los amantes se muerden, se husmean, se amansan, se aprietan, siempre están con fiebre buscando en el otro eso que cada uno creyó ver...Y separarse les arruina el

alma...Porque nadie se resigna a que esté lejos ese nudo de su vida empotrado en otro cuerpo. (Cohen 1989, 197-98)

In view of this singular and primordial pact of precomprehension, it is certainly plausible that Eugenia's subsequent retelling of the stories to her sister would be considered—at least by León—a violation of the pact. But then again, as Lino later asserts in the context of Lotario's sudden and unexplained departure, it may also be that betrayal shares an originary, supplementary relation to every event of creation, every act whereby some being comes into existence—including love: “toda traición es un a priori, un suplemento al hecho de nacer y al ámbito del destino, cuya sola amplitud de movimientos consiste en elegir un objeto” (285).

Does the shared being that is love then constitute a template for communion in which incompleteness and difference are supplanted and overcome in the unity of the couple? Does love illustrate a dialectical process of identity and difference in which being or subject appropriates its own becoming in order to realize its potential for being? Or does love attest to an originary condition of in-completion that nonetheless *lacks* nothing and would therefore not be completable in principle? Love, then, as the name for a condition of exposure to the world and to the other; love as marking the site of a cut that, like the ear, can neither be closed off nor opened up and assumed as the property of a subject?³⁷

In contrast to its idealization in the Guevarian theory of militantism and the charismatic neopopulist leader, love in Lino and Clarisa's case seems to offer a far more modest response to the distress of the absence of distress of postdictatorship. “El amor,” writes Lino, “es apenas un placer de estar al lado, sin opciones, sin posición relativa, sin tácticas de corrección, con muy poco descanso” (67). This simple description signals a departure from any theory of love as

ground or first step toward some overarching goal. The shared existence of love is irreducible to opposition (“sin posición relativa”) and calculation (“sin tácticas de corrección”) because those are modalities of the subject, whereas love takes place in the facticity (“sin opciones”) that precedes any subject.

Cohen’s text enacts a refusal of two possible approaches to our contemporary scene. It rules out a cynical, nihilistic embrace of the productionist ideology according to which the transition from state to market frees us from antagonism, disorder and terror. It likewise rejects the reactive—and equally nihilistic—attempt to beat back the incursion of global technics and capital via a salvage operation that would restore literature to the leading role granted it by Arnold, Rodó and others. What is left in the wake of this literary deconstruction of “transition” is an attempt to bring transition into view via as an experience of groundlessness. To paraphrase Paul Bové, it is a literary attempt to be *of*—but not *for*—the time of globalization as interregnum, as experience of the suspension of the old signifying regimes together with an opening onto something new—but what? For Cohen, literature can only open itself to this vertiginous moment through what the text terms “perseverance.” It can open itself to the impossibility of *arkhē* that is disclosed today, but it cannot do more; it cannot provide answers or resolution concerning the questions that inevitably arise on such tenuous ground. Perseverance would call for resolve in the face of darkening of the world, preparing itself for the incalculable leap of beginning anew.

Mediatization and the Literary Neo-Avant Garde in Argentina

One can say that when the astronauts set foot on the moon, the moon as moon disappeared. It no longer rose or set. It is now only a calculable parameter for the technological enterprise of humans.

—Martin Heidegger, “Seminar in Le Thor 1969”³⁸

In recent years Latin Americanist cultural criticism has turned its attention to mass media in an effort to understand how mediatization affects inner life (perception, imagination, thought), social relations (ways of representing being-in-common and envisioning alternatives to the historical present), as well as the production, dissemination and archiving of knowledge. The German media theorist Friedrich Kittler characterizes the late 19th century and 20th century as a time of increasing media differentiation. Differentiation names a departure from an era dominated by a single medium (historically speaking this was print) to a new era of heterogeneity in which the formerly dominant medium is obliged to compete with new media—visual, sound, electronic and digital—each of which appears to be more adept than print at capturing key aspects of late modernity. By the same token, since the 1960s media theory has developed an account of how electronic media—and, more recently, digital media—facilitate the technological unification of the planet through the surpassing of traditional spatiotemporal limits associated with geography, geopolitics, and culture. For better or for worse, mediatization has been seen as inaugurating a new era of communicational immediacy.³⁹ It thus both parallels and supports the economic and political integration of all parts of the world in a global capitalist system.

Among Latin Americanist scholars the work of Néstor García Canclini, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Carlos Monsiváis, Nelly Richard, Beatriz Sarlo and others has contributed to

broadening our understanding of how visual and auditory media (photography, film, radio, television) have reshaped old notions about literature and cultural production that had evolved in societies dominated by print media. Edmundo Paz-Soldán and Debra Castillo's edited anthology *Latin American Literature and Mass Media* (2002) offers critical assessments of how narrative processes have been informed by—and respond to—the written word's relinquishment of its privileged status to the ever-growing sway of visual and auditory media. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the infusion of mass media into Argentine politics begins with the transitional elections of 1983 and is fully consummated under Menem, the master of televisual neo-populism, beginning in 1987.⁴⁰

The consequences of the shift from print-dominated society to a society of differentiated media in Latin America can be further explored through a distinction between what Angel Rama described as the "lettered city" (Rama 1998) on the one hand, and the new configurations of space and time that obtain with the rise of radio, film, television and Internet on the other. The lettered city was a real or virtual site, typically located within the geographical space of the city and administered by a "priestly caste" of intellectuals. Employed in legal, religious, and pedagogical institutions, the administrators of the lettered city were charged with controlling access to the law by enforcing the primacy of the written word. This meant both upholding the relation between word and sovereign right, and mediating between imperial center (whose authority was constituted through the written word) and periphery, much of which was still dominated by oral traditions. In contrast to the centralized, vertical structure of the lettered city, the new media network are decentralized and horizontal, with direct access in principle open to all. The shift from one media paradigm to another—from an

arcane, self-enclosed city-within-the-city to the diffuse network of visual and audio media whose transmissions infiltrate every moment and corner of our daily lives—has generated optimistic as well as skeptical analyses. This mediatic transformation is welcomed by some as the avatar of the end of exclusion, while others regard it skeptically as the sinister spread of a new regime of surveillance and/or simulacra that tend to produce passivity and indifference among its consumers. By the same token, the shift from print hegemony to differentiation obligates contemporary criticism to reevaluate its own interpretive practices—most of which were formed through training in the analysis of written texts. There is no reason for us to take it for granted that the old hermeneutic methods and concepts that were developed to understand the textuality of print culture can be relied on in the same way to navigate the differentiated, image-based media culture of today.

Beatriz Sarlo takes an especially pessimistic view of the mediatization of Latin America societies, asserting that its saturation of all spheres of contemporary life (work, leisure, art, politics, and so on) has debilitating effects on the possibilities for autonomous thinking and acting. In Sarlo's view the relentless and all-permeating flow of mediatic images effectively numbs the sensibilities and disables any capacity for ethical deliberation or political judgment. One implicit point of departure for her critique is the view, first introduced by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964), that mass media is synonymous with the implosion of space and the acceleration of time. Whereas McLuhan saw in electronic media the promise of a communicative immediacy that would enable consumers to transcend cultural divisions and geographical distances to form new virtual communities, for Sarlo mass media technics carries a much more dismal prognosis. Unlike print media, in which the distance

separating mediatic representation from its referent is always patent, the mediations performed by television technology (to take the most prominent example) are far more difficult to identify and distinguish from the reality that the medium purports to represent. The well-known difficulties faced by viewers in trying to separate the two realms, tends to instill resignation in the viewer, leading to erosion of the ethical and political basis of modern communal life. Mass media generates neither the stable representations found in print media nor the communicative immediacy imagined by McLuhan. Rather, it produces simulations of social and natural reality, which in turn contribute to a prevailing suspicion that the real as such has been supplanted by the simulacrum. Sarlo advances a critique of this process in her essay "Aesthetics and Post-Politics," some aspects of which I have already discussed in previous chapter. The complicity between television, neo-populist demagoguery and the neoliberal state is illustrated in Sarlo's characterization of mass media as fostering the displacement of the sign by the simulacrum in contemporary social relations. Here Sarlo's critique relies on one of McLuhan's fundamental insights, albeit without sharing McLuhan's optimism: electronic media enacts the subsumption of content in form, message in medium. For mass media the medium *is* the message. For Sarlo an important consequence of the electronic collapsing of content into form is that form ceases to embody the critical and emancipatory promise it held much of modernity.

Political symbols have changed, and if they were never really "symbols of reason," the latest Latin American examples allow us to foresee the triumph of the simulacrum above all other modalities of symbolization. The symbols of the public sphere, along with its discursive genres, are replaced by a scenography

that is no longer even a stage but rather stage-craft, constructed *by* and, above all, *for* the mirror of the mass media. (Sarlo 1993, 253)

Mass media claims as its primary advantage over other media its ability to provide “full coverage” of a given situation; it has the potential to provide insight in real time into all angles and perspectives, and it thereby proffers more or less unrestricted and immediate access to the real. The mediatic filtering and distribution of information through ever-evolving story lines is, however, essentially a self-reflexive process.⁴¹ The rise of mass media coincides with a new truth regime that bolsters its power through the cultivation of sensationalist self-reflexivity, which in turn feeds viewer demands for more news. Taken to its extreme, this desire for the new cares little about what truth value its content might possess. It becomes absorbed entirely in the search for novelty; it is a desire for what is newest of all, for what is only now breaking through the horizon of the present. In this light, mediatic consumerism is commodity fetishism par excellence. It is the fetish of contemporaneity itself: of being fully current in one’s information, software and hardware, and so on.

In modern Western societies media has always understood itself as a branch of civil society charged with calling attention to issues of public concern, no matter how inconvenient its subject matter might prove for power. The media thereby prepares an informed public to take under consideration matters that affect all. In the time of televisual media, meanwhile, the old dichotomy between event and mediatic representation has collapsed. Alongside the tendency of televisual media to focus on itself (its technologies, production processes, programming, stars, etc.), our perception of what constitutes an *event* has been irreversibly transformed. The old idea of an event—something new happens in the world that affects the

world and its inhabitants and causes them (or should cause them) to take notice—is substituted by new criteria: an event is something that will draw or has drawn media attention. Whereas an event was traditionally understood as a material occurrence that does not depend on mediation—indeed, something worthy of the name *event* should in some sense precisely defy mediation—in the new televisual mediatic regime, there can be no event prior to the arrival of the camera.

Sarlo worries that public discourse, informed and directed by the mediatic truth regime, will no longer be able to engage in debates about a social reality that is separate from the sites and conduits wherein media discourse is produced, transmitted and received. As the public becomes increasingly reliant on mass media for information and even for its opinions, and as this dependency becomes infused with desire for immediacy for its own sake, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish public space and politics from the logic of the market.

The phenomenon of mediatic spectacle plays a major role in inaugurating what Sarlo calls “post-politics,” a time in which technocratic knowledge emerges as the authoritative locus into which all collective decision-making must be translated in order to acquire legitimacy. The transfer of what used to be topics for collective debate and decision-making in the public sphere into problems to be resolved by technical expertise imposes a limit on any project aiming at a radical transformation of social relations. Neoliberal order is in this sense both self-referential and obscurantist:

If politics needs to compare options (what is more: needs to produce options), technology without politics presents itself as the only option. If political choices are increasingly complex and, consequently, difficult to communicate to public

opinion, technology pretends to dispense with the need for public opinion because it presents its reasons as the only viable ones. This imaginary suture of the split between society and politics when technology takes the place of politics is itself a technologically produced simulation of knowledge, a simulacrum that does not explain but rather *points to itself*. (Sarlo 1993, 255; my emphasis)

These remarks echo the self-referential logic discussed in the previously cited passage (“by and...for the mirror of the mass media”) from Sarlo’s essay. The mediatic spectacle, characterized by a specular movement of self-presentation returning infinitely to itself, works in coordination with neoliberal post-politics to institute a new technocratic order, and it likewise collaborates in obscuring the violence of this order’s genesis.⁴²

Before we accept as self-evident the idea that we are today living in the wake of a technologically-driven rupture, however, it might be worthwhile to pause and ask whether Sarlo’s critical account of new media does not also herald the return of the *same old subject*: the subject of metaphysics. Sarlo’s description of the formal logic of mass media production and transmission, as producing *of* and *for* itself, bears an uncanny resemblance to the philosophical subject described by Descartes as the origin of its own representations. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it in *The Experience of Freedom*:

In the ontology of subjectivity, being is posited as the *subjectum* of representation, in which, by this fact, the appearing of all things is converted. The essence of being is to “appear to itself” [*s’apparaître*] in such a way that nothing *is*, unless supported in its phenomenality by the subject. (Nancy 1993, 4)

Against Sarlo’s critique one could argue that modern conceptualizations of public space

and the political could never be fully accounted by the Enlightenment framework of rational discourse and collective decision making in which Sarlo wants to ground the ideas of producing and comparing options. The association between politics, public space, and shared decision-making belongs to a tradition of thinking about sovereignty for which legal and political orders have their origin in the structure of exception or in a decision that exceeds the scope of what can be debated and judged within the codified sphere of law. In constituting or suspending a given legal or political order, the sovereign decision paradoxically both does and does not belong to the totality to which it gives rise. Sarlo avoids engaging with the problem of sovereignty and decisionism here, in my view, because such considerations could pose problems for the clear and stable distinction she wants to establish between the time of neoliberal populism and mass media technics on the one hand, and earlier versions of the modern state together with older distinctions between technology, aesthetics and ethics on the other. By the same token, elision of the problem of sovereignty enables Sarlo to embrace what turns out to be a reactive solution—the revival of aesthetic and political modernity—that has in fact already been rendered inoperative.

Let us now turn and look closely at the formal link Sarlo draws between mass media and neoliberal technocratic order. She claims that these two historical tendencies are able to bolster their authority today through their self-reflexive structures and that neither form ever truly moves away from that self-reflexive mode in order to refer outside itself—to non-technocratic reason or to a concrete, pre-mediatic reality. Her assessment proves to be problematic, however, because it does not ask about what might be specific and new to mass mediatic production or about what these tendencies might share with the history of

technological forms in general. While I am proposing that Sarlo ignores the possibility of certain formal connections between mass media and an older history of technological thinking, her claim that the current situation in Latin America is defined principally by its newness (“post”) minimizes the ways in which prior state forms (such as the populist state) also employed mass media as an instrument for interpellation and social control (Barbero 1993 and Kraniauskas 2007).⁴³

Sarlo’s critical take on mass media is premised on the assumption that the present constitutes a break that definitively separates mass media technics from older technological phenomena. She then goes on to equate this ostensibly new situation with the essence of mass media technics: it is new because we know that mass media technics is essentially different from previously dominant modalities of circulating information and publicizing discussions concerning the social whole. It seems to me that Sarlo attributes too much stability to the phenomenon she is seeking to understand while relinquishing any question about what mass media might share with older technological forms. Her critique of mass media technics is too metaphysical in not being metaphysical enough.⁴⁴ In ignoring the possibility that mass media technics reproduces certain aspects of earlier traditions, Sarlo’s critique ends up assuming a thoroughly metaphysical position concerning technics.

If Sarlo’s understanding of mass media technics is grounded in the same presuppositions that gave rise to modern philosophical systems, does her critique still enable us to understand mass media and neoliberalism as instituting a definitive break with modernity? My position is that it does not. What Sarlo calls “post-politics” is in fact onto- and political theology under a different name. But that does not mean that nothing changes with the advent of mediatization.

We have indeed witnessed the subjugation of the political: to the mediatic apparatus that purports to “cover” politics, and likewise—as I will argue in the next two chapters—to the logic of global capital under neoliberal globalization. Instead of post-politics, then, which implies either too much change (rupture) or not enough (the “post” itself is a product of modernity and its way of determining historical time), I have proposed the idea of interregnum as a way of working through a global transformation of historical import among the effects of which include a rendering inoperative of the conceptual vocabulary with which we seek to understand this event. Mediatization effectively places “politics” under erasure; it introduces a situation for which the term’s traditional meaning is suspended or destabilized, but in which no new term is readily available to take its place.

These points will be developed through a reading of César Aira’s 2001 novel *La villa* in the dual context of Argentina’s early 21st century socio-economic crisis and the increasing presence of televisual media. First, however, a brief overview of Aira’s literary project as a whole will help to contextualize what I will say about *La villa*. With a few notable exceptions, literary criticism—especially outside of Argentina—has been somewhat reticent in turning its attention to Aira’s work.⁴⁵ This seeming critical reticence when it comes to Aira’s work has been explained by one critic as a reaction to the author’s “hyperloquacious” literary production which, in yielding an average of two to three novels per year over the last decade or more, may offer comparatively little time for critical reflection (Laddaga 2005). As Sandra Contreras puts it, Aira’s relentless novelistic production has helped foster the critical impression of a writer who is indifferent or even hostile to the traditional temporalities of literary production, which since the 19th century has been organized by desire for the singular great Work (Contreras 2002). In

his manic pace of writing and his much-publicized refusal to reread and revise what he has written, Aira would seem to come close—too close for critical comfort—to adopting the indifferent velocity of mass production. Critical misgivings may be reinforced by Aira’s tendency to incorporate—thematically and stylistically—the machinery of mass culture in his novels. As Contreras puts it, in Aira’s writing “el valor de la distancia (distancia crítica de la literatura, distancia temporal o distancia de la calidad poética del texto) se convierte, vía la banalidad del presente y la televisión, en efecto devaluado de inmediatez” (124). Aira’s writing thus mimics the effacement of all distance and deliberative time that Sarlo associates with postmodern media culture, while embracing the simulacra of televisual immediacy. In her *Fuera de campo: Literatura y arte argentinos después de Duchamp*, Graciela Speranza, meanwhile, makes an invaluable contribution to furthering critical understanding of Aira’s debt to the avant garde.

The engagement with mass culture writ large in Aira’s writing proves to be more complicated than first meets the eye, however. In distinction from the position staked out by Sarlo, for whom modernist aesthetics and mass media are the products of antithetical sensibilities and attunements, Contreras and Speranza, in their more nuanced critical approaches, describe the intertwining of literature and mass culture in Aira’s novels as a strategic intervention that is of the same spirit as Duchamp’s artistic deployment of the Ready-made. Aira’s inscription of the technological effects and sensibility of television and other forms of mass culture into the narrative form of the novel organizes an effort to reactivate artistic processes at a time when literary techniques have become routinized and when art is thus in danger of being reduced to a purely technical process, or as Contreras puts it, “una mera producción de obras a cargo de quienes sabían y podían producirlas” (Contreras 2002, 15). As

Speranza sees it, meanwhile, Duchamp's development of the Ready-made as procedure linking artistic form with innovation and history, provides the only hope for art in a world increasingly dominated by the logic and the exigencies of capital.⁴⁶

Aira's appropriation of mass media should be examined in the context of a sweeping and profound transformation of literary institutions in recent decades, and particularly the emergence of a small group of megapublishers (Planeta, Alfaguara, etc.) that play a major role in deciding what kinds of literature gets published and what does not. A number of Latin American writers have argued that publishing decisions made by megapublishers are governed by the sole criteria of what will sell; and since literary markets (in the Spanish-speaking world but also beyond it in the case of translation) are predisposed to publishing works that follow recognizable, easily-marketed stylistic conventions such as magical realism, the rise to dominance of multinational corporations in the publishing industry has resulted in significant restrictions on what kinds of literature can appear today; while innovation may still be possible when it comes to well-established writers, for those who are still trying to make a name for themselves the odds would seem to be stacked against innovation. In that context, Aira's tendency to venture outside literature and to the most formulaic and repetitive of all cultural genres—TV melodrama—raises an interesting question: is he simply catering to commercial forces by producing an easily recognizable brand that can be readily consumed, or should his experimentations with literary form and seemingly irreconcilable cultural modalities (print and electronic media, "high" and "low" culture) be seen as an effort to reintroduce vitality into literary production at a time when literary creativity is in danger of being reduced to matters of technical expertise and formulaic reproductions of best-sellers from the Boom generation?

Aira has written extensively about his approach to narrative innovation; the topic appears in essays as well as in his novels. His descriptions of his own writing practice take shape as a complex interweaving of playfulness and seriousness. If one follows either tendency far enough one inevitably find oneself on the opposing side, as if his account were a Mobius strip. Consider for example Aira's iconoclastic explanation of his attitude toward literary taste in his 1995 essay "La innovación," where he irreverently professes to embrace the production of bad literature. Such a bald assertion in an essay purported to present the author's views on something as revered as artistic creativity no doubt proves troubling for Aira criticism, especially considering that many of his readers readily admit to struggling over how seriously to take his novels and what to make of the evident qualitative discrepancy between the "good" Aira novels and the "bad" ones. As critics and scholars we would like to think that our training prepares us to deal with significant qualitative variations within the literary corpus of a writer. Of course we minimize or ignore the lesser works and focus on those that offer richer material for analysis and enhanced opportunities for aesthetic enjoyment. What could be more obvious? And yet what if such an approach turned out to be the wrong way to read Aira? What if in reading Aira in this well-established way, criticism renders itself blind to the source of that strange uniqueness we call "Aira," and condemns itself to misreading him as just another writer in a history whose critical gold standard has always been the Work? What we call "bad" literature, Aira's essay proceeds to clarify in Nietzschean genealogical key, is whatever fails to heed established canons of good taste and value. By implication, "good" literature would be nothing more than writing that in one way or another coincides with—and thereby validates—what has already been sanctioned by the prevailing regime of valuation.⁴⁷ In other words, what

counts as “good” literature is more often than not a work that has not yet broken with the reproduction of the Same. What is worse, the “good” today is increasingly the path reserved for artisanal production whose telos is the market. Artisan work must—and with good reason—conform to the idea of the good if it hopes to legitimate its own activity: producing a saleable commodity. The lone remaining chance for an artistic program seeking to avoid such a conformist destiny, meanwhile, is for Aira to be found in embracing a form of the bad that could lead to something more than just specular opposition with the good: a badness beyond good and bad, or a badness that would lead beyond valuation as such. Only thus, through an abandonment of taste and aesthetic value, can literary innovation lead to something truly promising: not the bad but the new.⁴⁸

Considering Aira’s much-discussed tendency to incorporate the iconography of contemporary mass culture in his novels, it may come as a surprise that Aira situates himself unequivocally on the side of literary modernity rather than postmodernity. He emphasizes the influence of the avant garde on his work, most notably Marcel Duchamp’s conceptualization of the readymade as a repeatable method for creating art. Aira claims to have developed an analogous technique, a narrative *procedimiento* or a procedure for emplotment that can be repeated indefinitely to generate any number of novels, and which therefore tends toward automaticity. A true *procedimiento* is a method that can be deployed by almost anyone; once initiated, the method—like a machine—effectively writes itself. By all appearances the specific procedure developed by Aira is surprisingly simple: it consists of little more than what he calls *una huida en adelante*, a “flight forward” in writing that has little concern for thematic consistency and plot development; it imposes an absolute proscription against reading or

revising what has already been written, and as Speranza reminds us it thereby remits the possibility of artistic innovation to the domain of chance—which, in Aira’s view, may be the only domain in which it is still possible to think something other than the calculative, equivalential logic of capital. Aira’s procedure is a program for writing anti-Works, for a writing whose point of departure is its abandonment of any notion of the creative process as perfection of itself over time. In lieu of return, rewriting and cultivation, the “flight forward” is compelled to make up for any perceived shortcomings in yesterday’s writing in today’s production. The result is the characteristic Aira novel: full of digressions that seem to lead nowhere and narrative threads that are left in an inconclusive state; erudite and serious reflections on pressing social, aesthetic and epistemological concerns interspersed with implausible and absurd developments; and a persistent rejection of classical notions of emplotment as a sequential process culminating in a climactic moment and governed by a logical unity. Here we have an additional layer to the paradox outlined earlier: with Aira there can be no novelty, no literary historical rejuvenation and thus no literary event without repetition, without the repeatability afforded by the formulaic *procedimiento*.

Aira locates the hallmark of modern literary sensibility in Baudelaire’s invocation of the new in the eighth and final canto of his poem “Le voyage,” a veritable manifesto of literary modernism:

O Death, my captain, it is time! let us raise the anchor!
 This country wearies us, O Death! Let us make ready!
 If sea and sky are both as black as ink,
 You know our hearts are full of sunshine.

Pour on us your poison to refresh us!
 Oh, this fire so burns our brains, we would

Dive to the depths of the gulf, Heaven or Hell, what matter?
 If only to find in the depths of the Unknown the New!

One would be hard pressed to find a clearer embodiment of disdain for the historical present and its prevailing regime than Baudelaire in relation to mid-19th century French bourgeois culture. For Aira there are at least four important points to take from Baudelaire's poetic announcement of the new as literary absolute: the effort to think innovation as irreducible to any specular relation of opposites (new and old, high and low, good and bad); the association of newness with an exploration of the decadence of the present and, moreover, with the experience of negative, non-productive moods such as boredom; the dissociation of innovation from subjectivity and individuality; and, finally, the link between the new, the unknown, and the real understood as refractory to established epistemological methods. All of these Baudelairean motifs find points of correspondence in Aira's literary vocabulary.

The Flowers of Evil situates the motif of novelty within a complexity that belies any simple antithesis of the new with its other: the old, canonical, traditional, etc. Despite what the ship-faring metaphor would seem to be saying, novelty is not to be won by setting out to conquer new territories nor can it be explained as the simple negation or overcoming of the present. The new, as Baudelaire thinks it, precisely disrupts the presentist conception of time, or time understood as a sequence of moments in which one present displaces another and so on ad infinitum. When Baudelaire sets out in search of the new it is not to a future present that he turns but conversely to what is already growing old and becoming past in the present: the decadence and decrepitude of civilization that is exemplified with the social and cultural ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. It is to the present as what "Le Voyage" calls an "oasis of horror

in a desert of boredom” that literature must turn, according to Baudelaire, if it hopes to find novelty. As Walter Benjamin no doubt intuited, for Baudelaire the historical present of the French Second Empire was infused with traces of both the past (in the sense that bourgeois hegemony was the decadent, anachronistic reenactment of aristocratic privilege) and the future (which must be sought not in the utopian projections of a new time but in the fissures whereby the present is exposed as being out of joint). The key distinction at stake in Baudelaire’s invocation of the new, then, is that it calls for a displacement of what Benjamin calls the “empty, homogeneous time” of Liberalism’s progress-oriented philosophy of history and of what Heidegger describes as the presentist focus of metaphysics, in which history is conflated with the sum of objects available to be represented (and used).

Benjamin discovers in the Baudelairean gesture of turning toward boredom an avatar of his own critical practice of exposing the atrophy that is latent in the liberal conceptualization of history as progress. While Benjamin emphasizes the revolutionary potential of boredom vis-à-vis the historical temporality of capitalism, for Aira the link between decrepitude and the new is what determines literary innovation as a transformation of the real, where the real is understood as materiality that remains refractory to epistemic processes of signification and rationalization. This helps explain why the customary association of innovation with a future present would be inadequate: such an equivalency could only reinforce the established coordinates of the present—namely, the characteristically modern understanding of time as sequential progression leading from past to present to future.⁴⁹ In the context of modernity any innovation worthy of the name would have to begin by suspending or breaking with the sequential and progressive ordering of past, present and future presents.

It may be that innovation in Aira's sense shares a structural resemblance to what I am calling interregnum, not because the call for innovation necessarily corresponds with the historical crisis of sovereignty in the context of neoliberal-administered globalization, but because both concepts enact a pause or step back that thinks itself as the first step toward a possible radical transmutation of the real. For Aira the verb "to innovate" turns out to be defective insofar as its grammatical structure presupposes a subject who could say: "I innovate." To innovate is to transform a given field in a sufficiently radical way so as to leave no space untouched, no ground remaining for a subject understood as the permanent presence of what lies underneath (*subjectum*). Innovation, if and when it happens, attests to the fact that even the *arkhē* is no longer the same as itself. "Si innovo," clarifies Aira, "tendrá que decirlo otro, y en otro momento" (Aira 1995, 27). The logic is profoundly Borgesian: if Pierre Menard inadvertently demonstrates how the intention to repeat pure and simply (recall that Menard did not want to be *like* Cervantes, he wanted to *be* Cervantes) engenders not the sameness it yearns for but rather transformation at the limits of what can be calculated, it is only Menard's reader—the one who eulogizes him posthumously in writing "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*"—who puts a finger on what it is that constitutes the true novelty in Menard's return to Cervantes. Of course it is nothing other than the word "*historia*" that emerges as orphaned, mutating letter of the *Quijote*.

Menard's desire to *be* Cervantes notwithstanding, Aira asserts that innovation requires that the would-be innovator kill off all of the masters he or she has ever had. Innovation calls for symbolically putting to death not just the masters we can do without but precisely those one is condemned to love (27). Such a parricidal act is tantamount to a kind of suicide: the

masters we are fated to love are those around whom our own selves have taken shape. Thus the antinomy between innovation and subject becomes even more entrenched. Innovation, if and when it happens, begins with a “leap,” a departure from the known and from familiar ground into the unknown, which for literature is what Alberto Moreiras calls “the unguarded possibility of the real” (*Exhaustion of Difference*, 213). Literary innovation and world history obey similar laws when it comes to thinking the event. Aira illustrates this point ironically with a joke about a Norman peasant heard to remark one day to his fellow peasant: “Did you hear the news? Today is the beginning of the Middle Ages!” (27). Innovation corresponds not to the visible and intelligible but to those aspects of any historical present that can only be deciphered a posteriori.

But in the name of what, and to what end, would innovation recommend this leap? To answer this question we must grapple with an apparent contradiction: innovation calls for a departure from the certainty of familiar ground, and yet innovation cannot be the result of calculative intentionality. Its possibility begins there where the trajectories of calculation and intention reach their limit. But how is one to know where calculation ends and the leap begins? Would a blind leap necessarily be free from calculation and intention? Even prior to any consideration of where one expects to land, how could the leap as such be purified of all subjective calculation? The answer would seem to be that it cannot, but that the trajectory assumed in leaping asymptotically approaches the limit of calculation. As the joke suggests, the leap must be taken in the name of time and history, a history whose demureness borders on silence. One implication of this discussion is that there can be no time and no history without innovation; the very fact that there is something called history is conclusive proof that

innovation happens. Recall that for Aira the event of innovation, if and when it happens, accommodates no witnesses and admits no agents. Innovation can only be ascertained after the fact and from the new terrain it discloses. Thus the subjective structure of intentionality does not preclude innovation, and perhaps all innovation necessarily takes off from a calculative point of departure; but what will have been innovation must necessarily break in some way with the calculative programming from which it began. As Borges never ceased reminding us, innovation is structured by a law of errancy that short circuits the causal logic of intentionality. Innovation is always already differing from itself, from whatever intentions might have been present at its first impulses. Artistic innovation is necessarily an impersonal affair that is “in the air” and not the property of any individual writer or artist. Any new move or invention that could be assigned to a subject could never be anything more than the voluntarism of artistic intention.

Newness, as we have seen with the prominence of Baudelaire in Aira’s discussions of literature, begins with a return to the familiar, to what is so familiar that it has grown old or become boring. Boredom for Aira, meanwhile, is synonymous with the hollowing out of all content and the emergence of pure form.⁵⁰ One might consider, for example, how the experience of reading a novel is transformed when one loses interest in the plot or becomes fatigued—but instead of putting the book down one continues reading, with the eye beginning to act on its own accord, like an automaton. In the monotony with which the eye continues to consume words, sentences and paragraphs that have now ceased to generate sequentially-accumulating meaning, we approach a literary experience of language as such, of language in its non-negatable materiality. Of course I am describing what can happen in the reading

process, whereas Aira is concerned with what constitutes innovation in writing; and yet in Aira's thought the writing/reading distinction is not as clear and stable as one might expect. Let us recall once again that the thought of innovation does not leave any room for a subject: just as I do not decide to innovate (or if I do, such a decision cannot guarantee the outcome or provide the sufficient cause for any innovative effect), the "I" can never provide the measure of innovation. The event of innovation, if and when it happens, is structured by a paradoxical temporality that resembles the future perfect tense. We can never say with certainty that there is or will be innovation, but only that it will have been—if it happens at all. Innovation entails a relation between times that is irreducible to sequentially progressive models. It thus paradoxically names both a *relation*—the identification of a before and an after—and a *non-relation*, insofar as the true measure of the event is that continuity between the old and the new will have been broken.

Lo nuevo es lo real. O mejor dicho, lo nuevo es la forma que adopta lo real para el artista vivo, mientras vive. Igual que lo nuevo, lo real es lo imposible, lo previo, lo inevitable, y a la vez: lo inalcanzable. El salto del arte no llega nunca a él; ha llegado, parte de él, pero no lo sabe, no puede saberlo, ni decirlo. Es el discurso de la lengua incomprensible, misteriosa. (32)

The new is the real, or it is the form that the real adopts in and for art. But does that equation not also announce that the real would no longer be the real, at least not the *real* understood in the Freudian and Lacanian traditions as resistance to or excess of symbolization? Or does the adoption of form in this context also entail what Samuel Weber describes as the unraveling of form (Weber 1996, 9-35)? Aira's association of the new with the real takes shape

as an accumulation of contradictions: the new, like the real, is the impossible and the unobtainable; it is the inaugural and the unavoidable; the leap that is innovation's only chance can never hope to arrive at what is truly new; and yet it has always already arrived and in fact it begins with the new, albeit without ever knowing it; it is the discourse of a language turned mysterious and incomprehensible. This contradictory accumulation of propositions reformulates the paradox found in Baudelaire's projection of the new in the out-of-jointness of the present with respect to itself, in those interstices of the present where one feels most at odds with oneself and with the times (boredom for Baudelaire, anxiety for Heidegger).

Some of the difficulties associated with the linking of the new (innovation) and the real can be further illuminated by clarifying that for Aira, as for Roman Jakobson, the impetus toward realism or verisimilitude is the goal of all art regardless of period, culture or style. By the same token, what counts as "realistic" in visual arts as well as literature is never natural but always coded in one way or another.⁵¹ Not only must one learn to read the code, but in becoming familiar with it one must also assume the risk of internalizing the convention too much, at which point one ceases to see it as conventional. To lose sight of conventionality altogether would result in a loss of the distinction between referent and representation, which is to say that one would be unable to experience art as art. The condition of possibility of reading (familiarization with conventions) is thus also, at least potentially, the condition of reading's impossibility. Art qua realism always hangs in the tenuous balance between codification of the real and naturalization of convention. This balancing act provides one way of explaining Aira's association of innovation and the real.

Nos lanzamos a lo desconocido (a lo que pueda resistir a la prueba del

conocimiento) en la busca imposible de lo nuevo. Y lo nuevo es lo que hacen los otros. El otro es nuestra megalomanía, y a la vez nuestro eclipse. La luz de esta astronomía es la lengua. Pero la lengua ha caído en manos del otro, y el otro la aleja hacia lo nuevo, la luz se proyecta hacia lo nuevo donde no podemos ser sino una mancha de sombra. No me entenderás...susurra en su huida. La lengua se precipita hacia ese fondo en el que se deja de ser lengua, se hace incomprendible. El salto a lo incomprendible es el mismo salto a lo real, a la experiencia irreductible al pensamiento. (Aira 1995, 31)

The real for Aira is not the name for a substance but for an encounter with the unknown that resists capture by our epistemological apparatuses. Its heading therefore also accommodates what becomes of discourse or symbolic production (literature, art, etc.) when it leaves the hands of the author and enters into circulation in public space (the space of publication, reading, the archive, etc.). The condition of possibility for making discourse legible and accessible is also the absolute delimitation of intention; to innovate is to expose the text to the fatality of the real. The leap into the unknown or into the real would thus be a way of describing the experience of literary language as it leaves the hands of its paternal guarantor and enters into circulation among readers. The real in Aira's vocabulary provides a general name for the unthought of any present, while the new in turn names the attempt to think or expose this unthought in and through a transformation of the coordinates of what is thinkable and sayable.

As Willy Thayer has argued, the historical self-determinations of the avant garde—as critique of representation, as rupture or interruption, as new beginning—may no longer be

sustainable in the time of neoliberal-administered globalization, when the market has (at least arguably) become the unsurpassable horizon for thought and action.⁵² This is not to say that avant garde or neo-avant garde gestures are not being produced today. What it does imply is that the vanguard act may be unable, at least by itself, to alter the fundamental coordinates of our world today. In a situation where the state of exception has become the norm and where decision-making power has been transferred from the political to the economic, it is no longer clear to what extent the kinds of ideology critique associated with the avant garde can still hope to play a transformative role today. We can only expect so much from the critique of representation today, says Thayer; though such critiques have not suddenly become unimportant, we can no longer expect the insight or attunement they might provide to generate the sufficient conditions for social transformation or revolution. By the same token, the neoliberal regime of globalization renders the old geopolitical coordinates for social transformation obsolete. Politics at the national and international level does not thereby lose all significance, but it can no longer be expected to provide what it did throughout the history of modernity: a katechon against the global forces of transnational capital, whose ebbs and flows today can longer be controlled or regulated by the state. Thus we are faced with a new globalization in which the possibilities for interruption and transformation have been deferred and rendered uncertain; it is no longer clear how—or even if—a break with the hegemony of the global market could be brought about. What is clear is that culture, including literature, can no longer offer a pure and critical space outside the logic of capital that could be used against capital. On the contrary, like the factory in the 19th century, culture in the new millennium is the privileged terrain and the paradigm for all commodity production as such. In this context,

the historical avant garde with its call for rupture and radical newness has been rendered inoperative today.

In turning to Aira now I want to allow the questions and limits indicated by Thayer with respect to the avant garde in the time of neoliberalism to linger. I am not interested in proposing that Aira offers anything like a solution to or exit from the impasse just described. On the contrary, Aira's understanding of literary history and the possibility of innovation militates against any hasty attempt to formulate an answer to this situation, insofar as it is difficult to imagine a response that would not fall into the trap of voluntarism that Aira is careful to avoid. I want to propose that Aira is aware of the kind of problem identified by Thayer and that *La villa* responds to this quandary by seeking to make the impasse its own—that is, to write from the site of this question without either celebrating it or reifying it as the inevitable, as the eternal present of all future Latin Americanist reflection.

Aira has become well-known for his literary appropriations of mass media, and this tendency is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in his 2000 novel *La villa*. In the time of neoliberal globalization, when the electronic and digital technology associated with new media increasingly hold sway over perception, thought and imagination, what if anything distinguishes Aira's literary appropriations of mass media (its rhythm, techniques, lexicon, etc.) from the technical form itself? What could prevent Aira's work from becoming a mere effect of—if not an apologist for—neoliberal-administered globalization? For Contreras what keeps Aira's work from collapsing into the well from which it draws is that, in borrowing literary elements from mass media, Aira's text also introduces mutations that call attention to an imperfect fit between what we might call the donor and recipient contexts. The borrowing and application

of mass media to literature only succeeds partially; something is left out of place or time, sticking out or out of beat with the dominant rhythm. “Se trata, siempre, de recetas de *cómo hacerlo*. Sólo que las recetas son únicas e inejemplares....o los métodos son directamente imposibles....o los procedimientos dejan de operar....Impráctico, inejemplar, y a desatiempo—lo definen una inadecuación y un desfase temporal en relación con el resultado—el procedimiento en Aira siempre es *anacrónico*” (Contreras 2002, 18). Aira’s turn to mass media technics for literary procedures resembles what John Johnstone calls “mediality,” or a tendency in contemporary literature to inscribe “within its own language the effects produced by other media” (Johnstone in Tabbi and Wutz 1997, 175). Mediality in Aira generates a literary effect (Contreras calls it *desfase temporal*, a temporal discrepancy or phase difference) that is neither fully consistent with the temporality of mass media nor the simple continuation of traditional literary procedures. Mediality introduces an excess or an imbalance—akin, perhaps, to a sense of jet lag [*desfase horario*]*—that cannot be made proper to either time, either tradition or contemporaneity.*

Of course the premise that literature borrows its rhetoric, images, rhythm, tonalities and lexicon from other social discourse in order to generate its own artistic procedures is not altogether new. As Roberto González Echeverría famously argued in *Myth and Archive* (González Echeverría 1990) similar discursive appropriative strategies can be found throughout the history of the Hispanic novel. As Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat points out, literary appropriations of mass culture—with either celebratory or critical intentions—have been going on in Latin America since at least the 1960s (Paz Soldán and Castillo 2001). What is perhaps new when it comes to Aira is the feeling that literature or art in general is no longer able to orient itself in

relation to a *beyond*, a transcendent point outside the here and now that would serve as literature's object of desire and/or as its justification. With Aira it may be that we no longer have to do with a literary affirmation of transcendence but with an exploration of the possibilities that open up for literature following the exhaustion of modern forms of transcendence—that is to say, the possibilities that obtain with overexposure. As we will see, the feeling that the beyond has been subsumed within the here and now constitutes the starting point for Aira's unsettled and unsettling reflections on literature in the time of mass media technics.

Josefina Ludmer's discussion of "post-autonomous" literature draws on Aira as an exemplar of how the contemporary novel handles the distinction between reality and fiction, rhetoric and reference. As we saw in the introduction Ludmer's sketch of autonomous literature hinges on her claim that a shift has taken place today in the literary economy of tropes. The critical reliance on tropes to mark the difference between autonomy and post-autonomy is not arbitrary. For one, literature has always been the site where tropological language has been produced and been allowed to flourish. By the same token the presence of tropes provides one way of explaining why literary language is not transparent but must be interpreted. Finally, critical and interpretive practice has provided a compelling account of why aesthetic experience can serve as a foundation for modern civic life: learning to interpret art is a proving ground for the critical judgment required of citizens in a democracy. But in focusing on what she believes is a shift in tropological economies Ludmer thereby reduces literature to rhetoric and signification while blocking any consideration of what Paul de Man would call "material" elements in literary language.⁵³ By the same token she does not consider that

distinction between an “autonomous” economy in which tropes produce meaning and a “post-autonomous” economy in which tropes refer only to themselves, or to the becoming-indistinguishable of rhetoric and reference, may well be impossible to determine and sustain. After all, tropical language has never *not* referred to itself. Similarly, if we could remove altogether the signifying and referential functions of language we would be left with something altogether unintelligible. When it comes to literature the distinctions between reference, signification, and self-reference are necessarily rendered unstable.⁵⁴ For all of the interesting and important points that it raises, what is missing from Ludmer’s argument in my view is a consideration of how literary language never ceases producing in excess of what is needed for signification, and how this language thereby opens the door to short-circuits within the economics of signification and interpretation.

To develop this point about the irreducibility of literary language to tropology and signification I now turn briefly to Gilles Deleuze’s discussion of literary serialization in his 1969 book *Logic of Sense* (Deleuze 1993), after which I will show how all of this connects with Aira. Literary serialization refers to the textual production of multiple chains of signifiers—names, words, figures, themes, and so on—in which the members of a given series correspond with others of their kind; at the same time each set of signifiers generates relations with other sets or series. As a result of serialization each particular signifier turns out to be *overdetermined* by a multiplicity of relations or forces. Serialization provides a model for language as sense machine. Sense should not be confused with meaning: if meaning is the arrival of the signifier at the signified (a red octagonal sign at a street corner signifies “stop”), sense is the conduit or trajectory followed by a message, or its capacity to generate a range of associations. In the

example just given sense might include ideas such as “ticket,” “accident,” “law,” “motion,” “traffic,” “safety,” but also “graffiti.” How does serialization work in literature? In Poe’s renowned detective story, “The Purloined Letter,” one series is constituted by the Queen who conceals a letter from her secret lover, the King who doesn’t see the letter and remains oblivious to its implications, and the Minister who *does* see the letter as well as the potential it bears. A second series is formed by the Minister who steals the letter and hides it in his apartment, the inept police who search the apartment but are unable to locate the letter, and the detective who is able to retrieve it because his search is guided not by common sense but by his identification with criminal intelligence. Deleuze highlights both the correspondences and displacements between series; in one series the Minister pulls a fast one on the Queen while in the other series he dupes the police but is bested by Dupin. The logic of serialization resembles a sliding tile puzzle: the differential relations within *and* between series are motivated by the uncanny presence of something that *has no proper place* in one series while in the other series it establishes an *empty place that cannot be filled*. In Poe’s story this uncanny object is of course the letter that is purloined and circulates from one party to another in the first series and which, in the second series, is never to be found where it is supposed to be.

The advantage of Deleuze’s account of serialization is that it helps us to focus on something in literature that remains irreducible to the economy of meaning-production and the claim to epistemological privilege. Whereas in the Rulfo example alluded to in the introduction we saw how literature might be equated with sublimation as the filling in of absence, in Deleuze’s analysis literature generates a gap and an excess where they did not previously exist. One could also read certain works associated with literary autonomy in this way, *Pedro Páramo*

included, since the fantasm and murmurs of Comala call attention to a concern with exclusion, excess, and the limits of phenomenality, all of which are foreclosed from the dominant cultural and political discourse of post-revolutionary Mexico.

In this light I want to propose that serialization provides both an important step back from *and* a much-needed compliment to the theory of *post-autonomía*. First, it enacts a step back from what can now be seen as an overly-hasty equation of modern literature with tropological language and signification; serialization helps us to see how literature also engages with a kind of relationality that is irreducible to the conversion of signifiers into meaning. Second, it could possibly add a useful supplement to Ludmer's efforts to think about how today's global capitalist system presents a real conundrum for the critical tradition. Post-autonomy names a time in which both social organization and critical sensibilities are being reshaped by the hegemony of the market, premised on the tendential elimination of exclusion from our political and cultural vocabularies. There is room for anything and everything in the market so long as it presents itself as one brand among many; the market excludes nothing except perhaps exclusion itself.⁵⁵ It may be that there can be no such thing as epistemological privilege under such conditions: if the tools that were once proper to critical thought have now become part and parcel of the system against which this thought aims its critiques, then the more devastating the critique the more it serves to strengthen the system at which it takes aim. In that case there would no longer be a critical role for literary or artistic sublimation today. Perhaps, following the path indicated by Deleuze, literature's urgent task today would be not to fill in gaps but to make them appear *as such*. In order to show what serialization might look like in Aira's text let me first say something about emplotment and context.

Like many of his novels, *La villa* is set in Flores, Aira's own neighborhood in Buenos Aires. Stylistically speaking the work displays elements of melodrama, the thriller and the hard-boiled detective novel. The episodic structure of the plot is driven by a series of unexpected developments that tend toward the absurd. In the novel the Flores neighborhood borders on a fictive *villa miseria* or shantytown, and it is in and around this metonymy of "barbarism" that much of the action in the novel takes place.⁵⁶ The uncanny presence of the *villa* in the heart of a metropolis that has always considered itself "the Paris of the South" is complemented by the shadowy existence of those who remain unaccounted for in the prevailing calculus of the social in post-dictatorship Argentina. The inhabitants of urban and suburban *villas* have historically included impoverished migrants from the country's interior as well as illegal immigrants from Andean countries. In recent decades the *villas* have also come to be associated with a transnational drug trade that has flourished in Argentina alongside the systematic dismantling of old social structures. Moreover the *villas* have long posed a problem for the Argentine state and for the ruling ideology (liberal, populist or authoritarian). Under the populist regime of Juan Perón (1946-55) the existence of the *villas* was officially denied while at the same time images of state interventions to improve life of *villa* residents were used to highlight Peronism's dedication to incorporating the working poor into modern society. Since the 1990s, meanwhile, the number of *villas* in and around Buenos Aires has grown dramatically in conjunction with increasing disparities between rich and poor. In the wake of Menem's privatization reforms and the subsequent economic crisis of 2001 *villa* inhabitants have been obliged to pursue informal strategies for survival. Aira's novel employs two of the most recognizable and powerful images of crisis and informality in Argentina: the common practice of constructing illegal networks of

cables to draw electricity from the local power grid, and the emergence of trash-picking as a semi-permanent vocation for a large number of Argentines. The term used to describe these practitioners is *cartoneros*.

It would not be difficult to surmise that the location of the *villa* in the heart of the metropolis generates a literary image of the failure of transition in Argentina during the 1980s and 90s, a transition from one political form to another (dictatorship to democracy) and from one principle of social organization to another (state to market). Similarly, the spectral sight of the *cartoneros* emerging from the *villa* to make their nocturnal rounds attests to the violence that accompanies and sustains a new phase of accumulation in Latin America today. The *cartoneros* would bear witness to the ongoing nature of what Marx calls “primitive accumulation.” The story of primitive accumulation names both an end and a new beginning in Marx’s analysis, as the destruction of old social forms and practices clears the way for the emergence of capitalist social relations characterized by the separation of capital and labor. Whereas Adam Smith attributes the separation of capital and labor to a moral discrepancy between virtue (embodied in those who know how to save) and vice (those who spend all they have and more) Marx reminds us that the accumulation required for capitalist production had material origins: in colonialist expropriation, legalized land-grabs, and criminalization of social practices deemed incompatible with the generation of surplus labor populations. Such processes generated a new class of people who, in Marx’s words, have “nothing to sell but their own skins” (Marx 1977, 873).

Aira’s novel appears to propose that we are now approaching the extreme limit of the history traced by Marx. On one hand the growth of *cartonero* populations should be

understood in the context of new forms of accumulation (flexible production, financial speculation) that first took root under the military dictatorships of the 1970s. The *cartoneros* populations would therefore attest to a new forms of accumulation in which the expropriation and reinscription of the common (e.g., public space, social justice, and the regulatory or welfare state model) generates the space and resources needed for the emergence of new forms of capitalism (post-Fordism and financial speculation). On the other hand the analogy with “primitive accumulation” understood as the origin of capitalism also has its limits, because the figure of the *cartonero* presents an inversion of the fable use by political economy to rationalize the origins of capitalism. The *cartoneros* embody a new social phenomenon for which even the unfreedom of labor market comes close to being out of reach. For this population the only access to even marginal and temporary employment lies in whatever residual value can be found in the refuse produced by the system—assuming they can get there before the city sanitation workers. If survival for the *cartoneros* depends on their ability to recover whatever the system generates as garbage, is this not because they themselves, qua social form, embody a kind of detritus of the system?

While a reading of the *villa* as allegory of the violent birth pangs of neoliberal transition seems irrefutable it also has a potentially fatal weakness: its inability to account for the fact that Aira is clearly interested in the *villa* not as a site for critique but as a literary topos. Moreover his unapologetic attempts to discover the literary in a site commonly associated with crime and suffering flies in the face of a social realist tradition that, from Bernardo Verbitsky on, sought to highlight both the social reality and the dignity of the villa inhabitants—and which has more or less overtly rejected what it considers to be the “literary” treatments of poverty found

in classical Argentine literature from Echeverría to Borges.

A few words about the plot of *La villa* will help give a sense of how the novel positions itself in relation to contemporary social, cultural and political debates in Argentina. In the first part of the novel we have the story of Maxi, a young body-builder who comes from a middle class family. Maxi is remarkable both for his physique and because, for whatever reason, he simply does not think; he embodies the pure spontaneity and selflessness of non-reflexive, uncalculating life. When he is not working out he devotes his time to assisting the *cartoneros* as they make their nocturnal rounds, competing with the sanitation services for anything that could conceivably be sold, eaten or repurposed. Whereas his self-absorbed teenage sister and their upper middle-class neighbors have adopted the habit of looking past the *cartoneros* as if they did not exist, Maxi joins these spectral residents as they traverse the city, helping to push their overloaded carts and hoist the more unwieldy items. Maxi is the ethical subject of the novel, performing his role as protector of the vulnerable and powerless with no concern whatsoever for what he himself might stand to benefit. Perhaps most noteworthy about Maxi—and as his name itself suggests—is the maxim that governs his actions. In aiding the *cartoneros* he responds to a law that has been evacuated of all particular content, all self-interest and calculation. The true motivation that prompts Maxi to join the *cartoneros* every night remains mysterious. It is not just that his rationale is never revealed to the reader; Maxi himself never stops to reflect on his reasons for helping them, or perhaps he is incapable of such ethical reflection. His actions respond to a call whose origins remain beyond interrogation. In this respect he is like the rose in Angelus Silesius's famous poem: he does not ask himself why he does what he does, he simply does it. Within the world of Aira's novel it may be

precisely *because* he does not ask questions that Maxi finds himself on the side of the good; those who do think, by contrast, inevitably end up interpreting their situations badly, often with dismal consequences for themselves or others. The promise Maxi appears to embody, that the good could be brought into the world if we would only renounce the calculating and speculative deliberations that are proper to thinking, is one of the most seductive and also one of the more troubling aspects of Aira's novel.⁵⁷

The second part of the novel presents a parallel intrigue of drug trade, murder, and police surveillance. The cast of characters includes the Inspector Cabezas (a hard-boiled detective who, in contrast to Maxi and in homage to Poe and Borges, could be described as a *puro razonador*), a judge, an evangelical minister (who turns out to be the judge's son working as a police informant), and another Cabezas, unrelated to the inspector, who seeks to bring his slain daughter's killers to justice. The novel's melodramatic culmination occurs when these two threads finally run together, as Maxi's sister and her friend venture to the *villa* to make a drug buy and unwittingly lead the police to the place where the traffickers have hidden their stash. In a series of misrecognitions the Inspector Cabezas shoots the evangelist/informer after mistaking him for a member of the cartel, and then is in turn mistakenly pegged by the police as a rogue cop working for the cartel as a hitman. The ensuing police manhunt, which comprises the final episodes of the novel, is followed closely by news helicopters; the televised coverage of the events—seen from the perspective of the Inspector as he sits holed up in a pizzeria—provides a live feed of the search for the assassin interspersed with frequent updates on the cast of characters in this real-life drama. The novel's concluding episode offers a parody of mediatic coverage of violent crime, replete with claims to “full coverage” and “breaking news”

and plagued by ironic misinterpretations and distortions of the storyline. As a literary citation of mass media the conclusion illuminates at least two important ideas. The first concerns the question of form and repetition: Aira's novel shows that the discourse it mimics is itself already a repetition of literary drama, including tragedy, comedy and melodrama. Second, the parody not only exposes the internal inconsistencies and absurdities of the discourse it repeats; in this case it also sheds light on how mass media and its ideologemes shape the way we perceive, think and imagine our world today.

Serialization in *La villa* would work as follows. In the first series we have a set of characters related to one another by way of their respective relations or non-relations to those quasi-invisible but increasingly ubiquitous urban dwellers, the cartoneros: Maxi, his family, and their friends and upper middle-class neighbors. The cartoneros both symbolically and quite literally have no place—no home to speak of and no social subjectivity. Not entirely unlike the garbage in which they seek the means to sustain themselves, they are the detritus of neoliberal privatization and of a post-Fordist mode of accumulation based on speculation and cultural commodity production. A second series is formed, meanwhile, when a certain subset of those characters are drawn into relation with other characters (the judge, the two Cabezas, and the minister) by an element that does not appear in the series itself: the lure of the mythical drug *proxidina*, whose renowned effect is “to bring everything closer” [*acercarlo todo*], but which is never there where it ought to be, never in its place. Proxidina is the analogue of detritus: the drug as lack or *empty place of consumption* in juxtaposition to trash as *excess of consumption* and cartoneros as the non-consumer, the occupant without a place in the market.

True to his name, Cabezas is the embodiment of reason. Akin to the protagonist of Poe's

detective stories—to say nothing of Aira himself and his literary *procedimiento*—Cabezas employs a foolproof, infinitely repeatable rational method for solving mysteries. Toward the end of the novel, and after catching a glimpse of the *villa* in its entirety while watching the aerial footage provided by a news helicopter, he manages to crack the code through which the cartel had communicated with its clientele while avoiding police surveillance. But in following through on this discovery Cabezas will find himself caught up in a fatally ironic denouement that recalls Borges's rewriting of Poe in "La muerte y la brújula." Cabezas's downfall nicely illustrates how textual play with notions of place and displacement in *La villa* coincides with the novel's reflections on mediatization as a technological mechanism for globalization, i.e., for the unification of the globe under a mediatic order that operates in real time and is governed, as we have already seen, by the logical economy of commodity demand, production and consumption. After deciphering the cartel's code and intuiting where the cartel has its stash hidden the Inspector Cabezas makes his way to the secret location only to discover that he has been had. The spatial configuration of the *villa* is a vast circle of randomly-arranged, tightly-packed shacks, with meandering passages leading from various points on the circumference in toward the center. The only way for outsiders to distinguish one entry point from another and thereby navigate the labyrinthine structure of informal construction is by consulting a configuration of light bulbs that has been arranged in unique fashion at each of the entry points. Every entry bears its own distinctive image; the path the Inspector is seeking is distinguished by a configuration arranged to resemble a duck. The unity of place in the *villa* can be altered, however, when the narcos—who have been tipped off to the imminent arrival of the Inspector—rotate the electrical image of the duck to another point on the circumference,

thereby leading Cabezas down the wrong path. Retrospectively we see that Cabezas's downfall resides in his unshakeable belief in unity: in the unity of the sign or of place. The novel's comic denouement is consistent with the critical belief that mass media technics undermines traditional values and concepts.

La villa looks at the ascendance of mass media in Argentina as the emergence of a new regime of truth. Aira's literary treatment of the role of new media, especially television, in shaping public perception shares important insights with Martin Heidegger's account of modern technological evolution. Particularly relevant is Heidegger's association of modern technics with *Gestell*, a term that could be translated as "framing," "installation" or "emplacement." In an approach that resonates with the chapters' epigraph, *La villa* portrays the mediatic regime as giving shape to a technologically produced world in which elements that once functioned as indices of transcendence have been subsumed into the here and now. We encounter a motif for this thought of total subsumption within the present in a literary description of the judge with whom the Inspector is competing to see who can be the first to crack the drug ring:

In one of the judge's most famous and misunderstood pronouncements, she once declared that her only wish was that, when her brief time on earth had come to an end, she would have left it a better place than she had found it. This may have struck some as a mere expediency, but things were in fact more complicated. For one, introducing something new into the world is no easy matter: it would have been like bringing back a rock from the moon, except that given the way things are today the moon is now in the world. She did not have in

mind creating a new combination of elements using things already at hand, nor did she intend to change the place occupied by something in the world. She meant adding something truly new, a new element with which—if one wanted to—one could combine old elements. At the same time, coming from a magistrate this was a strange desire indeed. Justice operates according to a zero sum logic. One could say that justice must leave a given situation with exactly the same number of elements previously encountered in it. Such is the essence of its task. As for adding something new, that task belongs to art. (Aira 2001, 136-37; all translations of Aira are my own)⁵⁸

I want first to pick up on the literary disqualification of this hypothetical moon rock on earth as a non-event. In a time dominated by techno-scientific and techno-military rationales and their calculative appropriations of (outer) space, the ontological status of the moon is transformed from a celestial signifier of the beyond (an immutable series of concentric spheres for Aristotle, for example) to one point among many in a cosmological system that has been fully mapped. The event of the first lunar landing announced the imminent technological domination of a sphere that had for millennia metonymically designated the unreachable and/or the unchangeable. In Aira's novel the allusion to that event and its ripple effects provides an image for a technologically-driven world-historical transformation, which collapses the cosmological distance that was once the horizon for thinking and acting in the world. At the same time, the subsumption of the beyond into the here and now calls into question the Platonic understanding of truth as residing beyond the world of appearances. The ontological tremors unleashed by the phrase "the moon is now in the world" are consistent with the view

that the era of media differentiation necessitates a rethinking of the hermeneutic tradition that arose in the context of print-dominated societies. This literary image of subsumption would seem to be consistent with the Jamesonian account of postmodernity as the flattening out of old surface/depth dichotomies. Aira's novel develops these motifs through a reflection on mass media and its role in reshaping our experience of the world, portraying a world that has been entirely transformed into a picture or an image. I borrow this phrase from Martin Heidegger's 1938 essay "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," whose title has been translated into English as "The Age of the World Picture" (*The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*).⁵⁹

For Heidegger the modern philosophical tradition that begins with Descartes is grounded in an understanding of being as totality of objects capable of being represented or of appearing before a subject. Beings can only appear qua beings—and not *nothing*—insofar as they allow themselves to be objectified and measured according to the logical criteria of philosophy. The subject, meanwhile, is understood as the ground or origin that gathers appearances back into itself, thereby securing a proper place for everything that is. This subject-driven ordering process generates a world that comes into focus as a picture [*Bild*], which is to say as the totality of objects that lend themselves to being represented and ordered by a subject. Heidegger's view of modernity as governed by calculative reason is equally applicable to modern methods of portraying the past (historiography) as to techno-scientific representations of present and future. The calculative ordering of the world aims to secure a place for the subject, who *enters into the picture*—or establishes its sovereignty—as the one who has anticipated the world as totality.⁶⁰

Heidegger also suggests that this subject-centered project of domination can potentially

become a victim of its own success. Under the influence of modern techno-scientific thinking it is increasingly the system itself—in lieu of the representing human agent—that initiates and administers the ongoing ordering of the real. In Heidegger's words, "where the world becomes picture, the system, and not only in thinking, comes to dominance" (Heidegger 1977, 141). In contrast to other modes of revealing and ordering the world, technics as enframing (*Gestell*) determines the essence or being of what *is* as "standing reserve" or as a totality of resources available to be counted, stockpiled and consumed. Whereas traditional forms of technology left room for a reciprocal relation with nature—the mill let itself be driven by the whims of the river current in Heidegger's prosaic example—modern technology tends to assert itself over against nature; the power plant, to continue the analogy, demands the extraction of coal from the earth or imposes itself by damming up the river. Although modern technological systems clearly take root in a metaphysical view of the world based on subject-object relations, the evolutionary drive of modern technology threatens to override the old aim of securing a ground for the representing subject. Thus the historical irony identified by Heidegger: in a world now tendentially dominated by *Gestell* what awaits us is not the complete domination of nature by the human, but instead the demise of the old dream of the subject as master of its world. This displacement of the subject is no longer a mere hypothetical possibility; it becomes increasingly conceivable as technological evolution outstrips traditional conceits about technology as a means to an end and as a tool employed by a human agent. Amidst the relentless drive of *Gestell* there would seem to be nothing that could prevent the human itself from sliding fully into the picture, or into the stockpile of "standing reserve." Indeed, one could say that such an event has already been announced, either because all time has now been incorporated into a

calculative, administrative rationale that self-evidently equates the human with “human resources,” or because the deployment of sovereignty today enforces a systematic reduction of the human to that figure of disposability that Agamben calls “bare life.”

Let us return to the novel’s assertion that “the moon is now in the world” and juxtapose this figure with Heidegger’s discussion of the world become picture. With that phrase Aira is doing something more than just commenting on the impact of the historical event of the lunar landing. That event is recalled as a proleptic announcement of a new situation that in Argentina only obtains at the end of the millennium. The distinction between the celestial and sublunary worlds will have been suspended in a time when both inner life and social practices have been subjugated by the demands of technological manipulation, programming and calculation. One could certainly read this tropological inclusion of the “outside” within the “inside” as indicating that the human has, in Maurice Blanchot’s words, “become astral” (Blanchot 1993, 396), or that humans can now accomplish what was formerly the proper domain of the stars. Aira suggests, however, that the collapsing of the celestial into the terrestrial world does not inaugurate a new immanent order of things in which the world now administers itself as a stable, self-contained totality, i.e., with humanity fully in control of an always expanding and accelerating technological prowess. On the contrary, this tropological subsumption attests to the feeling that, with the collapse of the old horizon that separated the here-and-now from the beyond, our time suffers from a loss of sense. In Aira’s words, when “nobody sees the whole, especially because in reality there is no whole” (Aira 2001, 55) then “nothing makes sense, even within sense” (63).⁶¹ The inclusion of the beyond in the here and now is experienced as the loss of the world’s constitutive outside. That the moon is now part of the world means that the inside or

the sublunary, which has always received its bearings and its meaning from its relation to a certain beyond, can no longer sustain itself as a unified, coherent totality.

“Nothing makes sense, even within sense”: While I am taking this paradoxical phrase as a shorthand way that Aira’s novel has for illustrating the profoundly unsettling effects of technological (tele-technic and technocratic) globalization together with incapacity of our modern conceptual vocabularies to make sense of this new situation, we saw in the previous discussion of artistic innovation that this could also provide one possible formulation of the real, which is by definition refractory to thought. This sentence names in enigmatic fashion the unthought in contemporary thought. In the context of innovation and the avant garde, it is both from and toward this (non)place that all writing takes form. In this light we can begin to visualize an important difference between Sarlo, who believes that we can still think and write our way out of our current conundrum through a return to aesthetic values, and Aira, who is not in search of an exit from contemporary nihilism but rather a site from which a thinking confrontation with the present and its unthought might be possible.

La villa illustrates a powerful imaginary that coincides with the ascent of mass media technics while posing a significant challenge to modern epistemology. I will call this the fantasy of *total inclusion* and *full coverage*, allowing these terms to resonate with a variety of cultural, technological, epistemological and political contexts in the time of neoliberal globalization. The term “total inclusion” corresponds with the technological administering of free choice and unlimited economic opportunity in the market, the logic of which becomes hegemonic for all social spheres in post-dictatorship Southern Cone. “Full coverage,” meanwhile, names the self-presentation of mass media as technologically equipped to provide direct, instantaneous and

universal access to the totality of the social, in real time and with no omissions or modifications, so that the viewer can freely choose what conclusions to draw from the data.⁶² Full coverage appeals to the identification of mass media with contemporaneity and unfettered access to the real. Full coverage and total inclusion are thus ideological signifiers that serve to dissimulate the forms of violence, the exclusions and the gaps that accompany the economically-driven reorganization of post-dictatorship Southern Cone societies. *La villa* explores the effects of this sweeping reconfiguration of the social by playing with the mediatic notion of full coverage, even to the point of mimicking its idiom, while also suggesting that the notion of total visibility includes its own peculiar kind of exclusion (more on that shortly). However, Aira's literary reflection on technics and mass media is not a critique in the same vein as Sarlo's essay. What *La villa* has to say does not presuppose or seek to imagine an alternative terrain outside the situation on which it reflects; nor does it rely, as Sarlo does, on a presumably clear and stable distinction between domains (e.g., art that fosters critical awareness as opposed to mass culture that anaesthetizes critical thinking). Not only does Aira's novel thematize the absence of any site untainted by technological mediation and image commodification, it also self-consciously highlights the presence of these tendencies in its own literary language.

In the introduction to *Reading Matters*, a critical anthology of essays on literature and mass media, Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz describe how writers such as Thomas Pynchon envision the technological development of new media leading up to a global system of knowledge and control that, for better or for worse, could alleviate the need for human oversight and decision-making. According to Tabbi and Wutz, this "endlessly looping, total knowledge" is precisely what Pynchon and other writers resist or attempt to transform by

imagining other, more affirmative uses for technology (Tabbi and Wutz 1997, 21). At the same time, the anthology editors also suggest that a total system of knowledge is logistically impossible, since its development would require “more time—more machine time and memory—more paper, more and cheaper human labor, more everything than the universe provides” (21).

In my reading *La villa* likewise raises doubts about the possibility of total knowledge or “complete coverage,” albeit with an important distinction. For Tabbi and Wutz the infinite must be considered a logistical impossibility based on the assumption that we live in a finite universe. Their understanding of total knowledge is thus what Hegel would call a bad infinity, or an infinity that consists of nothing more than endless accumulation of particularities. For Aira, meanwhile, the impossibility of complete coverage is logical in nature. As we will see, it is determined by the fact that the mediatic system generates excesses it cannot account for and control. It is there that the question of literature and mass media inserts itself in an important way. We have already seen how critics have documented Aira’s tendency to incorporate thematic and stylistic elements of television and other new media as a form of neo-avant garde rejuvenation of literary history today. Now, in light of this consideration of mass media as truth regime and of the possible limits of the ideology of full coverage and total exposure, I want to advance the following hypothesis: in Aira’s novel the literary incorporation of mass media—its sensibilities, its rhythms, its rhetoric, and its self-presentation—also generates a certain distortion or warping effect, which in turn exposes a limit for the self-presentation of mass media technics. This limit should not be conflated with the idea of an outside; it designates an excess that is produced through technical framing, reproduction and transmission but which

does not therefore remain within the sway of technological reason. This excess or limit is thus profoundly literary, even when it does not stem from literary texts, because it mimics the sense in which literature is itself constituted through an excess of words. I call this limit “overexposure” as the other side of full exposure.⁶³

Rather than rely on supposedly stable distinctions between televisual media and mass culture on the one hand, and prior modes of technics and cultural production on the other, Aira’s text invites us to consider how mass media technics reproduces certain features found in traditional technological forms and understandings while intensifying contradictions inherent to human interaction with technics. This double movement of repetition and intensification can be elaborated by way of important points made by Samuel Weber in his discussion of television as a privileged sphere for thinking about mass media and technics (Weber 1996, 108-28). As the word “television” suggests [*tele-*: from afar] one of the powerful presuppositions driving the expansion of mass media in the world today is the notion that televisual technology extends visibility across distance. Since a body can only be present in one place at a time, distance not only constitutes a limit for the body, it marks the body *as* a limit. Tele-vision embodies the promise of overcoming those corporeal limits by making what can be seen in one place visible in another place. What gets transmitted in a television signal is thus never just a specific stream of images but also the power of vision and presentation themselves. Like all technological apparatuses, television functions as a prosthesis supplementing a limit that we tend to perceive as a deficiency of being. It should thus be clear that televisual technology is itself a form of globalization insofar as it promises a profound reduction or elimination of distance.

We saw previously that Sarlo locates the specificity of mass media technics in the

production and circulation of the electronic image, whose essence she understands as simulacrum. The problem posed by the simulacrum is that it effaces what the Western tradition has always held to be a necessary distinction between original and copy, or mere appearance and truth. A simulacrum is neither copy nor original but an orphaned copy that cannot be traced back to any origin that would be free from repetition, reproduction and artifice. However, the seemingly self-evident identification of mass media technics with image and simulacrum risks overlooking a crucial dimension of televisual technics. As McLuhan argued, the specificity of television requires us to address not only the image content but also, and even more fundamentally, the medium itself. Among its many and considerable merits, Weber's essay emphasizes the way in which televisual medium produces ideological effects that in turn mediate the way in which we perceive technics, the world and ourselves in it. Televisual technics reproduces in the here and now an act of perception originating in another place. It is not just the image, then, but the power to perceive and (re)produce images that is at stake here. The images that appear on the TV screen are like impressions derived from another's perception (that of the person holding the camera, for instance); and yet televisual transmission "sees" in a way that nobody ever could: by being capable of becoming present in more than one place at a time. Whereas we think of our subjective perceptions as situated and thus intransferrable, the technical process of image capture in television technology presupposes the possibility of duplication and transmission. This is not to say that the situatedness of perception is absent from television, but rather that the *boundary* between the singularity of place (situatedness of perspective) and the generality of what can be transmitted and made visible anywhere in real time (the electronic image) becomes unstable. Here we can

see a connection with Heidegger's meditation on *Gestell*: televisual technics brings the act of perception into view as the power to frame and place something before our eyes.

The television screen is the site of...an uncanny confusion and confounding. In the uncanniness of such confusion, what Derrida has called the irreducible "iterability" of the mark—that repeatability that both allows a trait to constitute its identity while splitting it at the same time—manifests itself in the only way open to it (since it is not of the order of manifestation), namely, as the undecidable being of the televised images we see. (Weber 1996, 121)

In Weber's view, televisual technics calls into question—but stops short of overthrowing—some of modern philosophy's foundational assumptions, including notions of body, subject, place and event. Mass media technics causes these philosophemes to become unstable because it intensifies the paradoxes and uncertainties that have always resided in them. For example, while television technology appears to transcend the limits that define our embodied scopic relation to the world around us, it also reintroduces separation in the very presentation of perception. Limits do not simply dissolve into the televisual ether but instead return—uncannily, as we shall soon see—as internal to the televisual process itself. What we see when we watch TV is not something taking place here in front of us alone. What is "on" here corresponds with an act of perception going on in some other place, something that is also being transmitted to an untold number of other locations at the same time. But if television presents the "same" images and the "same" power of perception in multiple places, then what is "here" televisually speaking can never be fully present, since that would exclude being present anywhere else. When it comes to television, the very reference to "the same"

underscores the fact that presentation can no longer be the same as itself—assuming it ever was. Tele-visual presentation turns out to be governed a ghostly logic: its transmissions are neither fully present nor simply absent. The technics of transmission and reception both extends and divides the identity of the perceiving-presenting subject (who ought to be only in one place at a time) as well as the unity of place (since *here* by definition cannot also be *there*). By the same token, the temporality of televisual transmission also disturbs the unity of what we call an event. If nothing in televisual transmission allows us to determine definitively whether we are viewing a live broadcast or a recording, and if what is “on” here is always going on someplace else, then the ontological status of the event understood as origin and first time has been placed in question—even before we begin to consider the problem of the so-called “media event.”

In contrast to what was said earlier in discussing Sarlo’s position on mass media, Weber indicates that television cannot prevent the constitutive reproducibility of the image (its iterability) from flashing before our eyes. If the systematizing drive of modern technics frames *being* as the totality of objects that can be dominated technologically and made available for consumption or instrumentalization, the setting-in-place of the televisual image would seem to disclose a limit internal to this calculative project: iterability both grants the image its power to appear while signaling the impossibility of determining a first time or ever becoming fully present. The appearing of the image thus coincides with the impossibility of establishing its ontological status (presence or representation?). The televisual image is a ghost that hovers in an ontologically undefinable zone between *eidos* and copy, appearance and epiphenomenon, presence and absence. The law of iterability unsettles the picture at the same time that it

enables the picture to constitute itself. Televisual presentation thus belongs to the logic of the event—because something happens, because there is presentation—but it cannot be made fully consistent with the logic by which events are customarily understood, since any such appearance, no matter how original, has already been inscribed within the secondary time of repetition. The tele-visual overcoming of distance thus cannot avoid reintroducing distance and separation. However, its flickering light does indeed seem to be more adept than other forms of technology at softening the ambiguities and paradoxes that accompany these limits.

One of the most fascinating instances of Aira's literary reflection on mass media occurs toward the end of the novel, which as mentioned earlier culminates in a manhunt after a police informant is gunned down in a tragic misunderstanding on the periphery of the *villa*. The fugitive suspect of the manhunt, again, is none other than the unfortunate Inspector Cabezas, who shot the informant after mistaking him for a member of the drug cartel. The police, unaware of this fatal misunderstanding, believe the Inspector to be a rogue cop working for the cartel. As the forces of law and order close in on the *villa*, news helicopters circle overhead providing live coverage of the operation. The Inspector, meanwhile, has fled and sits holed up in a nearby pizzeria watching the events—how else?—as they unfold on TV. Media coverage of the “breaking news” assumes center stage in this literary drama, alternating between live footage of the manhunt and investigative reports delving into the sordid and tragic histories of victim and suspect. Aira's literary treatment of the media event is driven by a series of misrecognitions and thereby provides an example of what Contreras calls *desfasaje*. In addition to the aforementioned misunderstandings surrounding the death of the informant, the media conflates the Inspector with another Ignacio Cabezas, a civilian whose daughter was the

accidental victim of an earlier shooting in the *villa* and who has been mounting a grassroots campaign to bring her unknown killers to justice. On the basis of these confluences, the real-time coverage of the events unfolds as a fable about a grief-stricken father who has confused justice with revenge.

In a scene that illustrates another sense of *desfasaje*, meanwhile, we find a description of media coverage as it inadvertently—but also symptomatically—focuses on itself. The manhunt is conducted in the midst of a violent storm with high winds that cause the news helicopters to be tossed back and forth in midair. The live feed coming from the helicopters attests in real time to this turbulence, with images of the manhunt around the *villa* interspersed with occasional errant footage of other news helicopters with their TV cameras. What began as an uncanny scene in which the Inspector Cabezas sees himself in distorted form on TV, his face and history contorted almost beyond recognition by confusion and mistaken identities, morphs into a dizzying scenario in which television coverage of the event is interspersed with televisual coverage of itself covering the event. The inadvertent and spasmodic rhythm of mediatic self-coverage would seem to be a parodic literalization of Sarlo's claim: there is no event before the camera shows up, and thus the camera becomes indistinguishable from the event itself.

I propose that we call this a scene of *overexposure*, exploiting both the photo-technical sense of the term (exposure of a negative as step in the reproduction process) as well as its epistemological sense (exposure or revelation of a concealed truth). The term clearly resonates with mass media culture and its specific form of technical reproduction: full coverage, in real time and from all conceivable angles, as synonymous with truth. The specific appeal in the idea of full coverage brings to mind two distinct sources. The first is a technological fetish rooted in

the belief that technological evolution brings us closer and closer to an immediate relation to the real. The other is a connection between “full coverage” and the association of the market with the end of exclusion: just as the market always benefits from the inclusion of new options, the transition from state to market opens up space for everyone to participate in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Full coverage and full inclusion are two variations on the theme of representation.

Overexposure illustrates a way in which Aira’s text can be said to read itself: as extending insights generated at a given point in the novel onto prior moments in the narrative. The earlier moments are thereby “overexposed” to a second-order reading that superimposes itself over earlier possible readings. The linear chronology of narrative development would thus be overwritten by a second, non-linear movement of doubling back in which narrative folds back on its earlier presentations in order to highlight new interpretive possibilities made possible by subsequent developments. Textual meaning in Aira would thus be subject to transformation *a posteriori*. I will offer an example of what this might look like momentarily.

The scene I have been discussing supports two readings that are not easily made compatible with one another. The first reading, whose skeletal framework has just been presented, would take as its point of departure Sarlo’s claim that mass media presides over the displacement of the sign by the simulacrum. With the strategic rearrangement of lights on the periphery of the *villa* we saw how Aira’s novel thematizes a destabilization of the unity of the sign. Now, with the sporadic appearance of other cameras in the media feed, the text presents us with an image in which the ordinary understanding of mass media, as dedicated to the exposure of truth and dissemination of information that exists apart from the media apparatus,

is subverted. If television promises to place another act of perception before us, the accidental appearance of another camera on the screen constitutes a symptomatic excess, or what Lacan would call a stain. A stain is what happens when the conditions of possibility for representation, which cannot logically appear within the field of visibility to which they give rise, uncannily and in distorted fashion intrude into the picture. Like the death's head in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, it is the incursion of the frame on what it frames, or the showing through of the foreclosure that made the picture possible in the first place. One can go back in search of similar "excesses," such as the presence of the *villa miseria* and the *cartoneros* in the heart of Buenos Aires. Literary treatments of mediatic coverage and social crisis reflect a number of formal similarities: in both cases, part of the hegemonic order (mass media and its claim to provide complete coverage of the social; neoliberalism and its claim to institute a more natural organization of the social) can be seen, by virtue of what mediatic and literary optics make visible, to have constituted itself through an exclusion or foreclosure, which is subsequently rendered invisible by the prevailing rationale of the system.

The second reading superimposes itself on the first reading, not unlike the overexposure of a photographic negative. While it does not refute the first reading, the second reading suggests that the first must be situated historically, and that it has force only so long as we continue to believe that we can still distinguish the technological form of mediatic presentation and mediation from its social content. It could be that what in another era might have struck the reader's eye as a symptomatic excess or stain today no longer constitutes a stain at all. For traditional understandings of the media and its social role, the accidental appearance of the TV camera within a televised feed would indeed have constituted an unwanted—and therefore

potentially illuminating—surprise. The presence of a camera “looking back” at us as we follow the unfolding of some real-life drama on TV would invite us to confront the invisible framing mechanisms that make televisual presentation possible, and whose non-appearance is a requirement for television to produce its reality effect. If the concept of media event has become commonplace today, however, then the accidental appearance of a camera on the screen would be no longer constitute the same kind of uncanny excess or stain. The camera is by now, as Heidegger would say, fully in the picture. It is now well known that mediatic presentations are shaped by bias, and the notion of objective, disinterested reporting has by now been put to rest. If the event and its mediatic presentation are no longer rigorously distinguishable and if everyone knows this to be the case, then the unintended appearance of a camera can no longer metonymically embody the unthought and unspoken truth of the news production and distribution process.

What then could Aira’s novel still have to say to us, beyond the banality of repeating what is already well known? Perhaps we would do well to recall the Hegelian adage that what is familiar and well known is not really cognized at all (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, §31). Do the axiomatic truths of media bias and commodification themselves preside over a certain kind of exclusion? One possible response would be that what is excluded from the time of the media event is the very possibility of talking about truth, and that we should be asking what interests are served in relativistic eliminations of that possibility.

In light of this second reading, let us return once more to the question of transposing the insights gleaned from the novel’s concluding scene onto earlier moments. Could the alternative reading of the mediatic stain I have been hinting at—the camera’s intrusion into the

screen as non-event, or as mark of overexposure that signals the exhaustion of that old equation of mediatic representation with exposure or revelation—be carried over to the socio-economic problems thematized by Aira’s novel? Could it be that the visible presence of the *cartoneros* in the capital no longer constitutes a cognitive excess within the social topography of post-dictatorship Argentina? Have we reached a point where the *cartoneros*, in distinction from prior manifestations of the subaltern, can no longer be said to embody the obscene, unacknowledged exception to the developmentalist thinking that has dominated both the Left’s and the Right’s views of history in Latin America since the early 19th century? Consider Maxi’s upper-middle class neighbors and sister, whose social interactions and positions are predicated on their having rendered invisible the villa and its social conditions. Does this “invisibility” have the structure of a classical ideological misrecognition, in which the neighbors remain blind to the truth of their own situation? Are they simply unwilling to confront the fact that neoliberal accumulation produces the kind of extreme poverty and social marginalization that is made concrete by the villa and the practices of its inhabitants? Or does this invisibility on the contrary come closer to what Peter Sloterdijk calls cynical reason, which—in distinction from classical ideology—does not presuppose a separation between consciousness and truth? With cynical reason one knows perfectly well what is going on and yet one goes on living one’s life as if it had no connection with the social conditions of others.

If *La villa* can be said to *read itself* as I am proposing it does, the results are certainly ambiguous. Self-reading discloses a rift between one historical temporality in which there is a stain, and another in which “full coverage” and “complete inclusion” name—while simultaneously covering over—the collapse of the old distinctions between truth and mere

appearance. What constitutes a stain in the first reading does not necessarily do so in the second. What space, if any, is left for imagining an event that would disrupt or transform the coordinates of this latter regime?

Before I address this question, the notion of overexposure can be further developed in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy's claim that, with globalization, we can see—perhaps for the first time—that the world and its history have no predetermined sense: no ultimate goal and no overarching direction, design, destiny, or meaning. Nor, for that matter, does the world allow itself to be conceived as a fully constituted space of immanence, as the apotheoses of free-market capitalism would have it. As Nancy puts it, “what makes up ‘world’ and ‘sense’ can no longer be determined as a given, accomplished, ‘finished’ presence but is intermingled with the coming, the in-finity of a coming into presence, or of an *e-venire*” (Nancy 1997, 126). In proposing a thought of being as event [*evenire*] and arriving [*venire*], Nancy is not just stating that something is still taking place today, that our present moment has not yet been fully subsumed within the eternal present of neoliberal Consensus. The neologisms *e-venire* and *in-finity* (or infinite finitude) are Nancy's names for the incommensurability of any place, time or event with itself. These terms work against the reduction of sense to a predicate (the meaning of being, of history or of the world) and offer instead a thought of sense as presentation, or as a becoming that no system, picture or subject could ever fully grasp or complete. The sense of the world is not the meaning that we attribute to the world; it is the way in which a world unfolds for us today. If history is no longer understood as possessing a single sense (understood as telos or meaning) because it can no longer be theorized from some transcendent viewpoint (God, Reason, Progress, Spirit, Man, Revolution), then history now demands to be thought *as*

sense, as an arriving that is always already differing from itself. In the temporality of presentation (historical or mediatic) there is always something that remains irreducible to presence, something that is not a thing but which also cannot be described adequately as transcendence or otherworldly. I am describing a differential thought of sense that is opposed to the metaphysical tradition, which has always thought the world on the basis of some transcendent beyond and which always thought history as a process defined a priori by a determinate idea or goal. Sense understood as the difference of presentation with respect to itself is of course incompatible with claims that we have now arrived at the “end of history,” and that globalization is synonymous with the immanence of a world that has become fully present to itself.

To assert with Sarlo that the world today suffers from a loss of sense qua meaning or direction is to remain caught in an unexamined ambiguity: there can be no sense before the mark of loss and without the exposure of meaning to repeatability, which is to say the risk of separation, alteration, misunderstanding, deferral, and so on. To speak of the loss of sense as if there could be sense before loss only serves to fictionalize sense as what it could never be: originary presence or fullness. It is to forget that finitude and errancy are constitutive of sense in its emergence, and that the law of iterability does not deprive sense of anything it might once have possessed. Like all technological terms, iterability names a state of originary “default” in which the human is obliged to resort to the supplementary domain of technology in order to become what it is.⁶⁴

In alluding to the presumed rupture brought about by the ascendancy of mass media, Aira’s text also destabilizes the distinction between the time of mass media and its others,

exposing what the distinction is obliged to repress and forget: the fact that all language is technological in nature (because it is structured by the law of repeatability), or the fact that technics supplements everything we consider human—all labor and creative activity, social relations, memory and history. If the instrumentalization of language and the commodification of the image have become defining features of the age of mass media, those outcomes could only have happened because technics was inherent to language in the first place. To acknowledge this point need not be synonymous with resigning oneself to the worst consequences of neoliberal globalization as if it were an inevitable, self-driven process, but it does require that any criticism of neoliberalism and globalization consider carefully the (political, moral and epistemological) ground on which it stands.

Let us return now to the question posed earlier: What remains for literature in a time whose defining experience seems to be a general and prevalent loss of sense, when the old distinctions between celestial and sublunary, outside and inside, are no longer able to provide a solid basis for thinking, writing and political practice? One possibility to be drawn from Aira's novel is that what remains to be narrated is the story of overexposure or the sense of the loss of sense. What remains to be related is a new experience of history. Whereas modern thought has tended to view history as structured by an originary goal or as tending toward a logical endpoint, the exhaustion of all existing alternatives to free-market capitalism together with the increasingly clear fact that the market does not provide the solution for all social problems, leaves us facing a history that now manifestly has no telos but which, nonetheless, continues opening onto what it is not or what it is not yet. In order to see what this experience of history might look like in literature, let us turn once again to the narrative voice of *La villa* as it offers a

poetic assessment of the mediatic image in one of the novel's concluding scenes. This passage offers a quasi-oneiric rendering of the cycle of images that accompany the news reporting on the hunt for the presumed assassin. Perhaps the most salient image is a shot of the Inspector's face that has been distorted almost beyond recognition during the electronic reproduction and televisual transmission processes. This stream of images that comprise a mediatic account of the tragedy tells multiple stories, foremost among which is the age-old parable about the brevity of life itself:

Things were getting frantic on the cable channels. They had found photos of Cabezas in their digitalized archives and were interspersing them with images from the live feed. This was a face that had been subjected to horrible electronic distortion, a face without rhyme or reason. For the duration of its presence on the screen the face became more and more distorted by the second. (...) Once again it was the theme of the fleetingness of life in the world of images. The fantasy that hovered over the television viewers at that moment was an exacerbated version of the theme of life's fleetingness. It was as if an intergalactic traveler had landed on a strange planet, without any protection (what protection could there be?), and the environmental conditions in that world turned out to be unsuitable for sustaining life. Clearly the traveler was doomed and would die within a matter of nanoseconds. One could say he was already dead....But in the meantime he was still alive; he was landing in the world, arriving in the horrendous reality of the world. And this "in the meantime" was everything. (Aira 2001, 143)⁶⁵

This passage offers several possibilities for reading that are not easily reconciled with one another. The interpretive excess here is significant for our understanding of the novel and of Aira's work in general. By one reading the horrendous fate of the space traveler points to a link between calculation and its spectral others: overexposure and the sense of the loss of sense. The connection flashes in the phrase "in the meantime" [*mientras tanto*], which in the context of the doomed astronaut amounts to a leftover or in-between time, the time of radiological overexposure in an environment inimical to life. This in-between or residual time has been evacuated of the familiar markers that situate time in the metaphysical tradition: as a sequence of autonomous "Nows" linked together by an overarching logic of progress, self-realization or development toward some predetermined end. In this time beyond (metaphysical) time, this time defined by the abandonment of all transcendence, all that remains is the sheer facticity of existence. We have already come across the motif of mass media technics presiding over the collapse of old distinctions between the terrestrial and the celestial. Coming in the wake of that earlier announcement the literary presentation of this unworldly traveler hovers in between the domains of fantasy and the real. It alludes to the possibility of a beyond that has not yet been subsumed within mediatization while at the same time evacuating that uncharted domain of any salvational promise.

I have been arguing all along that Aira's novel takes up certain images from contemporary life that are fraught with instability or that call attention to ways in which economic and technological globalization destabilize the conceptual categories of modernity: the villa, the cartoneros, and the collapse of the heavens into the here-and-now. Aira's novel, I have noted, does not deploy these images as part of a social critique so much as it plumbs their

depths in order to explore their literary potential. What then is the literary import of this figure of the abandoned, overexposed space traveler? If we take seriously the earlier claim that the celestial has been subsumed into the sublunary we can no longer invest literature with the hope of giving shape to another world, or of bearing witness to a true world beyond the world of mere appearances. This is one of the implications of overexposure: what literature has to say to us can no longer be conceived in terms of a clear distinction between the here-and-now and the beyond, between surface and depth, between mere appearance and reality. If appearance can be said to hide anything it is the fact that there is nothing to hide. Bearing witness to the overexposure of truth (or truth as overexposure) offers one example of what the writing of the sense of the loss of sense would look like.

The importance of this passage is to bring forth a fantasmatic echo of something that had supposedly already been eliminated by neoliberal hegemony: a thought of the future as radically other; a thought of the future as a new, unexplored world. The fact that its conditions prove hostile to life is only a sign of its radical otherness. But the dismal nature of the situation in which this fantasized encounter takes place also points to a profound questioning of the teleological trajectory of modern historical time. Walter Benjamin calls this “empty, homogeneous time,” alluding to the teleological and unidirectional trajectory of liberal concepts of progress and development based on a projected adequation to European modernity, in which what transpires in the periphery is only, as Hegel put it, “an echo” of Old Europe. The tiny, almost insignificant phrase *mientras tanto* performs the exhaustion of this teleological narrative—whose ideology is captured nowhere better than in the 20th century space race—and it simultaneously introduces the thought of an in-between times, a thought of

temporal heterogeneity or interregnum that is irreconcilable with any understanding of history as a single, unidirectional historical timeline. The concept of development is itself an obstacle to thinking history as interregnum or to thinking history as comprised of disjunctive but simultaneous forces and drives. Amidst the ruins of developmentalism it may well be that this tiny phrase—*mientras tanto*—is all there is.

If announcing the exhaustion of our modern conceptual vocabulary were all that were left for literature, the notions of overexposure and the sense of the loss of sense would remain decidedly within the metaphysical tradition. But the phrase "*mientras tanto*" points to something that lies beyond redemption and memorialization, and which is not reducible to the dialectical motifs of contradiction, negation and reconciliation. It indicates a point where the dialectic begins to stutter, and attempts to name a facticity that negation is unable to negate. With this phrase Aira's text affirms the existence of an in-between time that has yet to be accounted for by the calculative drives of modern techno-science and neoliberalism, and which similarly does not belong to the metaphysical understanding of time as a sequence of self-contained Nows or presents. This time of overexposure is the zero-degree of relation; it is an opening to the other, to what is still strange in the familiar or still estranged within the present. It is thus also an opening to the future, which as futurity marks every present as different from itself. In the passage cited above a horrific death has been foretold as if it had already happened, a death by asphyxiation or irradiation, suffered in utter solitude and absolute oblivion. This imminent death bears the marks of repetition (it is a foregone conclusion, announced as if it had already happened) and absolute singularity (the experience is almost unimaginable; its story will never be told). Facticity here is all there is. Does this mean that the

non-negatable remainder of calculation is in fact the secret truth of every determination of *being*, that *mientras tanto*—the fatal leftover or in-between time that remains when all hope for progress, development, or even just the survival of the selfsame have been stripped away—is another name for *ser*?

The phrase “*mientras tanto*” provides a cognate in Aira’s novel for the existential time of being-toward-death in which *Dasein* is marked from the outset by a singular, mortal destiny that it can neither master, share or avoid. *Mientras tanto* names a second-order time beyond any hope of salvation from or redemption of finitude. Being-toward-death, however, also names a time of calculation through which *Dasein* seeks to anticipate and account for its horizontal finitude. In this latter sense “*mientras tanto*,” the time we are given according to our constitutive mortality, would also be the time of technics: of mass media and other modern tele-technologies but also of writing, literature, and the law of iterability that is inscribed in all languages. If this between-time of technics and repeatability appears last, after everything has been stripped away, shipwrecked and abandoned, this is because it comes first: it is that archaic time in which the human is born, albeit always “prematurely”—born into a need to turn outside itself toward the domain of prostheses and toward others. If the human has no essence or being to speak of before the turn to technics then in *mientras tanto* we can hear the murmur of a time that will have been forgotten in every account of technology as the instrument of a subject or as means to a non-technical end.

The phrase *mientras tanto* underscores a subtle but crucial distinction between Aira’s text and Sarlo’s critique of mass media technics. One can certainly identify moments in the novel that appear to share or at least mimic Sarlo’s critical views of the complicity between

mass media and neoliberal politics, which together threaten to deafen our ears to the voice of history. *La villa* can no doubt be read as a denunciation of the technical reconfiguration of post-dictatorship Argentina. But for Aira's novel technics is neither the problem nor the solution. As prosthesis, supplement, and even language, it is that which is both closest and most strange. In short, it is that to which we must open ourselves in order to think, act in the world, and relate to one another. By the same token if we take this Aira passage seriously then Ludmer's account of post-autonomous literature would be nothing more than a performative contradiction, assuming we understand the term chronologically as what comes after the historical time of aesthetic autonomy. If it is to attain any kind of conceptual clarity *post-autonomía* must be thought as *the other side of autonomía*.

The Dis-jointures of History: Market, Virtuoso Labor, and Natural History in Post-dictatorship Chile

Me pregunto: cuál será la manera posible de referirse a la historia política chilena cuando esa historia es a la vez personal [y] corporal, sin caer en el absorto vértigo testimonial o en el previsible ejercicio de construir una mirada “inteligente” o distante sobre acontecimientos que radican caóticamente—sin principio ni fin—en la memoria y cuyas huellas perviven en una atemporalidad transversal que, a menudo, asalta perceptiblemente en el presente.

—Diamela Eltit, “Las dos caras de la moneda”

History begins where memory ends. It begins where representation ends.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, “Finite History”

It is...event-ness that one must think, but that best resists what is called the concept, if not thinking. And it will not be thought as long as one relies on the simple (ideal, mechanical, or dialectical) opposition of the real presence of the real present or the living present to its ghostly simulacrum, the opposition of the effective or actual (*wirklich*) to the non-effective, inactual, which is also to say, as long as one relies on a general temporality or an historical temporality made up of the *successive* linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

The word wounds and pierces me, opening a breach in my kidney.

—Diamela Eltit, *Mano de obra*

The cut made by the signifying chain is the only cut that verifies the structure of the subject as a discontinuity in the real. If linguistics enables us to see the signifier as the determinant of the signified, analysis reveals the truth of this relationship by making holes in meaning the determinants in discourse.

—Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire”

In the first of the five epigraphs to this chapter, a passage taken from a 1997 essay entitled “Las dos caras de la moneda” (Eltit 2000), Diamela Eltit poses a fundamental question for post-dictatorship cultural production: how to narrate unpleasant or disruptive experiences from the recent past, experiences associated with loss, destruction and defeat, in a way that would allow these experiences to be understood in their social-historical context but without thereby losing sight of how history itself marks us on a personal and corporeal level? Narrative

is governed by an episodic time of causes and effects that privileges the final denouement as if there were an overarching logic governing the flow of everything that happens, culminating inevitably in the historical present. How then, Eltit asks, can the logical time of narrative capture or do justice to the transversal and contingent character of experiences that cut across regions ordinarily considered to be separate and distinct, such as the public and the personal, or the intangible realms of cognition and understanding versus the material register of the body? Post-dictatorship writing faces the challenge of avoiding what Eltit understands to be two dead ends: the self-absorbed mirror of testimonial narrative with its focus on the subject, and the false objectivity of historiography which seeks to recover an ideal past in which events were in full possession of their own meaning. She then proceeds to add an additional layer of complexity to the problem. On one hand the memory traces she has in mind—she hasn't yet told us anything about what these experiences might have entailed—have, akin to the structure of perception and cognition described by Freud, been inscribed on psychic and/or corporeal surfaces in such a way that they exist outside of time (“sin principio ni fin”).⁶⁶ On the other hand these same memory traces have a way of crossing over into the temporal register of the present (“una atemporalidad transversal”) where they are experienced as so many “assaults” on the here and now. The “eternal” or atemporal nature of these inscriptions thereby gives rise to a secondary and untimely—but nonetheless temporal—experience of return.

While biographical criticism would no doubt conclude that Eltit is alluding here to a very specific historical context, the fundamental problem thematized here—of narration and experience, history and memory, event and repetition—is not unique to the Chilean experience of dictatorship in the 1970s and 80s. As Freud proposed in comparing the process whereby

sensory data is registered in the psychic apparatus to a so-called “mystic writing pad,” even the experiences of everyday life entail mediation and inscription in a register other than that of consciousness. The supposedly “immediate” nature of lived experience is therefore already characterized by several forms of mediation: inscription, deferral, and repetition (Freud 1961, 230-31). The mystic writing pad, as Freud explains, was an early 20th century commercial writing device consisting of a wax or resin tablet covered by a pair of semi-transparent sheets that were glued together at both ends; the sheets were fixed permanently to the top of the tablet while the lower edges rested loosely on the wax tablet. The bottom of the two translucent sheets was made of waxed paper and the top sheet was durable celluloid. To use the mystic writing pad, one would press with a stylus on the transparent sheets; the pressure of the stylus point would cause the bottom of the two translucent sheets to adhere to the underlying wax or resin wherever the stylus may have passed, leaving visibly darkened outlines in its wake. The written text can then be erased simply by lifting the adjoined sheets away from the wax base; when the sheets return to their original position the contact with the wax has been broken. The tablet itself, however, continues to bear the traces of prior inscriptions that are no longer visible on the transparent surface.

For Freud this technological mechanism offers an analogy for how the mechanics of perception draw on conscious and unconscious processes. Like the celluloid sheet, the psychic register that first receives external stimuli—Freud calls this register the “perceptual-conscious system”—retains no permanent record of those occurrences, while the material medium in which these sensory traces are inscribed and stored belongs to another system that adjoins the conscious processes. As Jacques Derrida notes in his commentary on Freud’s essay (Derrida

1978), the Freudian analogy reminds us that all experience, no matter how “immediate,” is always already marked by mediation and deferral; there is no such thing as a direct or first-hand experience insofar as all experience is mediated by way of this transversal movement of inscription and transferal between recording and transmitting systems. When we experience something for the first time we are already experiencing it “after the fact” as it were: through the traces of prior experiences and through the signifiers produced by the unconscious as the supplementary condition of possibility for any experience of presence. As Derrida puts it in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” “writing supplements perception before perception even appears to itself” (Derrida 1978, 224).

In the “Dos caras de la moneda” essay Eltit is somewhat provocatively using the historical trauma of September 1973 and its aftermath to highlight a general set of questions and problems having to do with perception and experience, cognition and materiality, memory and narration. It is fitting that this somewhat surprising formal juxtaposition between the singularity of September 1973 and the generality of “experience as such” should be duplicated at the level of what the essay appears to be telling us: that all experience, understood as singular encounter or contact with the real, turns out to be mediated by structures of repetition.

One of the key terms in Eltit’s essay is *golpe*, which mobilizes an array of associations having to do with contact between bodies together with the effects of that contact. A list of ideas and meanings associated with *golpe* would include: blow, scar, bruise, fracture, mutilation, interruption, surprise, shock, accident, assault, pain, aggressive play, and symptom. Each of these possible connotations refers back to a scenario in which one body or corporeal

surface comes into contact with another, initiating a transfer of forces and stimuli that in turn crosses over from outside to inside, from soma to psyche—and then back again. We are prompted to envision a scenario in which some form of ideality—recognition, cognition, understanding, judgment—overwrites and codifies the material register in which bodies reside, move, and interact. One of the primary concerns in Eltit’s essay has to do with the temporality of experience and memory insofar as their end result (consciousness, self-consciousness, etc.) tends to project itself as the origin or justification of the process; what gets forgotten, meanwhile, is the necessary role played by materiality for spiritual life.

El golpe, territorio privilegiado y repetido de la infancia, cuya frecuencia ocurre bajo la forma de la caída o del ataque, es quizás la primera memoria, la primera práctica en la que se internaliza de manera carnal esa palabra cuando el cuerpo estalla materialmente como cuerpo o aparece en su diferencia con lo otro—el otro—ese precoz contrincante que se diagrama como cuerpo enemigo desde el golpe mismo. (Eltit 2000, 17-18)

As sign par excellence of infantile experience *golpe* holds the place of a mythical first memory. Repeated endlessly, as with a toddler losing balance and falling or suddenly seizing a companion’s toy, it is the *golpe* or the series of *golpes* that first delineates a distinction between inside and outside, psyche and soma, self and other, proper and improper. Here we have a complement to the Lacanian scene of the “mirror stage” in which misrecognition inaugurates the life of the autonomous Ego or subject; for Eltit it is the materiality of bodily contact that first gives shape to the self in distinction from the other. *Golpe* names an instance of contact that gives rise to corporeal sensations, which will in turn help to delineate a sense of

self, a *that happened to me*. As Freud puts it in *The Ego and the Id*, the Ego and its structure first derive from bodily sensations; the self that experiences things as happening *to it*, and which sees itself as the “depth” that resides beneath skin and flesh, is in fact a “projection” produced by the bodily surface in its interactions with the world: “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego: it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (Freud 1923, 215-16). *Golpe* names a material occurrence—a collision, a puncturing, a blow—that first delineates what will become a series of self-evident differences: between one body and another, and between corporeal and spiritual realms (soul, self, consciousness). *Golpe* thus designates a materiality prior to matter, prior to distinctions between matter and form, the sensible and the intelligible, and so on. *Golpe* is the name for an event whose occurrence will have given rise to an entire system of perception and intelligibility, but which for necessary reasons is not itself registered within that system. The origin of perception and consciousness, and of the self and its relation to others, cannot be subsumed within the distinctions to which it gives shape.

Somewhat paradoxically, alongside this meditation on the absent material origin of self-consciousness we find in Eltit’s essay a thought of event as repetition. Among its many possible meanings *golpe* names the symptom whose return “assaults” us in the here and now. We should keep in mind that the term alludes, on one hand, to the historical events of September 1973 in which the Chilean “experiment with socialism” through democratic means was interrupted, and replaced within the course of a few years by the world’s first experiment with neoliberalism. On the other hand, her use of the term also points to a thought of history as event, as an occurrence that shapes perception and memory while resisting cognitive capture. *Golpe* as material (i.e., non-idealizable) event traces a horizon of intelligibility within which the

here and now can understand itself, but it does not itself appear within this horizontal frame as one entity or moment among others.

In recent years a sometimes-heated debate has arisen in Chilean critical circles concerning how artistic production under dictatorship should be understood in its relation to history—social and political history as much as art history. The debate has to do with competing critical assessments of a neo-avant garde movement whose productivity peaked in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁷ This movement, which Nelly Richard famously dubbed “la escena de Avanzada,” draws on visual and performance art as well as poetry and narrative. Its participants share at least two primary concerns: denouncing violent repression under military dictatorship on the one hand, and calling attention to the severe impact of neoliberal monetarist policies on the most impoverished and vulnerable sectors of Chilean society on the other. The highlighting of how neoliberal reforms in Chile led to increased inequality and suffering is of course intended to refute the self-congratulatory discourse of neoliberal economists, as exemplified by Milton Friedman’s 1982 proclamation that a pair of “miracles” had occurred in Chile: first, the (arguable) return to relative economic stability following the hyperinflation of the early 1970s; and second, the fact that a free-market economy had been introduced by a military government with a centralized, authoritarian state apparatus (Friedman 1982, 59).⁶⁸ At the heart of the more recent critical debate, which picks up steam in the first decade of the new millennium, is the question of what sort of meaning the critical concept of the avant garde retains in the wake of September 11. I will say more about what is at stake in this question in a moment. Although Eltit’s *Mano de obra* was published long after the historical conjuncture in which the *Avanzada* emerged, the critical debate about the Chilean neo-avant garde has

something important to say about how we read Eltit's post-dictatorship writing. Her 2002 novel shares fundamental concerns with the *Avanzada* scene having to do with the social impact of neoliberalism and what can be expected of art and literature in the time of neoliberal-administered globalization. Factors that distinguish *Mano de obra* from the *Avanzada*, meanwhile, include the obvious difference between two political regimes (representative democracy and dictatorship) together with the various ways—some of them more obvious than others—in which globalization has become increasingly entrenched (and arguably also increasingly violent) over the course of the two decades that separate the publication of *Mano de obra* from the *Avanzada* scene.

In her groundbreaking 1986 book *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*, Nelly Richard frames the aesthetic and political aims of this neo-avant garde movement in the following manner. On one hand, the *Avanzada* deploys its creative forces in order to interfere with the languages of administrative authority and power deployed by the military junta and its allied institutions.⁶⁹ As “disruptive force” artistic form can no longer be understood simply as a vessel or mirror whose primary purpose would be to convey or represent a meaning or message whose origin lies elsewhere, outside of the creative realm of art. Literary and artistic composition become politically charged spaces or procedures not because they transmit information or judgments about the external world (though this can of course happen) but because, in the context of the Pinochetista restructuring of Chilean society, these artistic fields constitute sites where the very determination of truth—of what counts as meaningful speech versus what is to be discounted as mere babble or outdated jargon—is at stake. The avant garde's historical association with critique of prevailing social forms and logics thus reemerges

as contestation of the authoritarian neoliberal common sense that prevails in Chile in the wake of September 1973.

In at least two different respects the artistic deployment of language, image, and symbolic production as fields of contestation helps explain why the works of the Chilean neo-avant garde are notoriously resistant to interpretation, favoring ambiguity, circumlocution, and linguistic play over transparency and immediacy. For one, says Richard, the conditions for artistic production in the late 1970s and early 80s are constrained by the practical matters of political repression, censorship, and fear or self-censorship. While the use of metaphor and ellipsis serves to dissimulate political content that might run afoul of state censors, such rhetorical devices also stage a confrontation with the instrumental logic of business culture and its demand for efficacy and transparency in communication. While the *Avanzada* conceives of itself as a disruptive agent vis-à-vis the forces of reinscription that are in the process of transforming the social and symbolic order of post-1973 Chile this contestatory movement also breaks with old assumptions about the representational nature of art, assumptions that are prevalent in both traditionalist-conservative and radical artistic traditions. The *Avanzada* constitutes a critique of the post-Kantian ideal of aesthetic autonomy as well as a departure from earlier radical traditions, in which art was frequently instrumentalized in the service of one or another ideological program.

Richard also locates in *Avanzada* artistic production a solution to the paralysis and self-censorship that afflicted much of the Chilean Left in the aftermath of September 1973. As artistic and critical practice the *Avanzada* endeavors to invent a new symbolic fabric and to initiate a new network of libidinal investments that could replace the old political imaginary

that was shattered in September 1973. In so doing it also seeks to steer clear of the ideological polarization that plagued Chilean politics in the early 1970s.

[La escena de Avanzada] emerge en plena zona de catástrofe cuando ha naufragado el sentido, debido no sólo al fracaso de un proyecto histórico, sino al quiebre de todo el sistema de referencias sociales y culturales que, hasta 1973, articulaba—para el sujeto chileno—el manejo de sus claves de realidad y pensamiento. Desarticulado ese sistema y la organicidad social de su sujeto, es el lenguaje mismo y su textura intercomunicativa lo que deberá ser reinventado.

(Richard 1986, 2)

To assess the catastrophic effects of September 11, 1973 and its aftermath, Richard asserts, we need to look beyond the immediate circumstances in which the Chilean military deposed a popularly-elected President and thereby brought to an abrupt and violent conclusion the possibility of achieving socialism through a democratic process. What was destroyed during and after September 1973, she asserts, was not only the generational project of the Chilean Left of the late 1960s and early 70s, but an entire social and cultural referential system that had served for the better part of the 20th century to orient perception, thought, speech and action in the public sphere in Chile. Above and beyond what it might have meant for the Chilean Left, 9/11/73 names the destruction of the *res publica* together with its conceptual and pragmatic vocabularies, its parameters for understanding and acting.⁷⁰

In contrast to the deployment of aesthetic experience as a way of interrupting authoritarian neoliberalism's prevailing common sense, the *Avanzada* also seeks to create a new shared referential framework and collective idiom that has freed itself from the constraints

and coerciveness of authoritarian order as well as from the culture of fear that dominated much of Chilean society during the mid to late 1970s. The aim is not only to establish less coercive and more democratic parameters for social coexistence; it is to inaugurate a new symbolic order that could help to revitalize personal and collective desire following the collective shock of September 1973. For the *Avanzada* the solution to the task of world-creation is found in the figure of the fragment, which serves both as a memory of what was destroyed in September 1973 and as the index of a new beginning, a new way of being in common that would renounce the absolutist claims found in both the Latin American Left of the 1960s and the authoritarian traditionalist responses of the Right. The aesthetic of the fragment as conceived by the *Avanzada* carries out two artistic operations at the same time: on one hand it constitutes a form of historical memory that attests to the secret connection between progress and destruction, while on the other it proposes that we consider dislocation and the impossibility of wholeness—the impossibility of a social totality that would have freed itself finally from all forms of strife, conflict and difference—as the factual conditions in which any world first becomes possible. Fragmentation performs double duty in Richard’s account, indicating both the actual conditions for which art offers a critical response and an originary condition of finitude that constitutes both the limit and the only hope for a democratic project in the 1980s.⁷¹ The *Avanzada* is thus a reflection on the idea that what we call world takes root in a void or a gap. In emphasizing the creative potential of the fragment, Richard takes pains to distinguish Chilean neo-avant garde production of the 1970s from the utopian tendencies that defined militant experience in Latin America during previous decades. The *Avanzada* rejects the utopian determination of historical time that is programmed in advance by the idea of a

unified, homogeneous and conflict-free social totality, e.g., the plenitude and harmony that would obtain with the end of separation and alienated labor, or the natural efficacy and productivity of the market.

Las figuras que construye esta escena son más propiamente atópicas que utópicas: más que la superación de la realidad en la idealidad de un más allá (ficticio o imaginario) que evada las limitantes de un aquí y ahora declarado inhabitable, las obras postulan—desde el arte—el no lugar de la distancia que separa lo real de su(s) otro(s) deseados; la exploración de esa distancia nómada como desarreglo calculado de las sistematicidades vigentes, como infracción a la normalidad pauteada por las técnicas disciplinarias de adiestramiento del sentido, como práctica de la disensión. (5)

Whereas the vanguard traditions of the early 20th century often dedicated themselves to the figuration of imagined realities that had yet to see the light of day, as an atopic praxis the *Avanzada* attends not to ideality per se but rather to the ideal insofar as its semblance helps to illuminate a gap between the actual and the possible. Its aesthetic object, in other words, is not a utopian future but rather the structuring void at the heart of authoritarian neoliberal social order. The *Avanzada*, as Richard understands it, is a radically anti-representational project. It will be important to bear this point in mind when it comes to exploring some of the most forceful and compelling critiques of Richard's account of the *Avanzada*.

Critical emphasis on the negative (the void, the gap) in the work of the *Avanzada* is echoed in Richard's analysis by what she calls "a practice of the interstice" (11). Aesthetic thematization of intermediacy pushes back against the totalization of sense at work in such

disparate projects as sovereign dictatorship, neoliberal Consensus, and the political militancy that characterized much of the 1960s Latin American Left. The interstice forms an internal limit for any and all ordering and accounting procedures. There can be no count of the whole—of bodies, social categories, roles, words, and so on—that does not rely on interstitial spaces, which is to say the gaps and the contiguity between constituted, recognizable spaces: between male and female, bourgeois and proletariat, intellectual and worker, and so on. And yet the interstice itself cannot be counted or ordered; the sexual difference that allows for the distinction between “masculine” and “feminine,” for example, cannot itself be assigned a sex or a gender. The interstice therefore introduces a limit for the calculative logic that governs politics (the friend/enemy distinction) and the mediatic regime of globalization (complete coverage, full exposure). Its prominence in neo-avant garde art brings to light those points or moments where the logic of the prevailing order is made to tremble.

For Richard it is the *Avanzada*'s focus on the body in its materiality that best illustrates both the new challenges faced by Chilean contestatory movements in the aftermath of September 1973 well as the strategies developed by the *Avanzada* for intervening in the new conjuncture that is authoritarian neoliberalism. Neo-avant garde attention to the body should be understood in part as a response to what was happening to the concept of the public in Chile in the aftermath of the 1973 *golpe de estado*, when established public spaces and institutions—including labor movements, political parties, free elections, the free press, and so on—were severely curtailed or suspended. In a context where public space as such has been subjugated to the state of exception, the private sphere—and especially the body—offer new sites for struggle between power and the resistance that is proper to life. The body is not just

one site among many; as a primary site for interrogating confrontations between power and resistance, the body calls attention to a tectonic shift whereby the old delineations between public and political on the one hand, and private and personal on the other, have become unstable. As interstitial surface the body makes evident a shift in contemporary configurations of power, in which the spectacular displays of September 1973 give way to more subtle, routine and unremarkable forms of subjugation.

La elección de la corporalidad como material de trabajo en el arte...habla de reasignarle valores de procesamiento crítico a todas las zonas de experiencia conformadoras de una cotidianeidad social: de producir *interferencias* críticas en esas zonas que abarcan el cuerpo y el paisaje como escenarios de autocensura o de microrepresión.” (Richard 1986, 5)

In focusing artistic attention on corporeal surfaces—through “body art” in particular—the *Avanzada* bears witness to the emergence of new forms of power that closely align with Deleuze’s notion of control as opposed to the modern disciplinary power theorized by Foucault (Deleuze 1992). A similar dynamic can be observed in the generalization of corporate supervisory power in *Mano de obra*, to which I will turn next. The reorientation of artistic and literary focus toward the body, seen as an interstitial contact surface where the personal/private and the mechanisms of power interact, sets the tone for the *Avanzada*’s artistic practice of “critical interference”: the task of art, as this movement understands it, is to explore and make visible how the body in its materiality constitutes a site of struggle between new forms of power and resistance for these apparatuses of capture, control and subjugation. A passage from Deleuze’s essay on societies of control could provide the epigraph for the

Avanzada: “there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (Deleuze 1992, 4).

What Richard and others refer to as *el Golpe* tends, as we will now see, to function as a metonymical reference that holds the place of a series of historical occurrences that began in late 1960s. The term holds the place for a chain of effects that is not governed by any discernible necessity—no predetermining goal or rationale—and whose meaning is subject to retroactive transformations in the context of subsequent historical developments. This metonymic chain is not a sequence in the traditional, linear sense of the term; its figure attests to a strange multidirectional temporality in which any particular occurrence may be at one and the same time: an effect that is made possible by the occurrences that precede it; a deviation that departs from the political intentions that engendered it; and a cause that retroactively confers new meaning onto the past. *Golpe* in this context designates as a discrete event something that in fact also demands to be understood as repetition or as part of a circuit defined by retroaction. What follows is a condensed account of how these conceptual categories—event, repetition and reinscription—interact with one another in the Chilean context.

As Javier Martínez and Alvaro Díaz argue in their 1996 book *Chile: The Great Transformation*, economic restructuring in Chile following the 1973 golpe was facilitated—in a great irony of history—by several waves of reformism that were initiated in the late 1960s. These reforms involved nationalization of latifundios and copper mines that had long been in the hands of the Chilean oligarchy. The expropriation strategy was initiated by the moderate Christian Democratic regime of Eduardo Frei (1964-70) and later extended and radicalized

under Salvador Allende's socialist Popular Unity government (1970-73). Nationalization broke the traditional power monopoly of Chile's landed oligarchy and deposited considerable resources in the hands of the state.⁷² In the aftermath of September 1973 much of the expropriated land and capital was transferred back into the private sector—not to the landed oligarchy from whence they came, however, but to a newly emergent group of entrepreneurs and investors who were in a position to purchase land and capital at greatly reduced prices. The golpe is thus only poorly understood as a power play in a long-standing conflict between the landed elite and the working class. The turbulent transformative process that runs from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s in Chile more closely resembles what Marx described as “so-called primitive accumulation,” in which the violence of destruction and expropriation gives rise to a new dominant social class and to a new logic for organizing social relations, time, legal codes, and so on. The imposition of neoliberal economic reform and monetary policy in Chile after the 1973 golpe has as its primary goal the dismantling of the modern state form and its role as mediator between global capital and the local (Martínez and Díaz 1996, 88-89).

In his fascinating monograph on the political thought of Jaime Guzmán, an economic advisor to Pinochet as well as one of his leading ideologues, Renato Cristi documents how Pinochet's regime continued to redefine the meaning of the golpe during the mid-1970s and in accordance with the emergence of new economic and juridical goals (Cristi 2000). In the weeks and months leading up to the September 1973 golpe de estado the anti-Allende opposition in Chile had been calling for military intervention on the premise that Allende's political maneuvers were in violation of the rule of law established in Chile's 1925 Constitution. These allegations prompted the call to protect constitutional rule of law, and thereby provided the

major pretext under which the military overthrew Allende and established a ruling junta in his place. In its inaugural moment the junta was seen publicly—and, just as importantly, apparently understood itself—as a commissarial dictatorship charged with protecting constitutional rule of law against the twin threats of disorder and Marxist dictatorship.⁷³ However, in the days following the September 11th golpe and in response to internal conversations between the military command and its legal and economic advisors, the regime's self-understanding soon evolved into something more closely resembling what Schmitt would call sovereign dictatorship. The first clear indication of this metamorphosis in the meaning of the golpe and dictatorship came in the days following the coup when the junta announced the creation of a new Commission charged with producing the first draft of what was to be a new Constitution, which would become known as the Constitution of 1980.⁷⁴ Jaime Guzmán, then a 27-year old Constitutional law professor at the Catholic University of Chile, was selected by the junta to head the Comisión Ortúzar. Although Guzmán had asserted publicly in his mid-September university lectures that the military command believed it was acting in defense of the existing Constitution, according to Cristi he was at the same time working to convince the junta that the 1925 Constitution was in fact already dead—it had been killed by Allende with his subversion of the rule of law—and that a new constitution was therefore not only desirable but necessary. One of the most significant differences between the 1925 and 1980 Constitutions involves a discrepancy in how political sovereignty is determined. Whereas the 1925 Constitution acknowledged the Chilean people as constituent power, the new constitution arrogated this sovereign power to the junta itself. It was not until 1975, however, that the junta finally announced publicly—again, through Jaime Guzmán in a communique published in the Santiago

daily *El Mercurio*—that the 1925 Constitution was no longer in effect (Cristi 2000, 33-36).

Over the course of the first decade of dictatorship Guzmán's thought reveals its own transformations. These changes are consistent with the ongoing process of reinscription that I am suggesting is at work in public perception and discourse about *el Golpe* and the meaning of September 11. Guzmán came from a deeply conservative Catholic background. As a student and a junior faculty member he advocated a traditional form of national corporatism, which he—like many Latin American intellectuals of the late 19th and 20th century—viewed as providing a moral buttress against the destructive forces of modernization and the amoral tendencies of consumerism. After assuming his new role as leading juridical theorist for the junta, however, Guzmán began to see Milton Friedman's account of the moral foundations of liberalism in new light. As Cristi tells it, Guzmán's reservations about capitalism appear to subside in the mid-1970s, and by 1980 he had become a staunch supporter of Friedrich Hayek's brand of neoliberalism, which advocated doing away with the Welfare State and returning to the "Lochner Era" of unregulated liberty of contract as the only effective solution to the moral and economic crises of modernity (Cristi 2000, 192-97).

A turn to Willy Thayer's 2003 response to Richard's theorization of the *Avanzada* can help shed further light on how this ongoing process of reinscription informs our understanding of both the *Golpe* and artistic responses to it. Thayer's critical assessment of the Chilean neo-avant garde furthermore establishes parameters for exploring what kind of relation Eltit's *Mano de obra* maintains with the avant garde. Like Richard, Thayer understands the vanguard tradition as grounded in two fundamental aims. The first tendency is what he calls the critique of representation, which itself entails two related registers: first, a critique of the account of the

essence of art as mimetic representation, which determination runs from Plato through the realist tradition and its post-19th century legacy (the regional novel, la novela social, testimonio, etc.); second, a critique of the liberal reduction of politics to representative structures and institutions, which goes hand in hand with the suppression of radical forms of political action and politicization. Alongside this double critical impulse Thayer also understands the avant garde tradition as striving to bring about a rupture within prevailing social organizational logic. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, he terms this rupturalist impulse a “voluntad de acontecimiento” [literally, “will to event”] (Thayer 2006, 16).

This association of the avant garde with a rupturalist intention differs little, if at all, from Richard’s influential account of the *Avanzada*. The real disagreement arises because, according to Thayer, Richard takes for granted the possibility of generating a ruptural event in a context where representation may no longer have a primary role to play in organizing social relations and justifying power relations. In that case, Thayer suggests, it would no longer be clear whether critique and rupture can still be expected to provide the impulse for social transformation. From a post-millennial perspective, Thayer argues, the *Avanzada* shows itself to have been a belated attempt to recover an aesthetic and political modernity that had already been eclipsed through the total integration of Latin American localities into the global capitalist system, along with the concurrent privatization of all public spheres and subordination of politics to the market as first principle of the social. The attribution of a ruptural potential to artistic innovation in Chile today stems from a critical forgetting or refusal of the fact that the real rupture, according to Thayer, has already taken place with the *Golpe*. In retrospect *el Golpe* can be seen to have beaten the *Avanzada* to the punch and already carried out its vanguard

“will to event.”

The provocative assertion that the Golpe constitutes the real event of recent Chilean history responds—albeit without naming it as such—to Federico Galende’s assertion that the Unidad Popular was “el verdadero acontecimiento de Chile” (Galende 2005, 62). As Thayer sees it there is an unexamined formal symmetry between the avant garde tradition—as exemplified by either the Unidad Popular or the Avanzada—and its attempt to bring about what Walter Benjamin called the “true state of exception” on the one hand, and the Golpe understood in Benjaminian terms as routinization of the state of exception on the other hand. Where Benjamin posits a distinction between “routinized” and “true” states of exception, Thayer proposes that the one (routinized state of exception) has annulled the possibility of the other. By the same token its institutionalization exposes the hidden truth of the constituted order, in which the consensus and legitimacy presupposed by the social pact have always served to occlude or naturalize an underlying violence. As Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott puts it, “through its so-called state of exception dictatorship ends up confirming the exceptionalist foundation of Chilean history in its more than two hundred years of political violence, “Republicanism” and “rule of law” notwithstanding” (Villalobos-Ruminott 2013, 134). Thayer would therefore also reject the relevance of the Schmittian distinction between “commissarial dictatorship” and “sovereign dictatorship” today. That distinction has been relegated to secondary status due to the fact that what the Golpe exposes in Thayer’s view is a secret link between the ruptural promise of the vanguard tradition and the absolutization of the state and its representational apparatuses.

Although the tenor of this specific debate does not always allow for such subtleties, we

should not conclude too hastily that Thayer is simply dismissing Richard's account as mere ideology of the *Avanzada*. His contribution to our understanding of this scene is to call attention to a peculiar temporal structure of critical insight and knowledge when it comes to history. His response to Richard seeks to bring forth something that could not have been apparent to Richard in the mid-1980s, something that only becomes legible today, twenty or more years after *Margins and Institutions* and when the form of life it sought to theorize has grown old.

Thayer's assertion that the Golpe already accomplished the purported aim of the neo-avant garde requires some explanation. It is not difficult to see how the Golpe initiates a break with the past insofar as the military junta first suspends a Constitution that had oriented almost half a century of democratization and development in Chile, and then later declares that Constitution dead. But the previously-mentioned redefinition of political sovereignty and Constituent power (as belonging to the junta rather than the People) cannot alone bear the explanatory weight of Thayer's argument. After all, one could certainly envision a scenario where critical interventions in the post-Golpe years play a role in swaying popular opinion against dictatorship and thereby hasten its demise, leading either to restoration of the old democratic tradition or the institution of an alternative to the sovereign dictatorship of 1973-89. Thayer's critique, however, asserts that the old association between critique of representation and rupture has become inoperative today, because what the Golpe ushers in is a new order in which the old political logic, grounded in the principles of representation and sovereignty, is now subordinated to a new logic predicated on the full integration of the national within the global capitalist system.

The new order inaugurated by the Golpe is one that Thayer terms “post-sovereignty,” and which I in turn am calling interregnum. Interregnum as I use the term here is no longer synonymous with a time in between sovereign orders, nor does it name the disappearance of sovereignty tout court. Interregnum is the time of political sovereignty’s subordination to the requirements and dictates of global capital and, at the local/national level, the administrative rationale of neoliberalism. Indeed, what could be more compelling evidence of this subordination of political sovereignty to the economic than the observation that the economic principles of liberalism function equally well under democracy, dictatorship, or anything else in between (Thayer 2006, 84)? Jaime Guzmán was also well aware of the indifference of neoliberal order to democratic or non-democratic political forms; he asserted that if and when democracy is conceived in Republican terms (as freedom from domination) rather than according to liberal criteria (as freedom from interference) then democracy in fact becomes a detriment to the liberal conception of freedom, progress and security:

Democracy is a form of government, and as such it is only a means—and it is by no means the only one or the best in all circumstances—for assisting liberty, which in turn is the form of life toward which all political systems should take as their end or goal. This form of life encompasses security as well as spiritual and material progress in the social and economic realms. (Guzman 1979, 18; as quoted in Cristi 2000, 11; my translation).

The organization of social relations (time, labor, bodies, etc.) is grounded in the logic of entrepreneurialism and investment, whose truths comprise the common preunderstanding that goes without saying and determines what counts as intelligible, reasonable, practicable, and so

on. Within this new post-sovereign order, neo-avant garde movements may well be capable of producing their critiques and their breaks; and they may even be very good critiques and very interesting breaks. What has changed, however, is that we can no longer expect of critique that it provide the spark for a ruptural event, because in the prevailing order the targets of critique—representation and ideology—have now been relegated to subservient positions (Thayer 2006, 16). The inevitable conclusion to which Thayer's essay points (without actually saying as much) is that we must look elsewhere to find the real target of this movement's artistic innovations and interventions, or else we must look precisely to the *absence* of any stable distinction between appearances and truth, surface and depth, narrative and reality in order to understand what the Avanzada might have been responding to—albeit without necessarily being fully aware of it at the time. It is precisely in view of the void that appears with interregnum, a void left by the retreat and exhaustion of old models of determining who and what counts (as the rightful place of members of the community, as reasonable speech rather than babble, and so on), that the artists and writers of the Avanzada seek to envision and invent new forms of being with others.

We now come to the heart of Thayer's response to Richard:

El Golpe globalizador, treinta años después, opera póstumamente la deflación de la voluntad vanguardista de presencia (deflación de la *presentación de lo impresentable*) al transparentar lo impresentable, la presencia, como maqueta.

La globalización no es otra cosa que la nihilización póstuma de la voluntad acontecimiento que activó a la vanguardia. La verdad del Golpe la experimentamos más ahora, en el intercambio globalizado, en que no hay

tiempo prometido en el tiempo intercambiado. Lo que póstumamente se revela con el Golpe—y esto sería lo siniestro que se ha presentado—no es la irrupción de una presencia que devasta toda forma trascendiendo la inmanencia representacional del sujeto histórico. Lo que con el Golpe se ha presentado—y esto es lo que sabemos ahora, en el momento postdictatorial—es que la presencia prometida no era más que una forma progresista en la teleología estatal de la representación: era un recurso más de capital. (31-32)

That the old structures against which critique aimed to bring about a ruptural event have now been dismantled or displaced was not readily apparent to the *Avanzada* in its moment. It only becomes fully evident after the fact: after the military intervention of September 1973 that interrupted Chile's democratic experiment with socialism, after the transfer of Constituent power from the People to military junta, and after the neo-avant garde response that culminates in the publication of *Margins and Institutions* in the mid-1980s. Akin to Freud's understanding of the structure of trauma as *Nachträglichkeit*, the term Golpe names a series of transformations through which the past is subjected to ongoing resignification. What is more, in Thayer's view this deferred disclosure reveals in uncanny fashion (*lo siniestro*) the secret, long-forgotten identity between avant garde rupturalism and the representational domain to which it always understood itself as opposed. The avant garde would therefore find its ultimate truth in the modern configuration of the state as mediating and disseminating agent for capital, both of which are defined by a nihilistic postulation of the will as origin of all truth in the world.

As Thayer describes it the exhaustion of the avant garde and its rupturalist potential

only becomes fully clear in the aftermath of that *other* 9/11: the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington of September 2001. The latter 9/11 telegraphically designates the inauguration of a new time of global war in which the forces of capitalist globalization are engaged in endless conflict with violent fundamentalisms that are themselves the offshoot of capitalist globalization. However, this date also stands in metonymically for mediatization, or the mediatic integration of the planet through real-time telecommunicational technologies that serve to unify our world today within a single time (“real time”) and under the regime of the image in its im-mediacy.

La fotografía con que el número especial de El Mercurio del 11 de septiembre del 2001 hizo circular, una vez más, la imagen teledigital del cielo de Nueva York quemando las pantallas y las portadas del planeta, imagen que durante todo ese año no dejábamos de ver una y otra vez en la TV del escaparate o del restaurante, o en el sofá de la casa, o en la imaginación; tal fotografía no cita tanto el estallido de las torres, sino el evento de su mediación, el acontecimiento: la clausura del suceder en la mediación, y a la vez, el despliegue de la mediación como suceder. Esto equivale a decir que el velocidad de la mediación es más veloz que la velocidad del suceso o, como dice Virilio, “que los sucesos se virtualizan al momento mismo de suceder,” que el suceso es alcanzado en su velocidad por la velocidad de la mediación. (34)

Globalization exposes a turn and a hiatus within the time of modernity and its representational logic. “La clausura del suceder en la mediación”: what the ceaselessly-proliferating televisual images of the attacks on the Twin Towers remind us is that no event can

hope to arrive, to appear on the horizon of our world and be recognized as something that has taken place, except insofar as it aligns itself with prevailing forms of visibility and intelligibility, namely mediatic representation and the calculative rationale of the market. In other words, within the horizontal time of neoliberal globalization and mediatization there can be no event that is not *mediatable*. Thus globalization is itself the event, the Golpe that conditions what is perceivable and comprehensible in our world. Mediatization as one of the names for globalization does not itself arrive or happen so much as it is the condition of possibility for anything to take place today.

A partir del Golpe ya no actuamos-comprendemos desde la lengua estatal, el principio de la autonomía de los campos. El Golpe de Estado rompe con la ruptura (epokhe) que produjo la autonomía inaugurando, más que la neo-heteronomía, la invaginación entre empresa, transnacional, educación, pragmáticas gubernamentales, cotidianidad, massmediación, extensas superficies labores nihilizada, monopolio de la decisión, etc. (73)

While the term “Golpe” clearly alludes to Chilean social and political history the capitalization of the term in Thayer’s text serves to stake out a space in between empiricism and historicism on the one hand, and transcendence and idealist philosophy on the other. It designates an event that is irreducible to phenomenalization or transcendence. Heidegger’s distinction between *Offenbarung*, or the event of revelation, and *Offenbarkeit*, or the conditions of revealability, here proves inadequate.⁷⁵ Whereas Heidegger asserts that an event can only be perceived—and hence be recognized as having taken place—under certain conditions that are separate from the event in question (for instance, to register that a

“miracle” has taken place presupposes the existence of a certain religious faith and familiarity with a certain theological narrative structure), Thayer is attempting to think the event as transformation of the conditions under which we can perceive and recognize. The Heideggerian privileging of *Offenbarkeit* (revealability) over *Offenbarung* (the revealed) is thus set on its side and destabilized: *Offenbarung* or event of revelation is nothing other than a puncturing of *Offenbarkeit* or conditions of possibility for revelation. If the tectonic effects of the Golpe had already become discernable in the late 1970s, as Thayer asserts, it was nonetheless not possible to discern fully what is at stake in this global transformation until the *repetition of 9/11*.

If a second 9/11 must take place before the Owl of Minerva can spread its wings and fly, then is not what Thayer refers to as the event or the Golpe in fact another name for thinking the event as repetition? The Golpe, in distinction from all phenomenal golpes, gives a name to the epochal forces that are reshaping not only the social pact but also the ways in which we perceive, think and understand ourselves in relation to the world—and therefore also, inevitably, the ways in which we act or do not act. This is why the Golpe cannot be phenomenalized: because it is the blow that catches us by surprise, arresting and (re)conditioning all perception and all understanding. We cannot think or perceive the Golpe as such because it is precisely from something like a Golpe that perception and thought proceed in the first place.

I now turn to Diamela Eltit’s *Mano de obra* [The Workforce] (2002), an important literary reflection on the history of the present in postdictatorship Chile. Eltit’s novel juxtaposes a portrait of working conditions in neoliberal Chile over against allusions to the reinscriptions, erasures, disappearances and forgetting through which a space was cleared for neoliberal

hegemony in Chile beginning in the 1970s. A few words about the organization of the novel will help to put that juxtaposition in perspective. *Mano de obra* is divided into two parts, each of which is organized into chapters. The first part is set in a mega-supermarket, the “*súper*,” in which the narrator is employed under precarious and highly exploitative conditions. Each chapter from the first part bears a title whose meaning is never explained but which turn out to have been taken from the archives of early 20th century Chilean working class culture; each title is accompanied by a place name and a date (I will return to the matter of these chapter headings later). By contrast, narrative discourse in the first part focuses on the social and psychological dynamics in the contemporary supermarket, through the highly idiosyncratic first-person account of an entry-level employee who alternates between seeing himself as an extension of corporate power and a victim of its technologies of control. Devoid of any substantial plot, it relates the narrator’s interactions with demanding clientele and sinister supervisors during a holiday shopping frenzy. These dealings are woven into a meticulously-detailed account of his daily routine: stocking, arranging and maintaining produce displays; and responding to customer queries and requests. Narrative discourse deploys what Dianna Niebylski terms an “aesthetics of scarcity” [*estética de carencia*]: a minimalist plot mediated by a pseudo-realist attention to the minutiae of the narrator’s surroundings in lieu of the symbolic language of metaphor. While the privileging of referentiality over the ideality of signifying relations might be understood as promising enhanced access to the real, what the reader finds here is not a literary presentation of the real but a density and opacity in which both mediation and immediacy encounter their limit (Niebylski 2005, 497-98). This “impoverishment” or hollowing out of literary language can be understood as a transcoding of social reality into

literary form. In Niebylski's view it also constitutes a form of possible resistance to neoliberal ideology, a fly in the ointment that exposes what Consensus prefers to keep out of view: the link between neoliberal reform and deepening of inequality; privatization as instrument for a massive redistribution of wealth and resources to the rich; and the pervasive marginalization and moral denigration of the working poor.

The novel's second half, entitled "Puro Chile, 1973," is an account of the narrator's domestic life in an apartment shared with a group of fellow employees. It narrates—primarily in a sober, third-person voice—the collective's desire for the national popular in the time of post-dictatorship. At the same time, the personal relations between housemates display a broad spectrum of attitudes ranging from solidarity among the exploited to the petty jealousies and rivalries that are the symptoms of dislocatedness and precarity. As Franco and Niebylski both point out, the second part of the novel deploys the colloquial use of profanity and other "improper" forms of discourse in order to highlight the breakdown of modern forms of collective existence—not just civility and other bourgeois codes but the very notions of the public and the common (Franco 2007; Niebylski 2014). In the concluding chapters an overarching theme emerges: the group's previously-unspoken search for a charismatic leader who could deliver them from their dislocated situation and resolve their new inability to symbolize exploitation in a way that would make it recognizable as a wrong or, similarly, to effect any significant disruption within the temporality of neoliberal consensus. The saga ends on a somewhat ambiguous note, as it becomes clear that this group continues to be guided by the same racist, sexist and ontotheological imaginary that has dominated Latin American cultural politics in the region for the past two centuries. The unifying figure these housemates

seek turns out to be nothing more than a confirmation of the same dominant signifiers—masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexual virility—that have sustained the *criollista* fiction of national identity in Latin America since colonial times. The concluding lines of the second part—“Caminamos. Demos vuelta la página”—allow for two ways of reading: as holding open the hope of a new path that would puncture a hole in neoliberal consensus, or—more likely—as announcing the full reinscription of this shared yearning for the popular into the logic of the market.

A handful of tropological figures from the novel’s first part serve to establish a referential frame for reading the novel as reflection on social transformation in Chile. In order to work through what is going on in the space of the *súper* we must first ask what this topos has displaced. The novel can be read as allegory of post-Fordism in which the factory has been supplanted by the supermarket as new paradigm for commodity production and as new site for reproduction of capitalist relations of production. As industrial manufacture gives way to flexible accumulation and service economy, the old emphasis on specialized labor is replaced by a new focus on diversification and continuous reskilling.⁷⁶ With the privatization of the regulatory state together with the depoliticization of the relation between capital and labor providing the backdrop for this story, *Mano de obra* registers how precariousness emerges as a defining element for social relations in the time of postdictatorship. Employment is now devoid of contractual guarantees and defined by the withdrawal or privatization of social programs, the deregulation of labor markets and working conditions, and the dissolution of shared assumptions about what constitutes a livable wage and decent working conditions. In the time of industrial capitalism the factory was a site of potential conflict between capital and labor;

capital would often seek to defuse antagonism by providing workers with tangible measures of security, livability and dignity—as exemplified when Henry Ford promoted the idea that the worker should be able to purchase the product she or he makes. With the withering of the labor movement and the exhaustion of old vocabularies for symbolizing antagonism, meanwhile, post-industrial capital no longer finds itself obliged to seek compromises with labor so as to neutralize the radicalizing force of conflict. Workers are now well aware that everyone is equally dispensable in the time of diversification and reskilling, and that any suspected agitators will be dismissed and replaced from a readily-available stock of surplus labor. Under such circumstances one is now content to be able to say that one is exploited, because the mark of separation distinguishes one from the even worse fate of having no job at all.

“The customers...meet in the supermarket only in order to talk” (Eltit 2002, 14). “The customers take over the supermarket as a venue [*sede*] (a mere infrastructure) for their meetings” (15). These two passages announce tropologically the subsumption of the modern concept of public space within the (super)market. Together they figure what Thayer terms the invagination of the political by extrapolitical (technological and economic) factors. The modern division between spheres begins to break down when the market emerges as first principle of all collective decision-making. The first of these two passages prepares the way for the narrator’s classification of customers on the basis of their purchasing power: the high-volume “buenos clientes”; the slow-moving, miserly “viejos del súper” who clog the aisles and impede the smooth flow of traffic while beleaguering others with their inane questions and petty requests. The worst of the worst, according to the narrator, are the clientele who come only to look, fraternize, and complain rather than to purchase, and whose persistent lingering impedes

the circulation of consumers and merchandise. To use a linguistic analogy, they are akin to a heavy accent, a stutter, or slip of the tongue, all well-known phenomena in Eltit's writing: excesses of speech, devoid of any meaningful content, confusing the exchange of information and preventing language itself from silently retreating from the scene and returning to its place.

The second line, in which "*sede*" substitutes for "*súper*," repeats the process of societal transformation at the level of the signifier. In this context the Spanish "*sede*" would be translated as "the venue for an event." But in other contexts *sede* also allows for meanings such as "the headquarters of an organization" and "the seat of a government." This condensation of possible meanings provides a tropological figure for privatization: all of these meanings, together with the institutional spaces and mandates they designate, have now been incorporated within the fold of the (super)market. The old division between civil society ("the headquarters of an organization") and state ("the seat of a government") has been collapsed into the commercial space of the *súper*, which now stands as a synecdoche of the new social totality. The *súper* would seem to have established itself as the only site where anything can happen today. Recall that the prefix *super-* refers to what lies over, above or beyond everything else; in the same way the space of the *súper* illuminates a new temporal horizon within which nothing can appear that has not already been attuned to the administrative rationale of the neoliberal marketplace. The setting of *Mano de obra* in the *súper* allegorizes the historical triumph of free-market capitalism over all adversaries; in its defeat of all ideological alternatives the market is understood, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, as the "coherent and directional [historical force] that will eventually lead the greater part of humanity to liberal democracy" (Fukuyama 1992, xii).

In *Mano de obra* the rise of neoliberal Consensus is associated with an epochal shift from sovereignty to post-sovereignty or interregnum. Such a transformation is registered in the narrator's reflections on how the organization of time is reconfigured in the era of post-Fordism: "Las horas son un peso (muerto) en mi muñeca y no me importa confesar que el tiempo juega de manera perversa conmigo porque no termina de inscribirse en ninguna parte de mi ser. Sólo está depositado en el súper, ocurre en el súper" (31). These somewhat enigmatic musings about time should not be understood too hastily as referring to phenomenal or experiential time. What does it mean to say that time "only occurs" in the supermarket, and moreover that it is "only deposited" in this venue? By my reading this passage refers to the way in which time as such is determined today; it is concerned with how temporalization is transformed in the service economy, or how post-Fordism can be understood as a total appropriation and management of time.

In *Capital* Marx famously demonstrates how industrial capitalism shapes the modern experience of time in a variety of ways. For one, capitalist production invents its own ways of dividing time: work time vs. leisure time; the introduction and regulation of break time; the administration of living labor through the careful measurement of how long takes the average worker to complete a given task; and, moreover, the determination of exchange value in accordance with an abstract, technologically-mediated "socially-necessary time" required to produce a given commodity. At the same time, time also becomes a primary site of struggle between capital and labor: the length of the workday, as well as related issues such as increased compensation for overtime (Marx 1977, 340-416).

Temporalization in the supermarket is both like and unlike the factory. The *súper*, as synecdoche for the service economy and flexible accumulation, is formally similar to the factory because it gives rise to its own ways of organizing time such as the elimination of overtime wages, which the workforce appears to accept without so much as batting an eye. It is unlike the factory, meanwhile, in that it is conceived in seemingly contradictory fashion as both a depository of time and as the only place in which time can take place. While the latter idea would seem to support an allegorical reading of the novel in which the *súper* is the spatialized instantiation of an event that cannot be perceived as such, the depository motif is a bit more ambiguous. Is this a reference to post-Fordism and its specific temporality as giving rise to a new form of accumulation (“depositing”)? Or are we meant to hear this phrase as indicating an unsuspected resemblance between the supermarket and more readily identifiable depositories such as a bank?

As suggested earlier, the first half of *Mano de obra* illustrates a situation resembling Deleuze’s “society of control.” Foucault’s well-known conceptualization of disciplinary society was of a striated space with divisions between spheres and institutions, each of which possesses its own distinctive way of codifying behaviors and integrating subject-formation with power. By contrast, control society describes a smooth space in which the boundaries separating institutions and spheres have become porous. In that context the codes and logic that were once specific to a given institution can be transferred and diffused throughout the social. One example of the movement from discipline to control society can be found in the dispersion of the economic logic of marketing into realms that used to conceive of themselves as autonomous from commercial forces, such as education, health care and politics. It is a sign

that we have entered control society when we have all become familiar with the administrative axiom that students or patients are to be treated as customers, while politicians seek to bolster their popular appeal by declaring in down-to-earth fashion that government's task is to get out of the way of business or that the nation's affairs should be conducted like a business.

The *súper* presents a stark contrast with the many recognizable scenes of ideological conflict, repression and violence through which a space was cleared for neoliberal Consensus in Chile during the mid-1970s. To grasp this contrast it is enough to recall the "Las dos caras de la moneda" essay where Eltit reflects on how the *golpe* carried out its interruption of the national popular project through a calculated deployment of a bellicose theatrics: of soldiers walking the streets armed to the teeth, breaking down doors in search of a furtive enemy, detaining civilians at gunpoint and herding them into detention centers; of tanks and warplanes bombarding the Presidential Palace; and so on (Eltit 2000, 18-19). Eltit qualifies these images of war staged in the streets of Santiago and elsewhere and circulated throughout the country by the media, as "Hollywoodesque" (18). Their repeated dissemination in September 1973 effectively transformed the country—not into a battlefield but into a giant movie theater. The primary target in the mediatic reproduction and circulation of these images is the Chilean public, which is presented with the sudden and spectacular recasting of politics as war. What does this transformation mean, and what effects does it put in motion? The aesthetic of war initiates a recoding in which what Carl Schmitt would term the real enemy—the political adversary with whom one shares common ground and thus also the possibility of recognition and negotiation—is symbolically transformed into an absolute enemy. The absolute enemy is one who refuses to play by the rules of the nomic game, and with whom reconciliation is

therefore impossible.⁷⁷ Whereas inside the real enemy there is always a potential friend waiting to emerge, the naming of the absolute enemy raises the specter of a monstrous, inhuman other whose destruction has been legitimated in advance (Schmitt 2004, 64-68). The “war” of which Eltit speaks in “Las dos caras de la moneda” is not a typical war as conceived by traditional conceptual categories; it is staged as a battle between uniformed soldiers of the state and a furtive, irregular force who, in disassociating themselves from the rules of the game (they wear no uniforms and they do not show themselves in public), have renounced the rights of protection under which both uniformed combatants and citizens have historically been protected. The cinematic effects described by Eltit engender the image of a furtive enemy who is neither a soldier nor a common criminal, and who espouses ideas that are not authentically Chilean but which cannot be properly assigned to any foreign nationality either (not Russian, not Cuban, etc.). The furtive enemy falls outside of the law but not therefore outside of sovereignty tout court; it falls precisely within the space of the sovereign ban, and can thus be killed with impunity.

In contrast to the cinematography of war that Eltit associates with the 1973 *golpe de estado*, the contemporary *súper* deploys softer but not necessarily less insidious forms of sovereign control that go hand in hand with precarious employment and technologies of full exposure: the omniscient video cameras that track the employee’s every move; and a corporate culture in which employees are regarded as potential thieves or, stripped of their historical rights as workers, become easy targets for abusive clientele.⁷⁸ The bellicose imagery and metaphors have not dissipated entirely from the contemporary scene, but the specific form of violence they once invoked has now been recodified as a diffuse mixture of psychological and

social tendencies that could be associated with the weakening of the social pact: anomie, aggressivity, unregulated corporate power, and generalized insecurity and privatization of risk. The narrator-employee and the store's clientele now regard one another through the lens of hatred and enmity (27); the employee's job is likened to combat waged against an enemy caste (26); compulsory extension of the workday without increased pay is translated as a declared "turno de emergencia" (69); and the tanks that once assaulted La Moneda have been replaced by armored vehicles whose comings and goings appear under the metaphor of "un bello operativo bélico" (76). But is it just a metaphor? Or does the insecurity that obtains with flexible accumulation, precariousness, and privatization give rise to a different kind of "war" that accompanies the breakdown of modern political forms and restraining structures? The past continues to haunt the present neoliberal consensus, no doubt at least in part because of what had to happen in order for a space to be opened for neoliberal accumulation. By the same token, these bellic figures metaphorize both the subreption of sovereign power by the military state in the 1980 Constitution and the invagination of political sovereignty by global and corporate capital.

Under this new configuration of space, bodies, time and power it is no longer just the worker's body and time that are surrendered to capital. The elements of inner life—moods, emotions, states of mind—are also attuned to and absorbed by a production process that has become increasingly reliant on the commodification of "service": affect, care, and the ability to create and manipulate symbolic meanings. The scene of the *súper* illustrates a growing indistinction between what belongs objectively to the production process and what is extraneous—or used to be extraneous—to production. One of the consequences of this

porosity is that capital's sway now infiltrates every pore and moment of the worker's existence.

In *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Virno 2004) Paolo Virno introduces a notion of “virtuosity” to shed light on how the interaction between capitalist production and life acquires new features and dimensions in the time of post-Fordism and the service economy. Virtuoso labor illustrates how elements that formerly had no role in the workplace have not only been integrated into the production process but now come to occupy front and center in the scene of commodity production and the extraction of value. Virtuoso labor emerges as paradigmatic in the context of post-Fordism, in which manufacture has become largely automated while “living labor” is increasingly dedicated to immaterial production, either as a supplement in the production of durable commodities or as part of the service economy. Virtuosity exemplifies how capitalism today incorporates psychic and somatic processes that were previously considered external to the production process; it thereby notifies us of the need to reexamine old boundaries that ostensibly separated “living labor”—or the quantum of time and energy that the worker devotes to production—from the rest of life. In that light, the concept should be understood as dialoguing with other attempts to theorize post-Fordist working conditions, including Jameson's discussion of the cultural logic of late capitalism, and Hardt and Negri's consideration of affective labor.

Virtuosity also necessitates a revised understanding of how the production process relates to its end or goal. In the factory the distinction between process and end is not complicated: the work of assembling a car is nothing like the final product, the car itself; and as long as the car is functional the buyer cares little about how it was actually produced. By contrast, virtuoso labor describes a scene in which the product that consumers pay for is

inseparable from the process of making it. The end is immanent to the time of production, which is in every case a kind of performance. To recall the distinction made by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtuosity is the *praxis* of a *poiēsis* or making; the end is contained in the *praxis* itself. While the term “virtuoso” implies exceptionality, the excellence that is reserved for those who possess a unique talent and/or expertise, Virno’s claim is that the formal immanence exemplified in virtuoso performance has become paradigmatic for contemporary capitalist production in general. In a manner of speaking we are all virtuosos now, no matter how inexperienced or inept we may be at what we do, because what we produce as the workforce of immaterial labor is inseparable from the act of producing it. The working conditions in which we find ourselves today require us to approach our work as if it were a performance. As teachers, administrators, doctors, editors, therapists, baristas, hotel maids, or produce stockers, the services we provide are for the most part inseparable from the manner in which they are carried out and presented. It is performance that generates the interest that finally convinces employers to hire us and clients to purchase the services we provide. By the same token, because virtuosity encompasses and calls upon the entirety of our being and not just our hands, eyes or minds, its ascent to paradigmatic form means that it is no longer clear where to draw the line between the time of production and non-productive time. We are always at work, even when we are at home, working out, or out for lunch.

The universalization of virtuosity in today’s capitalist system is made possible, according to Virno, by the fact that virtuosity is inherent to language itself, or at least to spoken language. The speech act is essentially virtuosic. Indeed, speech turns out to be even *more* virtuosic than whatever we envision as the exemplar of virtuoso performativity: a Glenn Gould piano recital,

to use Virno's example. Speech is the prototype of prototypical virtuoso performativity. Why so? In distinction from communicative modes whose purpose is to convey information, the speech act is characterized by an immanence found only in activities that constitute an end in themselves. Unlike other forms of discourse, unscripted speech imitates nothing; or at least it cannot be reduced to an imitative intention. Speech, moreover, has no shelf life beyond the time of its delivery, and it need not produce any durable effects in the listener in order to qualify as a virtuoso performance. Unlike the concert pianist, who performs a set piece that has been memorized or read and can therefore be repeated endlessly, a speaker is—sometimes to his or her misfortune!—under no requirement to follow a script. Indeed, the speech genre includes an implied proscription of repetition: the experience of listening to a speech is informed by the unstated expectation that what one is hearing rises to the level of an event, something that is about to be heard for the first—and possibly last—time.

There would appear to be sound basis for concluding that Virno's conception of virtuoso performance adheres more or less uncritically to the Platonic association of speech with the self-presence of the logos and writing with mediation and separation of the logos from itself.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, there is also an important distinction to be made between Virno's conception of the virtuoso act and Platonic thought: whereas Plato understands speech as guaranteeing a more or less immediate relation to the logos understood as pre- or non-discursive origin of speech—like a good father, the Platonic speaker always remains present to account for the “offspring” or logoi he produces—for Virno the speech act does not reflect or represent anything other than itself. There is no question of speech offering increased fidelity to some original intention or enhanced security against the risk of errancy and misinterpretation. There

is no separating form and content in Virno's conception of the speech act, and hence no possibility of content becoming available immediately—unless it is as form understood as end in itself. What Virno is interested in is the immanence of the act. What a speech performs is the sheer immanence of language, which in turn provides the model for the immanence of politics and post-Fordist commodity production. We can surmise that Virno accepts the Platonic distinction between speech and writing (i.e., that speech is more immediate and writing more fraught by mediation) despite all of the problems associated with that position, while at the same time moving away from the Platonic project of saving transcendence from the perils of mediation and finitude.

The paradigmatic status of speech turns out to be what virtuoso performance shares with politics. Neither the virtuoso act nor politics is conceivable apart from a thought of language. Both spheres must therefore be understood as containing their own end: they are praxes of a *poiesis*. On this point Virno's thought owes a debt to Hannah Arendt and her observation that virtuoso performance presupposes not just a performer but also an audience and an organized space or place in which the performance is delivered. Arendt detects a "strong affinity" between virtuosity and politics (Arendt 1968, 153) because virtuoso performance presupposes a public that does not exist prior to the act; the public of virtuoso performance is constituted in the act itself, i.e., through a performance in which the public first comes to see itself as such—as the privileged witnesses of a unique or exceptional occurrence—and through which it is moved, individually and collectively. Virtuoso performance and public presuppose one another: there can be no act that does not take place for an audience in a performance space, while the audience and the space of performance in turn are

constituted in their specificity—as different from, say, the audience in a movie theater—by the awareness of witnessing a singular performance. Arendt’s point is not just the obvious one that there can be no performance without observers. Unlike activities that can be repeated with no or little appreciable difference, such as going to see a movie or even (arguably) attending a piano recital, gathering for a virtuoso performance is itself a way of constituting a specific public that understands itself as such: as partaking in what will have been an unrepeatable event. Virtuosity highlights both the enhanced capacity of contemporary capitalism to incorporate all moments and aspects of our lives into commodity production as well as the emergence of new possibilities for contestatory politics that are opened through the creation of shared social spaces and activities that constitute ends in themselves.

Where does this leave us in our reading of Eltit’s *Mano de obra*? The concept of virtuosity sheds explanatory light on the scene of the *súper* and thus, by extension, on Eltit’s conception of how social relations have been reshaped in post-dictatorship Chile. It is much less clear whether or not the thought of virtuosity opens up any new spaces for contestatory practices in Eltit’s work. In the first half of the novel, we find disclosed the identity of narrative discourse with narrated content; in the second half, by contrast, narrative form and content merge asymptotically as the unfulfilled desire for a charismatic leader. In the first part, form and content become the same though the narrator’s endeavor to render an account that would bestow order on his myriad of menial tasks, all of which fall under one overarching responsibility: establishing and maintaining aesthetic order in the market. The identity of narrative form (subsumption of this myriad of tasks and tribulations within a single coherent story) with narrated content (e.g., maintaining the produce section of the supermarket as a

unified assortment of commodities) finds at least two corollaries within the storyline. The first occurs with the narrator's tendency to perceive the workplace as an extension of his body. The second parallel emerges through our awareness of the supermarket as a space in which body and psycho-somatic processes are infiltrated by corporate reason and power. This infiltration is evidenced in various ways: in the narrator's simmering resentment against customers whose traversal of the produce section threatens the delicate ordering of time and space; in the disclosure of a work ethos that amounts to an orthopedic determination and enforcement of proper posture in the face of adversity; and in the shadowy and sinister presence of supervisors whom the narrator suspects of seeking pretexts for his dismissal.

Tocan los productos igual que si rozaran a Dios. Los acarician con una devoción fanática (y religiosamente precipitada) mientras se ufanan ante el presagio de un resentimiento sagrado, urgente y trágico. Es verídico. Estoy en condiciones de asegurar que detrás de estas actitudes se esconde la molécula de una mística contaminada. (15)

The narrator's portrait of the supermarket unveils an aesthetic space in which the arrangement of commodities appears to constitute an end in itself. The virtuoso character of immaterial labor helps to explain the narrator's obsessive fastidiousness in attending to the orderliness of the displays as well as his seething resentment toward a clientele which, in making its way through the produce section, invariably disturbs the careful arrangements of items or impedes the free circulation of shoppers and goods. Not only is the object of his labor inseparable from the vigilance with which he attends to the displays, the order of commodities over which he presides is also the field in which subjectivity is constituted and confirmed.

While the aestheticization of work in *Mano de obra* thematizes a societal transformation through which material production is replaced by virtuoso labor, the literary portrait of consumption as secularized theology in the passage reproduced above alludes to the Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism.⁸⁰ The consumerist attribution of a “spiritual” force to the commodity bears witness to a forgetting of the role that social relations—and, in particular, the extraction of the surplus value—play in the determination of an object’s value. But is this passage simply a literary citation of Marx’s critique of valuation, perhaps in the interest of advancing an artistic condemnation of consumerism in post-dictatorship Chile? How we answer this question depends on how we read the novel: if we approach this scene as an isolated episode in possession of its own meaning then it would seem that the “citation” only makes sense as a derogatory portrait of consumer society; and, in light of the novel’s historical allusiveness, it no doubt also reminds us of what had to be crushed and dismantled in order for this “spiritualization” of the commodity to take place.

But what if this particular episode in the novel were not in full possession of its own meaning? What if its meaning has to be sought elsewhere? What if its meaning were to be found in between one episode and others that are either adjacent to it or which, located at a distance, still produce echoes of its thematics? The “*tocan los productos como si rozaran a Dios*” passage prefigures a later scene (chapter seven, “*El Obrero Gráfico*,” 61-68) in which the theme of commodity fetishism appears again, albeit in a very different light. There we find the narrator immersed in delirious or drunken musings about a small Christ figurine, a “*plastic Jesus*” of sorts which the narrator, in holding it up to the light, imagines to be God poised on his hand.

Estoy poseído por un Dios que me invade con un brillo que me ubica en la mira ávida de todos los presentes. Dios me posee constantemente como si yo fuera su ramera. Se me sienta (ya lo dije) encima de la palma de la mano o trepa, a duras penas, por mi espalda o se cuelga de una de mis piernas o se introduce de lleno en mi interior hasta oprimir los conductos de mi agobiado corazón. Dios está en todas partes. A lo largo y a lo ancho de mi cuerpo. Y se radica con una intensidad (que ni te digo) en mis órganos para que retumben en su honor. Quiere constatar hasta qué grado su morada se establece en mis retumbos. Ay de mí. No me queda más remedio que alabar el incomparable honor que Dios me ha dado. (62-63)

What was earlier presented as a secularized theological narrative now appears as the parody of a mystical narrative that renders obscure the way in which the laborer becomes a mere appendage to the scene of commodity production. This inversion unmistakably evokes Freud's famous commentary on the memoirs of President Schreber, albeit perhaps channeled via Deleuze and Guattari and their critique of what they perceive as psychoanalytic reinforcement of Victorian heteronormativity. The literary allusion to psychosis in this later episode from Chapter 7 highlights a distinction between postdictatorship and earlier organizations of social order, using the Schreberian figure of schizophrenia in order to comment on a distinction between forms of social totalization. The market inaugurates a new totality of sense comprised of individual signs (goods, brands) that have been deprived of any unifying meaning; in Lacanian terms, it is a totality in which no master signifier is to be found, no Other and no Law to bestow order and confer meaning on things in the world. In this post-sovereign

realm, signs now inhabit the narrator's world in a devastatingly literal manner. It is as if they were things and not coded references to something else. The reinscription of sovereignty (from the national popular to sovereign dictatorship), which makes room for the invagination of the political space of collective decision-making by economic and technological forces, raises the specter of a catastrophic loss of sense, or what Lacan terms the foreclosure of the paternal signifier, which leads to a collapse of the distinction between symbolic and real. The new order that is post-dictatorship, in which the market now constitutes the horizontal condition of possibility for the emergence of the new, is experienced here as the absence of that signifier that enables all other potential signifiers to act as signifiers. The scene of commodity fetishism in the supermarket thus inaugurates an allegory of the social impact of neoliberal globalization, where the totalizing function of political sovereignty has been suspended or invaginated by economic and technological spheres, and the possibilities for conceptualizing the social as totality have been reduced to one: the fragmentary logic of equivalency and infinite accumulation of particularities that is the market. By the same token, what I am describing as the commodity fetishism episode also initiates an illustration of why ideology critique (e.g., demystifying the commodity by showing how value is in fact the product of social relations defined by separation and exploitation) alone may not be enough.

This is also the point where the narrator begins to describe himself as feminized in relation to the phallic potency of God or of capital. This repositioning can be read as yet another literary citation; it alludes not only to the Schreber case and Freud's use of it to develop his own understanding of psychosis, but also to Schreber's significance for Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). Why

precisely this case and why the emphasis of this particular aspect of the case, i.e., the self-feminization experienced by Schreber in relation to the phallic potency of God? I have already proposed the possibility of an allegorical connection between psychosis and the neoliberal social pact. Through the turn to Deleuze and Guattari, meanwhile, we find a critique of Freud's supposed privileging of traditional gender roles, such as the unquestioning postulation of the Oedipal (heterosexual and monogamous, nuclear familial) structure of subjectivity. By the same token, Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on the insufficiently-explored social and economic components of psychoanalytic categories may be consistent with the critical outlook of Eltit's novel, in which psychic and affective phenomena offer themselves to be interpreted as symptoms of social realities that have yet to receive sufficient critical illumination—often because in the time of postdictatorship there is no vocabulary or symbolic archive for making antagonism visible. Literary allusions to psychoanalytic conceptual categories—desire, narcissism, aggressivity, perversion, neurosis, paranoia, and psychosis—in Eltit's novel are open to being read as symptoms of the tectonic shift to neoliberal post-sovereignty. Whereas gender traditionally designates the social codification of biological and anatomical differences—or, in Lacan's reading of the Schreber memoire, signals the impossibility of constituting a symbolically-differentiated field from out of the oppositional and complementary images of the imaginary register (Lacan 1993, 73-101)—in the discourse of the narrator of *Mano de obra* the rhetoric of feminization points to a gendered coding of the social relations of production. Gender becomes a mark of the new forms assumed by separation today; it is a metaphor for the production of precariousness (i.e., the dismantling of the labor movement, the privatization

of the Welfare state and the creation of a large army of surplus labor) as a fundamental condition for neoliberal accumulation. As Donna Haraway puts it her “Cyborg Manifesto”:

Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. Deskillling is an old strategy newly applicable to formerly privileged workers. (Haraway 1991, 26)

Earlier, in the context of looking at how the term “golpe” functions in the “Las dos caras de la moneda” essay, I discussed a correlation between the body in its materiality and the ideal register of the self as understood by Freudian psychoanalysis. In *Mano de obra* a similar interaction takes shape in the context of new ways of configuring social relations and new ways of expropriating time and surplus value in the post-Fordist economy. Here speech displays a peculiar cutting and penetrating power that recalls how the old metaphors of war is redeployed in the current context of precarity and insecurity. In the first part of *Mano de obra* the narrator literalizes a cutting remark uttered by one customer as affecting him at an organic level: “Me hiere y me perfora la palabra abriendo un boquete en mi riñón” (23). This poetic phrase finds resonance elsewhere in the first part through images of perforation and penetration: “Yo me estremezco ante la amenaza de unas pausas sin asunto o me atormento por los ruidos insípidos y, sumergido de lleno en la violencia, me convierto en un panel

agujerado por el terror” (13); and “Soy víctima de un mal que, si bien no es estrictamente orgánico, compromete a cada uno de mis órganos” (48). In these scenes the body becomes visible in a way that destabilizes traditional distinctions between inside and outside, materiality and ideality, soma and psyche. The body here is a surface inscribed and circumscribed by interactions between power and the resistance proper to life. This corporeal surface or boundary does not serve to fix and stabilize the distinction between inside and outside (e.g., public vs. private, outer world vs. inner life) as it is traditionally understood to do; instead it offers a permeable site open to the possibility of contamination—from the outside (penetration, internalization) or the inside (discharge of bodily fluids, the expression of symptoms). The first of these three images (23) could well serve as an epigraph for the novel as a whole. This literary image of an organ that has been “perforated” in the course of a passing exchange of words between customer and employee succinctly illustrates the way in which previously stable boundaries separating one sphere from another (e.g., the concrete realm of social relations of production versus states of mind; speech and body; material and somatic processes versus psychic processes and moods; etc.) have now become porous. At the same time this image makes palpable the violence of reinscription through which the traces of earlier histories are effaced from the landscape of postdictatorship Chile.

“Me hiere y me perfora la palabra abriendo un boquete en mi riñón.” One might wonder whether the relation between power, inscription, and body is not more complex than what syntax and grammar are able to convey here. The sentence refers us to a somatic register that finds itself subjugated under a new logic of sense and a new way of organizing social relations. The verbal exchange between clientele and employee plays out as a kind of theater in

which one party is able to display itself as possessing the capacity to reduce the other to almost nothing or, more exactly, to reduce the other to a state of passivity in which the other is able to understand and follow orders (or denigrating remarks) but is no longer in a position to produce anything comparable in return. Here we see at work two different but complementary ways of relating to the logos: there are the masters of the logos who are capable of giving orders, and there are the slaves of the logos whose capabilities are exhausted in follow orders. These ways of relating to or having logos are not the properties of subjects but are generated by the scene itself.

In this scene, which we could imagine reproducing itself ad infinitum in the daily routine of the narrator, we find an image of the specific form that alienation takes in post-Fordist society: bodies reduced to a standing reserve of serviceable parts; working conditions that mandate the subordination of all dignity to the subservience of “service with a smile”; and body and subjectivity marked and penetrated by forms of sovereign power for which there is no longer any corresponding contestatory vocabulary. The body as seen in this context is not a natural (biological or physiological) entity that only subsequently gets pulled into the symbolic fray of culture. As Judith Butler and Charles Shepherdson have shown in different ways, what we call the body is a field that has always already been marked by symbolic processes of appropriation and signification.⁸¹ While body designates a materiality irreducible to the realm of meaning and identity, as an entity that is always already socialized its surfaces and physiological processes are not equitable with a biological or natural state of existence; they have been inscribed by the same social forces and logics that produce the subject. The point is significant because it helps to shed light on a complexity inherent to the attempt to think

materiality and power in distinction from ideality in *Mano de obra*. Eltit's novel uncovers a kind of materiality precisely where one would expect to find ideality: in language and in the symbolic archives of the Chilean labor movement. It is thus a materiality that must be thought prior to the distinction between matter and idea, the sensible and the intelligible.

Not unlike a Benjaminian ruin, the body in *Mano de obra* constitutes an in-between site that does not belong fully to nature or to culture. An analogy can be found in the psychoanalytic theory of the drives as described by Shepherdson: the body constitutes a field of symbolic inscription and interpellation as well as a site of resistance to symbolic codification; physiological processes bear witness both to the symbolic coding of differences and to the inability of the signifier fully to suture the subjective field. It is on the body and in its processes that what Lacan refers to as the holes in meaning or the discontinuity in the real are registered or manifested. In the passage cited above this limit is announced with the term *boquete*: a hole or tear in the fabric of the organic body left by the signifier—in this case, a wounding remark made in passing. The etymology of the term points us to the intermediary zone that is the mouth (*boquete*: from *boca*). This peculiar wound would also seem to be an orifice that can act as a site for ingestion and speech.

I now turn once again to question of the novel's formal organization, and specifically the chapter headings which call attention to a certain break or discontinuity in history. My reading will, by way of conclusion, make its way back to the place where this chapter began: the recent critical debate about history and the neo-avant garde in Chile. For Eltit's novel the socio-political landscape of post-dictatorship Chile is defined by a rift which both links it to the past in a certain way (the present defined by neoliberal ideology as culmination and overcoming of a

long history of ideological conflict) while also marking off certain archives as illegible or inaccessible (as we will see in a moment). There are various ways of understanding what I am calling a rift, and thus it is not entirely clear that it would in fact be a rift rather than multiple fault lines running alongside one another. For one, we find—most notably in the second part—a literary reflection on the disappearance of “class” in contemporary social awareness and discourse, which retreat goes hand in hand with the neoliberal determination of Consensus (and the attendant retreat of all ideological conflict) as telos of history. Second, and relatedly, in the disjunctive relation between chapter headings and chapter content we find traces of the destruction of the labor movement during the 1970s and subsequently—as inaugural act of the democratically-elected Concertación alliance—the foreclosure of any possibility of politicizing the relation between capital and labor. Let us designate these first two rifts under the heading of the *withering of antagonism*. Then there is also the matter of a “deafness” to history which, while by no means unique to Chile, unquestionably acquires a distinctive character in the context of Chile’s recent past. For Chilean cultural critique it is the so-called transition to democracy that constitutes the present through a collective “forgetting” or eclipse of historicity; the past becomes illegible to the present insofar as the past was defined by antagonisms and ideological conflicts whose very form has become inconceivable or been recoded as antithetical with neoliberal reason. Any new occasions for reflection and debate about the past that might have opened in the wake of dictatorship are quickly tamped down and closed off through the combined forces of self-censorship and public stigmatization of contestatory politics; the neoliberal economic model imposed under military rule during the mid-1970s, meanwhile receives retroactive legitimation under the sign of democracy and is

recoded as the only conceivable alternative to fratricidal political violence.⁸²

The way of life of one class, in becoming synonymous with the prevailing logic of the social, threatens the existence of other sectors: this is the fundamental conflict that can give rise to the articulation of antagonism. Yet, in the time of post-dictatorship, there are few or no tools available for symbolizing such an existential threat. Post-dictatorship is an order founded on dislocation, which is to say the impossibility of making antagonism visible.⁸³ Separation and exploitation still obtain, at times in even more entrenched and intense forms than before, yet there would seem to be no poetics capable of bringing these conditions into view *as a wrong that is suffered collectively, a wrong that affects the count of the whole*. The impossibility of discursively bringing antagonism into view as such today is translated, in Eltit's novel, as the formal composition of the novel itself. The chapter headings are taken from the titles of working class political and cultural journals from the early 20th century, and allude back to key sites of conflict between labor and capital (e.g., Iquique). By contrast the contemporary supermarket constitutes a new totality devoid of any recognizable signs of history, in which any attempt to politicize the relation between labor and capital will immediately be expelled—not necessarily by police and military repression, but through dismissal and replacement from a standing reserve of surplus laborers.

The chapter titles of the first part, rather than performing the instrumental and contextualizing function that is conventionally expected of them, present instead a stark contrast juxtaposing the seamless façade of Consensus against the material ruins of an earlier history of political radicalism. These orphaned headings cast a faint light on the history of the present as an order whose prevailing common sense—or the determination of what goes

without saying—has been founded on erasure, destruction, terror, disappearance, and reinscription. Although the novel provides no hints about where these mysterious proper names might come from, readers familiar with Chilean social history will have little difficulty in discerning that the titles in the first half of the novel were taken from working class journals and pamphlets dating from the early 20th century, most of which were associated with radicalized workers in the mining industry. The title of the second half, “Puro Chile,” is taken from a leftist alternative daily published in Santiago during the time of Allende’s *Unidad Popular* government. The first part as a whole, meanwhile, is entitled “El despertar de los trabajadores (Iquique, 1911).” As Susana Draper reminds us Iquique was the epicenter of the Chilean mining labor movement during the early 20th century following a brutal 1907 army massacre of striking miners (Draper 2012, 99-124). *El despertar de los trabajadores*, meanwhile, was the title of a socialist journal founded by Luis Recabarren, one of the most dynamic voices in early 20th century Latin American labor politics. The first half of the novel is thus framed by a series of citations through which the novel evokes an older history of struggle against exploitation and repression—and which, for the neoliberal present, turns out to be a lost history that might as well belong to another world. These citations have been torn from their original context and inserted into a new context in which there is no longer any place for the illumination of antagonism that once resonated in them. As Jean Franco puts it, the headings are

fantasmatic indices of the distance that separates the neoliberal present, in which all that is solid melts into air, and a past in which those who worked had the power to negotiate using the threat of strike, in which labor unions had political force, and in which the working class could dream of inheriting the world” (Franco 2007, 145).

In her own very insightful reading of Eltit's novel, Susana Draper proposes that the chapter titles illuminate—in the Benjaminian sense of the term—a space or modality in between the empirical domain of actually occurring events (what Hegel terms the *rerum gestarum* of history) and the narrativization of these events within an overarching or transcendent poetic logic (the *res gestae*), an emplotment that serves to organize events in terms of causes and effects, and thereby inscribes them with meaning (tragedy or farse?). Draper associates this in-between dimension with Benjamin's understanding of how current political struggles can be animated through recollection of past struggles, as well as with Derrida's thinking about the structure of repetition—what he calls “iterability,” or the possibility of being repeated—as the condition of possibility for any novelty or event. Draper thereby develops a reading of the poetics of naming in *Mano de obra*, proposing that the recycling of these names taken from a bygone history of emancipatory struggles might help to catalyze a new “awakening” [*despertar*] in a quite different context: that of neoliberal privatization of the regulatory state, in which the politics of dissensus has been thoroughly stigmatized through association with the “demons” of the past.⁸⁴ This new awakening would rely on what Draper describes as a “double play between the possibility of remembering...[a] truncated past as that which never was in an actual state...and...a process of learning to remember what is closest to us in a more physical, material way” (Draper 2010, 108). In other words, awakening would involve two different modalities of “remembering.” On one hand remembrance draws on images from the past in order to actualize something latent in the prior context that could in turn serve as a catalyst for the present. It would not be a matter of reviving some political meaning or subjectivity that had fallen dormant so much as a kind of

aesthetico-political formalism in which old images and signifiers of struggle are taken from the past and redeployed in the here and now in order to open up a space in which new antagonisms could be made visible today. On the other hand, remembrance is also about coming to see the familiar arrangements of the present in a different light. In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin discusses such a potential for turning the familiar into something strange through the examples of domestic space and furniture (Proust), but one might also think of his interest in Brecht's concept of theatrical gesture as a way of bringing to light the social implications of seeming neutral accounts and positionings of bodies.

What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture in matinal half-slumber, what Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is to be secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening. (Benjamin 1999, 389)

In agreement with Draper I propose that we look at the chapter titles of the first part as a field of symbolic ruins. They are akin to citations that have been torn from their original contexts. Or, like archaeological glyphs, they attest mutely to the existence of past cultural practices whose symbolic world is no longer accessible to us. By the obscure light of these enigmatic names, the novel's plot content is revealed as belonging to a social order that has been founded on destruction, expropriation, and the foreclosure of history—not just of a specific past but of historicity as such. Not only have the struggles and conflicts alluded to in the chapter headings been relegated to oblivion, this disappearance has itself been rendered mute and nearly invisible in the context of a historical present that understands itself as the

inevitable culmination of all historical processes. These somewhat obscure citations play a role that is analogous to what Walter Benjamin, in his study of German *Trauerspiel* (Benjamin 1977), calls “natural history.” In Eltit’s novel precariousness and dislocation generate an experience similar to the one that Benjamin calls “natural history.”

Natural history refers not to the history of nature but to the material persistence of cultural artifacts after the dissipation of their symbolic milieu. Like a ruin, these signifiers may well find themselves in the process of being “reclaimed” by nature, and yet something that is not reducible to nature—and which may also be irreducible to the human—haunts such sites. Natural history designates the “afterlife” of culture, a time of material remainders that cannot be categorized as either culture or nature. By the same token, natural history can also name what becomes of life itself when it is torn from the lived context in which it emerged. One might think, for example, of what becomes of the tragic hero Oedipus once he has been obliged to abandon his familiar symbolic place and his customary trappings of power: the Oedipus of Colonus, that is. As Eric Santner puts it in *On Creaturely Life*:

Natural history is born out of the dual possibilities that life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that gave it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality.

Natural history transpires against the background of this space between real and symbolic death, this space of the “undead.” (Santner 2006, 17)

The epistemological and political import of natural history for Benjamin’s discussion of allegory resides with its bearing on our ability to experience history otherwise than its liberal conceptualization—i.e., as something other than a unidirectional, progressively-structured

sequence of occurrences in which “progress” serves to rationalize destruction and justify the infliction of suffering on others while also ensuring that any alternative to the liberal order can only appear as regression to a barbaric past from which we have thankfully moved beyond. Natural history understood as material “afterlife” constitutes an archive with the potential to animate alternatives to the liberal philosophy of history. As Santer emphasizes it is violence that gives shape in Benjamin’s thought to what I am calling historicity (17). The linking of history to contingency and violence (destruction, domination, reinscription, massacre, torture, etc.) similarly provides an interpretive key for *Mano de obra*, whose titles attest to the existence of another history. The chapter headings bear mute witness to the destructive violence and oblivion that have always accompanied what is called “progress” in Chile and Latin America. In this way *Mano de obra* takes shape as a neo-avant garde work in which social critique emerges as dissonance between form and content. The disjuncture between form and content highlights what Nelly Richard calls the “insubordination of signs” (Richard 1994), exposing as unstable those reference points that ostensibly serve to secure the appearance of inevitability for neoliberal consensus as the only game in town.

At the same time, and not in an unrelated way, we could say that the chapter headings exemplify a fundamental link between literature and the secret in its opacity, and that they thereby affirm a limit for any understanding of literature as revelation of inconvenient truths. The chapter headings point to what has been lost and destroyed, and they thereby cannot help but mark a limit for what we can hope to read and decipher. If these proper names and dates attest to an experience of history as irreversibility of destruction, they thereby also introduce within the novel an irreducible exteriority whose alterity cannot be neutralized through

interpretation, identification or any other form of communion with the past. But this is not all. It seems to me that these names that have been torn from their rootedness in a certain past also point mutely, beyond whatever specific historical contexts they may once have been associated with, to an essential void at the heart of the signifier. These orphaned names attest to what Platonism knows all too well and cannot abide: the capacity of any signifier to stray outside the city walls, beyond its pre-authorized domain of circulation, or to persist in its material existence after its original signifying intention has exhausted itself. As Derrida has shown, when it comes to the logos, “original intention” can never be truly and purely original (Derrida 1978, 63-171). The event qua opening or first time is always already contaminated by the law of repeatability as a condition of its appearing at all. These orphaned names thus do double duty in *Mano de obra*, both calling attention to destruction in the history of the present, and pointing to a split within the signifier itself, or the signifier *as* split.

In contrast to her previous work, at first glance Eltit’s *Mano de obra* appears to have little in common with the avant garde. It displays none of the overt experimentation with literary form and genre found in her previous works, and it is largely devoid of the linguistic play for which her writing became renowned during the 1980s and 90s. If there is an avant garde component to *Mano de obra* it is to be found in its literary exploration of the double register of the proper name and the signifier, an exploration that engages with forms of materiality that are irreducible to representation: incompatible with a Consensus that presents itself as the rational culmination of history, and irreducible to an idealist conceptualization of the sign as expression or representation of an original meaning. If neoliberal Consensus understands itself as the end of antagonism and exclusion—a time in which there is a place for everyone, a

market in which any and all are welcome to compete—*Mano de obra* takes up the task of bringing the void itself into view.

In his critique of Nelly Richard's account of the Chilean *Avanzada*, Willy Thayer raises important points about the importance of historicizing literary critical concepts while warning us against presuming too hastily that the conceptual categories of literary modernity can be applied unproblematically today. However, perhaps the critical points raised by Thayer would apply to more than just the *avant garde* and its contemporary reiterations. Indeed, Eltit's novel itself serves as a reminder that the conceptualization of the *avant garde* is in fact coterminous with what we call literature itself. If we have reached a point where the *avant garde* and its critical or ruptural impulse is no longer available to us, then literature as such may have suffered a similar fate. Literature, at least as it has been understood since the Romantics, is inconceivable without the accompanying thought of a narrative or poetic process that takes a critical distance toward representational understandings of language. What we call literature is born with the self-reflexive discovery that its classificatory categories are inherently unstable. Literature is its own critique. Since the Romantics literature has always manifested a tension or conflict between "avant garde" tendencies on the one hand, which are driven to explore the points where representation and signification stumble, and conservative, "retro-guard" tendencies on the other hand, which serve to reinforce representational uses of language. There can be no literature apart from this self-confrontation and this redoubling. A text that did not in some way raise unsettling questions about representation and truth would amount to nothing more than a transparent linguistic act that requires no interpretation whatsoever—simply put, there would be nothing literary about it. A text that abandoned representation

altogether, by contrast, would be nothing other than illegible—again, nothing literary. *Mano de obra* deploys this double register of the literary as its own critique in order to bring to light the limits of Consensus. What remains unclear is whether or not such a gesture can hope to produce anything like a rupture or awakening today.

Literary Contretemps: Histories of Love, Labor, and Abandonment

Toda escritura es una puesta en práctica del distanciamiento: cuando uno escribe, el distanciamiento con la realidad se hace tangible, porque de lo contrario no podría crearse esa mediación, que es la escritura.

—Sergio Chejfec, “Escribo para olvidar lo que escribí antes”

La idea de realidad ha ingresado en [la literatura] bajo la forma de una advertencia crítica. En la medida en que esas inclusiones se conciben como pertenecientes a un orden mediano o completamente ajeno a la escritura, producen un efecto desestabilizador, a su modo son anticipaciones críticas, aparatos levantados para resistir clasificaciones inmediatas y a la vez para disponer indirectamente su propia crónica, dibujando sus límites.

—Chejfec, “Breves opiniones sobre relatos con imágenes”

We do not know it, we cannot really know it, but abandoned being has already begun to constitute an inevitable condition for our thought, perhaps its only condition. From now on, the ontology that summons us will be an ontology in which abandonment remains the sole predicament of being, in which it even remains—in the scholastic sense of the word—the transcendental. If being has not ceased to speak itself in multiple ways—*pollakōs legetai*—abandonment adds nothing to the proliferation of this *pollakōs*. It sums up the proliferation, assembles it, but by exhausting it, carrying it to the extreme poverty of abandonment. Being speaks itself as abandonment by all categories, all transcendentals.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, “Abandoned Being”

Sergio Chejfec’s millennial novel *Boca de lobo* (2000) tells the story of a romance involving an unnamed writer and a young factory worker named Delia. It is narrated by the writer some years later as he sits in his well-lit studio at night, recollecting everything from their first encounter to their habitual nighttime meanderings through Delia’s neighborhood to the abrupt end of the relationship, all the while interjecting his idiosyncratic interpretations of the practices and outlooks found in Delia’s working-class community. The reader is surprised to learn, midway through the narrator’s recounting of this romantic tale, of its violent end: one night, while out on their customary evening walk, the seemingly mild-mannered narrator throws Delia to the ground, rapes her and then abandons her. He recalls having been informed by a mutual acquaintance sometime later of her pregnancy, presumably conceived the night of

the attack; the violation and betrayal is thereby suddenly redoubled in the abandonment of a progeny that he will never meet. His recounting of this saga leaves little room for moralizing; to be sure we can condemn the narrator as abusive and exploitative, but with Chejfec's novel we also get the strong sense that such moral judgments can only miss the point. On a formal level their relationship sets the stage for a series of reflections on capitalism, history and destruction, interpellation and abandonment, and potentiality and actuality among other themes.

While the storyline of *Boca de lobo* unmistakably gestures to the realist tradition and the *novela social*, at the level of poetics the novel distances itself from the referential ground of the realist novel. It treats what Barthes calls the "referential illusion"—or the narration of social reality through the minutiae of socially-situated objects, bodies and gestures—as an occasion for posing questions about literature itself. Through a highly self-aware deployment of aesthetic distance and mediation Chejfec's literary practice recasts social history as literary form.⁸⁵ The literary gesture of juxtaposing lettered and working-poor cultures, and of situating pockets of rural or proletariat culture within the urban, middle-class space of Buenos Aires, can be traced back to Esteban Echeverría's "El matadero" (written in approximately 1838, but not published posthumously until 1871). For Echeverría the *matadero* or slaughterhouse is a metonymy of "barbarism," a legacy of subjugation to a colonial order defined by authoritarian traditionalism and its disdain for the social codes of modern cosmopolitan life. By locating it in the heart of the city Echeverría created a poetic image of post-independence Argentina's inability to integrate itself fully into the temporality of modernity. As Sarmiento would put it, the slaughterhouse within the city is akin to a residue of the 12th century existing side-by-side with the 19th century.⁸⁶ When it comes to the *novela social* tradition, meanwhile, the poetic juxtaposition of

the *villa miseria* within urban space performs a near-complete inversion of Echeverría's critique, asserting the innate dignity of the working poor against liberalism's tendency to disparage these groups as something less than human. Chejfec's novel, meanwhile, should be read as a citation of both of traditions and their tropologies, which exposes an element of the original contexts that was not previously apparent. In that light, I will propose that *Boca de lobo* brings forth the traces of the literary from within the factory. But in doing so it also performs a profound displacement within the concept of literature.

Alongside its unavoidable engagement with the social realist tradition one of the most striking aspects of *Boca de lobo* is the complete absence of recognizable signposts that would help to situate the romance and/or the scene of its recollection in a specific historical context. One might reasonably assume that *then* and *now* take place on either side of the Menem era of neoliberal privatization. However, there is no indication of how the *before* time fits into what we know about 20th century Argentine history; there is no way of situating it in relation to Peronism, post-1955 authoritarianism, or the guerrillas, political violence and military dictatorship of the 1970s. The elimination of all familiar markers of historical time generates a disorienting, dream-like effect. It thereby replicates on purely a formal level a situation in which the capacity to experience history has been thrown in doubt. This is one example of what I meant when I suggested that Chejfec's novel transposes social history into literary form.

The difference between the time of romance and the time of recollection and narration is emplotted through contrasting ways of inhabiting space and relating with others. Events from the past characteristically take place outdoors or in highly socialized contexts (a visit to Delia's friend from whom she borrows clothing, a scene from inside the factory that Delia related to

her lover, etc.). The couple's time together is framed by their habitual and aimless nocturnal wanderings through her neighborhood, the recollection of which prompt many of his speculations concerning the zone's topography, its architecture and its working-class inhabitants. The narrative present is also situated at night time, but in contrast to the recollected scenes the narrator reposes in the solitude of his studio. His recollections and speculations are mediated poetically by the stark discrepancy between interior lighting and external darkness, by virtue of which the window over his desk functions more like a mirror than a frame that would allow the eye access to what lies beyond the writer's own domain. The brief descriptions of this scene of nocturnal writing suggest that *Boca de lobo* is a novel about the imagination as much as it is about social history.

Narration in Chejfec's novel sustains a strange relation to time. On one hand narrative unavoidably temporalizes. The narrator recounts the story he tells us by assigning it a beginning, a middle, and an end, connected logically through attributions of causes and effects. The sequencing of events acquires additional significance with the tragic reversal—the rape scene—together with an accompanying symbolization of an act that at first glance defies understanding.⁸⁷ On the other hand the novel displays a tendency to return repeatedly to certain key scenes. In conjunction with the absence of referential signposts repetition has the effect of disrupting the experience of temporal sequentiality and consistency. *Boca de lobo* is a novel about time in which narrative temporalization revolves around an atemporal void. The structure of the novel encourages an allegorical reading in which “then” and “now” correspond with different periods in national history: the time of the national-popular, import-substitution industrialization and class conflict for one; and a new time in which the old social referents and

principles have faded from view and in which there is far less certainty about what might have replaced them. The reader only catches brief and oblique glimpses of the narrative present, a time and place that is marked by the retreat and crisis of modern figures of sovereignty. The work of memory and writing do not bring into view a concrete past in its social specificity so much as they generate a sense of incompatibility between times or worlds: between a time that experiences itself historically, whose inhabitants see their lives as shaped by the technological and social forces of history, and a world in which historical processes are no longer evident and in which the future can only be conceived as a continuation of the present.

While the allegorical reading is unavoidable there is at least one important element in the novel that allegorical reference cannot account for: the excess or the lack of measure at the heart of this literary temporalization of love, betrayal and abandonment. In Chejfec's extended citation of the *novela social* what has been subtracted is a reference point that would afford some kind of perspective on the history of the present. We have no insight into what became of Delia and their child; and while we intuit that a long time must have passed since the breakup, we learn nothing of how the narrator has lived his life since that moment or of what has become of the factory and Delia's working class community. These questions, which are quite simply never posed, point to an ontological void within the text, a real *boca de lobo* that is without measure but that nonetheless gives form to the strange, tenuous relation between "then" and "now."

In the limitations of a book chapter I cannot hope to do justice to all aspects of what is unquestionably a very rich and complex novel, nor do I have the space in which to discuss what might be the place of *Boca de lobo* in Chejfec's oeuvre. My goal here is the more modest one of

exploring how memory, as illustrated by the narrator's recollections of Delia and her working class social environment, establishes a dialogue between literary self-reflection on the one hand and considerations of history, indeterminacy, potentiality, facticity and the crisis of sovereignty on the other.

In a collection of essays entitled *Potentialities* (Agamben 1999)⁸⁸ Giorgio Agamben develops a connection between language and philosophical consideration of potentiality and actuality that can help to shed light on the link between literary concerns and social history in Chejfec's novel. One of Agamben's aims in that collection is to call into question the way in which, since Aristotle, the philosophical tradition has tended to derive its understanding of *the possible* from the presence of *the actual*, so that possibility is only ever construed as a derivative of presence: as lacking actuality or as a future actuality awaiting realization. This questioning has clear significance when it comes to the question of modernity and its historical self-understanding. Agamben departs from this metaphysics of presence by proposing that we think the difference between actuality and potentiality as a distinction between language conceived in instrumental terms (as communicative, expressive, pragmatic, etc.) in contrast to language understood as referring to itself—or language as event, as in the fact *that there is language*. This “event” is at once the most obscure and the most quotidian of all facts. It is silently presupposed in every speech act and every written text, and yet as condition of possibility for communication, expression, or articulation this “fact” cannot become the object of representation or perception. It cannot be represented because, in the very act of referring to “the fact that there is language,” we have already produced another occurrence whose facticity must in turn be recognized. *That there is language* can never itself become apparent

but can only be glimpsed or intuited in specific linguistic acts. For instance, deictic language introduces simultaneously an appeal to referential immediacy (“here,” “now”) and the possibility of being repeated (received and reinterpreted) in a different context (e.g., the “now” that I designate as I write this is other than any of the “now’s” in which it might be read). The structure of deixis is what enables reference to take place at all (“*this cat here*”), but its indexical function exposes any actual utterance or inscription to the law of repeatability, which ruins in advance any hope of ensuring referential immediacy and immunizing a specific linguistic act or event against the risks associated with mediation and repetition (misunderstanding, alteration, being taken out of context, etc.). If the event of language cannot be submitted to representation this is not because it is “beyond” language in the manner of the Kantian sublime. It is because as event it is not One but divided, occurring in the difference and deferral of every linguistic act from itself.

In analogous fashion Agamben proposes a thought of potentiality as something other than a possible actuality. Potentiality would name a non-phenomenalizable register that cannot be reduced to presence: potentiality as a capacity *not to be*. I understand this “capacity not to be” as analogous to Heidegger’s thematization of the ontological difference. Potentiality for Agamben refers to something akin to the retreat of *being* amidst the presentation of beings, where being names the event of presencing or the movement of disclosure in distinction from the phenomenality of what is presented or disclosed as a being. If potentiality names a capacity *not to be* amidst the flow of becoming, then actuality in turn would mean the cancelation or suspension of that potentiality—if not also its forgetting. Potentiality is the condition of possibility for anything actual, but it is also what will have been subtracted from every actual

and thus it cannot be situated on either side of the actual/potential dichotomy that has presided over the philosophical understanding of time since Aristotle. Potentiality, as we will see with Chejfec, names the difference of all actuality (real or potential) from itself.

In the same collection of essays Agamben turns to Walter Benjamin's writings on historical remembrance [*Eingedenken*] to explore how it is that the question of potentiality opens up new ways of thinking about history and historical time. The rethinking of potentiality against the grain of metaphysical interpretation holds the key, says Agamben, for breaking away from the modern determination of historical time as progressive, sequential, and teleologically-guided continuity—or what Benjamin termed the “empty, homogeneous” time of historicism. In response to a letter from Horkheimer that is reproduced in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin poses an enigmatic account of historical remembrance that serves as impetus for this break with liberal and philosophical idealist accounts of history. The exchange between Benjamin and Horkheimer goes as follows. According to Horkheimer the contrast between the temporal nature of beings and projects on the one hand and the absolute finality of injustice on the other, legislates against any secularized expectation of justice within the lived time of human history. Regardless of how one chooses to define justice it unavoidably brings theology into the picture. The late Benjamin's idiosyncratic blend of Marxian historical materialism and Jewish messianism would not be immune to this critique. The implication of these cautionary words from Horkheimer is that Benjamin's understanding of memory and history remains dependent on an unexamined eschatology of the Last Judgment and Resurrection. The concept of justice necessarily presupposes a thought of completion, of an end to time or of a time beyond historical time when all debts would finally be liquidated and just shares meted out. But

the inclusion of a thought of completion within a non-teleological conception of history would seem to entail a contradiction, because the rejection of teleological solutions to the contingency of history involves a refusal of the idea that history has a goal or finality.

Horkheimer's critique of the concept of justice is based on the principle that only what is negative in this world (suffering, iniquity, death) can be said to have permanence; anything that has philosophically positive content (works, projects, dreams, joy) has no staying power. What is positive is always already differing from itself—because it is temporal and fleeting, and because history is the history of destruction—whereas the negative contains its own unity. Once an act of iniquity is realized it can never be undone: the dead cannot be brought back to life, and the stain of suffering cannot be wiped clean through progress and forgetting.⁸⁹

Benjamin's somewhat surprising response to Horkheimer's critique is that, given the transient nature of everything positive in history, the work of remembrance [*Eingedenken*] does indeed offer a possibility for thinking justice from a non-transcendent standpoint.⁹⁰ Without recourse to theology, it is remembrance that can make "the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete" (*Arcades Project*, N 8, 1; Benjamin 1999, 471).⁹¹ Historical remembrance in its intensive form provides Benjamin with a response to Horkheimer's warning that a non-teleological understanding of history must either make room for an idea of completion or find itself condemned to idealism. Memory as *Eingedenken* does not claim to recover what actually happened on a given occasion, but instead searches for, discovers, and activates differences that have been inscribed within a given past. The "now" of remembrance exposes what was only latent or possible in the "then." If a non-teleological understanding of history would envision a process that cannot be

completed because it has no predetermined goal, remembrance in turn provides an antidote to the risk of idealism to which Horkheimer refers. Remembrance alone can account for the need for finality within history while at the same time illustrating what is at stake in the idea of incompleteness: not just that history has no predetermined goal or finish line but that memory is not synonymous with historicism's tendency to reduce time to the presumed self-identity of the actual, which in turn is the basis upon which historicism conceives of remembering or historicizing as recovery what *actually* happened. Remembrance is a form of gnosis that recovers the past—a specific past, or a fragment of the past—in order to animate something that was “in it more than it.”

Remembrance as Benjamin understands it is imbued with a capacity to displace us from our accustomed adherence to the idea of historical time as linear, teleologically-driven process. “Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen,” adds Agamben, “but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again” (Agamben 1999, 267). Remembrance aims at potentiality in the past, and it thereby also highlights a split *within* the thought of potentiality, a difference between what could be actualized (but hasn't yet seen the light of day) and what falls out of all presentation of the actual. It focuses its light on a fissure that haunts time, a difference between the actuality of the “Now” and a potential *not to be* that must already have been suspended and forgotten in order for the actual to become what it is. If every “Now” is marked by an alterity that cannot see the light of day, the paradoxical task of remembrance is to bring into view the traces of this originary retreat from presentation.

We can use Benjamin's account of remembrance to shed light on the peculiar turns taken by narrative discourse on memory in *Boca de lobo*. We must keep in mind, however, that

this alternative thinking of the possible—as withdrawal from presentation or actualization—cannot itself become the object of representation, except at the cost of becoming what it is not. This is another example I meant when I stated earlier that Chejfec’s novel enacts a turn away from the representational and referential ground of the realist tradition. Akin to Benjamin’s thinking about remembrance, Chejfec’s novel is interested in recovering fragments from the past—images, bits and pieces of conversations, thoughts—not in order to provide the reader with more complete knowledge of what transpired between the narrator and Delia but insofar as these fragments can speak to the present about what is out of joint in the here and now. Literary image in Chejfec introduces a gap or a stammering into narrative time, which in turn shows itself to be out of step with the progressive temporality of modernity that Peter Osborne describes as “permanent transition” (Osborne 1995, 14).

Having established a possible connection between literary memory and a thought of heterogeneity that is incompatible with modernity’s dominant modalities of temporalization (namely: time as “empty, homogeneous” sequence of moments; or time as teleological progression directed by a predetermined goal), I now turn to narrator’s recollections of what might be termed the primal scene of his romance with Delia. His recounting of their fateful first encounter is pieced together through a series of reflections spanning the first hundred or so pages of the novel. The periodic return to this scene of origin illustrates a tendency in Chejfec’s prose to inhabit certain images and mine them for additional insights. In looking at these scattered reflections I will pay close critical attention to narrative focus on Delia’s gait, which emerges as a key topos for thinking about potentiality and difference in time.

“Todo comenzó en la esquina de los Huérfanos, donde la veía bajar del colectivo. Delia

llegaba cuando caía la tarde, ponía un pie sobre el pavimento y sin distraerse tomaba el camino de su casa. Más adelante hablaré de la forma como apoyaba ese pie” (Chejfec 2000, 12). This narrative postulation of origin—the birth of love and, by extension, of the need to tell the story—occurs four pages into the novel. This sketch assigns the history of love a unique place and time: a street named *Los Huérfanos* [Orphans]—not an insignificant name—at twilight, a transitional point when day gives way to night and the visible distinctions between individual beings fade into the poetry of grey. It is only fitting that Delia’s appearance coincide with this moment in between times, because for the narrator her very being will be associated with an experience of the threshold and of temporal flux. The name *los Huérfanos* will acquire importance as signifier in view of the conspicuous absence of Delia’s father. We learn nothing of him or his status from the narrator except by virtue of his omission from story, and by the fact that Delia has been obliged to take a job in order to support her family. “Orphanhood” could be construed as a signifier of the narrator’s somewhat paternalistic attitude toward Delia and the working class in general, of his tendency to see her as abandoned and as in need of a compensatory stabilizing presence.⁹² The narrator will return more than once to this ordinary scene to consider, from one angle or another, the image or gesture that prompted him to fall for Delia. Reading these different iterations of return with and against one another, we can see how literary repetition in Chejfec illuminates new features that were not apparent in the initial reading of the scene. This is one example of how recollection activates potentiality in a mnemonic image taken from the past.

Second iteration: several pages later the narrator returns to this scene in order to add a puzzling clarification about the birth of his attraction to Delia. “Descubrir que era obrera,

aunque me sorprendiera, fue decisivo para enamorarme de ella. Sin exagerar, era la marca que la distinguía del resto del género humano, y la condición que la señalaba entre todas mujeres” (15). It is Delia’s status as *female worker* [*obrera*] that sets her apart. Desire here is mediated not by sexual difference alone but by a bifurcation of social difference into forms of belonging that cannot easily be reconciled with one another. Just as her status as woman mediates her identity as a worker in the narrator’s eyes, her role as worker mediates her being as a woman, transforming her into something of an exception within the realm of the feminine. It may be precisely this overdetermination of (seemingly) disjunctive social codifications that accounts for the origin of love in the narrative.

Third iteration:

Antes mencioné su manera de pisar, la forma como apoyaba el pie sobre el pavimento al bajar del colectivo. Ahora voy a decir cómo era esa forma: era la de quien vive atravesando umbrales. Estribos de colectivos, portones de fábricas, lajas de jardines, cercas de terrenos, umbrales de casas, bordes de caminos. Con su levedad, Delia nunca parecía recuperar del todo una memoria trabajosamente acumulada; estaba aquí, por ejemplo, pero daba la impresión de demorarse mucho antes de terminar de llegar. (21)

In this passage, some half a dozen pages later, the narrator returns for a second time to the scene of origin. In her radiant appearance Delia plays the role of a Muse, an incarnation of beauty and artistic inspiration. This description is not unlike that of Beatriz Viterbo in Borges’s “El Aleph.”⁹³ Similarly it could be read as an allusion to the surrealist fascination with the figure of Gradiva (“she who walks”).⁹⁴ The point to be emphasized here is that the figure of Delia is

overdetermined by several thematic threads: artistic creation, the unconscious understood as limit for representation, and a structure of literary citation that encompasses Jensen, Freud, the Surrealists and Borges.

Although during his time with Delia it was typically the narrator who ventured across the social boundary known as “Calle Pedrera” into the foreign territory of Delia’s working class community, in retrospect he remembers Delia as the one who traverses social, geographical and temporal thresholds: factory/residential, working class/middle class, work/free time, etc. Her singular gait illuminates the threshold as such: an in-between site, the traversal of which symbolically constitutes the proper and property of a space or place (e.g., carrying the bride over the threshold as symbolic constitution of matrimony), yet which itself is neither inside nor outside, neither proper nor improper. Her stride, moreover, traces a potentially conflictive juxtaposition of vectors: appearing and retreating, stepping forth and stepping back. In the phrase “trabajosamente acumulada” we hear an echo of the sphere that Delia has left behind when she steps off the bus: the scene of capitalist production and accumulation in the factory. Whereas Delia’s appearance as she steps down from the bus was first associated with a transitional time of day this later return the scene focuses on a delay or gap within time. In her way of walking Delia seems to hold back part of herself, suggesting to the narrator a thought of withdrawal in what is otherwise a scene of radiant appearance. It is the “lightness” of her step that best conveys this lag time, as if every step forward were accompanied by a retreat by some other portion of her being. Her appearance in the street conveys the sense that the here and now is not fully in step with itself.

Fourth iteration:

Delia era una persona que iba hacia atrás. Para ella el tiempo no avanzaba; y si evidentemente tampoco retrocedía era claro que ocupaba dimensiones contiguas, donde la progresión o el retroceso, incluso la lentitud o la aceleración, estaban abolidas como posibilidades prácticas. Ese “ir hacia atrás” significaba que siempre ocupaba el momento previo, muy raramente el actual. No era posible el alcance ni la diferencia. Un don que le permitía no estar, como ya describí varias veces, sin irse de todo. Pero claro, ese minuto “previo” era engañoso, porque como ocurre con todo el mundo estaba obligada a participar del mismo tiempo que los demás. Entonces, para que ocurriera esto y lo inverso, Delia ponía en ejecución una impresionante cantidad de recursos involuntarios, que siempre por una u otra vía acababan dando esa idea de ausencia y regresión. (92)

Near the midpoint in the novel the narrator returns again to the association of Delia and her footsteps with delay [*demorarse*]. The rhetoric of memory shifts once again, moving from spatial divisions (*umbrales*) back to a movement in or against time. Unlike in the first scene, however, her gait now cuts a paradoxical figure—*ir hacia atrás*—that is not easily reconciled with the familiar conceptualization of time as linear, sequential progression. This *ir hacia atrás*, a counter-movement that suspends the earlier allusion to transition from one time to another (*cuando caía la tarde*), initiates a literary confrontation with the chronological ordering principles that frame modern understandings of history and historical time. Conceptual vocabulary for thinking movement and temporality—if it is not *avanzar* then it must be *retroceder*—proves insufficient here. The sequential ordering of movement into a chronology of

moments is deceptive (“ese minuto ‘previo’ era engañoso”) and incapable of accounting for what actually happens. In fact it is grammar and syntax themselves that turn out to be inadequate here insofar as they impose a single, homogeneous temporality on experience and history (“el mismo tiempo que los demás”). Narrativization subjugates what does not belong fully to the One (heterogeneity, potentiality) within a sequential time in which every moment or word is obliged to occupy its own place [*previo*: from *pre-* and *via*, or that which lies immediately prior along the same road]. Within such a sequential order there can be no thought of difference that does not reconfirm the silent, underlying principle of unidirectional, linear progress. The articulation of difference within a chronological chain of equivalency thus spells the annihilation of heterogeneity as such. But if submitting the strange, singular glance (“ese minuto ‘previo’”) that is the source of love to the strictures of grammar and rhetoric means betraying its singularity, would the alternative be any better? To remain silent, to refuse to speak or write of this “difference,” would not solve the problem either, because any such refusal—for example, to refer to alterity as “the unnamable”—can just as easily begin to act as a name in its own right.

The difficulty encountered here is a literary problem brought about, as Paul de Man frequently reminds us, by the conflation of grammar and/or rhetoric with reference. It is a problem to which literature itself calls attention, as can be seen as soon as we come to the realization that this passage amounts to another veiled citation of Borges, of the “Borges” who narrates the tale of “El Aleph”: “Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es” (Borges 1989, 1068).⁹⁵ We might surmise that this inadequacy is itself a sign that we have to do with an event: something which in taking place

also punctures our preunderstanding of the world and of being.

Many of the quintessentially literary moments in Chejfec's novel occur when the text calls attention to the failure or slippage of its own language, its inability to put its finger on difference as singularity without transforming it and converting it into something else: something familiar, equivalent and calculable. We have just seen one instance of what this looks like: the self-correcting account of Delia's gait as out of step with the present. At the very moment the narrator's discourse seeks to grasp the singularity of love, it discovers that it can only reinscribe this alterity back into a dialectical structure of capture from which nothing escapes.

We encounter another case in the fifth and final return to this scene of origin:

Esa forma sutil de ocupar un leve después, para decirlo de alguna manera, o un leve antes, una especie de "apenas" cronológico. [Delia] hablaba desde esa demora, quizá por eso su voz sonaba débil; y lo que decía se refería a algo que estaba a punto de ser superado, nunca transcurriendo en ese mismo momento. Así se desplazaba ella, por carriles diferentes. Estaba por ejemplo conmigo, toda su conciencia podía estar segura de acompañarme, y sin embargo había una parte que no estaba. Y cuando digo una parte quiero decir tiempo, no lugar. Esto, por supuesto, sería difícil tomarlo en su sentido literal, pero no puede expresarse sino a través de esta forma. (99-100)

Here temporality emerges as the dominant preoccupation in these returns to the scene of love at first sight. The "'apenas' cronológico" reference serves as a reminder of the limitations of the rhetoric of temporality when it comes to describing what actually happens, or

the event in its irreducibility to the idealities of causality and signification, or to rhetoric, syntax and grammar.⁹⁶ This is also the first time we hear Delia referred to as a speaking subject, and it is from withdrawal—rather than from a conscious, self-present subject—that her voice is said to issue. The elaboration of this point, in the phrase “se refería a algo que estaba a punto de ser superado,” provides another citational echo of the Borgesian account of aesthetic activity as “la inminencia de una revelación que no se produce.” Similar to what we saw in the first chapter with Lino’s consideration of stumbling while walking as a metaphor for interruption or the step back as the condition of possibility for thinking in *El oído absoluto*, with Delia the *paso* (a step, pace, passage, or crossing) traces a way in which cognition and understanding become uncertain, or where the dialectic stumbles.

As Edgardo Berg has pointed out this pattern of returning over and over again to a seemingly quotidian gesture or scene is a recognizable trait of Chejfec’s writing, one that Berg understands as reflecting the influence of César Aira (Berg 2007, np). The narrator’s frequent returns to certain key motifs—the gait, the threshold, and temporal heterogeneity among others—open up a diffuse narrative space in which far-reaching considerations of time and history, potentiality and actuality can unfold. Consistent with what we have been seeing with the narrator’s efforts to describe what it is about Delia’s gait that first caught his attention, narrative repetition destabilizes the clear distinction between before and after or first time and iteration. The insights that become available over the course of these returns to a “primal scene” are generated through shifts affecting how an image, scene or gesture gives itself to be read. But we should not conclude too hastily that Delia’s gait harbors some secret meaning waiting to be deciphered. Form, figure, and gesture are nothing more than generators of

interpretive possibilities that emerge from the narrative process itself, from the contiguous arrangement of episodes (e.g., from whatever it is that separates the first iterations on pp. 12, 15 and 21 from the later iterations on pp.92 and 99). The new insights that are gleaned in the each iteration are not contained in latent fashion in the original scene as such; these interpretive discoveries are a function of the incalculable juxtapositions of the “original” scene with what transpires “later” in the narrative, such as something the narrator might have been ruminating over just prior to a given recollection of the “first” scene.

Figurative association of Delia with the liminal space of the threshold illustrates how social content provides a point of departure for reflecting on literature itself. As the “Toda escritura” epigraph suggests, correlation between the literary and its others—the social history of capitalism, love and betrayal, ethical considerations of self and alterity—takes shape in *Boca de lobo* through an aesthetic of distancing and contortion rather than through reference or metaphors. The narrator’s recollections of Delia and her social circumstances frequently initiate veiled meditations on literary form, and by the same token it is often precisely when the question of literary form asserts itself that the text insinuates that it might also be saying something about the world beyond it. The representational basis of literary realism is supplanted in Chejfec by an analogical relation between forms: between literary form on the one hand, and ontological, epistemological, and political questions about potentiality and actuality on the other. The movement between social context and literary self-reflection in *Boca de lobo* finds a recognizable reference point in the various allusions to Borges’s formulation of the aesthetic act in “La muralla y los libros” as “la inminencia de una revelación que no se produce.” The threshold and the formulations of temporal heterogeneity translate

Borges's association of the aesthetic with liminality and with competing movements: disclosure and deferral or withdrawal.

Leo Bersani's discussion of aesthetics, form and ontology can serve to illustrate how this mirroring of literary reflection back to itself in *Boca de lobo* helps to open up new ways of thinking about non-literary questions concerning our relation to the world. In an essay entitled "Sociality and Sexuality" Bersani proposes an understanding of art and literature as spheres defined by a fundamental tension between figuration or creation of form on the one hand, and dissolution or unraveling of form on the other. Art, according to Bersani, is concerned first and foremost with the matter of *being* understood not as substance or essence but relation: with the coming-into-being of relationality or with relationality as the fundamental condition for what *is*. But since relationality is also the condition of possibility for all representation, relationality "as such" cannot be represented in any direct manner. Thus aesthetic figuration of being as event, or of coming-into-being as relation, requires that art first create a figure of *non*-relationality in order for relationality as such to become perceptible. To become perceptible means: to provide a glimpse of itself, to shine through. All art and literature must therefore submit its own formal structure, its figuring of form as relationality, to the risk of dissolution or unravelling. Interestingly, then, art does not begin from nothing (non-relationality) in order to arrive at something (relationality) but rather the reverse—or almost the reverse. I say almost because what Bersani describes as the unraveling of form, or in-formity, is not simply the antithesis or negation of being; it turns out to be the very site of its taking place:

If art is the principal site/sight (both place and view) of being as emergence into connectedness, then the metaphysical dimension of the aesthetic—which may

also be its aesthetically distinguishing dimension—is an erosion of aesthetic form. Origination is designated by figures of its perhaps not taking place; the coming-to-be of relationality, which is our birth into being, can only be retroactively enacted, and it is enacted largely as a rubbing out of formal relations. Perhaps traditional associations of art with form-giving or form-revealing activities are at least partly a denial of such formal disappearance in art. If art celebrates an originating extensibility of all objects and creatures into space—and therefore our connectedness to the universe—it does so by also inscribing within connectedness the possibility of its not happening. Relationality is itself related to its own absence. (Bersani 2000, 643)

Cognition can only grasp the event of origination retroactively and on the basis of what the event gives rise to. The origin only comes into view as an effect of its effects, which is perhaps another way of saying that the event only becomes visible as the outline of its retreat, not unlike the profile of Delia as she steps forward and down from the bus. For art to give shape to the event of presentation it must, like Delia's gait, begin by working "backwards," i.e., by systematically *erasing* formal relations in order to arrive back at their beginning. This is not merely a reverse chronological procedure of deducing causes through the elimination of their effects. If all figuration of being begins with the undoing of form, then critical conceptualizations of art and literature as figuration or creation of form—that is to say, of art understood as activation of the Kantian imagination, whose purpose is to bestow unity of form on the chaotic manifold of the sensible—must be supplemented by a thought of art's secret alliance with the other side of being: the nothing. Bersani is not opposing the idea of the

dissolution of form to Kant; the nothing is not the opposite of being, its absence or its negation. It “is” the *movement* of form’s unraveling or dispersion, the nothing-ing of nothing, an undoing of form that is at the same time already a relating-to that happens prior to the consolidation of ipseity. Aesthetic experience as Bersani thinks it initiates an engagement with potentiality as retreat, as the capacity not to be; it proceeds by negating the actual, the presence of which has been predicated on the negation or suspension of potentiality as such.

Continuing this critical exploration of the themes of indeterminacy and potentiality in Chejfec’s novel, let us now turn to look briefly at the title, *Boca de lobo*. Its significance is indicated in the following passage taken from one of the narrator’s recollections of his nocturnal meanderings with Delia:

La oscuridad, una incitación que prometía lo salvaje, la intimidad. A veces un foco vacilante aparecía en alguna dirección lejana: la linterna de alguien. Otras veces una lámpara solitaria alumbraba el aire inmóvil, con la excepción de los insectos o los pájaros que atravesaban el cono de luz. Una frase común puede dar la idea de aquellos pozos de oscuridad: boca de lobo. Había muchas bocas de lobo; o más bien el conjunto de la tierra era una bien grande e insaciable. Allí, en el reino de lo velado, todo parecía perdido y sin nombre. He leído muchas novelas donde la oscuridad es el reflejo invertido de lo claro; éste no era el caso. Si hay una belleza en el mundo, pensábamos con Delia, si algo golpea la emoción hasta dejarnos sin aliento, si algo confunde los recuerdos hasta el límite de su propia memoria impidiéndoles volver a ser tal como eran, ese algo vive en lo oscuro y muy de cuando en cuando se manifiesta. (59-60)

Darkness introduces the trope of veiling through which the narrative speaks of literature itself. The literary importance of the title is hinted at in the allusion to its proliferation (“había muchos bocas de lobo”), an assertion that will find confirmation elsewhere when the narrator associates the topos with a variety of sites of production or creation, including Delia’s womb, the factory in which she works, vestiges of nature in the city, and time itself. Obscurity, we are told here, is not the dialectical other (“reflejo invertido”) of light and visibility. The reign of the veiled and of darkness harbors what is most rare in the world: beauty, whose appearance takes us by surprise and has the potential to transform the present by exposing the obverse side of the memory image. If veiling is not the antithesis of the visible or of revelation, and if what is veiled cannot be brought to light, is this not because the veil is itself constitutive of visibility? *El reino de lo velado* configures a movement of withdrawal or secreting that is co-originary with the constitution of the field of the visible.

This proliferation of *bocas de lobo* performs a figuration of indeterminacy as one of the novel’s primary concerns: the indeterminacy of what remains formless in or alongside the presentation of what is. The phrase *boca de lobo* names a void that haunts the present and the sensible as its internal limit, a point that renders unstable the distinction between inside and outside, proper and improper. This figure also holds the place of a process of historical reinscription in which older social forms (industrial capitalism, class conflict) are replaced by new forms (service economy, Consensus). As a figure of obscurity it corresponds with the way in which reinscription processes tend to efface their own traces, making the present appear under the light of necessity, as if things couldn’t be otherwise. Pitch darkness, the narrator tells us, is not opposed to illumination and clarity as “not A” is to “A.” The darkness topos indexes a

thought of obscurity that proves refractory for modern modes of temporalizing history—e.g., in terms of production and development. It names a thought of negativity prior to dialectics. It is from within the enigma of this absolute darkness, unmediated by any economy of negation and recuperation, that beauty in its singular radiance emerges. As poetry has been reminding us since it began to speak of Orpheus, it is darkness and not the bright light of day that constitutes the proper domain of the beautiful and the strange power it holds over us. Like literature, pitch darkness moves us in potentially contradictory directions: fear and foreboding, intrigue and intimacy, not to mention the savagery of the lion’s den.

Literally a wolf’s mouth, the colloquial phrase *boca de lobo* can mean one of two things depending on context. “Meterse en la boca de lobo” is to place oneself in a dangerous situation, equivalent to the English phrase “to enter into the lion’s den.” “Oscuro como la boca de lobo”—clearly the implied meaning in this passage—translates as “pitch darkness.” While translating the novel’s title as *Pitch Darkness* might seem uncontroversial it comes with the price of losing the enigmatic link in the Spanish-language title between darkness and a certain animality, an animality that brings with it an association with danger and perhaps also with a site at the extreme limit of the law.

As Agamben notes in *Homo Sacer*, for pre- and early modern Germanic, Scandinavian and Anglo traditions, the wolf and the werewolf are associated with banditry and expulsion from the social pact (Agamben 1998, 104-12). Like a wolf, the outlaw is considered *Friedlos* [without peace], and it is on the basis of that determination—of an animal-like disregard for the law, a disdain that is refractory to reason and education—that it is considered permissible to kill the wolf or the werewolf without consequence. This figure represents an extreme limit for the

formalizing procedures of the law, occupying an indeterminate non-place in between the human and the non-human animal. But it is not just a figure of indeterminacy that resists the form-giving drives of biology and social institutions; as embodiment of indeterminacy it also provides a pretext for the deployment of power. The werewolf signals, in Agamben's words, "a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion" (Agamben 1998, 105). This figure is where the Aristotelian politicizing distinction between more voice [*phone*] and speech [*logos*] come together and fly off in their separate directions, and it is thus also a figure of the sovereign ban: the exception that constitutes the rule of law, the outside that is in the inside.

One detects a link between these different interpretive possibilities associated with the titular figure of the wolf's mouth (darkness, danger, criminality and sovereign ban) in the narrator's subsequent attempt to explain the unexpected and seemingly senseless attack on his lover. As he recalls, in that moment love was suddenly transformed into war; the lovers now appear in his mind's eye as mutually hostile forces bent on annihilation of one another in the name of self-preservation. It is not that enmity replaces love so much as that, at that moment, these opposing forces revealed themselves to be two sides of the same coin. Idealization and annihilation, adoration and destruction, are suddenly seen to be the same: not identical but of the same cloth. It is not a desire for possession that motivates the attack, then, but a compulsion to fulfill what the narrator views as a hidden connection between love and war. The passage is worth citing extensively; it also gives a sense of the narrator's circumlocutory style, which is wont to become acutely aware of its own rhetorical structures.

Y junto a Delia pensé, mientras caminábamos en silencio respirando ese aire

cansado del verano, una mezcla de olores húmedos y bruma plástica, pensé algo así como “La niña que es Delia me puede dar un niño.” Fue una reflexión instantánea, como si algo se desbaratara sin aviso. No era un deseo de posesión, sino más que eso: una urgencia por alcanzar la conquista arrollando, destruyendo, aniquilando. Sentí que Delia tenía algo que ya me pertenecía, y que si no se lo arrancaba a como diera lugar nunca lo habría de obtener. Esto era algo completamente distinto del deseo, por supuesto también diferente de la pasión, aunque debería reconocer que en alguna medida la contenía. Era sentir a Delia como mi enemiga, de quien sólo destruyéndola y adorándola podía obtener aquello que precisaba, un sacrificio. Esa boca de lobo que era el conjunto de los campos cuando bajaba el sol...se duplicaba y continuaba por un lado con su recorrido natural...en el interior de Delia. No me refiero a un interior figurado; digo “dentro” de Delia: literalmente en sus partes internas, entrañas, como se las llama. La noche inmensa, que devora el tiempo y la luz a una velocidad incesante, y el vientre de Delia, que esperaba alimentarse de mi fuerza para despojarme de lo que todavía no existe. (117-18)

Here we see the “boca de lobo” topos associated with potentiality in human reproduction, with the still unrealized possibility that Delia could “give him a child.” In the narrator’s recollections this thought of potentiality, located somewhat uncertainly within the female body, is quickly recoded as a struggle between rival programs of conquest, expropriation and possession. Up until this point the narrator had linked the *boca de lobo* topos with geographical places such as the factory and the undeveloped area in Delia’s neighborhood

known as los Cardos. The shift from economic production and development to the human body and its biological reproductive mechanisms does not become fully stable, however, due to the narrator's hesitations about the exact location of this biological *boca de lobo*. The first reference to "el interior de Delia" remains vague, and the efforts to provide more clarity are not necessarily any more decisive: "sus partes internas, entrañas, como se las llama" points hesitantly to the viscera, after which the reference to "el vientre" shifts the focus once again from digestion to reproduction. By his account rape constitutes an effort to safeguard or reclaim what will have been his, something that Delia was conspiring to take from him even before it became actual: his vitality? potency? paternal-filial relation? The one thing that is clear in this meandering attempt at explanation and rationalization is that a peculiar logic has announced itself: he takes from her by penetrating and inseminating on his own violent terms and then abandoning. In the process he both contributes to engendering a life and relinquishes any claim he might have had to participate in that life's future. He violates and betrays so as to forestall an imminent theft, the theft of something virtual but nonetheless vital; and then he takes flight from what his violent act will have helped to engender. In all of this the narrator acts out a fantasy grounded in Platonic and Hegelian accounts of sexual difference and truth, according to which paternity, logos and Spirit are the same.⁹⁷

Later on there will be occasion to discuss the novel's thematization of abandonment and a corresponding thought of remitting or giving oneself over to the other, in the context of a co-worker of Delia's who is dismissed from his position in the factory and compelled to undergo an informal "deskilling" process. Under the thematic light of abandonment as the factual condition of love—and indeed, of existence in general—we could hypothesize that the rape of Delia

amounts to a refusal on the part of the narrator of this unconditional demand that is synonymous with love: the demand that one expose oneself and give oneself prior to any calculation of what one stands to gain in return. What I am proposing to call abandonment implies a demand for remittance prior to any recognition or any other form of specular return. If rape constitutes a refusal of the fundamental selflessness of love it does according to a certain logic. First there is the projection of an imaginary relation that would justify the refusal. Delia is conceived as an enemy plotting to deprive him of what is rightfully his; and it is thus the proper is determined: as what can be (as in, is in danger of being) expropriated by the other. In a second logical step the violence of rape is recoded as a just defense of the proper. Or it could be that the rape carries out a war against indeterminacy as such, against potentiality seen as a condition that places in danger or destabilizes the determination of the proper.

Keeping in mind these questions about indeterminacy and potentiality, I now turn to literary treatment of history and time in *Boca de lobo*. I begin with a brief exploration of how Chejfec's novel both gestures toward and turns away from the representational poetics that forms the foundation of the social-realist tradition. While its subject matter is clearly familiar to the *novela social* and related genres, *Boca de lobo* announces no less clearly its distance from the aesthetic program of presenting the working class as typical or of giving voice to the subaltern:

El silencio del obrero, lo sé por Delia, es estático; al contrario del silencio rural, no transmite nada, a lo sumo poco, y cuando lo hace, por su misma complejidad no es otra cosa que una forma de comunicación contradictoria. Esta ausencia de expresión se convierte en contratiempo y nos desorienta, son múltiples

mensajes a la vez, disímiles pero solidarios; no es posible entenderlos como conjunto y no existen de manera individual. (98-99)

The peculiar silence that the narrator associates with the working class does not constitute a site for possible recuperation or restitution; it is not a sign of exclusion or expropriation, at least not of some positive, determinate content. This silence transmits nothing, or very little. Nothing or very little? Silence here does indeed announce a literary construction of social difference, but one that remains irreducible to any positive content. Perhaps this strange silence that transmits (almost) nothing serves notice that social differentiation is at work prior to any determination of the essence or identity of particular groups or classes. The description of this almost empty silence acquires additional complexity when it metamorphoses into an account of silence as *contratiempo* [contretemps]. In music theory *contratiempo* denotes syncopation, in which an established musical rhythm is unsettled through the introduction of unexpected, off-beat stresses and accents that deviate from the regular spacing of strong and weak beats. *Contratiempo* begins with an arrival that could not have been expected, a beat that arrives out of time and whose occurrence could not have been anticipated by the prevailing rhythm. The disruptive effects generated by this off beat open up new possibilities for rhythmic variation. In this passage, *contratiempo* offers an aesthetic metaphor for social heterogeneity experienced as disruption of the prevailing social logic, and as a form of visibility that resembles what Jacques Derrida calls the promise of a democracy to come (Derrida 1997). This content-less silence circumscribes a field whose determination or suturing is only ever tendentially secured, and which therefore remains perpetually open to the arrival or emergence of new forms and new voices. The semantic shift from a purely aural and static register (*silencio*) to a dynamic

term that combines sound with rhythmic repetition and alteration (*contratiempo*) suggests, moreover, that disruption occurs in or as an experience of temporalization, or the organization and disorganization of time. The smooth functioning of modernity is disrupted by the appearance of a heterogeneity that does not subordinate itself to dialectical unification of differences in time.

The *contratiempo* motif also turns back to literature itself, inviting us to consider literary language as something other than a mere conduit for meaning or purveyor of beauty, harmony and reconciliation. It names, for instance, an interruption of the rhythmic regularities that inform how we think and act in certain spaces and spheres of activity—e.g., the rhythm of production in the factory, the rhythm of our daily lives as citizens and consumers, and so on. The silence associated with the working class is, paradoxically, both (almost) empty and polyphonic. In this poetic account of social heterogeneity, silence is always already differing from itself; it is infinitely more *and* less than One, whence its potential to disorient us or awaken us from the prevailing logic of social organization. The intermingling of social and literary-artistic motifs in this passage displays a tendency that is becoming familiar in this exploration of *Boca de lobo*: what begins as a consideration of social difference and the limits of hegemony proves also to be a mode of literary self-reflection.

We have seen how the *contratiempo* motif lends itself to two distinct but interrelated lines of thinking in *Boca de lobo*. One thread is literary and has to do with the novel's engagement with a social content that has traditionally been the domain of the realist tradition and the *novela social*. Similar to what we saw earlier in the reflections on Delia and her gait, the *contratiempo* motif establishes a double register in which literary reflection on social

content turns out to be offering a way of thinking about literature itself: as heterogeneous totality irreducible to any representational program (e.g., the realist novel as presenting the social totality as tapestry awaiting interpretation; testimonio as giving voice to the subaltern, etc.). The intertwining of thematic threads; the myriad of messages that do not come together to form a unified totality, yet which cannot be neatly disentangled and isolated as a plurality of pure, self-contained meanings: these are nothing if not self-impressions of Chejfec's novel itself. The redoubling of interpretative possibilities for "silencio" and "contratiempo"—toward the social and the historical on the one hand, and back onto the literary on the other—precisely illustrates how literary *contretemps* works. Citing and distancing itself from the *novela social* in the same gesture, *contratiempo literario* remains skeptical of any claim of harmony or consensus, *contratiempo* introduces a thought of heterogeneity at the heart of totality.

The other tread entails an attempt to think historical time otherwise than its hegemonic liberal interpretation, according to which time is understood as a linear sequence of moments or stages organized by an overarching idea of progress, and whose end coincides with the liberal social pact. *Contratiempo*, which derives its creative force from interruptive and arrhythmic features, moves against what Walter Benjamin famously termed the "homogeneous empty time" of liberal modernity and historicism. Several scenes in the novel help to illustrate what a literary rethinking of historical time as arrhythmic creativity might look like. The motif plays out in a slightly different thematic register in each case. Such contextual variation has an undeniable impact on how we understand the thematization of *contratiempo*; it is not simply one self-identical theme appearing over and over again under different guises. The novel's consideration of the *contratiempo* topos is itself informed by a contratemporal law of

interruption, mutation and new beginning.

The first scene I want to look at occurs near the end of the novel as the narrator recalls having observed with Delia a group of children (“los hijos de F”) playing near a dump. This scene is accorded a power of framing the novel in its entirety, as the children’s innocent curiosity in contemplation of the garbage heap provides a metaphor that defines both the mnemonic process that drives narrative production and the experience of reading. This mirroring of reflective acts—play, speculation, writing and reading—destabilizes any preconceptions that the narrator might hold about the working class as embodying a drastically different outlook on the world in comparison with other classes. What we find here is a group of children whose desires and contemplative actions turn out to be indistinguishable, on a formal level, from the process of writing and the experience of reading.

Delia me dijo que en muchos casos mirar la basura era poner en práctica la imaginación, “Lo que no se tiene,” acotó...Toda mi vida había visto la ceremonia, ahora comprendía que quizá también yo la había practicado, pero por un extraño mecanismo de la memoria, o de la conciencia, recién entonces, observando los hijos de F en actividad...El pasatiempo consistía en desentrañar el pasado: el origen de la basura...y las cosas que se habían hecho con ella antes de que se convirtiera en desperdicio. Efectuada día tras día, era una tarea indeterminada que sólo los hijos de F, esa mañana, pudieron destacar para mí. Algunos pensaban que la basura hablaba, que mostraba una verdad oculta mediante mensajes organizados así, como basura, cuyo único destino consistía en ser descifrados. Y en este “destino único” estaba incluido el lenguaje

específico, necesario para leer y observar, que se activaba al ejecutar el análisis.

(143-44)

“Lo que no se tiene”: Delia’s interpretation is codified twice over, once in terms of desire and absence, and again in terms of expropriation in which the trash heap presents the culmination of a long process of labor, expropriation, production and consumption. Later in this same passage the scene is described—now presumably the words are no longer Delia’s but the narrator’s own—as the children engaging in a “pastime.” This latter term catachrestically equates the activity of a group of working class children with a concept (leisure time) that is the distinguishing invention of the bourgeoisie. Whereas the narrator’s choice of words glosses over social differentiation, Delia’s description emphasizes exploitation and exclusion from a form of activity—consumption—that is virtually synonymous with social belonging or citizenship.

Epistemologically speaking, the mound of worn-out objects is akin to a puzzle, and the children scrutinizing it are like critics charged with deciphering a secret [*desentrañar*: to solve a mystery, to get to the bottom of things]. Their task is to decode the history and former purpose of objects that have effectively fallen out of historical time. The resonances with the vanguard tradition—Duchamp’s readymade, the interest in “found objects” in Picasso and Dada, Breton’s *objet trouvé*, for example—are unmistakable. A cyclical pattern emerges from this scene. First the children are seen as initiating a retrospective and speculative assessment of the contents of the garbage heap, decoding or imagining a prior history of use through which the objects have been used up. These children are the eyes and minds that will reconstruct the social trajectory of objects that have been reduced to a mute, disordered collection of inert matter. This

archaeological operation, if completed, would take the curious observers back to a time of instrumental use; inert matter would be elevated once again to the ideal level of meaning through the children's playful work of interpretation. The structure of this interpretive labor is rigorously dialectical: first it presupposes production and the creation of value through labor; then comes the depreciation of value through consumption; and finally there is the negation of negation (the restoration of meaning through the work of interpretation), culminating in the *Aufhebung* [negation or elevation] of the negative in the retrospective deciphering of history.⁹⁸ The fact that Delia employs the indefinite grammatical subject ("lo que no se tiene") instead of a determinate one ("lo que [ellos] no tienen") instills a broader social relevance in her commentary. This impersonal grammar also allows for a metaphorical transfer from trash to memory, as if memory too were a kind of "trash heap of the past" in which what is no longer present could be brought forth and show itself in a new light.

These two mirroring scenes—the children at the garbage heap; the writer sitting before the mirror-like window or the blank page—together initiate a thinking of historical time as something other than a sequence of presents strung together or a teleologically-governed process. The impulses that give rise to memory in this novel have little to do with the aim of recuperating what actually happened in the past. Thus the fact that the narrator's recollections are mediated by the perspective of a particular social class is, in the end, beside the point. What is at stake in remembrance, let us recall, has to do with illuminating elements of past experience that could not have seen the light of day in their own time. Once again, by the same token, we see in the garbage heap scene a tendency in narrative discourse to turn back to literature; the anecdote taken from the lives of the narrator and Delia turns out to be telling us

something about the genesis of the text itself. Similar to what we saw in the discussion of *contratiempo*, the trash-heap scene juxtaposes a meditation on social relations with questions about literature and memory. Akin to the silence of the working class and the refuse in the garbage heap, literature would seem here to be a medium devoid of content (extra-literary meanings, purposes) and, at the same time, capable of illuminating the more obscure regions of our social and historical existence.

In the last part of the passage, beginning with the sentence “Algunos pensaban que la basura hablaba...,” we encounter the notion that the refuse heap might be harboring a concealed meaning that awaits discovery and interpretation. This mound of used-up objects would be akin to a giant tapestry awaiting decipherment at the hands of this group of miniature archaeologists or critics. As Jacques Rancière has pointed out in numerous places, the image of the tapestry, whose deciphering would unlock the truth of the social, turns out to be an invention of the realist tradition; it is literature that first introduces the association of a social totality, defined by the anonymous equality of its parts, with a woven textile whose hidden truths can be unlocked through interpretation. But narrative voice in Chejfec’s novel also destabilizes this modern conceit about the trash heap as an image that harbors hidden social meaning. At the very least it dispels the idea that interpretation could ever resolve the enigma of the social and the political—its dissensual composition—and arrive at true count of its parts: “Siempre hubo algo que descrifrar, un mensaje a la espera de ser descifrado” (145). It is the fact that the social has no ground to call its own, no *arkhē* or first principle, which makes interpretation both necessary and impossible.

Posiblemente esta tarea colectiva prolongaba esa arcaica labor del mundo que

consistía en adivinar el futuro desde un sistema de señales; pero en algún momento se había producido la inversión, y desde entonces era una labor dirigida a desentrañar el pasado. ¿Era otra prueba de que el futuro había dejado de importar? Los pobladores quizá se revelaban contra el tiempo lineal, “histórico,” que tanto los castigaba, optando por las alternativas que tuvieran más a la mano. Así, los desperdicios, para muchos un tipo de materia terminada que ha llegado al final de su ciclo de utilidad, tomaban un poco más de aliento: no importaba el futuro o el pasado, mejor o peor; importaba que fuera distinto.

(144)

This passage, which follows the preceding portrait by less than a full page, introduces several important interpretive shifts. We are now asked to see the scene we were just looking at a moment ago as the continuation by way of inversion of an older tradition of seeking in nature the signs through which the future can be foretold. The decline of prophetic practices coincides with the rationalization of the world, which in turn renders the future in its alterity inconceivable. Within a rationalized world the only future that can be envisioned is a continuation of the present or its trajectory, which is to say that from within modernity we perceive the totality of our present—i.e., the modern state, the social relations of capitalism, etc.—as objectively necessary outcomes of history. The turn to the past on the part of those who do not yet have a full share in this modernity may constitute an attempt to revitalize attunement to contingency and thereby reactivate alternative historical temporalities.

Once again we are reminded here that mnemonic practice has little to do with the historicist project recuperating the meaning once held by used-up objects. Such a hermeneutic

practice of recuperation would have difficulty breaking free of the linear model of historical time that constitutes one of the repressive elements deployed against the working class. Against the liberal, enlightened determination of history as progress through rationalization, Chejfec's novel highlights the material leftover of commodity production as bearing traces of alternative, non-linear experiences of historical time. The afterlife of the commodity in its used-up condition illuminates a form of materiality that resists the dialectical organization of historical time—i.e., the division of history into progressive stages, each of which surpasses or negates its predecessor, and which will in turn be surpassed by the next stage to come, while the violence of surpassing is recoded as progress. In the trash heap we find an accumulation of objects that have fallen out of the economy of production, circulation and consumption; these remains have become separated from what was once their rationalizing purpose, while their residual existence attests to a materiality that negation cannot be done with.

But the trace-like structure of this residue of commodity production and utility also constitutes a site for potential reanimation of historical time at a deeper level. This structure promotes a thinking of time as differing from itself in a way that cannot be recuperated and subsumed under a broader unity. The mound of residue marks the difference of presence—of any given present—from itself. In order to see what this self-differentiating role of the remainder looks like let us return to the narrator's earlier observations, made in passing as he recalled the typical appearance of housing in Delia's neighborhood, about the connection between development and ruins: "Todo lo que se edifica es una promesa de ruina, lo que se acaba de levantar también. Uno vive rodeado de escombros; habitar casas significa ocupar ruinas" (27). Architectural ruins are not just the eventual fate that awaits the structures we

inhabit and whose solidity and permanence we ordinarily take for granted. The challenge issued by Chejfec's novel involves thinking ruins—architectural ruins or used-up objects—*as form*. Or, more precisely, the novel invites us to think the unraveling of architectural and instrumental form that is the ruin or the used-up object as the other side of the significant relations that make up our world. The ruin is there from the beginning, not as goal or end but as return of the indeterminacy that lurks within all determination. In the next section I will look more closely at indeterminacy in terms of what Aristotle calls *sterēsis*, or potentiality as a register that is irreducible to the distinction between the actual and the possible.

Similar to what we saw with the chapter headings in Eltit's *Mano de obra*, literary reflections on the trash heap and ruins in *Boca de lobo* share a connection with what Benjamin tries to think under the heading of natural history: a zone that straddles the culture/nature division, a liminal space where objects once produced by human hands (or machines) and assigned functional meanings within a certain social configuration, subsequently fall out of those significant contexts. For *Boca de lobo* the possibility of a post-symbolic or natural history seems to be imprinted within cultural artifacts at the moment of their production; like a specter the ruin has already inscribed itself in the blueprint through invisible ink. Let us note an important logical turn in this formulation of the “promise of ruin” that haunts all production and edification, the rhetoric of which forces a differentiation of time from itself: the post-symbolic afterlife is both the material complement to ideal processes of cultural signification and it is a ghostly shadow cast upon the production of material culture. In the final section of this chapter I take this connection between ruins and architecture in a slightly different direction by exploring how similar figures—the ruin and also the trace—show up in the novel's

consideration of industrial production and capitalist social relations.

In *Specters of Marx* Jacques Derrida proposes that the thought of event is incompatible with what Heidegger refers to as the vulgar conceptualization of time, i.e., time thought on the basis of presentism, as a series of autonomous, self-contained Nows:

It is...event-ness that one must think, but that best resists what is called the concept, if not thinking. And it will not be thought as long as one relies on the simple (ideal, mechanical, or dialectical) opposition of the real presence of the real present or the living present to its ghostly simulacrum, the opposition of the effective or the actual (*wirklich*) to the non-effective, inactual, which is also to say, as long as one relies on a general temporality or an historical temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves. (Derrida 1994, 70)

Thought cannot even begin to approach what is at stake in an event until it abandons the metaphysical determination of time that has prevailed since at least Aristotle. There can be no thought of the event without a concurrent thinking of the present as contaminated or haunted by its others: past and future, to be sure, but also other modalities of non-presence (withdrawal, *ir hacia atrás*). The event, if it is thinkable, requires an overturning of the traditional determination of the non-actual as derivative of the present. But what would that overturning look like, and what kind of thought would it give rise to? Could there be a non- or post-metaphysical conceptualization of time? Without claiming to resolve this question once and for all, let us recall Derrida's assertion in "Ousia and Grammē"—in response to Heidegger's attempts to distinguish between "authentic" (non-metaphysical) and "inauthentic"

(metaphysical) experiences of time, that time as such is suppressed as soon as one begins to ask about its meaning—that is, its whatness, its essence, *ti esti* (what is it?) (Derrida 1982, 53, n.32). In that case it may be that there is no “vulgar” concept of time—because all conceptualizations of time belong by definition to the history of metaphysics, including (if not especially) those that oppose themselves to that history.

NATURE AND (IN)DETERMINATION: POIESIS AND TEKHNE IN THE TIME OF MECHANICAL PRODUCTION

Verum esse ipsum factum.

—Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*

The movements in Chejfec’s novel between history and literature, and nature and culture, come to a head in the narrator’s reflections on labor and industrial capitalism. These realms comprise distinct modes of *poiēsis* (making or production), which Aristotle defines as the imposition of form on *materia prima*. As Heidegger points out the Aristotelian understanding of production as form-giving presupposes a state of matter that could receive form (just as a piece of wax receives a stamp), a state from which matter would then emerge as fully formed, and to which it could presumably revert if and when it sheds its form (Heidegger 1976). Aristotle’s term for this hypothetical state of matter prior to form is *sterēsis* [ὑστέρησις: deficiency or lagging behind]. *Sterēsis*, often translated as “lack” or “privation,” names a withdrawal that opposes or complements the *poiēsis* through which determinate form is imposed on matter. *Sterēsis*, in Heidegger’s reading, is therefore the Aristotelian axis for thinking the ontological difference. It names a difference and a deferral of actuality that conditions every manifestation of being, but which also falls into oblivion as soon as thought focuses on the totality of beings in their actuality. Giorgio Agamben, meanwhile, associates

sterēsis with potentiality, which translates simultaneously a receptivity to form and, as we saw earlier, a capacity *not to be* that remains irreducible to presentation. As capacity not to be, *sterēsis* can never become present or manifest as such. I will take up the question of *sterēsis* in more detail shortly.

For the reader of Chejfec's novel these philosophical discussions initiate a dialogue that includes thematic concerns (social relations and technologies of capitalist production; class conflict and its disappearance in the time of post-dictatorship) and metaliterary concerns about aesthetic experience, representation and difference.

Ese edificio antiguo y en ruinas...irradiaba una de las pocas formas de la verdad, o sea, [era] el sitio donde se produce la transformación de las cosas, la combinación de trabajo humano y materia dócil que da como producto final la mercancía, los objetos que cada uno después compra, si puede. (100)

This portrait of the factory where Delia is employed contributes in at least two ways to the unfolding of the literary, philosophical and social-historical concerns I have been discussing. For one, it provides one of the few visible signposts in the novel of shifting historical temporalities. It is a metonymy of the "Import Substitution Industrialization" policies that dominated in Latin America from the 1930s through the 1960s and 70s. The other implication, which I will discuss in more detail shortly, involves the factory space as metonym of capitalist *imperium*, of a regime of sense that produces and imposes its own specific form of truth and intelligibility. In recounting Delia's experience of social organization in the historical time of industrial capitalism, narrative discourse in *Boca de lobo* illustrates the way in which capitalism generates a powerful account of subjectivity and freedom which simultaneously activates a

form of subjugation. At the same time this portrait of the factory anticipates a different kind of subjugation that might be presumed to define the time of recollection and writing: the subjugation of all social spheres, including the political logic of sovereignty, to the workings of the market.

It is helpful here to recall Fredric Jameson's assessment of the historicizing potential of the realist novel as exemplified by Balzac, whose literary production spanned the transitional period immediately prior to the Second Republic in France. "In Balzac," Jameson writes, "factories do not yet exist as such: we watch not the end products but the efforts of the great capitalists and inventors to construct them" (Jameson 1974, 203-04). If the Balzackian novel bore witness to the birth pangs of industrial capitalism in France prior to and during the Second Republic, in Chejfec's millennial novel the factory now appears in a ghostly light. Industrial capitalism is now in the process of being supplanted by other forms of production and accumulation, but these new modes are not accompanied by an iconographic image or topography that would be analogous to the factory as metonym of industrial production. Not unlike the pile of used-up objects discussed in the previous section and the ruins that haunt all architectural construction, the factory in Chejfec's novel serves as mute witnesses to the effacements and reinscriptions that have given shape to the history of the present in post-dictatorship, neoliberal Argentina. It appears under the phantasmagoric light of anachronism; in recalling the old order of industrial capitalism, its shadow also reminds us of the violent transformations experienced in Argentina during the last decades of the 20th century.

Once again we find in Chejfec's novel a building in ruins that is in the process of settling into the post-symbolic realm of natural history. How, in that light, should the statement that

the factory “radiates one of the few forms of truth” be understood? In what way can the factory be said to constitute a source of truth in the world? As Marx shows in the first volume of *Capital* the industrial workplace, organized to meet the needs of capitalist production of increasingly large scale, becomes the powerful generator of a new social logic: new ways of expropriating, dividing and allocating time; new ways of configuring motion and activity; and technological evolution driven by conflict between capital and labor. At the time of the industrial revolution the factory emerges as paradigmatic form of production, reshaping the way in which all forms of labor are conceived and organized. Although the majority of Englishmen in the 19th century may not have been employed in industrial workplaces, workers of all vocations were nonetheless compelled to see their work as mechanical and themselves as machines.⁹⁹

It may be, as the epigraph taken from Vico’s *New Science* suggests, that the thought of industrial production as truth regime only comprises a new chapter in a much longer history of thinking about truth. *Verum esse ipsum factum*: Vico’s statement can be translated as either “truth itself is fact” or “truth itself is made” [*factum* derives from *facere* or “to make”]. I want to focus on the second possibility here. If truth is understood as something to be made rather than found or unveiled it cannot correspond to an already existing property or essence; it must be produced through language and action. Vico’s statement goes against the Platonic account of truth as eternal Form, and comes close to the Kantian “Copernican revolution” according to which the subjective schema of perception and understanding (i.e., time, space and causality) must be rigorously distinguished from things and beings themselves. Truth, which determines what counts as intelligible or sensible experience, must be made because it is itself

fundamentally a form of making; truth qua intelligibility and sensibility is itself fashioned and deployed by the (Kantian) imagination and the understanding. Truth for Vico and Kant is thus a fictioning—not a distortion but a doing—that clears the way for cognition in time and space, and according to the rational law of causes and effects. As Reiner Schürmann demonstrates the understanding of truth as making is entirely consistent with the Kantian critical tradition, for which, in Schürmann’s words, “in every experience, it is we who constitute the true—*verum factum*, that which we make is true. The true and the fabricated are convertible” (Schürmann 2003, 453).

For *Boca de lobo*, in which the factory [*fábrica*] constitutes the site of making [*fabricar*] par excellence, the correlation between truth and *poiēsis* assumes a new historical dimension that is not yet fully accounted for by the Kantian critical tradition. Truth for Kant refers to the way in which reason freely assigns itself the laws according to which the sensory can be perceived and the intelligible grasped. In Chejfec’s novel, meanwhile, we encounter a literary reflection on how the historical evolution of capitalism, from industrial to post-industrial production, impacts social organization while also shaping the practices and sensibilities that accompany these forms of organization. Thus the equation of the factory with imperium proposes a historicizing operation that is absent from Kantian critique; if as Marx showed the factory invents its own specific ways of organizing time, bodies and motion, what then becomes of that industrial imperium in the time of post-Fordist capitalism? This is one of the central allegorical questions posed by the novel, which does not attempt to provide an answer (unless it is to be found simply in the retreat of the narrator to the private confines of his studio) so much as it presents the question itself as a point of departure for literary meditation on history

as destruction or finitude.

The interaction between “*material docil*” and “*trabajo humano*” in the passage cited above recalls Aristotle’s distinction between *physis* and *tekhnē*, or nature and technology (including arts and crafts). Aristotle defines this as the difference between those things that have within themselves their own source of growth (e.g., a tree has a self-regulating growth cycle that begins with the germination of a seed) and things that are brought about by external agents (e.g., unlike the tree, a wooden bed must be envisioned and crafted by a furniture maker). The distinction between endogenous and exogenous causality relates closely to Aristotle’s conceptualization of *sterēsis* as “privation” or “falling away” in contrast to *ousia* as “presencing.” *Sterēsis*, as indicated earlier, names a constitutive subtraction from all forms of *poiēsis*, of determination and production.

In Aristotle’s thought *sterēsis* provides a solution to an apparent contradiction at the heart of the Greek conception of being as *ousia*. The contradiction goes as follows: whatever *is* (e.g., a bed or a tree) must have derived from something that was there beforehand or, alternatively, it must have come from nothing. Both alternatives are fraught with problems, however. It is impossible to conceive of something coming from nothing, since in that case *nothing* would already be *something*—otherwise how to explain the fact that this particular *nothing* here and now engendered something substantial? By the same token, it is logically inconceivable that something could come into being *from* something else, since that *something else* can only be *what* it is and *where* it is; only one thing can occupy a given place at a given time, and the situated being of the thing does not have room for the additional presence of some other being.¹⁰⁰

The Parmenidean problem turns out to be a mere pseudo-problem, as Aristotle shows, because it accepts too easily the reduction of *ousia* to an either/or alternative—either being or nothing—while neglecting the possibility that existence and non-existence might each possess multiple modalities. Aristotle identifies two such modes which he calls “absolute” and “incidental” non-existence (*sterēsis*); it is the conflation of these two modes that leads Parmenides to confusion. While Parmenides is the implicit target of this move in Aristotle’s thought, the conflation of the absolute and the incidental or contingent is not the fault of a particular thinker but is endemic to Greek language (and, by extension, to our modern languages). When we say—to use Aristotle’s example—that a physician does something other than the practice of medicine (“the physician builds a house,” for instance) or becomes something other than a physician (“the physician becomes a mother”), we unwittingly assert that it is *as a physician* that she or he acts in such a way or becomes this or that. In fact the opposite is the case: the physician does nothing other than what a physician already does (attend to the sick), while alongside this physician-ness something or someone else emerges (a house-builder, a parent). And where does this something else come from? It comes from incidental non-existence or potentiality. Our language with its substantive, subject-oriented grammar can only obfuscate key distinctions between actuality [*entelechia*, *energeia*] and potentiality [*dunamis*], between form [*morphé*], coming into existence [*ousia*] and falling out of actuality [*sterēsis*], and between different modes of non-existence (absolute versus contingent). While it is indeed unthinkable that something come from nothing, all coming-into-being owes a debt to what Aristotle terms *sterēsis*, which is not nothing and could be translated as potentiality or as constitutive withdrawal.

Aristotle's discussion of matter and form remains clouded by an ambiguity that I want to highlight for the purposes of reading Chejfec's novel. *Sterēsis*, once again, names a privation of form or a falling out of existence that is contingent in nature and which must itself be shed in order for something to come into being. Moreover it can be understood as either "perishable" or "imperishable." Contingent or perishable *sterēsis* includes all of the accidents that befall things at certain moments in their history: the physician has a baby, for example, prior to which her maternal potentiality was contingently in privation. Imperishable *sterēsis* meanwhile, names an atemporal register that is presupposed by presentation or coming into being, but which is itself irreducible to presentation as such. Whatever the physician does, has done, and may do or become in the future, there will always be the potential for something more, and it is this *potential for*—in distinction from all future *determinate somethings*—that is irreducible to presence, either actual or potential. An atemporal deprivation or potentiality-to-be cannot dissolve once this or that possibility is actualized, since what dissolves is by definition already within time. Imperishable *sterēsis* designates the difference of all presentation or coming-into-being from itself.

While it would be easy to conceive of *sterēsis* and *ousia* as opposites, in a 1939 essay on Aristotle's *Physics* Heidegger adds a clarification that warns us away from such a hasty reduction. *Sterēsis* as potentiality for form or existence, *or* as capacity not to be, cannot be equated with absence understood simply as deprivation or negation of presence. Potentiality introduces a conceptual fold in which absence and presence, existence and non-existence touch on one another prior to their logical separation as antitheses. *Sterēsis*, as condition of possibility for any appearance or presentation, is not absence per se but rather the presence of

absence, the insistence of the limits of presentation within the order of the present and the visible. How does this insistence work or make itself known? Heidegger offers the analogy of an everyday object—a bicycle—that goes missing and whose absence itself becomes a source of preoccupation for us. The point of this illustration is not the distinction between the bike when it was present and the bike now that it is absent; it is the way in which absence “itself” becomes a cause for concern, as if absence as such were a thing that could be experienced in its own right. *Sterēsis*, in this philosophical anecdote, is the materialization or thingliness of withdrawal or privation:

When we say today, for example, “My bicycle is gone!” we do not mean that it is somewhere else; we mean that it is missing. When something is missing, the missing *thing* is gone, to be sure, but the *goneness* itself, the lack itself, is what irritates and upsets us, and the “lack” can do this only if the lack itself is “there,” i.e., constitutes a mode of being. *Sterēsis* as becoming-absent is not simply absentness, but rather is a kind of *becoming-present*, in which the *becoming-absent* (but not the absent *thing*) becomes present. (Heidegger 1976, 266)

In Heidegger’s account *sterēsis* makes itself known through affect and in response to our awareness that some key element has removed itself from an accustomed network of practical relations in our lives. The phenomenal fact that the bicycle has gone missing throws a monkey wrench into our organization of time, movement, activities and responsibilities. Its absence announces an interruption of the economy of everyday life with its appointed tasks, obligations and circuits; suddenly we find ourselves unable to make it to an appointment, get to work, go to the grocery store, and so on. This anecdote helps us to understand *sterēsis* as exposing a

void at the heart of the dialectic of presence and absence, and of coming-into-being as the negation of non-being or absence.

As experience of absence as such, *sterēsis* casts its uncanny shadow over the totality of our world. It is a non-place in which appearing and withdrawal, presence and absence fold into one another without becoming identical. Heidegger's use of the missing bicycle to illustrate what *sterēsis* looks like—and feels like—brings to mind his discussion of “world” in Division One, Chapter 3, §16 of *Being and Time* (1927), in which Heidegger equates world with a familiarized structure of practical reference [*Verweisung*]. We only become aware of worldliness [*Weltlichkeit*] or the totality of such referential structures when one of the referential relations is interrupted—for instance, when the carpenter's hammer breaks he becomes aware of the totality of referential assignments that makes up the “world” of his workshop and his practice. I will have more to say that connection in the next chapter.

Let us now return to factory in *Boca de lobo* so as to take a closer look at how literary reflections on technologically-driven organization of time and space under industrial capitalism cross paths with concerns about literary language. One memorable scene from the factory involves a coworker of Delia's, “G,” whose highly specialized skills are rendered obsolete and whose subsequent trajectory illustrates a form of abandonment that can be associated either with the existential condition that Heidegger terms facticity (more on that shortly) or with the historical situation of post-sovereignty. The tragic fate of “G” is a consequence of what Marx terms the real subsumption of labor under capital, a secondary process whereby capitalism generates its own forms of social organization, specialization and productivity, as opposed to the formal subsumption of labor in which capital appropriates preexisting productive forms for

its own purposes. This scene serves as a reminder of how technological evolution is intricately bound up with the social history of capital and its conflicts with labor.

Before turning to a closer examination of this episode in the novel, a brief look at the interaction between technology and human labor in capitalist production will help focus the discussion. The concepts of specialization and deskilling are of particular interest here. Classical political economy envisions capitalism as conferring on the worker the freedom to do whatever he or she pleases with technical skill and labor. In equating of the labor market with freedom, however, political economy is unable to account for how specialization in the capitalist workplace shapes and limits what the worker is able to do with skill and knowledge. The market encourages workers to develop expertise in a certain area—those who do not are consigned to the most menial of all jobs—but then a worker with specialized training is no longer capable of producing commodities; she or he can only contribute one or another part in a larger production process. In that light specialization, as a passport into the labor market, in fact makes the worker more dependent than ever on capital. The inevitable result of specialization, as Marx puts it, is that the laborer becomes a mere appendage of the production process:

If, in the first place, the worker sold his labor-power to capital because he lacked the material means of producing a commodity, now his own individual labor-power withholds its services unless it has been sold to capital. It will continue to function only in an environment which first comes into existence after [labor's] sale, namely the capitalist's workshop. Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of that workshop. As the chosen people bore in their features

the sign that they were the property of Jehovah, so the division of labor brands the manufacturing worker as the property of capital. (Marx 1977, 482)

The “freedom” of the labor market masks an originary unfreedom that coincides with the conjunction of real subsumption, i.e., specialization and deskilling. What political economy calls freedom presupposes a prior cut, a “circumcision” that marks all living labor as belonging a priori to what Chejfec’s novel calls the imperium of capital. The event that Marx calls primitive accumulation is thereby consolidated and repeated, within the historical temporality of capitalism, by a cut that will from here on function as the sign of an originary and unsurpassable debt. Any attempt to theorize how the productive potential of labor can be translated into anti-capitalist political subjectivization of the working class must take this originary condition into account.¹⁰¹ As long as separation between labor and capital prevails, freedom will always already bear this inscription of belonging.

In the context of Fordist and post-Fordist production, specialization becomes difficult to distinguish from what would seem to be its conceptual antithesis, deskilling. Forms of deskilling can be found in automatization of the production process, diversification (in which workers trained in one industry must acquire new skills), deprofessionalization (redefining doctors as health care providers, etc.), and so on. Deskilling is also synonymous with hyper-specialization, which draws new limitations on the number of tasks assigned to any given worker. In the industrial workplace deskilling typically took the form of breaking up and compartmentalizing the production process into component actions (adding a headlight to a car, screwing a lid on a jar), as well as organizing discrete tasks in an effort to minimize wasted movements and unnecessary down time (Harvey 1989, 125). In the post-Fordist world, meanwhile, deskilling no

longer simply delimits the number and variety of tasks a worker is asked to perform; it now redefines in more radical fashion the expected “shelf life” of skills, expertise and even job security. Deskilling comes into play, for example, with corporate decisions to downsize, automate, relocate, and diversify. It thus goes hand in hand with the condition of precarity. Under the paradigm of flexible accumulation it is no longer sufficient that workers learn to do one task well. Workers must now also learn to adapt to unpredictability, which often means being ready to forget what they know and acquire new skills following an acquisition or when they find themselves out of work (Harvey 1989, esp. chapter 17). If in the time of industrial capitalism specialization was the circumcisional mark of belonging inscribed in the body of labor, in the time of post-Fordism specialization is now only advantageous to the degree that it can be shed like an old skin. In this latter context, the reflection on abandonment in *Boca de lobo* supplements what Marx was attempting to think with the circumcision metaphor; if this scene anticipates the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, it also illustrates how abandonment is already present as possibility within the time of industrial capitalism.

Let us now turn to the episode in question, as the narrator recalls having heard it from Delia. “G” has worked in the factory for as long as he can remember. One day he shows up at his customary place only to discover that the machine he is trained to operate, and for which only he possesses the requisite specialist knowledge, has been replaced by a newer apparatus whose mechanics are entirely unfamiliar to him—in fact it is a pair of apparatuses that have replaced the singular machine that “G” was uniquely qualified to operate. In this scene technics turns its stinger against the human in its presumptive uniqueness as author of its own fate and history. The prosthetic know-how that gave G a proper place in the factory as imperium of truth

has silently transformed itself into an impediment for which there is no place.

G no estaba en condiciones de recordar su primer día de trabajo en la fábrica, pero intuía que hasta ese momento la vida no había sido real; la recordaba como un tiempo de espera, una antesala. La vida antes de la fábrica era una ficción, pero no tanto por haberlo sido realmente sino por la forma como la recordaba. Y al contrario, ahora pertenecía al imperio de la verdad. Como se ve, G no esperaba que esto terminara: las ficciones concluyen, la realidad no. Sin embargo los títulos estaban a punto de invertirse y sólo restaba que el drama se desencadenara de improviso. Ocurrió cierto día, cuando llegó al taller y se encontró con dos máquinas; no una sola, la habitual, sino otras dos. En el suelo se dibujaban las marcas de la anterior, huellas profundas, imborrables, que señalaban el paso del tiempo y el antiguo peso. En un primer momento creyó que las nuevas máquinas tendrían las mismas funciones que la otra, y que entonces se trabajaría con ellas de manera similar. Pero cuando advirtió que no era así, sino al revés, que no habría podido pensarse en nada más alejado de su viejo artefacto, se negó a trabajar. . . . No hace falta decir que lo despidieron de la manera menos contemplativa; según la fábrica, se necesitaba una respuesta “ejemplar” ante el resto de los operarios. Una máquina fuera de circulación dejaba una rémora: un obrero en desuso, en este caso G, desde varios puntos de vista el mejor de la fábrica, joven, sano y disciplinado. (162-63)

We first encounter “G” as exemplary subject of the disciplinary order of industrial capitalism. The circumcisional logic I have been discussing marks him to the core of his being;

for him the artificially organized time and space of industrial production possess more reality than does life outside the factory walls. Fully incorporated into the truth regime that is the factory, whatever lies outside its walls and prior to its temporalizing divisions can only appear to “G” as a “waiting room” [*antesala*], a staging ground whose meaning is determined teleologically by what follows. The *antesala* evinces something similar to what Borges calls the logic of the precursor: the outside world, like the past (the precursor), is understood on the basis of the inside or the present (Kafka); the outside or the past is defined retroactively as having made way for the present. The present (the factory, Kafka) thereby ceases to be seen as one particular moment among many and comes to represent the privileged point through which the meaning of all history becomes intelligible.

Nothing, however, could have prepared “G” for the stunning developments that await him on that fateful morning. Upon arriving at work he discovers that the place previously reserved for him no longer exists and that his specialized knowledge and skills have been rendered obsolete. The factory is an imperium that admits no rivals, which is what makes unthinkable the sudden and uncanny appearance of the double, the pair of machines in the place formerly occupied by a single, self-sufficient machine. “G” has been transformed overnight from a model worker into an obstacle to progress [*una rémora*], a non-part whose obstructiveness must be dealt with in notable fashion. The tragic irony in his downfall is that this sudden reversal, which takes him from exemplary subject of imperium to impediment and outcast, stems precisely from his having been too good a subject, from having internalized all too well the originary mark of belonging inscribed on his body.

The tragic story of “G” contributes a supplementary economic dimension to Bernard

Stiegler's philosophico-anthropological account of the relation between technics and the human. Stiegler's account of technics and the human offers a critical response to the humanist predilection for viewing technology as an instrument developed by and for the human. For Stiegler the human is defined by a congenital insufficiency vis-à-vis the facticity of existence (an insufficiently mythologized as the "fault of Empedocles"), while technics in turn plays the role of supplement or prosthetic. Whereas a traditional prosthesis replaces a natural appendage that has been lost or damaged, technics as prosthesis replaces nothing. Technics marks the human difference: not to say the sovereign difference postulated by humanism but an uncanny difference which, from the moment of birth to the instant of death, divides the human from itself and prevents it from becoming One ("whole" or identical to itself). The human can only realize its potential for being by turning outside of itself to technics: to language, instrumental reason, tools, etc. Its being is defined by a state of arrears, of being-behind, for which technics serves as an originary supplement.

Not unlike Stiegler's re-reading of the Prometheus and Empedocles myth, the story of "G" inverts the humanist narrative of mastery—both of technics itself and of nature through technics. Here technology is the interface that enables living labor to be organized in a productive manner and the surplus value extracted. The experience of obsolescence and abandonment marks the precise moment at which it becomes clear that this exemplary subject of technics and capital was in fact never anything more than a mere appendage of the machine, a supplement of the supplement. As David Harvey reminds us, technological innovation and evolution are both a logical consequence of capitalist competition and an instrument of discipline that assists the capitalist in circumventing market disadvantages (e.g., labor scarcity

that would drive wages up) and in combating and neutralizing organized resistance. The trajectory of technological evolution within the workplace serves as a reminder to workers that their replacement may well be just around the corner—if not another worker then in the form of a machine. The mythologization of the entrepreneur is thus but a modern version of Adam Smith's secular theologization of the origins of capitalism: a fable that serves to mask the coercive and exploitative forces at work in the social history of modernity.¹⁰²

As we might have predicted the "G" anecdote also illuminates a formal connection between the scene of industrial production and literature. We first glimpse such a link when the narrator, who is recalling a story once told to him by Delia, pauses to reflect on her description of the marks that have been left by the obsolete machine on the factory floor. These "profound," "indelible" traces attest, as Marx and Engels put it in the "Communist Manifesto," to the former solidity of what has since vanished into thin air (Marx and Engels 1978, 476). By implication these depressions in the factory floor also prophesize the precarity that lurks within those structures that we today tend to regard as permanent and necessary. The marks call attention to the imperceptible process whereby the contingent nature of the present order comes to be perceived as necessity by those who inhabit its domain. They are not only the signs of a deferred or absent meaning or subject, but they also attest silently to what no subject could ever experience in its simultaneity: history as destruction and annihilation, reinscription and recodification.

Si quiere ser obrera, la persona sabe que debe olvidar buena parte de sus destrezas y adquirir otras, circunscriptas a un radio limitado y relacionadas con una serie de tareas repetidas y relativamente sencillas. Y debo decir que ese

olvido de sí, el “abandono,” era otro elemento que convertía a los obreros, a mi modo de ver, en sostenedores del mundo. (174)

This episode thematizes abandonment as the other side of Marx’s metaphorization of circumcision discussed earlier. In the passage reproduced here abandonment indicates something more than just a synonym for deskilling. The forgetting that is a prelude to reskilling is no doubt a facet of what the narrator here calls abandonment, but abandonment as such appears to name something like the fundamental condition in which both *destreza* and *olvido* operate.

In an essay entitled “Abandoned Being” Jean-Luc Nancy proposes the term “abandonment” as a re-elaboration of Heidegger’s thinking of facticity or “thrownness” as point of departure for his engagement with the metaphysical tradition. Abandonment is what prevails following the exhaustion of the ontotheological history of determining the truth of being as self-presence or transcendence in any of its various manifestations: God, Man, Reason, Progress, etc.¹⁰³ Against the presentism that governs thought in the Western tradition from Plato through Hegel, abandonment attempts to thematize a thinking and experience of being that would start from—rather than simply turning away from—the destitution of all ground. That being is abandoned means that being relies on nothing, no *arkhē* or first principle; by the same token it also says that there is nothing to which being can return: no transcendent origin or first principle. Abandoned being is in a permanent state of being-thrown or being-born.

“We do not know it, we cannot really know it, but abandoned being has already begun to constitute an inevitable condition for our thought, perhaps its only condition” (Nancy 1993, 36). One of the crucial questions opened up in Nancy’s essay concerns the historicity of

abandonment. On one hand, abandonment is not something that happens to being or to the world at some point in history (e.g., after the “death of God”). There can be no history of abandonment; rather, abandonment is the unthought of all history. Whatever comes into being enters by necessity into abandonment as its fundamental condition, its (non)ground. Being is not abandoned so much as it itself is this abandonment. If we do not know it, as Nancy says, this is because abandonment cannot be grasped as a concept. It cannot be known as such not only because it does not respond to the ontological question “What *is* it?” but also because it “is” the unthought condition of possibility of knowing. Abandonment cannot be represented, or it can only be figured catachrestically—as, for instance, in the phrase “boca de lobo.” By the same token, and paraphrasing Heidegger, abandonment is also what calls to (and calls for) thinking today. On the other hand, if abandoned being has “*already* begun to constitute an inevitable condition for our thought” this would seem to imply that abandonment is becoming perceptible or thinkable today in a way that was not the case before—and that the experience of abandonment has something fundamental to do with *time*. The reality of abandonment becomes unavoidable with the retreat of transcendence in its various forms (God, Man, Progress, etc.) and with the decline of principal thought announced by the crises of sovereignty and of Hegel-inspired philosophies of history (of the Right and the Left). Abandonment as existential-ontological condition may be nothing new, then, but as a matter for experience and thought it makes itself known today in unprecedented ways and degrees of intensity.

While there is much more in Nancy’s essay that is deserving of close attention I will limit myself here to commenting on what he has to say about the relation between abandonment and the law insofar as it has something to say to the experience of reading *Boca de lobo*.

The origin of “abandonment” is a putting at *bandon*. *Bandon* (*bandum, band, bannen*) is an order, a prescription, a decree, a permission, and the power that holds these freely at its disposal. To *abandon* is to remit, entrust, or turn over to such a sovereign power, and to remit, entrust, or turn over to its *ban*, that is, to its proclaiming, to its convening, and to its sentencing. (Nancy 1993, 44)

Abandonment derives from *bandum* or the sovereign proclamation. This proclamation has no content other than itself; it forbids and requires nothing except for abandonment. Nancy’s account of the sovereign ban needs to be distinguished from several perspectives with which it has elements in common, such as Schmittian decisionism and Agamben’s messianic proclamations about politics freeing itself from the sovereign ban (Agamben 1998, 59). What Nancy describes as remitting or giving over to sovereign power in its abandonment is not a decision that one could undertake or refuse. Abandonment as condition precedes the self-conscious, willful subject in the same way that the name precedes and creates a place for the speaking subject. One does not choose or opt out of abandonment. Insofar as we decide anything at all we do so from the condition of abandonment itself. By the same token there can be no freeing of politics from what Nancy tries to think as the sovereign ban, as Agamben imagines it, because there is no being beyond abandonment, no being except being-in-abandonment.

One always abandons to a law. The destitution of abandoned being is measured by the limitless severity of the law to which it finds itself exposed. Abandonment does not constitute a subpoena to present oneself before this or that court of law. It is a compulsion to appear absolutely under the law, under the law as such

and in its totality. In the same way...to be *banished* does not amount to coming under a provision of the law, but rather to coming under the entirety of the law. Turned over to the absolute of the law, the banished one is thereby abandoned completely outside its jurisdiction. The law of abandonment requires that the law be applied through its withdrawal. The law of abandonment is the other of the law, which constitutes the law. (44)

The law of which Nancy speaks here is not the codified, phenomenal order that Schmitt has in mind with his account of sovereignty as exceptional decision that either suspends or guarantees a given legal order. The law of abandonment is the other of the phenomenal order, an other which both constitutes the law in its phenomenality and escapes its purview. As Benjamin Pryor notes, there is an important ethico-political position inherent in Nancy's insistence on the irreducibility of the sovereign ban to any phenomenal order of legality. The distinction interrupts or marks a limit for the law's self-presentation through which it equates itself with the exhaustive fulfillment of the meaning of justice (Pryor 2004, 265). The sovereign ban introduces a remainder, which the law can neither account for nor expel and have done with. Abandonment, as Nancy thinks it, is at once the situation in which we find ourselves always already *and* the unthought of our situation, what still remains and calls for thinking in the time of postmodernity as post-history. It thus constitutes what Heidegger would call a destiny. For Nancy it is only in and through thinking abandonment as such—as something other than a merely negative condition: deprivation, lack, alienation—that we can hope to initiate something new, something that could oppose the sovereign violence inflicted by capitalism and the state and thereby disclose the possibility of a world.

By way of conclusion let us return now to the thematization of abandonment in the story of "G." If specialization or *destreza* signifies belonging to the imperium of capital, G's fate illustrates how, in the blink of an eye, the sign of belonging can transform itself into a mark that consigns its bearer to irrelevance and disappearance. In fact it has never been anything but that—as David Harvey puts it, "the only thing secure about modernity is insecurity" (Harvey 107)—though it may be only now that this lesson begins to impart itself to us. The self-forgetting that is put on display in the exceptional case of "G" is an extreme version of a general condition that holds for all capitalist production. The violence of primitive accumulation did not cease when there was no longer any colonial expropriation or uprooting of peasants, gauchos and *indios* from the land, followed by their forced conversion into wage laborers or extermination through military expeditions. That archaic violence is repeated in the time of capitalist production, only now it operates in more or less subterranean ways, for example through the double disciplinary demand for learning and forgetting, specialization and deskilling. The degree zero of supplementation and inscription into capital, *la falta de destreza original*, constitutes a defense against the even more profound abandonment whose depths are touched by "G" in the moment of confronting his unexpected dislocation. The narrator calls this originary state "indetermination" (175).

Specialization remits the worker to the facticity of abandonment, which in the case of "G" reveals itself as the hidden, sinister other of circumscribed inscription. The juxtaposition of specialization and belonging with deskilling and abandonment acquires added weight through the narrator's recollections of "G's" peripatetic trajectory in the weeks following his sudden expulsion from the imperium. In his exodus "G" could be seen wandering through the

neighborhood without apparent purpose or destination. The narrator surmises that what drove him into his new vagabond-like trajectory was a desire to rid himself of his prior mark of inscription—the knowledge, experience and sensibility cultivated through specialization—so as to recover what the narrator calls *la falta de destreza original* [original lack of skill]: an imaginary state prior to supplementation that would lay bare the radical nudity or what Stiegler calls the “(de)fault” [*falta*] of the human (1998). This *falta de destreza* may represent for “G” a blank slate that could pave the way for a new beginning, but as his exodus demonstrates it is also indistinguishable from the post-symbolic natural history into which Oedipus enters following his tragic downfall.

In the narrator’s discourse *la falta de destreza* almost certainly coincides with what he refers to elsewhere, in the context of his reflections on the working class, as humanity’s “infinite debt” (43). According to the narrator’s idiosyncratic reckoning, the working class is subject to a double expropriation. The first expropriation occurs with the extraction of the surplus value; the second happens because the working class inherits what he enigmatically calls humanity’s infinite accumulation of debt: “pagan con su trabajo en primer lugar lo literal, o sea lo que reciben como salario—por otra parte una cantidad que jamás se iguala con el valor verdadero de su esfuerzo—, y que también pagan todo aquello que no tiene precio, es decir, la deuda infinita acumulada por la humanidad” (43). Infinite debt corresponds with what has no price (“aquello que no tiene precio”) and thus cannot be calculated let alone liquidated. It is perhaps analogous to what Heidegger calls facticity and Nancy terms abandonment. If this debt is infinite it is because it constitutes the condition for all thought today.

Perhaps we are now in a position better to understand the narrator’s attribution of how

he fell in love with Delia to the fact of her being a female worker—“*Descubrir que era obrera, aunque me sorprendiera, fue decisivo para enamorarme de ella*”—as well as his assertion that industrial workers are the backbone of the world [*los sostenedores del mundo*]. Both statements postulate a deep correspondence between the conditions of capitalist social organization on the one hand and the existential-ontological conditioning of thought and action by finitude on the other. As the obscure other side of belonging, as its *boca de lobo*, abandonment is not just what happens to those whose usefulness to capitalist imperium has been used up or rendered obsolete. As bandum or proclamation, abandonment names a zone of capture in which sovereign power grabs us and subjugates us to its mandate while also maintaining us at a distance. If for “G” the experience of *abandono* harbors the dream of returning to a mythical pre-technical “state of nature” from which his reintegration into capitalist productivity could then be facilitated, his exile from the workplace is already an encounter with the finitude of abandonment: exile from the imperium of the factory, to be sure, but also abandonment under the law of capitalism. These regional forms of abandonment in turn presuppose a more general sense of abandonment that would coincide with what reveals itself in our time as the an-archic (groundless, a-principial) condition for all thought and action.

Repetition or Interruption? The Fates of Literary Modernity and World in the Time of Globalization and Global War

In a 2003 interview conducted shortly before his death Roberto Bolaño describes Ciudad Juárez—a city he would never see firsthand—as a contemporary and terrestrial hell, calling it “nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, el espejo desasosegado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de los deseos” (Maristain 2010, 29-30). The distant echoes of Plato’s account of mimesis as a mirror held up to the world (*Republic*, Book II) are unmistakable here. For Bolaño’s posthumous novel *2666* (2004; English translation 2008), meanwhile, the interweaving of reflections on violent turmoil in the Free Trade Zone along the Mexican-US border with age-old questions about art and representation stages complementary considerations of what may be the limits of political and aesthetic modernity in the time of globalization. If it is art that brings truth into view for classical understandings of mimesis, for Bolaño it is a place on the geopolitical map that first exposes the unsettling truth of neoliberal Consensus. *2666* would thus constitute a second-order mirror, a mimesis of mimesis, framing an ill-formed and infirm reality whose disproportions and morbid symptoms seem to defy comprehension in any single, unifying image. Or perhaps this novel should instead be understood as working the limits of mimesis. This does not happen in the manner of certain novels associated with the “Boom” and the Latin American neobaroque, in which the “free play of the signifier” subverts familiar forms of literary reference. In *2666* we encounter not the apotheosis of linguistic play but instead a familiar and fully legible referential structure for which the referent has withdrawn. Reference is not subverted in favor of self-reference; it remains intact, albeit as a suspended relation, a relating-to whose substantial object has gone missing. It would be reductive to claim that *2666* is a novel about Ciudad Juárez and

globalization. It is that, among other things, but it is also a novel about literature: about writing, reading, criticism, and literary institutionality. It is a novel about narration and the unnarratable, about temporalization and temporal heterogeneity, about citation and innovation. Moreover, when we pursue this or that thematic thread far enough in *2666*, we invariably find ourselves back where we began: facing questions about literature. This is not to say that Bolaño reduces everything that we call real to literature. This labyrinthian hermeneutic structure contributes to destabilizing our understanding of literature and its “essence,” and therefore, by extension, of the distinction between the fictive and the real, literature and the world. Put another way, *2666* bears witness to historical processes that are reshaping social spaces and relations while redefining the way in which art and literature have been conceived in modernity. And it does so by telling a story in which aesthetic form and aesthetic procedures assert themselves as problems.

As a friend says to the narrator in Borges’s “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*,” mirrors and paternity are abominable because they reproduce and disseminate the visible universe [*porque lo multiplican y lo divulgan*]. Not unlike the technique of writing, the mirror introduces a thought of duplication and with it the unavoidable risk that the copy (son, image, grapheme) will stray from the security of its origin and become separated from the authority (father, eidos, idea) whose task it is to track and account for the offspring’s words and deeds. But where exactly does the anxious component (*desasosiego*) reside in the mimetic relation between Ciudad Juárez and the world? And if the appearance of Juárez itself is unsettling, what then of its presumed duplication in the novel? Does literary representation provide a way of dressing the real in a familiarizing, comforting veil? Or does this literary portrait of Juárez instead disrupt

aesthetic harmonization and thereby—perhaps—prepare us to awaken from our post-historical slumber?

Without pretending to offer a definitive answer to these questions, I propose that Bolaño's posthumous novel deploys a poetics that is analogous to Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny, understood as disclosure of what was once familiar—on a personal or collective register—but has long been forgotten (Freud 1955, 247-48). The novel presents an appearance whose uncertain status—underdeveloped aberration or truth of globalization?—disrupts the integral logic of the autonomous subject of liberalism. Repression or forgetting do not presuppose any positive content; the uncanny is not a literary formula for referring to the female victims of Ciudad Juárez. At a more originary level it provides a way of indicating how the subject of psychoanalysis depends on the forgetting of a negation or expulsion, which must in turn have been coterminous with the constitution of the self in its delineation from a certain outside. The subject, in other words, is constituted through the expulsion of what is neither proper nor improper; and it is the return of this undecidability, this other side of the self, that ushers in the uncanny as experience of the return of the subject's own originary division. The psychoanalytic relation between the uncanny and the subject provides a metaphor for thinking about the history of the present and about how the historical present is similarly constituted through negation and forgetting of negation.

Although the Santa Teresa of 2666 is located in the state of Sonora and not Chihuahua, it displays many if not all of what have become the most recognizable traits of Juárez: a sprawling border town with a thriving transnational *máquila* industry together with abundant sex and entertainment industries; a major destination for migrants seeking employment as well

as a nexus for illegal international trafficking of people and narcotics; and, of course, the unresolved serial killing of women, many of whom have been employed in the *máquila* or sex industries. For the time being I am going to pass over the distinction between Santa Teresa and Ciudad Juárez, treating them as if they were two names for the same thing. Later on there will be occasion to look more closely at what is at stake in the composition of Santa Teresa as literary space.

I want to pose a preliminary query concerning the “we” in Bolaño’s assessment of Ciudad Juárez as a site that produces consternation for us today (*nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo*). Does this collective grammatical subject appeal to an idea of Latin America as a region defined by shared interests and a shared history, or does the “we” designate a geographically indeterminate collectivity, as in the West or even a global community that could be expected to feel responsibility in view of the alarming disparities that arise along the border? The real question, however, is not one of semantic clarification—who is this “we”?—but about how the reality of Juárez might oblige us to reconsider our accustomed belief in the self-reflexive totality that we call “world.” It has to do with how what calls out to us in the name Ciudad Juárez also inevitably affects how we think about our world. The two are absolutely inseparable: we cannot talk about the world today or even make reference to “our world” without also bringing up the various malignancies that are named metonymically by Ciudad Juárez, i.e., the precarity produced by neoliberal globalization, the naked savagery of narcocapitalism, and so on. To the extent that “we” to perceive the reality of Juárez as “unimaginable” and “unlivable,” does the existence of Juárez and the social phenomena it names metonymically still allow us to speak of anything like a world understood as global community? What sort of community would this be,

if one of its parts can only be perceived by the other parts as infernal order of the damned? Or does the unsettling, uncanny appearance of Juárez announce the disruption of the sort of being-in-common on which any reference to a world is predicated?

The question I am raising here requires further clarification concerning what we understand by “world.” A world is not just a sum total of countable entities but, first and foremost, a structuring of sense, reference and relations of co-belonging that makes it possible to think or experience totality and commonality. The question I want to explore here, then, has to do with the way in which the economic and technological unifying effects of contemporary globalization act to disarticulate older ontological-existential structures of relationality, and whether or not the dissociative logic of global capital leaves any room for the emergence of new forms of relationality. Neoliberal globalization presides over the dismantling of an old referential framework in which the national state served as mediator between the global and the local. It coincides with technological evolutions that have resulted in both the automation of tasks formerly performed by manual labor together with the real-time integration of production and demand on a planetary scale. Moreover, as Naomi Klein has argued with her notion of “disaster capitalism,” financial capital appears to have become increasingly adept at finding in natural disasters and man-made destruction new opportunities for accumulation and development (Klein 2007). But does this new configuration of accumulation, circulation, distribution and production on a global scale still constitute a *world* in the strong, Heideggerian sense of the term? Or does it instead produce what Jean-Luc Nancy calls an “enclosure in the undifferentiated sphere of a unitotality” (Nancy 2007, 28), that is to say, a totality in which both difference and infinity are violently subsumed under a global logic of equivalence?

Nancy's unitotality is analogous to what Hegel calls a "bad infinity." A bad infinity can never constitute a true totality because it is incapable in principle of closing itself off and thus it is unable to relate to itself as totality. Hegel illustrates the distinction between a "bad" or "spurious" infinity and a "true" infinity as the difference between a straight line and a circle.¹⁰⁴ The logic of the market fits the Hegelian definition of a bad infinity because its organizing principle is the negation and sublimation of difference under the logic of equivalency. As a kind of totality the market is nothing more than a potentially endless accumulation of differences in which one particular (a consumer or brand X) establishes its being over against another particular (another consumer or brand Y), while that other particular in turn establishes itself as "something" over against some other particular, and so on ad infinitum.¹⁰⁵ The problem with this form of infinity is that it has no necessary limit. Like the straight line in Hegel's example, the whole is nothing more than an endless amassing of particulars, akin to brands on the supermarket shelves. As totality it cannot comprise a system, since it cannot in principle be completed; one can always add more brands, more consumers. And yet it also remains incapable of fulfilling the definition of incompleteness as something that *ought* to be able to complete itself. By contrast, a true infinity can be illustrated by the figure of a circle, which displays characteristics of both the infinite and the finite at the same time. With a circle the finite (the particular points on the circumference) has been absorbed by the infinite (the circumference, which has no beginning or end), which is in turn mediated by finitude (the enclosed nature of the geometrical form). The points of a circle are no longer just particularities; they have also begun to act as parts of a whole. Modern configurations of sovereignty, such as the nation, are analogous to a circle; the nation's members lead the lives of

individuals while at the same time functioning as constituent parts of a larger entity. Society understood as a group of consumers, meanwhile, would be analogous to an infinitely extendable line.

In *Narrative and Time* Paul Ricoeur demonstrates how narrative processes have the potential to enact a form of Hegelian totalization through the symbolic work of poetics. Poetic temporalization works by transforming a chaotic or arbitrary sequence of occurrences into an ordered whole that has a beginning and an end; the discrete, episodic parts are related to one another via an overarching causal logic that is disclosed, over the course of narrative time, through aesthetic devices such as peripeteia (reversal) and anagnorisis (recognition) (Ricoeur 1984, 31-51). With and against Ricoeur's account, and largely in agreement with readings by Brett Levinson (2009) and Gareth Williams (2014), I propose that *2666* places in question the possibility of totalization today. If Ciudad Juárez brings into view the dissociative effects of global capital in the absence of the mediating structure formerly provided by the national state, Bolaño's novel reproduces the possibility of the impossibility of totalization at the level of literary form. Levinson's analysis of the episodic structure of *2666* is apropos here: the structuring of episodes is neither random nor is it governed by an identifiable theme, paradigm or logic. If violence or atrocity is the thread that links different Parts and episodes (the racist assault against the Pakistani cab driver in the first Part; the knockout punch in Fate's Part; the serial killing of women; WWII and the Nazi genocide; and so on), there is no single instance that exemplifies or grounds what the sequence is about (Levinson 2009, 182).

If the world *worlds*, as Heidegger puts it in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (Heidegger 1971, 44), does Ciudad Juárez as symptom of globalization attest to the *unworlding* of the

world in a time when all openings for creation or the new are just as rapidly subsumed within global capital's calculative logic of equivalency? This may be one way of defining the major concern that haunts *2666*, the real "gran tiburón negro" (Bolaño 2005, 25) that lurks beneath the thematic surface of Bolaño's novel and for which the critics' pursuit of Archimboldi—an obvious allusion to Ahab's pursuit of *Moby Dick*—plays the role of stand-in.¹⁰⁶ *2666*, then, could be read as a literary meditation on the possibility that neoliberal globalization generates a new form of enclosure within which infinity, alterity, and heterogeneity are all too easily captured: a world that has been entirely produced and whose horizon has been subsumed within a calculative logic that forecloses any possibility of the event. If the "secret of the world" lies concealed in the crimes of Santa Teresa, as one of Bolaño's characters asserts, this may be because those crimes illustrate a mortal danger that accompanies globalization: that the unification of the globe does not yield "One World" but instead unleashes an *unworlding* of the sovereign ban, through which life is increasingly reduced to the status of detritus and disposability.

A brief discussion of Heidegger's philosophical treatment of world may help to make this point clearer, and it may also serve to illustrate why the questions about Juárez and the world do not meet with any definitive answer in Bolaño's novel. World, as Heidegger clarifies in Chapter 3, §16 of *Being and Time*, is "not an innerworldly being, and yet it determines innerworldly beings to such an extent that they can only be encountered and discovered and show themselves in their being, insofar as 'there is' [*es gibt*] world" (Heidegger 2010, 72). Neither transcendent (extraworldly) nor immanent (innerworldly), world names the horizontal condition of possibility for thinking, perceiving and encountering beings. World refers not to a

sum total of objects and beings but to a historically specific structure of interrelatedness that precedes the determinate identities and purposes associated with the beings that populate a world. World names a pre-ontological structuring through which beings disclose themselves to one another. Heidegger's formulation, *es gibt* world, literally says "it gives world" rather than "there is a world." It thereby positions the question of world prior to ontology and its interrogation of essences. World precedes and conditions any determination of what is to be understood under the heading of *being*, as it is only from within a given world that ontology can begin to inquire into the being of beings.

Heidegger uses the term reference [*Verweisung*] to describe the interrelatedness of beings and things. Reference refers not to language in the restrictive sense but to the *practical* assignments and correlations through which entities take on specific values, purposes and meanings while being brought together as the interrelated parts of a totality of use values. Things and beings in the world are interrelated insofar as they are referred or remitted to an overarching structure of meaning and utility. The world we inhabit first manifests itself to us, Heidegger says, not as objects in general [*res*] but as that specific class of object known as tools [*pragmata*]. Our experience and understanding of our world is first and foremost practical and equipmental in nature.¹⁰⁷ In our daily lives we move about in equipmentally-attuned spaces in which things disclose themselves to us as tools that are ready to hand. Heidegger's assertion that the relationality that comprises our world is equipmental in nature is illustrated by the linguistic fact that we never speak of "an equipment"; we speak of equipment only ever in the plural, i.e. as part of a pre-given totality.

The ontological-existential structuring of totality, or the worldliness of the world,

remains an elusive secret both to everyday consciousness and to the inquiries put forth by the metaphysical tradition. For practical reason, the question of the totality within which it finds itself is overshadowed by pragmatic concerns and demands. After all, it would be a poor craftsman that lets him or herself get distracted from the tasks at hand by the fundamental questions of philosophy. By the same token, when ontology asks about the world it is trained to inquire about the nature or essence of its object. But in formulating its inquiries in this way ontology necessarily overlooks the fact that to ask questions in the way it does, questions that probe into what hidden “nature” or “essence” lies behind appearances, is already to be situated within a particular, constituted frame of reference: the *ti esti* of metaphysics, the “what is it?” concerning a given being or the question about *essentia* or essence. When it comes to thinking the worldliness of the world, Heidegger asserts, traditional ontology “is at a dead end—if it sees the problem at all” (Heidegger 2010, 65). Ontology’s inquiries are founded on an originary forgetting or foreclosure of the fact that thought always finds itself already within a referentially structured world, and that its representations and questions about entities, things and their essence have already been framed by a structuring of sensibility, meaning and belonging-together that delimits in one way or another the horizon for thinking.

The worldliness of the world thus comprises a secret register that remains inaccessible both to ordinary experience and to ontology in its traditional configurations. Where we *do* have a chance of experiencing the secret of the world or its worldliness, Heidegger tells us, are in those rare moments when referential networks are interrupted or suffer breakdowns. In a carpenter’s workshop, to take just one example, it is immediately obvious how everything discloses itself first and foremost as a tool that has its proper place and its designated function;

it is so obvious, in fact, that we rarely give it a moment's thought. Each tool is defined *a priori* by its relation to other tools: the hammer in relation to nails, the saw in relation to the lathe, and so on. Moreover, all such tools are situated in relation to an overarching production process within which everything takes on purpose. It is within the space of the workshop, then, that the hammer first appears *as a hammer*. All of this goes without saying, and this obviousness makes the carpenter's practice akin to a second nature. In this example it is a carpenter's shop but one could also speak of the referential structuring of a city, a nation, of a community of nations or even of the planet. It is when something happens to disrupt the smooth functioning of referential order, meanwhile, that we are suddenly in a position to experience "world" as such. For instance, the hammer unexpectedly breaks, and it is then, alongside our rising irritation in the face of *what does not work*, that we first become aware of worldliness as such.¹⁰⁸

Bolaño's literary treatment of Ciudad Juárez illuminates a similar thought of interruption or breakdown with respect to the ordering rationale of aesthetic and political modernity. Specifically, *2666* registers how two of the foundational discourses of modernity—the academic and literary institutional determination of literature, and the political logic of sovereignty—have fallen into crisis today. By the same token, the novel initiates a figuration of evil through which Santa Teresa emerges as the visible form that accompanies the lifting of the katechonic restraining structures imposed by modernity in order to regulate the antagonisms generated by capitalism.¹⁰⁹ One of the novel's most significant contributions to Latin Americanist debates about literature and critical thought is to have placed in question the adequacy of traditional epistemological tools for understanding what is happening in our world today. As one of the

cops in “The Crimes” puts it, “Siempre hay que hacer preguntas, y siempre hay que preguntarse el porqué de nuestras propias preguntas. ¿Y sabes por qué? Porque nuestras preguntas, al primer descuido, nos dirigen hacia lugares adonde no queremos ir. . . . Nuestras preguntas son, por definición, sospechosas.”¹¹⁰

For Heidegger there could be no clearer formulation of the way in which the conceptual vocabulary of political modernity has difficulty accounting for what is going on in—and going terribly wrong with—our world today. This statement, uttered by a speaker whose moral legitimacy to represent the law is inherently suspect, has the power of suggesting that an unsurpassable gap may in fact separate what is transpiring in the world today on the one hand, and the critical vocabulary and modes of inquiry that we have at our disposal for understanding it on the other hand. What Bolaño’s fictional rendition of the Mexican-US border offers us is not a rehashing of the old national-allegorical literary frame but instead a literary reflection on the possibility that our conceptual toolbox may turn out to be harboring some broken hammers. The appearance of Santa Teresa both withholds and discloses our world to us. What I have elsewhere called *the secret of literature*—a fold where form and content, reference and self-reference, presentation and withdrawal become undecidable—here proves to be formally indistinguishable from *the secret of the world*, or the site of a breakdown in the global circuitry that at once calls attention to the fact that there is [*es gibt*] a world while simultaneously illuminating the terrible specter of the end of the world (as we know it).¹¹¹

Juárez is a symptom of the violent contradictions that accompany globalization, putting on display the inability of modernization to resolve the social problems associated with a long history of inequality in Latin America. What is more, Juárez illustrates how destruction,

dissociation and precarity, more than just unintended and temporary side-effects of modernization, have in fact become integral elements in the restructuring and accumulation that mark the shift from Fordism and national capitalism to post-Fordism and globalization.¹¹² While capitalism has always relied on the dialectic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, destruction and development, neoliberal globalization inaugurates new forms of accumulation that thrive on more drastic, far-reaching forms of destruction. Globalization produces enormous concentrations of wealth alongside massive impoverishment, intensified insecurity and precariousness. Its ebbs and flows are not easily regulated by the modern partitioning of the globe into sovereign national states. But globalization should not be confused with homogenization. While benefitting from the lifting of old restraining structures, global capital also produces its own forms of delineation between what Etienne Balibar calls “life zones” and “death zones,” which at times coincide with national borders and regional boundaries (“North” vs. “South”) while at other times arising within one and the same nation or city (Balibar 2003, 126). These new divisions form what Balibar calls “superborders,” which give rise to the specter of new forms of enmity and conflict: not between a clearly delineated “us” and a “them” as was the case for modernity, but between a fully constituted humanity on the one hand and a remainder classified as something less than human on the other hand. The non-belonging of this “non-human” excess is evidenced by its refusal or inability to play by the common rules, and serves to legitimate its potential annihilation.

Juárez names a location that can be mapped within the modern geopolitical boundaries of Mexico, but the geographic specificity it appears to name turns out to be destabilized by the concurrence of rapid economic growth with the privatization of the state and the crisis of

national sovereignty. The historical processes embodied by Ciudad Juárez today could thus be said to pose the question of its impossibility qua discrete and unified place in the cartographic system of modernity. This particular place name stands in for a conjuncture of historical forces that can no longer be administered and controlled by the geometry of modernity and its corresponding institutions. Juárez is synonymous with, among other things, new forms of global capitalist production that are less tied than ever to a specific place or political space, and new, globally integrated modes of production, distribution and consumption that are not easily regulated by national states. The rapid expansion of the *máquila* industry in the wake of NAFTA has transformed the social and demographic landscape of northern Mexico, disarticulating traditional forms of collectivity while attracting new waves of migrant populations from elsewhere in Mexico and Central America in search of readily available jobs. In the case of Juárez, moreover, neoliberal globalization coincides with the proliferation of narco-capitalism, whose violence not only poses a threat to the modern state form with its monopoly on legitimate forms of coercion, but also announces the decoupling of capitalist accumulation from the ideological narrativization processes of modernity (labor and accumulation in the name of virtue, progress, civilization, and so on). As Bolaño frequently reminds us, neoliberal economic growth in northern Mexico leads not to social stability but to new forms of vulnerability—especially among working-poor women—and an intensification of anomie and various forms of precariousness (social anonymity, transience, temporary employment, as well as the emergence of new labor patterns at odds with traditional mores and ideologies).

In what follows I pursue a reading of 2666 in terms Carlo Galli's distinction between political modernity on the one hand and globalization and global war on the other.¹¹³ Galli

proposes that recent transformations in the technological, economic and political structuring of the planet—in the wake of privatization and the dismantling of the Welfare State, together with the emergence of the war on terror as a conflict that transcends the modern logic of sovereignty—constitute a new conjuncture for which the conceptual vocabulary of modernity is unable to account. As far as this conceptual vocabulary goes, Galli focuses on what he calls the political geometry of modernity. My reading of Bolaño is an inquiry into what happens when we extend Galli’s argument to include what might be called the aesthetic vocabulary of modernity, a vocabulary that extends from Romanticism to the neo-avant garde movements of the 1960s and 70s.

For Galli the dominant concepts and structures of the modern era—from the Hobbesian theorization of sovereignty through the invention of the Welfare State in response to the crises of global capital in the first part of the 20th century—are the products of a “political geometry” whose function is to produce and organize space. The modern nation and the *Jus publicum europaeum* are two classic examples of how political geometry delineates and generates smooth, homogeneous social spaces that can be mapped in a variety of ways and according to various political rationales. In Galli’s view almost all of the important categories of modern political thought—sovereignty, freedom, friendship, enmity, empire, state, nation, hegemony—are spatial concepts that presuppose the self-production of the world as spatial totality.¹¹⁴

Take for example Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, which first gives shape to the modern concept of sovereignty. It is only when all Englishmen agree to relinquish their own unconstrained freedom and recognize the authority of the sovereign over the affairs of all that a stable common space can be secured against the fatal passions and insecurities that threaten everyone—the

strongest as much as the weakest—in the state of nature. In contrast to traditional figures of sovereignty that find their support in transcendent references—Being as One, the Platonic Forms, Nature, God—Hobbesian sovereignty is immanent to the order to which it gives rise, albeit without becoming subject to the order’s norms. Its formal logic is that of quasi-immanence. The *Leviathan* draws a border that delineates an inside, whose space is unified and homogeneous, over against an outside that is conceived as chaotic and threatening. The specters of disorder and bloodshed raised by the 16th and 17th century European religious civil wars are thereby expelled from the inside, and banished to the outside where they are reincorporated in the figure of the enemy or, even more frightful, the non-European barbarian whose existence is not governed by any sovereign pact whatsoever.

Political modernity discovers in geometry—the study of the relative shape, size and position of figures in space—a conceptual vocabulary and a set of procedures with which to develop its own authoritative social organization and decision-making. Geometry’s criteria provide politics with a schematic archive for theorizing, as Galli puts it, “collaboration and conflict, order and disorder, hierarchy and equality, inclusion and exclusion, borders and freedom, sedentariness and nomadism, marginality and centrality” (Galli 2010, 4). An analogy with Kantian critical philosophy helps to illustrate what geometry has to offer to modernity. For Kant, concepts need to find support in a sensory impression such as an example (if the concepts are empirical) or a schema (if they are non-empirical), in order to confirm that their abstractions indeed possess reality.¹¹⁵ In that light, the turn to geometry constitutes both the strength and an internal limit for modern political thought. The reliance on geometry provides evidence that modern thought is unable to address the political immediately and as such; it

must rely on the spatial figures and diagrams of geometry to provide recognizable figures and formal arrangements for thinking about the political portioning of bodies, roles and goods. But in borrowing from geometry, political thought must also make a “cut”—it must select or create a specific figure or diagram—which cannot be justified by reason, precisely because the act of cutting grounds political reason itself. Modern political thought thus depends on *figurations* whose origins and legitimacy cannot be guaranteed or accounted for by political reason. Schmitt’s friend/enemy distinction is a classic illustration of this aporia, and it points out the irreducible instability of all modern political concepts.

There is also an ideological component to the connection between modern politics and geometry that is worth commenting on briefly. Modern political thought is confronted with the dilemma of how to generate consent for figurations that it must make without having recourse to traditional references to transcendence. Once one accepts that geometrically-mapped spaces are not equivalent to the real, lived space in the world around us, the language and methods of geometry can then readily be accepted as exemplifying the modern principles of self-making and autonomy. As Paul de Man has shown in “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion” (de Man 1996), geometry provides an exemplary language for the modern subject because its methodology is determined by what Pascal calls nominal definitions in distinction from real definitions. Nominal definitions are conventional; unlike real definitions, they have no bearing on the nature of the things they designate. For instance, mathematics defines all numbers that are divisible by two without remainder as *even* numbers; it thereby unambiguously designates real objects (numbers) while refraining from attributing any external meaning to them (the fact of being “even” has no bearing on the relative value or position of the numbers “two” and

“four”). As a purely auto-referential language, geometry divests itself of any referential involvement in phenomenal matters. Freed in this way from any suspicion of harboring undeclared interests, geometry exemplifies a self-founding discourse of truth that is accessible to all and infinitely open to rational scrutiny. Hobbes, meanwhile, describes the virtues of geometrical language sardonically as a system whose rational authority is admitted only because it steers clear of individual interest:

For I doubt not, but if it had been a thing contrary to any man’s right or dominion, that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two angles of a square, that the doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of geometry, suppressed, as farre as he whom it concerned was able.

(Hobbes 1972, 166)

What Galli calls global war names, by contrast, a new time in which the restraining forces and institutions invented by modernity are no longer able to perform their appointed historical tasks of containing or expelling the contradictions and antagonisms that accompany the production, mapping, and administration of social space. In producing social and geopolitical space, the political geometry of modernity also generated conflicts and antagonism, which it then had to regulate or banish. Globalization and global war by contrast are characterized by a more or less uncontained irruption of conflict. Borders are no longer able to secure stable, enforceable distinctions between inside and outside; frontiers have become sites of indistinction, contamination and infection where the logic of sovereignty is no longer capable of administering and policing the flows of capital investments, technology, contraband, populations, diseases, and so on. Whereas modernity was shaped by the dialectic of

systematization and contradiction, enclosure and freedom, the time of globalization and global war bears witness to what Galli calls a “contradiction without system” (Galli 2010, 110), or an explosion of drives and antagonisms that were previously suppressed, expelled or put to work. A contradiction without system is a conflict that cannot be absorbed dialectically within a larger totality, and which therefore cannot be converted into part of the system’s mechanics. A contradiction without system is another name for what I am calling interregnum.

The shift from modernity to global war occurs, roughly speaking, in two phases. The first stage corresponds with the wave of economic globalization and privatization initiated in the 1980s and 90s under the banner of neoliberal Consensus; it also coincides with new technological, administrative, and political trends: (1) industrial capitalism is supplanted by automation and the service economy, and the factory is replaced as paradigmatic form of production by a new configuration of affective and intellectual labor; (2) the rise of flexible accumulation and development of new technologies allowing for enhanced, real-time coordination between supply and demand throughout the world; and (3) the privatization and dismantling of the Welfare state, which until the 1970s stood as the last form of political mediation between the local/national and global capital.

The second phase corresponds with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington DC, and the subsequent response by the US and its allies. The events of 9/11 inaugurate a new global situation for which the modern distinction between politics (the ordering and regulation of the inside) and war (crisis of order in which the continued existence of the political community is threatened, most often from outside) has become unsustainable. “Global war” describes a knot whose strands cannot be untied using the conceptual vocabulary

of political modernity. Its syntax enacts this impasse through its own internal contradiction. The modern concept of warfare refers to militarized conflict between sovereign territorial states employing uniformed armies; its usage can be expanded to include conflict between factions competing for control over the state (civil war) or between an invading uniformed army and an informal partisan or guerrilla force dedicated to the defense of a territorial homeland. In going global, meanwhile, war sheds its definitional rootedness in the defense or conquest of territorial space, and it thereby also separates itself from what used to be its legitimating foundation: the sovereign decision that draws the line between “us” and “them,” friend and foe, order and crisis. If, for modernity, war was a means of last resort undertaken by national states at exceptional times of crisis, global war names a process without sovereign and without telos whose violence and insecurity has become difficult to distinguish from the routine time of order. Global war names a time in which clear and stable distinctions between politics and its others—war for one, but also terrorism, criminality, and other specters of social disorder and insecurity driven by ostensibly non- or pre-political forms of violence—are becoming nebulous. The theaters of armed conflict in today’s world are no longer defined exclusively or even primarily by confrontations between sovereign actors over defined territories. By the same token, the distinction between times—the time of war and the time of peace—is no longer self-evident. The threat and reality of war, terror and insecurity play prominent roles in shaping all aspects of the foreign and domestic policies of national states. Not only would war seem to have become part and parcel of the game of politics as usual, the US-led “War on Terror”—a doubling down on the confusion between categories—has served to legitimate a profound expansion of the biopolitical technologies of Western states into our daily lives. In the time of

global war the forms and figures invented by modern political geometry are no longer capable of explaining or administering over conflict as it flares up around the globe.

In the time of global war, Galli says, “the external seems to have become internal and to have opened up a second front” (139). This trope accounts for a variety of phenomena that are arguably new to the time of globalization. As 9/11 taught us, the enemy is no longer reassuringly located on the other side of a border or an ocean, nor can the potential enemy easily be distinguished from the guest who would be a friend. That the external has become internal takes us back to the *Leviathan* in order to announce the undoing of the Hobbesian spatial pact, which was predicated on the expulsion of negativity from the inside or the proper. Global war is the uncanny other side of modernity, the violent return of the repressed of modern political geometry.

The external has become internal: this should not be confused with a simple inversion of modern paradigms of spacing, which as inversion would still reconfirm the organizing integrity of the inside/outside distinction as such. The subreption of the inside/outside distinction constitutes a rupture for political modernity, because the outside was never a fully determinate space to begin with. With the outside’s uncanny presentation within the inside, political geometry is now unable to produce and regulate flows within and between spaces. The determination of political differences—friend or foe, fellow citizen or outsider—can no longer be secured through recourse to a stable boundary between inside and outside, proper and improper. Galli’s essay challenges us to extend our understanding of “war” to spheres and contexts that have no direct or necessary connection to military power structures and politically-governed decision-making processes. If the “Global War on Terrorism” is in fact

globalization by another name, it may be that globalization in *all* of its modalities unfolds as one or another kind of war, as insecurity and violent conflict with varying degrees of intensity, but in every instance without sovereign and without telos.

One might be tempted to object that Galli's thesis on global war is guilty of an Anglo-European bias, and that Latin America, which has for the most part avoided direct involvement in the US-led "War on Terror," is not necessarily subject to this epochal distinction. "Global war" might therefore be somewhat less than truly global in its scope. The objection, while useful because it obliges us to clarify and expand what is understood by "war," overlooks what seems to me a more productive reading of Galli's thesis. Global war is not just a name for the extension of militarized conflict beyond the purview of sovereign nation states, nor is it simply the outcome of conflicts involving the US and its allies with "rogue" states and non-state terrorist organizations. Global war functions metonymically in naming a time in which the categories of modern political geometry—politics and war, order and crisis, inside and outside—are increasingly difficult to keep separate, and in which the regulatory mechanisms of modernity are no longer fully operative. To persist in thinking war as a matter of the sovereign decision and the military apparatuses of the state, or as entirely synonymous with a "War on Terror" that continues to understand itself as a defense and policing of the distinction between legitimate sovereign power and illegitimate power, is to avoid dealing with the unsettling emergence of new forms of violence, insecurity and destruction on the one hand, and the production, accumulation and reproduction of global capitalism on the other hand. And that is precisely the point: that global war is inseparable from economic globalization. Naomi Klein's thesis on "disaster capitalism," which tries to account for how both man-made disasters and

natural calamities have been seized by capital as new opportunities for accumulation and restructuring of social relations, is one example of how “global war” could be said to unfold in non-traditional forms and theaters. The flourishing of drug trade in the Free Trade Zone along the Mexican-US border as well as throughout Mexico and Central America is another such example.

While the rapid growth of the *máquila* industries in the Free Trade Zone during the 1990s coincides with the retreat of the state’s historical role as mediator between the local and the capitalist world system, the more recent surge in narco violence provides clear evidence that the Mexican state is now unable to guarantee order and security through monopolization of the legitimate means of physical force.¹¹⁶ If NAFTA (1994) provided the most recognizable threshold in the region for the opening of national markets to global capital, the 2005 Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) sought to establish coordination between the security apparatuses of Canada, the United States and Mexico in what Thomas Shannon, then the US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs, described as the “armoring” of NAFTA.¹¹⁷ Although the SPP is of course the product of political decisions undertaken by sovereign states in concordance with national security mandates, its existence illustrates how state sovereignty increasingly struggles to confront the uncertainties associated with economic globalization, drug trafficking and the specter of terrorism. The SPP was discontinued in 2009, but other programs such as the Mérida Initiative (or “Plan México”) continue to operate and to generate controversy in light of apparent connections between private capital, the state and extrajudicial violence, as evidenced in a 2008 *LA Times* exposé of a video showing employees of a private US security firm instructing Mexican police officials on

the use of torture techniques for interrogation (Bonello 2008, np).

With the alarming increase in narco-related violence in northern Mexico during the first decade of the 21st century, the distinction between law and illegality, order and insecurity, is becoming less clear and less stable. While the Mexican federal police and army are once again accused of employing the tactics of terror while committing widespread human rights abuses against known and alleged cartel members, one former cartel hitman recounts how the best and brightest of the Chihuahua police academies find employment not with local law enforcement but in the cartels they have been trained to combat. This same witness asserts that the spectacular proliferation of violence and fear in the narco wars in fact serves as a “smokescreen for the real business,” where profits are higher than ever (Bowden and Molloy 2011, 26).

Globalization and global war are unmistakably intertwined in the case of Mexico. The roots of the recent escalation of narco violence can be traced back to the presidential election of Vicente Fox in 2000, whose political triumph broke a seven-decade-long PRI hegemony and put an end to existing arrangements between the cartels and the PRI state. The cartels were thus obliged to seek out new arrangements with local politicians and law enforcement agencies, which in turn prompted a proliferation of corruption at local levels. At the same time, the PAN’s decision to end the state’s unwritten pacts with the cartels led to the dissolution of old territorial divisions and fostered increasingly violent encounters between rival cartels seeking to carve out new *plazas* or defend old ones. In 2006, Fox’s successor, Felipe Calderón, intensified the Mexican state’s crackdown on the cartels by deploying federal troops in Michoacán and other regions for the first time in the conflict. While militarization was enacted

in the name of overcoming the corruption and inefficiency that plagued local law enforcement and political institutions—in other words, it was done in the name of national-state sovereignty—it quickly escalated into an undeclared war between cartels and the Mexican state, which would in turn deepen suspicions about the Mexican state's inability to administer affairs and mediate conflict within national territory (Bussey 2008).

If Juárez is a mirror for us today, as Bolaño suggests, it is because it gives geopolitical form to a situation that exceeds the explanatory capacity and ordering authority of the political geometry of modernity. Grounded in the concepts of national and state sovereignty, the geometry of smooth spaces and stable inside/outside distinctions proves incapable of accounting for how the relation between capitalist accumulation, violence and insecurity is reshaping social conditions in Central and North America today. In this context Ciudad Juárez provides an uncanny image of what Galli's assertion that "the external seems to have become internal" might look like. Juárez is a point on the map that calls attention to the fact that the map itself, and along with it the modern linking of epistemology and politics under the discourse of geometry, may have been rendered inoperative. As a nodal point for an array of new exchange circuits and trafficking flows, Juárez is the contorted, mutilated image that exposes the fractured, dissociated non-unity of what used to be the sovereign nation-state.

In much of northern Mexico it would seem that everything is now out in the open and interconnected—and torn asunder—under the double rubric of globalization and global war: post-Fordist, transnational capital thriving in predatory fashion alongside the retreat of the regulatory state; an army that knows no restraints and whose tactics resemble those of a terrorist organization; and the cartels that act like mini-states, claiming territory in Mexico and

Central America using military-grade weaponry and recruiting soldiers—not through ideology but with the offer of paying jobs—from the growing ranks of unemployed and, increasingly, among disaffected young adolescents who have been abandoned by a collapsing educational system (González Rodríguez 2012; Beckhusen 2013). Even the state appears willing to embrace the thesis of global war, as suggested by a November 2012 petition issued by the President of Costa Rica on behalf of the Organization of American States requesting that the UN begin categorizing drug trafficking as a form of terrorism (Fendt 2012). If Oliver North and Iran-Contra exposed the secret connection between politics, counterinsurgency terror and the drug trade during the Reagan years, that Cold War secret is now out in the open for all to see in the time of global war.

Galli uses the term *katechon* to describe the restraining structures—such as the Welfare State—that were invented by political modernity to administer and mediate the conflicts that accompany the production of smooth but differentiable social spaces. Originally a theological concept, *katechon* enters into the political vocabulary of modernity in Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth* (Schmitt 2006). In his Second Epistle, Paul counsels the Thessalonians not to act as if the Judgment Day were near, since for that to come about the Antichrist would first need to make an appearance. According to Paul something [τὸ κατέχον] or someone [ὁ κατέχων] must currently be preventing the arrival of the Antichrist, and it is this unnamed restraining force or structure that receives the name *katechon* [that which withholds]. For Schmitt the modern state form in its various guises plays an analogous role, from state sovereignty conceptualized by Hobbes as a barricade against the “war of all against all” to the regulatory and welfare state of the 20th century—arguably the last instance of the *katechon*—understood as a restraining

device against the dual threats of economic crisis and anti-capitalist movements that first emerged in the wake of global financial crisis in the 1930s. Globalization and global war, meanwhile, together announce the definitive dismantling of these modern restraining structures. The state has not disappeared today, of course; but its institutional, juridical and ideological presence no longer serves as the unquestioned first principle of all social organization, nor is it still capable of regulating the global ebbs and flows of capital, information, migrant populations, and contraband that traverse its borders. Global war suspends the old distinctions between war and peace, war and politics, while also helping to put an end to the principal status formerly held by state sovereignty.

Until now I have been treating Santa Teresa and Ciudad Juárez as if they were two names for the same thing. I now turn to take a closer look at the question of the literary in *2666*, focusing on how literary figuration and innovation emerge as concerns in the novel. Two narrative threads serve to orient this exploration. One is found in the novel's reflection on spatiotemporal condensation and distortion in the time of globalization, which is first introduced through a literary portrait of the topography of Sonora, and then further developed through Amalfitano's experiment with a certain geometry textbook. The other thread consists of the novel's engagement with the avant garde tradition in a series of episodes that resonate with what Hal Foster calls the neo-avant garde (Foster 1996). Generally speaking these stagings of the avant garde involve marginal figures who are widely regarded as not being of sound mind, and whose activities recall or reenact early 20th century avant garde experiments. While each of these figures produces an aesthetic act that recalls the critical or ruptural force associated with the avant garde, these returns unavoidably add to and transform the

significance of what they repeat. When the two threads touch on one another, most notably in the last sections of the Part about the Critics and the Part about Amalfitano, we find ourselves confronted with the question of what possibilities remain open for literature in the time of globalization and global war, when it is no longer clear that the ruptural force associated with the avant garde would still be available, or that it could still be expected to possess transformative potential if it were to show itself.

I begin this discussion by looking at a description of the state of Sonora as perceived by the critics upon their arrival in the Hermosillo airport following their flight from Mexico City, in the last section of Part One. In the second Part, meanwhile, new ways of looking at this literary landscape portrait will be opened up in the context of Amalfitano's meditations on the distinction between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries—that is, between a geometry of flat, smooth spaces and a geometry of warped or curved space. Carlo Galli's diagnosis of how the political vocabulary of modernity is unable to account for globalization and global war can help to bring these otherwise disparate literary reflections on geometry and geography into dialogue with Bolaño's literary fascination with the crimes of Ciudad Juárez and their connection with globalization and the narco wars.

A la mañana siguiente volaron a Hermosillo y desde el aeropuerto telefonaron al rector de la Universidad de Santa Teresa y después alquilaron un coche y partieron hacia la frontera. Al salir del aeropuerto los tres percibieron la luminosidad del estado de Sonora. Era como si la luz se sumergiera en el océano Pacífico produciendo una enorme curvatura en el espacio. Daba hambre desplazarse bajo aquella luz, aunque también, pensó Norton, y tal vez de forma

más perentoria, daba ganas de aguantar el hambre hasta el final. Entraron por el sur de Santa Teresa y la ciudad les pareció un enorme campamento de gitanos o de refugiados dispuestos a ponerse en marcha a la más mínima señal. (Bolaño 2004, 148)

This first impression of a strange luminescence and a “curved” atmospheric space suggest tropologically that the critics have left behind the familiar (“flat”) space of Europe and Mexico City, and that they have now entered a zone of differentiated space. It is difficult to know—for the reader at least—to what extent the codes and expectations borne by the critics in their passage from the capitals of Europe to the DF will still be relevant in Sonora. Similarly, it may be that this spatialization of difference allegorizes a temporal discrepancy that separates the peripheral zone of Northern Mexico from the metropolis, in the sense that Sonora, as stand-in for the periphery in general, finds itself “out of sync” with respect to the developmental historical trajectory of European and Latin American capitals. The allegorical reading I am proposing gains momentum when juxtaposed with the novel’s thematization of spatiotemporal compression in the time of globalization, first in the presence of transnational capital in the *máquilas* and similarly with the critics’ discovery, while talking with Amalfitano’s students, that their own translations of the German novelist Archimboldi have already reached the nether regions of the world thanks to the wonders of the Internet. It is not until we reach the second Part, however, that we can begin to unpack the implications of this strange literary portrait of the desert landscape of northern Mexico. For the time being the images of curved space and unexplained luminescence are quickly overshadowed by the encroachment of other narrative preoccupations: Liz Norton’s equally enigmatic speculations about a possible

correlation between the strange atmospheric lighting and her own hunger; and then the critics' shared perception of Santa Teresa as a gigantic gypsy camp, which serves to introduce the precarious social atmosphere of this border city while also reminding us that the critics' perceptions are mediated by their own provincial predisposition to see and evaluate everything as if they were still in Europe.

In the second Part, which opens with a brief prosaic sketch of Amalfitano's house, we are brought back to the geographical specificity of Sonora. Narrative discourse looks over Amalfitano's humble abode in quasi-cinematic fashion, first comprehending the structure in its entirety and then zooming in on a seemingly insignificant appendage: a wooden bench that sits on his porch, its planks worn smooth by the winds that come at it from each and every direction.¹¹⁸ The bench is an inanimate double of Amalfitano himself, who has similarly weathered the winds of history and persevered—albeit in threadbare fashion—through a series of displacements that have propelled him from Chile to Buenos Aires to Barcelona to Sonora. This unremarkable domestic scene also provides the stage for a series of thematic encounters between culture and nature, and between the temporality of change (the forces of erosion) and the materiality of resistance.¹¹⁹ This little bench also sets the stage for what is to come; in hanging a geometry textbook on a clothesline in his back yard, Amalfitano will reenact one of the classic artistic experiments with the relation between ideality (the realm of mathematical concepts) and materiality (the pages of a book).

The motive behind the experiment, as Amalfitano describes it to his daughter, is to determine whether a mathematics textbook is capable of absorbing the realities of life: "Se me ocurrió de repente, dijo Amalfitano, la idea es de Duchamp, dejar un libro de geometría colgado

a la intemperie para ver si aprende cuatro cosas de la vida real” (251). The English-language translation by Natasha Wimmer renders the crucial final portion of Amalfitano’s explanation as “to see if it learns something from real life” (Bolaño 2008, 195). A comparison between the Spanish and English idioms (*aprender cuatro cosas; to learn something*) provides a clue about what is at stake in this scene, which poses among other things a limit for translation. While the Spanish construction is idiomatic and somewhat unusual (a more common phrase would be “si aprende *algo* de la vida real”), Wimmer’s choice of “something” is self-explanatory and common. What perforce falls out in the English-language translation is the motif of calculation (*cuatro cosas*) in a context where what truly *counts*—a matter of learning—resides beyond all calculation. What could there be for this particular book to learn, if a book were capable of learning? *Something*, no doubt. But if one could predetermine exactly *what* or *how much* the book stood in deficit vis-à-vis life and the real, one would then find oneself back within the domain of calculative mastery; having already been calculated, this *something* would no longer impose itself with urgency, and as in need of being learned. The odd proposition about the book learning from real life must therefore by logical necessity be incompatible with any claim to have calculated the deficit. If the Spanish idiom calls attention to what is at stake here through irony—the naming of the direct object destabilizes the premise of the verb—the English translation has no room for this fold where narrative language turns back on itself. I say this not in order to find fault with Wimmer’s choice of words but simply to note the bind, which as we will soon see imposes itself on Spanish just as with English and any other language. One cannot say in English “to see if it learns four things from real life.” One could perhaps translate *cuatro cosas* as *a few things*, but that would probably sound somewhat clunky and, moreover,

it cannot retain what is at issue in the Spanish: the overly-precise enumeration of an epistemic deficit in a context where it is precisely the limits of calculation that are at stake.

The experiment is of course a reenactment of Marcel Duchamp's collaborative "Unhappy Readymade," and it is fitting that the melancholic Amalfitano would choose that particular installation from among Duchamp's large corpus of Readymades. In 1919, while living in Buenos Aires, Duchamp mailed an unusual wedding gift to his sister and brother-in-law in Paris: a set of instructions for stringing up a geometry book on the balcony outside their apartment so that the wind could, as Duchamp would later recount, "go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages" (Cabanne 1971, 61). The completed installation, which Duchamp also referred to as an "Assisted Readymade," poses critical questions for aesthetic theory concerning some of its key concepts and ideologemes, including the notion of the work and its time and place, as well as the relation between creation and the intentional subject. When Duchamp's new brother-in-law, the French painter Jean Crotti, hangs the geometry book on a clothesline outside the apartment, is he bringing a new artwork into existence or is he merely playing a curatorial role in carrying out orders for an idea conceived in a different time and place? Where and when does the work *take place*, and what roles do ideation, transmission, and manual labor play respectively in its taking place? The question becomes even more complex in light of the fact that the installation of the "Assisted Readymade" yields not a self-identical, unchanging work but a fluid scene destined to culminate in its own unravelling. To be sure, the only visual evidence that remains today of the "Unhappy Readymade" are a blurry black-and-white photograph and a painting of the clotheslined textbook done by Suzanne Duchamp. The question of when and where the work takes place is

thus simultaneously a question about when the work ceases to be a work, a question about its un-working or—once again, like Amalfitano?—becoming unhinged.

Duchamp's Unhappy Readymade stages an exposure of aesthetics and mathematics to a series of contradictions: between installation and decomposition; artistic conception and manual realization; and the logic of geometrical theory on the one hand and the materiality of its pages along with the unpredictable chance represented by the weather on the other. It stages a confrontation between the rational and the real that is made even more salient by the audible echoes, on both sides of the encounter, of a key signifier: the implied presence of Euclid's *Elements* [*Les Éléments* in French], the foundational text of classical geometry, in juxtaposition with the transformative, corrosive force of atmospheric elements [*les éléments*]. We are back again at the question of translation and its limits, which shows here in the Spanish-language original when Amalfitano refers to Duchamp's work as his inspirational source. The implicit play on Euclid's text (*Los elementos*) in relation to the unpredictable and corrosive forces of nature is absent from the Spanish version—in which no exact translation of the atmospheric "elements" exists; the closest approximation is *la intemperie* [the open; inclement weather]—but it surfaces again in Wimmer's English translation, which would be the felicitous translation of a translation of a translation: "It occurred to me all of a sudden, said Amalfitano, it's a Duchamp idea, leaving a geometry book hanging exposed to the *elements* to see if it learns something about real life" (Bolaño 2008, 195; my emphasis).

Although Duchampian original and Amalfitanian repetition both participate in a Latin America-Europe circuit, the neo-avant garde reenactment does not simply reproduce verbatim the formal features of the avant garde aesthetic act. Amalfitano's extraterritorial trajectory

presents the inverted image of Duchamp's journey from Europe to Argentina and back again. By the same token, in Amalfitano's reenactment there is no letter, no gift, and no others—unless we understand his trajectory as itself introducing considerations of transmission and reception, distance, and time—for example, through his oft-repeated ritual of packing and unpacking his library. But missive and gift are not simply absent in Amalfitano's installation either. They are substituted, as he is unpacking his boxes in Santa Teresa, by the uncanny appearance of a strange geometry book, one which Amalfitano, wracking his book-addled and jet-lagged brain, cannot recall having acquired let alone packed before his departure from Barcelona: the Galician writer Rafael Dieste's 1975 *Testamento geométrico: Introducción a Euclides, Lobatchevski y Riemann: Los movimientos en geometría: Tres demostraciones del V postulado*. Dieste was himself an exile; he spent almost two decades in Buenos Aires (1939-48, 1952-61) following the fall of the Spanish Republic in 1939. His "testament" is peculiar for reasons that go beyond its unexplained presence in Amalfitano's library (about which I will have more to say shortly). Not only does it purport to offer an introduction to both Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries (those of the 19th century mathematicians Lobatchevsky and Riemann), it is written by a minor author known primarily as a poet, playwright and essayist rather than a professional mathematician. But then again, before the world saw any evidence of his artistic ability, Duchamp's first academic recognition came in the form of several mathematics prizes awarded during his lycée years.

The title of Dieste's book provides an important indicator for thinking about neo-avant garde repetition and reenactment as transformation of a prior act or context. Euclid's Fifth Postulate or Parallel Postulate, the primary focus of Dieste's text, is precisely the differential

axis that distinguishes Euclidean geometry (a geometry of flat space for which the Fifth Postulate is axiomatically valid) and the non-Euclidean geometries associated with the names Lobatchevsky and Riemann (hyperbolic and elliptical geometries of curved spaces for which the Fifth Postulate is not axiomatically true).¹²⁰ If Amalfitano's reenactment of Duchamp shares or reproduces the avant garde sensibility associated with the original it is because, akin to the literary portrait of the skies over Sonora discussed earlier, it demarcates the thought of a spatiality that would be irreconcilable with the smooth spaces of Euclidean geometry and political modernity. It points to such a difference as becoming apparent in Sonora, inscribing this difference as a sign available to be read. In alluding to a distinction between how different geometries theorize parallelism and transversality, Amalfitano's experiment also sets the scene for understanding Santa Teresa as a literary nexus traversed by a myriad of narrative threads and emplotted trajectories (the critics, Amalfitano and his daughter, Fate, Haas, and Archimboldi among others), as well as by various circuits of exchange, trafficking and accumulation. But do the various narrative threads of *2666* in fact *meet* in Santa Teresa or does their parallelism legislate against their eventual meeting, as it would in a smooth, Euclidean space? As we can see here, Amalfitano's reenactment stages what Brett Levinson has described as an unresolved—and perhaps unresolvable—question about the interrelatedness between the novel's various threads and parts (Levinson 2009).

The presence of the Dieste text poses additional problems for what seems to be the obvious way in which Amalfitano's reenactment wants to be read: as appropriation and revitalization of the disruptive potentiality of the avant garde. Let us see why. In his recollection of the instructions he sent to his sister and brother-in-law, Duchamp speaks only of *geometry* in

the singular. Although the instructions may or may not have stated what sort of geometry book was to be used, one might surmise that the ironic thought behind the “Unhappy Readymade” was to take a textbook on Euclidean geometry and, through exposure to the unpredictability of the elements, allow its pages to be transformed materially into a non-Euclidean order of uneven, ruffled space. Thus the ideational content of the book will manifestly have no answer for the real, for the unpredictability of the elements and, by extension, for the materiality of a book whose form is undergoing continual mutation. In Amalfitano’s reenactment, by contrast, something resembling the post-Euclidean destiny envisioned by Duchamp has already been accounted for in the book’s title and epistemological contents, and thus it becomes more difficult to claim that a ruptural or transformative force could emerge from Amalfitano’s repetition. The neo-avant garde gesture seems silently to acknowledge its own inability—which may well be the inability of contemporary art and literature—to generate an experience of incommensurability between form and content, between the rational and the real. It performs the impossibility of the avant garde understood as interruption or transformation. Is that because the real has now tendentially been fully rationalized under the equivalential logic of commodity exchange in the time of globalization? Or is it because both the spacing and the ruptural possibilities found in the geometries of modernity have been eclipsed by the situation that Galli calls global war, which manifests in Sonora in the form of narcocapitalism and narcowars?

I now return to the matter of the unexpected appearance of the Dieste text amidst Amalfitano’s library. A close examination of this scene will lead us to other scenarios in *2666* in which the neo-avant garde figures prominently. The unexplained presence of this odd book is

structurally analogous to what Lacan, borrowing from Aristotle, calls *tuché* in contrast to *automaton*.¹²¹ For Lacan *tuché* names a chance encounter with the real that irrupts with traumatic, unassimilable force from within the order of *automata*, or the symbolic ordering of life according to the regulatory mechanisms of the pleasure principle (Lacan 1978, 53-64). *Tuché* designates an encounter with the real “in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter” (Lacan 1978, 55). The automaton refers to the associative and contiguous chain of signifiers that mediate—in machine-like fashion—the subject’s relation to the real so that reality can be experienced in more or less predictable fashion and without disruption of the subject’s world. *Tuché* by contrast denotes what happens when our actions bear witness to a misfire in one of the circuits in the symbolic economy. The misfire is contingent but not for that reason simply arbitrary. It signals the return of the repressed: not of a determinate content (e.g., a prohibited desire) but of a primordial foreclosure that must be presumed to have accompanied the advent of signifier and the speaking subject’s entrance into language. It is in this sense that *tuché* is always experienced as a missed encounter: it announces the return of an “event” that never took place as such; it is the echo of a foreclosure that was constitutive of the subject. As Malcolm Bowie puts it:

Lacan’s *tuché* is in one sense very simple: it is a tile falling on to the head of a passer-by, a person from Porlock bringing a creative trance prematurely to its end, or, to take one of Lacan’s own examples, a knock on the door that interrupts a dream.¹²² The network of signifiers in which we have our being is not all that there is, and the rest of what is may chance to break in upon us at any moment. (Bowie 1993, 103)

While Lacan discusses in detail the metaphorical significance of the knock on the door in the context of Freud's account of the dream of the "burning child" in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Lacan 1978, 57-60), Bowie's added example of the ceiling tile falling on the head of a passer-by is useful because it metaphorizes both the sheer contingency of irruption (who walks around expecting a falling tile?) as well as its correlation with a breakdown in social and psychic ordering and regulatory structures. In this example what gets dislodged is nothing other than a piece from an architectural structure designed to protect us from the unpredictable nature of the elements.

The presence of an uninvited guest of sorts amidst Amalfitano's personal library can be illuminated by Lacan's discussion of *tuché* because this book of no account—Dieste's—precisely disrupts the fulfillment of a ritual that ought to symbolize the reestablishment of subjective homeostasis following an experience of displacement. If the weather-beaten porch bench is the material embodiment of Amalfitano's travails, the unpacking of his personal library would in turn offer itself as an image of temporalization or temporal totalization. This ritualistic scene would symbolize the unification of past and present, contingency and necessity, displacement and home-making, destiny and freedom. Amalfitano appears to be saying something similar when he asserts, in a conversation with Norton and Pelletier near the end of the first Part, that exile constitutes the negation of destiny.

El exilio debe de ser algo terrible—dijo Norton, comprensiva.

—En realidad—dijo Amalfitano—ahora lo veo como un movimiento natural, algo que, a su manera, contribuye a abolir el destino o lo que comúnmente se considera el destino.

–Pero el exilio–dijo Pelletier–está lleno de inconvenientes, de saltos y rupturas que más o menos se repiten y que dificultan cualquier cosa importante que uno se proponga hacer.

–Ahí precisamente radica–dijo Amalfitano–la abolición del destino. (Bolaño 2004, 157)

In a reversal of Mallarmé’s assertion that a throw of the dice could never abolish chance, the contingencies of exile are said by Amalfitano to abolish destiny, or what is commonly understood as destiny. That understanding, if we take our cue from Pelletier, would entail “anything you try to do that’s important” (Bolaño 2008, 117); in other words, the associatively-linked chain of duties, obligations and appointments that we construct and assume in our personal and professional lives—or in Freud’s terms, anything and everything that relates to the pleasure principle. Exile, says Amalfitano in response to the overly-sympathetic, romanticized images of abjection and trauma put forth by the critics, in fact has the fortuitous effect of disrupting the symbolic network into which we habitually integrate ourselves. In that respect it turns out to be formally analogous to the chance encounter or *tuché* in contrast to destiny understood as the circuitry of the automaton. By the same token, it also bears formal resemblance to the avant garde conceptualization of aesthetic act as interruption of the status quo.

Something, however, does not fully add up between these two scenes that speak of the same topic—exile and destiny, chance and homeostasis—without either arriving at a complete agreement or articulating a clear and distinct disagreement. In his exchange with the critics, Amalfitano is the one who sets the critics right by demystifying their idealized and patronizing

assumptions about Latin American exile. Exile is not the unimaginable, traumatic experience they imagine it to be; and he, by extension, is not the abject survivor they need him to be.¹²³ If exile is, despite everything that has been said about it, a liberating experience that releases one from the routines and abstract temporality of capitalism (specialization, work time vs. leisure time, etc.) then destiny is implicitly juxtaposed to *azar* or *tuché*, a motif that appears throughout the novel and which is also signified indirectly in Amalfitano's response here through allusion to Mallarmé's poem "Un coup de des... jamais n'abolira le hazard." In Amalfitano's conversation with the critics it is the trajectory of exile with its unforeseeable and serendipitous occurrences that abolishes a certain idea of destiny, interrupting the symbolic circuitry of regulatory goals generated by the pleasure principle.

In the subsequent episode we find Amalfitano unpacking his library. Here chance in its incalculable returns in the form of the Dieste text, whose presence among his books he cannot explain to himself. This book of no account embodies an excess that may be proper to exile, and it also disrupts Amalfitano's own symbolic practice: his attempt to reorganize subjective life through the reinstallation of that familiar symbolic order that is his cherished, mentally catalogued collection of titles or signifiers. The uncanny presence of the Dieste text introduces one signifier too many, an excess that ruins the count.

I suggested earlier that these meditations on destiny and chance find echoes in other sections of the novel. There are two episodes in particular that help to shed light on the question of avant garde poetics in *2666*. The first is the Edwin Johns episode in the Part about the Critics. The Englishman Johns is a former painter whose artistic career culminated in a final self-portrait that he crowned with the gruesome gesture of cutting off his own hand and

attaching it to the canvas. Johns's opus magnum is a literalization of reflection on the relation between art and body, self-representation and mutilation; it also recalls neo-avant garde experiments with body art and self-mutilation such as the Vienna actionists of the 1960s or the Chilean CADA movement (Raúl Zurita, Diamela Eltit and Carlos Leppe) of the 1970s and 80s. On Morini's bidding the critics decide to pay Johns a visit in the Swiss asylum where he has been institutionalized. Their efforts to establish rapport with the enigmatic, reclusive artist appear to find a foothold when Morini observes that Johns possesses an anthology of German literature containing a story by Achimboldi. When Morini remarks happily on this coincidence ("es increíble, qué casualidad") Johns replies sardonically that the world itself is nothing but an infinite series of coincidences and that there is therefore no point in speaking of chance—which is, after all, just the other side of the coin that is destiny. Johns then launches into a monologue that can be drawn into productive relation with the discussions of chance and destiny:

—La casualidad no es un lujo, es la otra cara del destino y también algo más—dijo Johns.

—¿Qué más?—dijo Morini.

—Algo que se le escapaba a mi amigo por una razón muy sencilla y comprensible. Mi amigo (tal vez sea una presunción de mi parte llamarlo aún así) creía en la humanidad, por lo tanto creía en el orden, en el orden de la pintura y en el orden de las palabras, que no con otra cosa se hace la pintura. Creía en la redención. En el fondo hasta es posible que creyera en el progreso. La casualidad, por el contrario, es la libertad total a la que estamos abocados por nuestra propia naturaleza. La casualidad no obedece leyes y si las obedece nosotros las

desconocemos. La casualidad, si me permite el símil, es como Dios que se manifiesta cada segundo en nuestro planeta. Un Dios incomprensible con gestos incomprensibles dirigidos a sus criaturas incomprensibles. En ese huracán, en esa implosión ósea, se realiza la comunión. La comunión de la casualidad con sus rastros y la comunión de sus rastros con nosotros. (Bolaño 2004, 123)

Morini's exclamation—"qué casualidad"—is not just a banality that one utters when one doesn't know what to say. It advances a performative appeal to equality. The chance disclosure of a shared interest in Archiboldi, he proposes, is proof that the critics and Johns have something to say to one another and, moreover, it suggests that he should not hesitate to confide in them. What Morini means to say is that the presence of an Archiboldi text in this forsaken place is anything but a coincidence: it is a manifestation of the being-in-common that joins critics and artist. Johns replies to Morini's initiative by noting that he does not read German (thus there is no common ground, at least not a ground based on a shared aesthetic appreciation) and then by appropriating and resituating Morini's term, *casualidad* [coincidence, chance], first within a dialectic (chance, he reminds them, is just the other side of the coin that is destiny, and thus it is not the absolute that Morini makes it out to be) and then by asserting its irreducibility to dialectics (*y también algo más*). All of this transpires as if to show to Morini and his friends that they are at least two steps removed from knowing of what they speak.

In a half-mad rhetorical tour de force, Johns then stages for the benefit of the critics a dialogue between two competing accounts of art: the viewpoint of a certain friend who associates art with redemption and progress, contrasted with what we take to be Johns's own

position, which links art to the terrifying figure of the unknowable, beyond redemption and irreconcilable with the teleology of progress or with any thought of communion. It is fitting that Johns speak to the critics of an “incomprehensible God” who directs himself toward his “incomprehensible creatures,” since he himself—not unlike the mad poet sought out by Amalfitano’s wife Lola or the German immigrant Klaus Haas, who we meet at the end of the Part about Fate—embodies the contradiction of a minor, forgotten figure who, when finally seen in person, suddenly and terrifyingly looms larger than life.

At face value Johns’s self-portrait is indistinguishable from a prototypical avant garde act: it combines shock value with a questioning of prevailing codifications of art, i.e., of what counts as artistic subject matter and media, and of the avoidance or denigration of material concerns in aesthetic theory, including perhaps the exploitation and marginalization of *manual* labor in the production of art.¹²⁴ The self-portrait aligns itself with the avant garde tradition and its critical predilection for raising uncomfortable questions about the autonomy of art in capitalist society, and for exposing the hidden side of autonomy: culture and art as fetish. It exemplifies what Hal Foster (Foster 1996) terms the neo-avant garde, or mid- to late-20th century returns to the scenes and gestures of the historical garde that serve to recode the characteristic avant garde act in a new way and in light of the contemporary contexts. The historical distinction between the avant garde and the neo-avant garde seeks to account for how return or repetition can bring out unrealized meanings or possibilities in the first scene while at the same time constituting it as “origin” and “original.”

In Johns’s case the meaning of neo-avant garde repetition is rendered somewhat uncertain, however, by the secretive nature of his whispered response to Morini’s question

about what prompted him to cut off his own hand. If Johns's answer to Morini was—as Morini later tells Norton—that his self-mutilation was motivated by the prospect of financial gain, then the neo- would signify that the critical potential associated with avant garde radicalism has now been fully subsumed back into the logic of the status quo: equivalency and commodity production.¹²⁵ While the irony of a repetition that cancels what it purports to repeat certainly illustrates one way of reading this episode, there may also be a residual ambiguity in Johns's response, whose content is only relayed to us via Morini. We should not lose sight completely of the inherently violent nature of Morini's question, which demands that art give accounts to a questioner who just happens to be a critic, and that it do so on the critic's terms. If art must explain what it does by aligning itself with a principle of reason that belongs to criticism, then the avant garde in its historical mandate has already been rendered obsolete. So it is Morini's question that first introduces the possibility of the impossibility of the avant garde. In that light, what if Johns, in letting on that this seemingly subversive work was in truth prompted by mere commercial motives, were simply returning to Morini his own message in inverted form? The market or the metaphysics of criticism: as far as art is concerned it makes little difference, because both represent exogenous truth regimes in which nothing can happen that will not quickly be reabsorbed within the logic of the regime.

This residual uncertainty that haunts Morini's account of Johns's response to Morini's question parallels an ambiguity concerning the possibilities remaining for literature today. In returning to avant garde scenes of interruption, Bolaño's text raises the possibility that the avant garde and its aesthetic of interruption have run aground—not because it is no longer possible to produce works that move against the dominant logic of the capitalist order, but

because the cultural logic of late capitalism has dulled our capacity to be shocked and awakened, or because shock has become part and parcel of the logic of the market and thus has relinquished its disruptive power, or because—as we saw in Chapter 3—the aesthetics of interruption may be unable to touch the pre-political decision that has rendered politics subservient to the market.

The hyperbolic image of an “incomprehensible God” gesturing to his uncomprehending and uncomprehended creatures is echoed in an episode from the novel’s second Part, when Amalfitano’s wife Lola visits another “mad” creator: a Spanish poet residing in a psychiatric hospital in Mondragón, Spain.¹²⁶ The poet’s physician, who also happens to be his biographer—no conflict of interest here!—describes his literary project in terms similar to those through which Johns confronts his friend’s reassuringly humanistic, enlightened view of art. As the doctor-biographer puts it, the poet’s work harbors and conceals a kind of disorder—of an ontological, not psychological, nature—that, if it were ever to see the light of day, would cause even the most fearless and composed among us to tremble:

lo que él nos quiere mostrar, su aparente orden, un orden de carácter verbal que esconde, con una estrategia que creo comprender pero cuyo fin ignoro, un desorden verbal que si lo experimentáramos, aunque sólo fuera como espectadores de una puesta en escena teatral, nos haría estremecernos hasta un grado difícilmente soportable. (225)

Neo-avant garde poetry leaves no room for catharsis. The teeming fray lurking beneath the ordered flow of poetic discourse pertains to the (dis)order of the real, which is not to be confused with the unrepresentable. Recall Aristotle’s distinction in the *Poetics* between the

terrible and pitiable on the one hand and the merely monstrous on the other. Drama is at its best, Aristotle tells us, when violence is reported but not actually made visible on the stage; in that manner it is left up to imagination to find a specific form for violence. To put violence on the stage, meanwhile, is to risk letting it sink into mere spectacle. Thus the unrepresentable, which alone stands capable of evoking true terror and pity, is not at all incompatible with a certain theatrical dialectic of identification, empathy, and purgation of negative affect. The “verbal disorder” of which the poet’s doctor speaks, meanwhile, belongs to another register; it lies beyond the Aristotelian economy of identification and purgation, beyond the diagnostic and statistical calculations of the psychiatric profession—and perhaps beyond dialectics tout court. “Divine incomprehension” and “verbal disorder” in Bolaño’s narrative discourse may also be consistent with what the Spanish critic (also Bolaño’s friend and executor) Ignacio Echevarría, in his prologue to *El secreto del mal* (Bolaño 2013), terms a poetics of indetermination or uncertainty [*indeterminación*], a narrative tendency to veer away from its object and cut off as the moment of truth nears. Narrative discourse is suddenly and unexpectedly brought to a halt just as the reader is preparing to undergo an encounter with evil. While the short story genre provides an ideal framework for exploring the literary relation between presentation and interruption or revelation and withdrawal, the critical concept of indetermination can also help to shed light on the episodic structure of Bolaño’s novels in general and of *2666* in particular. It is precisely the loose, uncertain association between seemingly disparate episodes and Parts that allows for self-interruption of narrative discourse in *2666*.

As the episode with the poet of Mondragón illustrates, evil in Bolaño’s writing is not what we often make it out to be: a phenomenon whose content is beyond representation,

“unimaginable” because too heinous or inhuman. As Alenka Zupancic points out, if evil names an irruption within the symbolic that departs from its codifications of what is possible, then evil is determined not by content but by the form of the phenomenon; or, more precisely, evil is the morphing of form into formlessness as seen from the perspective of the symbolic law (Zupancic 2001, np). In many of Bolaño’s works, narrative form approximates the experience of incomprehension that must logically accompany the kind of irruption within the symbolic described by Zupancic. In distinction from the Kantian sublime, here reason does not discover in the incapacity of the aesthetic imagination to bestow form on the object the sign of its own triumphant ascent.

Of course Bolaño is not the first writer to have been taken in by the question of evil, which has similarly preoccupied and fascinated writers such as de Sade, Baudelaire, Melville, Céline, Sartre, Bataille and others. In fact the question of evil may be inherently linked to art and literature if, as Zupancic asserts, the nature of evil resides in a constitutive lack that structures all representation. It is in this specific sense that evil designates a limit for representation. Evil is not unrepresentable by virtue of a content whose malevolent intensity cannot be—or ought not be—fathomed by the imagination of mere mortals. Evil resides at the limit of representation because its appearance touches on the void that structures the imaginary and the symbolic registers. As Zupancic explains:

[Evil] belongs to the Imaginary register although it is not an image, in the strict sense of the word; rather, it is that which makes a certain image “shine” and stand out. You could say that it is an effect of the Real on our imagination, the last veil or “screen” that separates us from the impossible Real” (Zupancic 2001,

np).

What distinguishes evil from symbolically-legitimated modes of being and acting is a kind of flatness, a spreading-out of form that coincides with the fact that evil has no proper motive other than itself. Evil does as evil does, for the sheer enjoyment of it—or out of pure spite—and not because it harbors ulterior motives or hopes to gain something in return. In this sense, as Zupancic points out, it is formally indistinguishable from the Kantian definition of the moral law.

Much of the contemporary, psychoanalytically-informed interest in the question of evil allows itself to be historicized in terms of recent global trends, such as technological evolutions that have rendered unstable what used to be seen as natural and insurmountable limits for the human (e.g., cloning, advances in treating previously incurable diseases, etc.), as well as the emergence of free market capitalism as the sole legitimate or possible model for social organization. The technologically-administered unification of our world under capitalist production coincides with what we could call an evacuation of the form of the impossible. The foreclosure of the impossible occurs both in the ethical and the political spheres. It happens with the evolution of biotechnologies that destabilize old boundaries between nature and culture, or biology and technology; and it also happens with the relegation of all utopian imaginaries to the trashcan of history. To the extent that globalization cancels or subordinates the authority of traditional boundaries, it unleashes what Lacan in his seminar on anxiety calls a lack of lack (“lack happens to be lacking”: Lacan 2014, 42). This may explain why the manifestations of globalization seem to intensify our anxieties today instead of dissuading them. In this light, Bolaño’s literary interest in the matter of evil does not just translate some fascination with the morbid symptoms that obtain with the crisis of modern forms of

sovereignty. The turn to evil may be part of a literary attempt to reintroduce the possibility of the impossible, understood as structuring void of the imaginary and the symbolic, and in the absence of which desire turns out to be incapable of latching onto any object for more than just a fleeting moment.¹²⁷

Having established a tentative connection between Bolaño's literary project and the possible consequences of globalization for ethical and political life, let us return now to Amalfitano and the question of the neo-avant garde. It seems clear that Amalfitano's reenactment of Duchamp seeks to recover and redeploy the ruptural intentions at work in the historical avant garde. Or, if that motive cannot be attributed with certainty to Amalfitano (e.g., because he may simply be mad), at the very least it provides a possible measure for the significance of this episode within the novel as a whole. If Duchamp's "Readymade" genre unleashed a critical force against the institutional structures (economic, cultural, academic, etc.) within which art finds itself enclosed in the time of modernity, Amalfitano's reenactment might be seen to take aim at a different but similarly dominant set of institutional configurations in the time of globalization: the colonization of nature and imagination by the logic of commodity production, and the reduction of knowledge and symbolic practices to techno-scientific and capitalist forms of valuation. But, as we have begun to see, repetition also raises questions about the status of the example, and it thereby destabilizes this seemingly self-evident analogy. For Duchamp art unquestionably occupies a key place within the dominant social logic; in a historical context where blood, lineage, and religion no longer serve to secure social authority, liberal bourgeois order is sustained in large part by a postulated link between aesthetic education, citizenship, and human freedom. Duchamp's innovations acquire their

force because they take aim at one of the aesthetic and ethical principles of modernity: the autonomy of the modern subject as evidenced and perfected through aesthetic education. Today, however, that classical liberal education has been displaced from its central role in disseminating and legitimating social authority. So whereas Duchamp's procedures turn one of liberalism's key ideologemes against liberalism itself, Amalfitano finds himself in a world in which art has all but been stripped of its prestige and thus also of its critical potential; his reenactment cannot help but call attention to the historical distance that separates it from the original context. If the meaning of the original ("Duchamp") is determined a posteriori and through repetition, the status of the repetition is in turn structured by a missed encounter that repetition can never hope to master.

The concept of the *avant garde* postulates a faction or part that moves ahead of the whole; the *avant garde* is out in front, attuned to what has not yet dawned on the majority. But as Amalfitano's reenactment reminds us, an event—say, the *avant garde* act or "Duchamp"—can never amount to a self-contained, fully autonomous moment. The meaning of a given act or event only ever arrives after the fact; or more precisely, meaning is always in arrears, always still to come because open to the possibility of future reiterations and transformations. It is only retrospectively that the Duchampian "Readymade" is constituted as a genre exemplifying an *avant garde* sensibility with respect to modernity. Duchamp will not have been "Duchamp" until repeated. By the same token, Amalfitano's reenactment of Duchamp sheds light on the way repetition alters the original that it claims to repeat; in reenacting the *avant-garde* Readymade, Amalfitano illustrates precisely what may be unreproducible in that earlier scene today. If the meaning of an event is only constituted a posteriori, then perhaps the *avant garde*,

in addition to giving conceptual and aesthetic form to rupture, revolution and new beginning, also illuminates a difference and a lag-time that divides any event from itself, a delay or splitting that is internal to the temporality of history. The thought of the event can never be made synonymous with the immediacy and autonomy of the moment or the subject; the structure of the event necessarily introduces temporal heterogeneity into history. The avant garde spirit, of invoking or announcing a new present that would break decisively with the past, gives rise in Amalfitano's repetition to a different and yet not entirely unrelated possibility: a thought of the present as divided and differing from itself in relation to meaning that is always still to come. Against the apotheoses of neoliberalism as the end of ideological conflict and antagonism, Amalfitano's anachronistic, unhinged gesture—which is seen by very few and apparently understood by no one—nonetheless affords a reminder (if there is anyone who knows how to read it) that the here-and-now remains different from itself, open to what is—perhaps—still yet to come.

Let me pose a possible resolution to the question of what is at stake in this literary interest in the avant and neo-avant garde in *2666*. The myriad of allusions to and citations of the avant garde tradition and its characteristic gestures tend to work in an ironic manner, suggesting that the interruption or rupture that the avant garde sought to bring about is not available to be produced today. Neo-avant garde repetition in Bolaño is not a catalyst for rupture or interruption, but rather sheds light on the possibility that the aesthetic and political logic of modernity is no longer in force. That logic has been replaced by something else—but what? Is it simply the naked force of a savage capitalism that has been freed from all restraining devices? Or is there something else, a new governing logic, working alongside global capital?

In assessing the exhaustion or suspension of aesthetic and political modernity, Bolaño's novel paradoxically confirms *and* denies its belonging to the tradition whose end it announces. In assessing the exhaustion of that tradition Bolaño's text necessarily situates itself beyond it or outside modernity; otherwise the announcement would negate its own message. But in order to mark a limit for the modern, Bolaño's work would have to cross that limit and survive it; and, as Hegel has taught us, a limit that can be crossed is no limit at all, and in crossing it one merely pushes it further out. The announcement or performance of the exhaustion of modernity in Bolaño cannot be reduced to either of the two mutually-incompatible interpretations: it is neither the end of the modern and the beginning of something else nor a simple continuation of the modern, albeit perhaps under a different name. One possible alternative to this conundrum is what I have been calling *interregnum*, or persisting within the ruins of the modern in a way that illuminates their ruination, albeit without being able to imagine or inaugurate a new order. Bolaño's return to the aesthetics of interruption takes the odd form of a tradition that announces its own suspension: the interruption of interruption. Interruption is accompanied by an awareness that aesthetic experience and whatever critical insight it might be expected to foster can no longer claim to provide a reliable roadmap to good or desirable ethical and political ends, and that critical awareness of ideology does not provide a clear path to transforming the material practices of power in the world today.

By way of conclusion I want to focus on how the literary thematization of repetition in *2666* generates a thinking of time that could prove helpful for advancing this discussion of literary aesthetics and its relation to history today. As a reiteration of an exemplary moment from the vanguard tradition, Amalfitano's reenactment attempts to register that something is

out of joint in our contemporary situation. The “conjuncture” that is neoliberal-administered globalization is in fact a disjuncture; Consensus is a denial of temporal heterogeneity. I have already discussed how, in Amalfitano’s reenactment, irony points up the inability to reproduce avant garde interruption today. But his repetition of Duchamp also illuminates a difference that marks the here and now, separating the present from itself. It points, without knowing to whom or to what, to something in the present that is neither here nor there, neither present nor absent. Let us call this something spectral, which continues to insist in dissenting fashion, within and against the neoliberal conjuncture. While we can no longer state with confidence that this spectral remainder embodies revolutionary or ruptural potential today, we cannot for that matter simply consign it to the logic of the market either.

Perhaps the most recognizable thematization of temporal heterogeneity in Bolaño’s novel is to be found in Amalfitano’s idiosyncratic theory of jetlag, which I will not discuss here.¹²⁸ But we should also consider Liz Norton’s struggle, shortly after arriving in Santa Teresa, to put her finger on a peculiar but insistent sense that something strange is going on in the world. Not only does she find herself unable to determine what it is that is going on and going wrong, she cannot even locate the intuited disorder within established geographical coordinates: “Norton...pensó que algo raro estaba pasando, en la avenida, en la terraza, en las habitaciones del hotel, incluso en el DF con esos taxistas y porteros irreales, o al menos sin un asidero lógico por dónde agarrarlos, e incluso algo raro, que escapaba a su comprensión, estaba pasando en Europa...” (Bolaño 2004, 151). Norton’s suspicions do not translate a presumed phenomenal difference proper to Santa Teresa, an essence that would distinguish this peripheral place from Europe or even from the metropolitan Mexico City. Heterogeneity is not

an essence or a property. On the contrary, Norton's sense of foreboding is inseparable from a dawning realization that modernity's cartographic and epistemological resources are unable to provide a reliable diagnosis for what is going on in—and going terribly wrong with—our world today. For Norton and her colleagues Santa Teresa is undoubtedly the locus where this general sense of the world's disadjustment with respect to itself obtains. But disadjustment, we learn, is both everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. It names the fundamental experience of our world today.

What do Norton's sense that something is out of joint in the world today, Amalfitano's theory of jetlag, and neo-avant garde repetition have in common? They are all literary considerations of a thought of temporal heterogeneity that remains irreducible both to the metaphysical determination of time as a sequence of self-contained moments and to the modern determination of time as linear evolution governed by the overarching principle of progress. How should we understand these literary illuminations of the problem of time in the context of Bolaño's engagement with geometry? Do these reflections on time intersect with reflections on space in *2666*? Does the discrepancy between the spatial logic of modernity and global war discussed earlier find a corollary in our experience of time?

Carlo Galli understands space as product of a modern synthesis of epistemology with politics. The political geometry of modernity produces the very social space that it is charged with organizing, partitioning and regulating. By implication, there can be no pure phenomenology of space, no perception or intuition of "space as such" prior to the incorporation of geometrical figures and schema into political discourse. In his monumental *Narrative and Time*, Paul Ricoeur proposes a similar way of understanding time and modernity:

time, according to Ricoeur, becomes available to experience through narrative poetics and its temporalizing procedures. It is through narrative poetics that discrete occurrences can be articulated together as episodes linked by a common logic of cause and effect; and it is the poetic procedures of narrative that confer a tragic or comic sense on this or that sequence of events. For Ricoeur there is no pure phenomenology of time either (Ricoeur 1984, 6ff): our experience of time is always already supplemented by rhetorical figuration, through which relations of contiguity and succession are infused with meaning. As Peter Osborne has shown, meanwhile, European modernity unfolds as a particular modality of experiencing and projecting time (Osborne 1995, 1-29). There are of course many ways of conceiving time within modernity. The Enlightenment tradition, liberalism, and Marxism all give shape to their own distinct conceptualizations of how historical time is structured. What they have in common is that their understandings of time are all grounded in the postulated connection between the present and the new. It is the principle of newness—understood as progress, permanent transition, or revolution—that governs all modern conceptions of time.

But perhaps the understanding of time as determined product of narrative temporalization procedures is not the only way of thinking time. In contrast to Ricoeur's account of narrative as resolution of the aporias of time, Jorge Luis Borges proposes in a 1979 lecture that philosophical and literary reflections on time lead to the conclusion that the aporia of time is in fact unresolvable. Moreover, Borges proposes that history itself in fact depends on the non-resolution of the aporias of time. Time, as Borges puts it, is our problem: not because it is ours to possess and resolve but because it defines us. To resolve the aporias of time, then, would be to dissolve and dismiss for once and for all the question of being, and moreover it

would be to annihilate ourselves as sensible, thinking, and speaking beings.

Creo que Henri Bergson dijo que el tiempo era el problema capital de la metafísica. Si se hubiera resuelto ese problema, se habría resuelto todo.

Felizmente, yo creo que no hay ningún peligro en que se resuelva; es decir, seguiremos siempre ansiosos. Siempre podremos decir, como San Agustín ¿Qué es el tiempo? Si no me lo preguntan, lo sé. Si me lo preguntan, lo ignoro.

No sé si al cabo de veinte o treinta siglos de meditación hemos avanzado mucho en el problema del tiempo. Yo diría que siempre sentimos esa antigua perplejidad, esa que sintió mortalmente Heráclito en aquel ejemplo al que vuelvo siempre: nadie baja dos veces al mismo río. ¿Por qué nadie baja dos veces al mismo río? En primer término, porque las aguas del río fluyen. En segundo término—esto es algo que ya nos toca metafísicamente, que nos da como un principio de horror sagrado—porque nosotros mismos somos también un río, nosotros también somos fluctuantes. El problema del tiempo es ése. Es el problema de lo fugitivo. (Borges 1979, pp?)

Borges goes on to propose that what we call time is a *donation of eternity* in the double sense of the genitive. Time is imparted to us as possible experience by eternity understood as beyond time and as forever inaccessible to us as object of experience. An experience of eternity would be ruinous or fatal; like the God of the Old Testament, if being as such were to disclose itself to us, Borges says, we would be struck dead or be driven mad. Time, then, is the donation of the real as possible experience, a giving of the real by the real.

What if, when it comes to modernity, time were not simply the other side of the coin

vis-à-vis space? And what if Ricoeur's account of poetic temporalization were only half the story when it comes to the modern experience of time? What if we were to think of time not only as a vehicle or instrument through which modernity asserts itself as historical project but also, following Borges, as the *real of modernity*: as a problem that modernity never ceases to grapple with, and which it remains incapable of resolving and banishing once and for all?

In 2666 Bolaño's meditations on the violence and destabilizing effects of narcocapitalism and post-Fordism give shape to a thought of the historical present as disjuncture rather than conjuncture, or as a situation defined by temporal heterogeneity. Heterogeneity is a name for our historical conjuncture—a coalescence of forces that include global capital, its liberal proponents and its illiberal opponents, as well as the integration of the planet through informational and mediatic technics—but it is also a name for a difference or non-contemporaneity that inhabits history; heterogeneity, which can be illuminated through repetition, moves against the current of progress while also keeping open a sense of the future as incalculable, as openness to the possibility of being surprised by the event. Our conjuncture is thus defined at once by the uncertain experience of disadjustment—as illustrated in the cases of Norton and Amalfitano—and by concerted technological, political and military efforts to eliminate all disadjustment.

In *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994), Jacques Derrida proposes a thinking of time as informed by the logic of spectrality, in which the living present is secretly marked—and unhinged—by undead remnants of the past and apparitions of the future. The present, any given present, owes a debt to the past from which it inherits more than it can ever know. Yet to inherit something is also by definition to change it, and thus the incursion of debt also

invariably transforms our understanding of the prior moment from which we inherit. Time, as Borges puts it, is a constant state of flux; and we ourselves are also this flow, flight and self-differentiation. If time is to be conceived as a sequence of Nows or presents, Amalfitano's repetition of Duchamp in turn illustrates how every Now is already different from itself; the proper sense of any present is contaminated by what is not (yet), by what is no longer and by what is yet to come.

I have argued that Amalfitano performs the possibility of the impossibility of the avant garde qua interruption today. The manifest impossibility of interruption might lead us to the conclusion that it is no longer possible to experience or imagine an outside, an alternative to globalization and the hegemony of the market. However, if the avant garde was always paradigmatically modern in its sensibility—indeed, however much it strives to make a clean break with the modern, it could be said to embody the essence of modernity—then it may be that the interruption of interruption generates a second-order interruption, the ghost of interruption, which would be conjured through our recognition that art is no longer capable of providing a compensatory “outside” for modernity and its history of destruction. The interruption of interruption might therefore stand a chance of bringing the contradictions inherent in the global system to a head for us in a way that a classical avant garde gesture would be incapable of providing, i.e., because it was always possible to experience avant garde provocations and ruptures as belonging to redemptive aesthetic practice and experience. One of the most important insights offered by Bolaño's literary project—at times despite himself and the never-ending construction of his literary persona and legacy—is that our world today leaves intact no hope for an aesthetic remedy to the suffering and destruction inflicted by

modernization and the disasters of the 20th and 21st centuries. What is more, the illumination today of the impossibility of a compensatory role for art—which is to say, the impossibility of what was once the great hope of aesthetic modernity—may well be the only thing that provides a glimmer of hope in our ever-darkening world. “El mundo está vivo,” he tells Mónica Maristain, “y nada vivo tiene remedio y ésa es nuestra suerte” (Bolaño 2006, 71).

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¹ Occasionalism refers to a logic that attributes phenomenal occurrences to a transcendent cause or first principle—in this case, the sovereign decision that gives rise to and legitimates a given legal or political order albeit without becoming subject to the codes of that order.

² “Principial authority” refers to Reiner Schürmann’s discussion of the Aristotelean concept of principle (*arkhé*) as a term that serves as the axiomatic foundation of a given lexicon or logic (Schürmann 2003). Schürmann’s analysis of *arkhé* in the history of Western thought turns out to be formally quite similar to Schmitt’s account of sovereignty in the history of modern politics.

³ On the status of this term (*sous rature*) see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, 19-26, as well as Martin Heidegger, “On the Question of Being” (*Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill, Cambridge University Press, 1998). Spivak’s introduction to *Of Grammatology* also contains a

highly useful clarification of the Derridean and Heideggerian deployments of this critique of ontology; see *Of Grammatology*, xvii-xx.

⁴ Whereas some critics understand *testimonio* as initiating a radical break from Latin American literature and its aesthetic sensibility, I would argue that *testimonio* is a continuation of that literary history in a different key. The fact that its conventions and rhetorical gestures differ from those of the Boom or the regional novel does not in itself make the testimonial genre any less literary. On the contrary, it is the critical understanding of this genre as contributing to the production of a subject—no matter how alternative or revolutionary—that makes *testimonio* literary in the ideological sense of the term that I am trying to pin down here.

⁵ On the globalization of capitalist production see Harvey 1990 and Jameson 1991. On the notion of paradigmatic forms of labor see “Postmodernization, or the Informatization of Production” (chapter 3.4) in Hardt and Negri 2000, 280-303.

⁶ See, among others, Jameson 1991 and Virno 2004.

⁷ See my discussion of this scene in Dove 2004.

⁸ See Sauri 2010, DiStefano 2013 and Hatfield 2014. While I largely agree with the objections that these three critics raise against the critical shift from interpretation and truth to affect—in particular I find myself in agreement with the idea that such a shift could provide emancipatory or even just desirable results today—I have reservations about what seem to me to their insufficiently critical reliance on conceptual distinctions such as form and content (Sauri) and authorial intention versus reader perception (DiStefano and Hatfield).

⁹ See in particular “Kant’s Materialism” and “Kant in Schiller” in the posthumously published *Aesthetic Ideology* (de Man 1996).

¹⁰ See in particular Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927) and the 1936-38 lectures published as *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*.

¹¹ See the introduction to Jameson 1991.

¹² The tactical equivalence ignores the fact (as documented by Martin Edward Andersen in his *Dossier Secreto: Argentina’s Desaparecidos and the Myth of the “Dirty War”*) that the armed Left in Argentina had already been infiltrated and no longer posed a military threat when the March 1976 *golpe de estado* was implemented under the much-publicized pretext of saving the country from communism or disorder. The moral equivalency argument, meanwhile, discounts any meaningful distinction between civic violence on the one hand and extrajudicial repression by the state on the other. However misconstrued and fatally flawed the decisions that led many among the Argentine Left to adopt armed struggle as the solution to a political problem may have been, those decisions cannot be placed on the same moral plane as the decisions and procedures that led to the permanent suspension of constitutional rights and the systematic implementation of torture and other forms of terror in the name of “Western, Christian values.”

¹³ Similar forms of rewriting can be found in the Chilean transitional process. See Levinson 2003.

¹⁴ For an illustration of what such reflection could look like, see Thayer 2006. In response to the conceptualization of “transition” as return to or restoration of democratic tradition in Chile, Thayer proposes that the real transition is to be found in the epochal transformations initiated with the military *golpes de estado*, which not only interrupted the possibility of radical Left projects but also enacted their own, equally radical shift away from the state-centered national histories of the 19th and 20th centuries and into a new history governed by the retreat of the state in deference to the logic of the market.

¹⁵ For a discussion of hegemony and universality see Ernesto Laclau 2005, and Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000.

¹⁶ I am alluding to the so-called “Washington Consensus,” a term that was coined by the IMF’s John Williamson in 1989 and soon became the code word for the particular brand of neoliberal reforms (in particular: deregulation of major national industries; privatization of public services; prioritization of fiscal discipline over public expenditure; elimination or reduction of entitlement programs deemed not to possess a high rate of economic return, such as welfare and social services; liberalization of trade and foreign investment policies and removal of protective tariffs; securing of private property rights against state appropriation and nationalization; and liberalization of interest rates) (Birdsall et al. 2010).

¹⁷ In 1989 and 1990 Alfonsín’s successor, Carlos Menem, issued blanket pardons for convicted military criminals as well as for a number of actors who might conceivably have faced prosecution for crimes committed before, during or after dictatorship. The pardons covered crimes committed by guerrilla leaders, by the military during dictatorship as well as during post-dictatorship military uprisings.

¹⁸ One of the best accounts of the turn from optimism to despair in post-dictatorship Argentina is Marguerite Feitlowitz’s *Lexicon of Terror*; see in particular the final two chapters (Feitlowitz 1998).

¹⁹ While he was writing *El oído absoluto* Cohen was still residing in Barcelona. At the conclusion of the novel we find the dateline: “Lorelei, 1986-1989.”

²⁰ My discussion of *Stimmung* and *Bestimmung* is informed by Michel Haar's "Attunement and Thinking" (Haar 1992). By the same token, I was influenced to begin thinking about "mood" as a philosophical and literary problem by Alberto Moreiras's "The Order of Order" (Moreiras 1999).

²¹ With the considered use of the future perfect here I am trying to describe a paradoxical temporality by which something ("being" or its determination by thought) shapes the way we look at the world while at the same time it can only be said to acquire consistency and efficacy through determinate acts (e.g., of praxis or thought). Let us give a concrete example: the underlying experience of *being* in Ancient Greece is nothing outside of the specific works of Greek culture (philosophy, tragedy, poetry, sculpture) and politics that reason presumes to be governed by an originary experience or essence, albeit only unconsciously. The preunderstanding of being thus functions in Heidegger's argument like a speculative fiction: it is a necessary supposition for thinking but it cannot be discovered through interpretive work of any kind.

²² Like *Stimmung*, *Bestimmung* bears a variety of related connotations, the most salient of which for this discussion are "determination," "modification" and "destination."

²³ In "Science and Reflection" Heidegger recalls that "the [Greek] verb *theōrein* grew out of the coalescing of two root words, *thea* and *horaō*. *Thea* (cf. theater) is the outward look, the aspect, in which something shows itself. Plato names this aspect in which what presences shows what it is, *eidōs*. To have seen this aspect, *eidēnai*, is to know [*wissen*]. The second root word in *theōrein*, *horaō*, means: to look at something attentively, to look it over, to view it closely. Thus it follows that *theōrein* is *thean horan*, to look attentively on the outward appearance wherein what presences becomes visible and, through such sight—seeing—to linger with it" (Heidegger 1977, 163). While Heidegger relentlessly emphasizes the connection linking the origins of the metaphysical tradition in the Platonic *eidōs* to the modern specular project, such an analysis would be incomplete unless it also attends to the economic undertones present in Heidegger's translation of *horaō* as "to look at something attentively, to look it over, to view it closely"—in other words, as appraisal grounded in a preunderstanding of value as exchange value.

²⁴ "The subject, if anything, is the thing that senses and thinks. Sensations and thoughts do not belong to the 'world of energy', they cannot produce any change in this world of energy as we know from Spinoza and Sir Charles Sherrington. All this was said from the point of view that we accept the time-hallowed discrimination between subject and object. Though we have to accept it in everyday life 'for practical reference', we ought, so I believe, to abandon it in philosophical thought. Its rigid logical consequence has been revealed by Kant: the sublime, but empty, idea of the 'thing in itself' about which we forever know nothing. It is the same elements that go to compose my mind and the world. This situation is the same for every mind and its world, in spite of the unfathomable abundance of 'cross references' between them. *The world is given to me only once, not one existing and one perceived*. Subject and object are only one. The barrier between them cannot be said to have broken down as a result of recent experience in the physical sciences, for this barrier does not exist" (126).

²⁵ As for narrative approaches that are incapable of navigating the complexities of globalization as violence, Cohen specifically mentions: "el relato confiado de las tensiones dramáticas que se resuelven" (which seems to refer not to a specific genre or subgenre but to a classical understanding of aesthetic experience with the production and resolution of dramatic conflict, of which Aristotle is the principle example); "las estéticas exotistas y el cuento maravilloso" (which seem to refer to the proliferation of magical realism in the aftermath of the Boom novel); "el grotesco colorista" (the theater of the grotesque was popularized in Argentina and Uruguay by Italian immigrants during the first decades of the 20th century but was soon adopted by the hegemonic *criollo* culture and became an important vehicle for representing social conflict and class antagonism in the work of Armando Discépolo and others); "la comedia negra de costumbres" (the *comedia* was an early modern Spanish theatrical tradition; *comedia de costumbres* as a general term translates as "comedy of manners"); "las comprensibles poéticas de denuncia" (which could refer to any use of poetry or prose as a vehicle for denouncing injustices); and, finally, "la literatura prospectiva de nuestro siglo" (science fiction understood as attempt to predict the future).

²⁶ Sarlo is by no means the only one to offer such an assessment. As Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz see it, "mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, 249-50).

²⁷ There is a non-fictive Lorelei to which Cohen's Lorelei alludes: a large rock structure that towers over the Rhine River near St. Goarshausen, Germany, at the narrowest point in the river's trajectory. Because the narrowing of the river combines with unusually strong currents, this point is one of the most hazardous for navigation along the entire river, as evidenced by its many shipwrecks. In 19th and 20th century literature (Brentano, Heine, Joyce and others) and music (Mendelssohn), Lorelei has been linked to legends of a mermaid or siren who lures unsuspecting sailors to their demise. The thematization of utopia and dystopia in *El oído absoluto* has a clear relation to the Lorelei legend: it is through neopopulist sentimentality or kitsch that Cohen's Lorelei sells itself as a bastion of tranquility in

contrast to an outside world that is increasingly threatened by natural and man-made disasters.

²⁸ While the resonances between the events in Lorelei and post-dictatorship Argentina are too obvious to be ignored, my intention here is to illustrate why interpretive focus on this more or less direct connection would result in a very limited and impoverishing reading of the novel. At the same time, the link between utopian thought and developmentalism is further underscored in one of the self-promotional slogans projected above the city's sky: "LORELEI ES TUYA. HA NACIDO PARA ALENTAR A QUIENES SE ESFUERZAN POR SUPERAR EL ATRASO" (20; all caps in original). What could better capture the ideology of neoliberalism described by Wendy Brown as staging an individualized, moralistic opposition to postmodern despair by taking charge of our own human capital through "proper choices and investing in proper things" (Brown 2010, np)?

²⁹ In Lotario's cryptic formulation, "El aire hierve de vibraciones, pensamientos, deseos, mala leche, voluntad... El aire es una jungla de aspiradoras mentales. O surtidores. Y los únicos que lo saben son los paranoicos. Ellos saben que el aire está infestado" (Cohen 1989, 73).

³⁰ On the lexicon of terror see Feitlowitz 1998.

³¹ This ghostly anecdote reflects Cohen's interest in the dynamics of libidinal investment and love, especially in the context of distance and absence. Whereas the case of Eugenia's sister presents a thought of love "before first sight" whose generative force is not immediacy but rather narrative, in his essay "Realmente fantástico" Cohen relates a story from the Taoist text *Leizi* about a man born in Yan and raised in Yu, who is deceived by travelling companions into believing that a third town, Jin, is his native Yan. The man reacts emotionally, touching the city's walls, kissing the ground beneath him and bursting into tears. Later his follower travelers reveal the deception, but when the man finally arrives at the real Yan his reaction is devoid of all emotion. Cohen then proposes a number of possible interpretations of the Taoist fable (we are dominated by our fantasies; language and mental categories are constitutive of our reality) before moving into a reflection on how the relentless bombardment of "messages" in our contemporary mediated world might alter or intensify the questions posed in the Taoist fable of the man from Yan.

³² "...Yo no tenía pasado, no me acordaba nada. Mi historia era un montón de muertos" (Cohen 1989, 216);

"Eugenia era mi almanaque, mis pertenencias y mi barco, mi libro de balances... el diario que algunos escriben para vigilar la memoria" (204).

³³ This phrase is a near-exact translation of a line from Emily Dickinson's poem "Perception of an Object," which is itself a commentary on memory and idealization.

³⁴ If one wishes one can still perfectly well read *El oído absoluto* as national allegory. In an all-too-literal key, the utopian façade of Lorelei would correspond with the first years of postdictatorship during which time radical contestatory politics was highly stigmatized (the *teoría de los dos demonios*) while democratic governments were periodically threatened by military uprisings led by far-right factions of the Argentine armed forces. By the same token, Campomanes embodies the increasing involvement of mass media in Argentine politics, a process which according to Luis Alberto Quevedo began with the innovative and intensive use of televisual advertising and marketing during the 1983 Presidential election (the first election following military dictatorship) and came to full fruition during Menem's presidential election campaign in 1987—a year or so before the publication of Cohen's novel (Reati 2006, 138). While the resonances between the events in Lorelei and post-dictatorship Argentina are too obvious to be ignored, my intention here is to illustrate why interpretive focus on this more or less direct connection would result in a very limited and impoverishing reading of the novel.

³⁵ See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta: Figures of Wagner* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994), esp. pp.26-31. For a fuller discussion of Cohen's thinking about the so-called return to realism in contemporary Argentine narrative see the essay "¡Realmente fantástico!" in Cohen 2003.

³⁶ Elsewhere in the same essay Guevara refers to love as the originary impulse of Marxist praxis (love for one's fellow human) and as the vital force and rhythm of labor in Cuba (the Cuban women and campesinos "cut the sugar cane with love").

³⁷ These questions were prompted by chapter 4 of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, entitled "Shattered Love" (Nancy 1991).

³⁸ Earlier versions of this chapter have been presented in conferences (the 2006 Latin American Studies Association and American Comparative Literature Association Conferences), as a lecture at the University of Aberdeen (2006) and as an invited paper at the University of Illinois at Chicago (2011), and as an article published in the *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* (Dove 2009). I am grateful to Kate Jenckes, Alberto Moreiras and Dianna Niebylski for those invitations, and to Carl Good for having prompted me to begin thinking about Aira.

³⁹ As Winfried Schulz puts it, "media technologies extend the natural limits [sic] of human communication capacities. Human communication is limited in terms of space, time and expressiveness; the media serve to bridge spatial and temporal distances. In addition, the media help to surmount limitations of encoding. Hence, the phylogeny of the media has to be understood as a continuous effort to extend these limits" (Schulz 2004, 88).

⁴⁰ See p.65, footnote 28.

⁴¹ The idea that televisual media introduces a new degree of self-reflexivity that is unparalleled in other media was first discussed, in the Argentine context, by Oscar Landi in *Devórame otra vez: qué hizo la television con la gente, qué hace la gente con la television* (Landi 1992).

⁴² The origins of neoliberalism in the Southern Cone involve at least two forms of violence. One, to which Sarlo is alluding in this passage, entails the presentation of what was in fact a political decision (the determination of technocratic knowledge as the truth of the political, a decision that was consolidated under Menem) as if it were something other than a decision, i.e., the market as the only “natural” means of social organization. The other account of origin involves the fact that the groundwork for the transitions to market economy in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay were laid under military dictatorship in the 1970’s and 80’s, and that the imposition of market-driven reforms have frequently been accompanied by a rhetoric of fear: either embrace the road to modernization as defined by global capital or risk the return of the “demons” that terrorized the country in the past (revolutionary violence and state terrorism). If neoliberalism is only officially introduced to Argentina under Menem, the groundwork for its introduction was nonetheless created by the dictatorship’s Minister of Economy, José Martínez de Hoz.

⁴³ In *Communication, Culture and Hegemony*, Jesús Martín Barbero describes how radio and film “convey[ed] the challenge and the appeal of populism, which transformed the mass into the people and the people into the nation” (Barbero 164). In “The Cinematic State,” meanwhile, John Kraniauskas discusses how the use of cinematic techniques and affect (melodrama in particular) helped generate a “state effect” in which the image of Eva Perón acted as an ideological mediating force between Juan Perón and the masses of *descamisados*. A concrete example of this mediation can be seen in video recordings of the August 1951 *Cabildo Abierto* in which Eva Perón, at a moment when she was expected to accept the popular nomination for Vice Presidency, addresses the masses and announces her decision not to accept (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-PLyxKSSRk>).

⁴⁴ Shirin Shenassa’s cautionary note regarding critical approaches to mass culture in thinkers like Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin and Brecht is potentially relevant for Sarlo’s critique as well. The important differences between their approaches notwithstanding, Shenassa finds in each of the aforementioned thinkers an unwitting tendency to “separate the technology from an idealized user who, given sufficient enlightenment, can return to that technology to make better use of it” (Paz Soldan and Castillo 2001, 251). For Shenassa, critiques of mass culture too often remain caught up in an all-too-metaphysical understanding of technics as the instrument of a subject. While it is true that Sarlo argues that mass media technics represents a threat to the subject understood as the ground of political, ethical or aesthetic judgment, she nonetheless appears to adopt the view that the subject represents the best alternative to a world dominated by technics—the subject understood as one who has learned to use technics without ceding its own agency to technology. What she discounts in taking this position, meanwhile, is the possibility that the subject and technics in fact share a common history: modernity’s gradual subsumption of nature and the imagination under the logic of techno-science and capitalism; that is to say, the reduction of these former to what Heidegger calls “standing reserve” and/or to commodity forms.

⁴⁵ Among the best of Aira criticism are Contreras 2002 and Speranza 2006.

⁴⁶ “Sólo las vanguardias ofrecen una alternativa para salir del callejón sin salida en que ha quedado la literatura después de la profesionalización del escritor, responsable del congelamiento de la forma artística; sólo mediante la creación de procedimientos—la herramienta esencial de las vanguardias—el arte puede recuperar su radicalidad constitutiva” (Speranza 2006, 307).

⁴⁷ “La literatura del futuro se alza en nosotros, un alcázar de oro, el espejismo de los espejismos. Qué error pensarla ‘buena’. Si es buena no puede ser futura. Lo bueno es lo que dio tiempo a ser juzgado, y caducó en el momento en que se lo dio por bueno” (Aira 1995, 30).

⁴⁸ “Yo vengo militando desde hace años en favor de lo que he llamado, en parte por provocación, en parte por autodefensa, ‘literatura mala’. Ahí pongo todas mis esperanzas, como otros las ponen en la juventud, o en la democracia; ahí me precipito, con un entusiasmo que las decepciones, por definición, no hacen más que atizar: al fondo de la literatura mala, para encontrar la buena, o la nueva, o la buena nueva” (“La innovación” 29).

⁴⁹ On the origins of the modern understanding of history as progressive chronology see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (Koselleck 2004), especially Chapter One (“Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”).

⁵⁰ “Baudelaire, en efecto, inventó lo nuevo tal como lo conocemos, y lo hizo en una operación que parece paradójica. Lo que inventó, o descubrió, fue la vejez, la decrepitud, de la civilización en la que había nacido. Para él lo nuevo es un epifenómeno de lo viejo; la innovación comienza y termina con la creación de ese aburrimiento en el que al fin podamos desear otra cosa, y no podamos no desearla” (28).

⁵¹ In premodern Western artistic traditions, for example, the respective sizing of different figures in a painting indicated not the figure’s relative proximity to the viewer but degrees of importance on a thematic, spiritual or social hierarchy.

⁵² See Willy Thayer, *El fragmento repetido: Escritos en estado de excepción*, especially the first two essays on the Chilean Avanzada (Thayer 2006). I discuss Thayer's position in greater detail in Chapter 3.

⁵³ Materiality for de Man refers not to matter per se but to a non-phenomenal occurrence in language that both conditions and resists cognition and understanding. For example, in Kant's discussion of the sublime in the third Critique de Man finds an attempt to think materiality at the end of Book II ("Analytic of the Sublime") in the "General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Judgments" where Kant provides several examples of what he means by the aesthetic object in its presentation of a limit for conceptuality and teleology. In de Man's account the thought of materiality emerges in the shift from one discursive mode to another: in this case, from a rhetorical language of tropes and cognition to a performative language of power. Materiality as de Man is trying to think it does not reside in one mode or the other but in the transfer between them. In the case of Kant this passage is produced as what de Man calls "the epistemological critique of trope," where it is tropological language that first allows Kant to develop his understanding of critique and critical philosophy, and then in instances such as this one the critical enterprise finally turns against the hegemony of the trope (de Man 1996, 132-33).

⁵⁴ See Derrida's discussion of the secret as limit that ruins the distinction between reference and self-reference in his reading of Baudelaire's short story "Counterfeit Money" (Derrida 1992b).

⁵⁵ Or, as Brett Levinson points out in a brilliant discussion of marketing and accent, it may be that the market excludes—as in having no way of accounting for or putting to work—those elements of social life that stand in for language itself (Levinson 2004, 169).

⁵⁶ Ricardo Piglia suggests somewhere that Esteban Echeverría's short story "El matadero" instantiates an Argentine tradition of representing barbarism through metonymy: a locus of barbarous outlooks and practices within the city, and so on. Aira's novel could be seen as reproducing Echeverría's irony in a manner that is recoded for late modernity.

⁵⁷ I owe a debt of gratitude to Carl Good for helping me to see this point.

⁵⁸ "Una de las declaraciones más famosas de la Jueza, y de las peor entendidas, había sido que su única intención era dejar el mundo, al fin de su breve estada en él, enriquecido con algo que el mundo no hubiera tenido antes. Parecía una tontería, una de esas cosas que se dicen para salir del paso, pero tenía su complicación. Por un lado, poner algo nuevo en el mundo no es tan fácil: sería como traer una piedra de la Luna, salvo que tal y como están las cosas, la Luna ya está en el mundo. Y ella no se refería tanto a una combinatoria nueva de elementos ya presentes, o un cambio de lugar de una cosa, sino a algo de veras nuevo, un elemento nuevo, con el que, si alguien quería, podía hacer combinaciones viejas. Y por otro lado, era un deseo extraño en un magistrado; la justicia funciona como una suma cero, se diría que debe dejar la situación con la misma cantidad de elementos, exactamente, con que la encontró, y que ahí está la esencia de su trabajo. Lo de agregar algo nuevo es más propio del arte."

⁵⁹ As Samuel Weber has observed, the English translation leaves out the crucial reference to the question of time (*Zeit*) in the German title (Weber 1996, 79). What Heidegger calls the *time* of the world picture is not simply one segment or duration taken from a longer extension of time; it is, among other things, a reinscription of time itself that transforms our very experience of historical temporality.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of what it means to be "in the picture" see "The Age of the World Picture" (in Heidegger 1977), especially pp.129ff.

⁶¹ "Nadie capta el conjunto, sobre todo porque en realidad no hay conjunto"; "Nada tenía sentido, aun dentro del sentido."

⁶² The hegemonic triumph of neoliberalism in Latin America is commonly referred to as "the Washington consensus," borrowing a term coined by the IMF's John Williamson in 1990. Justification for neoliberal reforms frequently appeals to the idea that free markets and unfettered economic opportunity offer the closest possible approximation to freedom; the market, in this ideological vision, becomes synonymous with the end of exclusion and the advent of unlimited choice. "Consensus" would be another name for what I am calling the fantasy of total inclusion and complete coverage.

⁶³ I owe this term to Brett Levinson's article "Dictatorship and Overexposure" (Levinson 2003).

⁶⁴ On the relation between technics and default, see Stiegler 1998.

⁶⁵ "En los canales la actividad era frenética. Ya habían encontrado fotos de Cabezas en sus archivos digitalizados, y las estaban intercalando en la emisión en vivo. Era una cara horriblemente deformada por la electrónica, una cara sin explicación. Cada segundo que permanecía en la pantalla se deformaba más. (...) Era otra vez el tema de la brevedad de la vida, en el mundo de las imágenes. La fantasía que sobrevolaba a los teleespectadores en ese momento era una exacerbación de la brevedad de la vida: un viajero intergaláctico que desembarcara en un mundo extraño, sin protección alguna (¿qué protección podía tener?), y en ese mundo las condiciones ambientales hicieran imposible la vida: estaba condenado, evidentemente, moriría en unas décimas de segundo, podía decirse que ya estaba muerto... Pero mientras tanto estaba vivo, estaba desembarcando en el mundo, en la realidad horrenda del

mundo. Y ese ‘mientras tanto’ era todo.”

⁶⁶ See, for example, Freud’s short “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” (Freud 1961, 226-32).

⁶⁷ Key contributors to this debate include Nelly Richard (*Margins and Institutions* [Richard 1986] among other works); Pablo Oyarzún (*Arte, visualidad e historia* [Oyarzún 1999]); Willy Thayer (“El Golpe como consumación de la vanguardia” [Thayer 2003; revised and republished in Thayer 2006] and “Crítica, nihilism e interrupción: La Avanzada después de Márgenes e Instituciones” [Thayer 2006]); Federico Gallende (“Esa extraña pasión por huir de la crítica” [Gallende 2005a] and “Dos palabras sobre arte y factoría” [Gallende 2005b]); and Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott (*Soberanías en suspenso: Imaginación y violencia en América latina* [Villalobos 2013]).

⁶⁸ As numerous critics have pointed out, the “economic miracle” touted by Friedman ignores a series of inconvenient facts, including a series of recessions in the 1970s and beyond as well as the dramatic rise in inequality throughout the 1970s and 80s.

⁶⁹ “...La creatividad como fuerza disruptora del orden administrado en el lenguaje por las figuras de la autoridad y sus gramáticas de poder” (Richard 1986, 1).

⁷⁰ “La toma de poder que ocasiona la fractura de todo el marco de experiencias sociales y políticas que la antecede, desintegra también los modelos de significación configurados por el lenguaje que nombraba esas experiencias; lenguaje ahora destituido en su facultad de designar o simbolizar una realidad por lo mismo en crisis de inteligibilidad” (2)

⁷¹ “Sólo la construcción de lo *fragmentario* (y sus elipsis de una totalidad desunificada) logran dar cuenta del estado de dislocación en el que se encuentra la noción de sujeto que en esos fragmentos retratan como unidad devenida irreconstituible” (2).

⁷² Under Allende it was announced that latifundios expropriated by the state would eventually be divided up and distributed to peasant groups, who would then become new owners. However, the land reform measures also built in an intermediate time in which the state was named as owner and the peasant communities were granted usufruct rights over the land. See Chonchol 1973 for details.

⁷³ In *Dictatorship* Carl Schmitt describes a commissarial dictatorship as suspending constitutional law in the interest of preserving the existing social and legal order against an external or internal threat. A sovereign dictatorship, meanwhile, imposes a state of exception in order to establish a new legal order (Schmitt 2014).

⁷⁴ The commission was called the Comisión de Estudios de la Nueva Constitución Política de la República de Chile, and was more commonly known as the Comisión Ortúzar. After its work was completed the first draft was then passed on to a newly-formed Consejo de Estado or State Council (1976-90), which prepared the final draft that was then formally adopted following a highly-controversial national referendum in 1980.

⁷⁵ On the distinction between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit* in Heidegger’s thought see Jacques Derrida in Kearney 1999, p.73.

⁷⁶ Harvey 1990, Part II.

⁷⁷ For an illuminating commentary on the distinction see Alberto Moreiras, *Línea de sombra*, chapter 2 (Moreiras 2006).

⁷⁸ “Y expulso de mi mente la escalada de mi atroz resentimiento, porque, después de todo, se trata de clientes que ejercen su legítimo derecho a maltratarme. Nuestros clientes son el lema obligatorio—no te olvides—que el cliente es el amo, el tutor absoluto de la mercadería” (Eltit 2002, 75).

⁷⁹ Virno’s distinction between speech and other performative acts may be problematic insofar as it appears to rely on a traditional, ontotheological classification of speech as self-presence and writing as the secondary order of copies and mere appearances. As indicated in Chapter One in the context of Lotario’s discussion of music theory, no performance of a musical piece could ever be reduced to mere repetition; a recital, no matter how rote its implementation may be, is necessarily also an interpretation. The same could be said of other forms of performance. By the same token, no speech—no matter how original or extemporaneous—could ever be purified of all repetition; in order to be understood and in order to have its effects (convincing, motivating, etc.), all speech relies on recognizable signs and turns of phrase.

⁸⁰ See Marx 1977, Chapter 1, section 4 of *Capital*, v.1: “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret.”

⁸¹ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Butler 2006), especially Part 3, Chapter IV (“Subversive Bodily Acts”) and Charles Shepherdson, *Vital Signs* (Shepherdson 2000), especially chapter 3 (“The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex”).

⁸² The clearest and most vitriolic account of this foreclosure of historicity in the Chilean transition can be found in Tomás Moulian’s *Chile actual: Anatomía de un mito* (Moulian 1997). For a highly visceral demonstration of the force of “forgetting” and the return of the repressed in post-dictatorship Chile see Patricio Guzmán’s documentary film *Chile, la memoria obstinada* (1997).

⁸³ On the difference between “antagonism” and “dislocation” see Laclau 1990.

⁸⁴ I discuss this stigmatization of dissensus in the context of the Argentine post-dictatorship in Chapter One. For a helpful discussion of stigmatization in the Chilean context see Levinson 2003.

⁸⁵ I discuss the connections between *Boca de lobo* and the realist novel in more detail in Dove 2012. The *villa miseria* is the topos par excellence for the Argentine *novela social*, as exemplified in Bernardo Verbitsky’s 1957 *Villa miseria es también América*.

⁸⁶ “En la República Argentina se ven a un tiempo dos civilizaciones distintas en un mismo suelo: una naciente, que sin conocimiento de lo que tiene sobre su cabeza, está remedando los esfuerzos ingenuos y populares de la edad media; otra que sin cuidarse de lo que tiene a sus pies, intenta realizar los últimos resultados de la civilización europea: el siglo XIX y el XII viven juntos; el uno dentro de la ciudades, el otro en las campañas” (Sarmiento 2008, 91).

⁸⁷ As Paul Ricoeur has argued it is this Aristotelian juxtaposition of reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis) leading to catharsis that most decisively illustrates the connection between narrative poetics and temporalization. It is by way of the formal mechanisms of tragedy, in other words, that we first discover why there can be no pure phenomenology of time: the experience of time is always dependent on the supplement that is poetic or rhetorical mediation. See Ricoeur 1984, 31-51.

⁸⁸ Although first published as a collection in English in 1999, most of the essays included in *Potentialities* were first written in the early to mid-1980s.

⁸⁹ Benjamin includes the following assertion by Horkheimer within the text of the *Arcades Project*: “The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not comprised within in. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain....If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment...Perhaps, with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the suffering of the past are irreparable. The justice practiced, the joys, the works, have a different relation to time, for their positive character is largely negated by the transience of things. This holds first and foremost for individual existence, in which it is not the happiness but the unhappiness that is sealed by death” (Letter from Horkheimer to Benjamin, 16 March 1937, as quoted in *Arcades Project*, N8, 1; Benjamin 1999, 471).

⁹⁰ *Eingedenken* refers to a specific act of remembrance, as opposed to the faculty of memory. On the status of *Gedenken* and *Eingedenken* in Benjamin’s thought, see Rebecca Comway, “Benjamin’s Endgame” (Benjamin and Osborne, 1994) and Irving Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure in Benjamin’s Last Reflections” (Osborne 2005).

⁹¹ As an aside it is interesting to note that this association of historical remembrance with potentiality provides a stark contrast to Benjamin’s assertion, in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, that it is the memory of enslaved ancestors that infuses the working classes with political passion, and not the idealized portrait of the proletariat as future liberator of mankind (which is of course what the Social Democrats sought to instill as their own emancipatory discourse).

⁹² As marker of social abandonment, orphanhood could also echo Peronism’s social strategy of transforming ideological signifiers of subjugation (“los descamisados,” “las grasitas”) into a language of social and political subjectivity.

⁹³ “Beatriz era alta, frágil, muy ligeramente inclinada; había en su andar (si el oxímoron es tolerable) una como graciosa torpeza, un principio de éxtasis” (Borges 1989, 1062).

⁹⁴ I owe a debt of gratitude to Moira Fradinger for pointing out to me the possible connection between Delia and Gradiva. The name “Gradiva” refers to Wilhelm Jensen’s 1902 short novel *Gradiva: A Pompeian Fantasy*, of which Freud produced his famous interpretation four years later (“Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s *Gradiva*,” 1907). Jensen’s novel tells the story of a German archaeologist, Norbert Hanold, who becomes obsessed with the figure of woman in a real-life bas-relief that he sees while in Rome. After returning home he obtains a plaster reproduction of the relief, which he hangs on his wall as an object for contemplation. His musings depart from his scientific training and tend increasingly toward the imagination. Hanold is convinced that the woman’s profile does not fit a bustling city such as Rome and he decides that she must have come from a smaller town. Soon he begins to associate her with the city of Pompeii and its unique raised stepping stones; this association then leads to a dream in which he finds himself in Pompeii at the time of Vesuvius’s cataclysmic eruption. In the wake of this dream Hanold travels to Italy, ending up in Pompeii where he encounters what he believes to be the woman he has been dreaming about. However, we finally learn that this woman is none other than a girl from his neighborhood in Germany, with whom he was infatuated at a young age and whose memory he had since repressed. Zoë Bertgang then proceeds to dissolve Hanold’s delusions and restore his capacity to confront the history of repression. While Freud reads *Gradiva* as a literary performance of a still-emerging psychoanalytical conceptual vocabulary of repression, delusions, symptoms

and dreams with Zoë embodying the role of the analyst, the surrealists—who came to Gradiva via Freud—find in her a figure of artistic inspiration. For Bretón, Masson, Dalí and Duchamp, Gradiva exemplifies the surrealist project of liberating the unconscious as a way of enabling new and emancipated forms of human expression.

⁹⁵ Note that in Borges's text the problem described by the narrator is similarly reproduced—unavoidably, it seems to me—in the very description of the problem: while “simultaneity” attempts to describe what is irreducible to the sequential time of narrative syntax, it cannot help but postulate a single, overarching time in which all occurrences are contained. The very reference to “simultaneity” unavoidably presupposes an understanding of time as the Same.

⁹⁶ For a discussion of the event in its irreducibility to grammatical and rhetorical ordering procedures see Paul de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology* (de Man 1996), especially the two essays on Kant's third *Critique*.

⁹⁷ For a discussion of the groundless or reciprocally grounding analogical relation between paternity and logos in Plato's *Phaedrus* see Jacques Derrida's “Plato's Pharmacy” (Derrida 1981, 79-84). For a discussion of Hegel's treatment of paternity as speculative instance par excellence see Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (O'Brien 1981).

⁹⁸ In this respect it is worth noting the preponderance of words beginning with the prefix *des-* in this passage (*desentrañar, desperdicio, destacar, descifrar*), which typically bears the sense of denying or undoing something.

⁹⁹ See Hardt and Negri 2000, 289-94.

¹⁰⁰ “When [philosophers] first began to reason on the truth of things and the nature of all that exists, they fell upon a false track for want of a clue, and maintained that nothing at all could either come into existence or pass out of it; for they argued that, if a thing comes into existence, it must proceed either out of the existent or out of the non-existent, both of which were impossible; for how could anything ‘come out of’ the existent, since it is already there? And obviously it could not come out of the non-existent, for what it comes out of must be there for it to come out of, and the non-existent is not there at all. And so, developing the logical consequences of this, they went on to say that the actually and veritably ‘existent’ is not many, but only one” (*Physics* I, 191a25-33; Aristotle 1980, 85).

¹⁰¹ Consider, for example, the following remarks by Alvaro García Linera concerning a possible correlation between work and politicization, which focuses on the Hegelian theme of subjectivity arising in response to the perception of a mark in the product; here it is the worker's capacity to manipulate the quasi-sublime machinery in the industrial setting that establishes the idea of the workers, as Chejfec's narrator puts it, as “sostenedores del mundo”: “[El] poder obrero sobre la capacidad productiva de los medios de trabajo industrial habilita no sólo un amplio ejercicio de autonomía laboral dentro la extracción o refinamiento, sino que, además crea la condición de posibilidad de una autopercepción protagónica en el mundo: la empresa con sus monstruosas máquinas, sus gigantescas inversiones, sus fantásticas ganancias, tiene como núcleo de su existencia al obrero de oficio; sólo él permite sacar de la muerte a ese sistema maquina que tapiza [el lugar de extracción o producción]; sólo él sabe cómo volver rendidora la máquina... cómo distribuir funciones y saberes. Esta autoconfianza productiva, y específicamente técnica del trabajo dentro del proceso de trabajo, con el tiempo dará lugar a la centralidad de clase, que pareciera ser precisamente la trasposición al ámbito político estatal, de este posicionamiento productivo y objetivo del trabajador...” (García Linera 2008, 155)

¹⁰² “The ‘coercive laws’ of market competition force all capitalists to seek out technological and organizational changes that will enhance their own profitability vis-à-vis the social average, thus entraining all capitalists in leap-frogging processes of innovation that reach their limit only under conditions of massive labor surpluses. The need to keep the laborer under control in the workplace, and to undercut the bargaining power of the laborer in the market (particularly under conditions of relative labor scarcity and active class resistance), also stimulates capitalists to innovate. Capitalism is necessarily technologically dynamic, not because of the mythologized capacities of the innovative entrepreneur (as Schumpeter [argued]) but because of the coercive laws of competition and the conditions of class struggle endemic to capitalism” (Harvey 1989, 105).

¹⁰³ At the same time Nancy's discussion of abandonment remains wary about the Heideggerian assessment of the “end of metaphysics.” It retains a critical view of Heidegger's estimation of his own ability to distance himself and his thinking from the metaphysics of presence, and is skeptical about the linear historical time that would seem to be presupposed in Heidegger's pronunciation of the “end.”

¹⁰⁴ “The image of the progress to infinity is the straight line, at both limits of which alone the infinite is, and always only is where the line—which is presence—is not, and which goes out beyond the non-presence of line, that is, to the indeterminate. As true infinity, bent back into itself, this image becomes the circle, the line which has reached itself, which is closed and wholly present, without beginning and end” (Hegel 1969, 149).

¹⁰⁵ On the market as bad infinity see Brett Levinson, *Market and Thought*, especially chapter 3.

¹⁰⁶ In the Part about the Critics Archimboldi is described as “el gran tiburón negro” (25); in the context of the first Part this metaphor generates an unavoidable literary comparison between the critics' self-interested—and potentially

self-destructive—pursuit of Archimboldi and Ahab’s pursuit of the great white whale. As we discover later, however, this same citational allusion to Melville’s *Moby Dick* will also have served to foreshadow the presentation of evil in Bolaño’s novel. Melville’s account of the recently finished novel in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne of November 17, 1851: “I have written a wicked book” (Melville 1993, 212). I address the relation between Bolaño and Melville/*Moby Dick* more extensively in Dove 2014b.

¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere in *Being and Time* Heidegger discusses the key role of anxiety, or fear in the absence of any determinate object, in bringing forth the experience of world and being. While I am unable to explore here the question of anxiety as it is present in certain sections of *2666*, the motif is connected to the kinds of questions I am raising here, especially in relation to Bolaño’s play with an aesthetics of indeterminacy or withdrawal, which in my view can be linked to Borges’s account of the aesthetic act as the “immanence of a revelation that does not take place.” I discuss the connection between anxiety, aesthetics and world in the first chapter, albeit in the context of Marcelo Cohen and not Bolaño.

¹⁰⁸ Note the parallel between this formal linking of the breakdown of instrumental relations and the disclosure of world with the discussion in the previous chapter of Heidegger’s illustration of *sterēsis* through the anecdote of the bicycle that has gone missing. In both cases it is an unexpected interruption, an absence or breakdown—or what Heidegger calls *Abhandenheit*, being-not-at-hand—affecting everyday circuits and habits, that leads to an awareness of the trace of Being as simultaneous disclosure and withdrawal. The experience of *Abhandenheit* plays a central role in Heidegger’s early efforts to distance himself from ontology, and it begins to recede in the seminars of the 1930s as Heidegger becomes increasingly concerned with historically-specific modes of thinking and sensibility.

¹⁰⁹ On the katechonic restraining structure see below, p.269ff.

¹¹⁰ “It’s always important to ask questions and it’s always important to ask yourself why you ask the questions you ask. And do you know why? Because just one slip and our questions take us places we don’t want to go....Our questions are, by definition, suspect” (Bolaño 2004, 553; Bolaño 2008, 442; translation slightly modified).

¹¹¹ I discuss the relation between the secret of literature and the secret of the world in Dove 2014a.

¹¹² Ciudad Juárez experienced a rapid population increase during the 1990s due to large influxes of migrant and immigrant workers seeking employment in the growing *máquila* industry. Exacerbated by the precarious nature of employment in that industry, this rapid population increase contributed to an environment of social anonymity among new arrivals. The vulnerability of precarious employment is intensified, especially for young, single women, through a combination of new and old forms of violence, including narco-capitalism, police corruption, and a traditional *marranista* culture in which women—and most notably single women working outside the home—tend to be seen as morally suspect and as deserving of being “put back in their place” (González Rodríguez 2002 and 2012).

¹¹³ This is as good a place as any to acknowledge my debt to Alberto Moreiras for having first brought Galli’s groundbreaking essay to my attention, as well as to Gareth Williams and Edgar Illas (along with Moreiras) for having helped me to begin thinking about the implications of Galli’s argument, as well as its possible limitations, especially when it comes to Mexico and Latin America.

¹¹⁴ Alongside Galli’s emphasis on the spatial logic of political modernity, or political geometry, it seems to me that it would be necessary to consider that a certain experience of time could similarly be understood as characteristic of modernity. But time and space may be more than just two sides of the same coin. For Galli, space is the product of political geometry, which also serves to regulate the tensions and antagonisms that accompany this production process. Time, one could argue, is similarly a product of modern temporalizing procedures. However, it is also clear that, from time to time, modernity gives rise to an experience of time that is not reducible to the dominant organizing logic of modernity, which has always conceived of time from the privilege of the present and as a chronologically ordered sequence of self-present moments. Alternatives to the modern experience of time, as Jacques Derrida has shown in *Specters of Marx*, can be found in Shakespeare, Marx, Heidegger, and Freud—and, I would add, César Vallejo and Borges. On the temporality of modernity see Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (Osborne 2010). I will return to the question of time in the concluding part of this chapter.

¹¹⁵ Schemata are mental maps or sketches that provide a concrete, geometrical impression of how a given concept relates to others.

¹¹⁶ This is of course the classic account of the modern State found in Max Weber’s lecture “Politics as a Vocation.” See Weber 2004, 33.

¹¹⁷ “This is a North American effort to take NAFTA, address the remaining friction points in the commercial and trade relationship to ensure that as our economies evolve that our trading relationships evolve and our regulatory regimes evolve so that we can actually facilitate the movement of goods and services across our borders, but also

understands North America as a shared economic space and that as a shared economic space we need to protect it, and that we need to understand that we don't protect this economic space only at our frontiers, that it has to be protected more broadly throughout North America. And as we have worked through the Security and Prosperity Partnership to improve our commercial and trading relationship, we have also worked to improve our security cooperation. To a certain extent, we're armoring NAFTA. We're trying to show that this \$15 trillion economy can be protected against a threat of terrorism and against a threat of natural disasters and environmental and ecological disasters" (Shannon 2008, np).

¹¹⁸ "Tenía una casita de una sola planta, tres habitaciones, un baño completo más un aseo, cocina americana, un salón comedor con ventanas que daban al poniente, un pequeño porche de ladrillos en donde había un banco de madera desgastado por el viento que bajaba de las montañas y del mar, desgastado por el viento que venía del norte, el viento de las aberturas, y por el viento con olor a humo que venía del sur" (211).

¹¹⁹ Note that the Spanish word for wood, *madera*, derives from the Latin *materia*, or matter.

¹²⁰ The fifth or parallel postulate states that "if a line segment intersects two straight lines forming two interior angles on the same side that sum to less than two right angles, then the two lines, if extended indefinitely, meet on that side on which the angles sum to less than two right angles." By implication, if the two interior angles equal ninety degrees or two right angles, then the two lines will be parallel and—in a Euclidean space—will therefore never intersect.

¹²¹ In Aristotle's *Physics*, *tuche* refers to luck, chance or accident operating within human affairs, whereas *automaton* refers to chance at work in the non-rational world of nature (Aristotle 1980, 139-63).

¹²² The tile falling on the head of a passer-by may be a reference to a dream analyzed by Freud in Chapter 5D of *The Interpretation of Dreams*; the image as reported by Freud was prompted by the analysand's childhood memory of her mother, who was once hit by a falling roof tile (Freud 2010, 277). The "Person from Porlock" is an allusion to Coleridge's account of an untimely interruption that allegedly prevented the poet from completing "Kubla Khan," after having allegedly worked the poem out in its entirety during a dream (or perhaps an opium-induced trance). What was finally published of the poem is only 54 lines and is considered incomplete.

¹²³ "La primera impresión que los críticos tuvieron de Amalfitano fue más bien mala, perfectamente acorde con la mediocridad del lugar, sólo que el lugar, la extensa ciudad en el desierto, podía ser vista como algo típico, algo lleno de color local, una prueba más de la riqueza a menudo atroz del paisaje humano, mientras que Amalfitano sólo podía ser visto como un naufrago, un tipo descuidadamente vestido, un profesor inexistente de una universidad inexistente, el soldado raso de una batalla perdida de antemano contra la barbarie, o, en términos menos melodramáticos, como lo que finalmente era, un melancólico profesor de filosofía pasturando en su propio campo, el lomo de una bestia caprichosa e infantiloides que se habría tragado de un solo bocado a Heidegger en el supuesto de que Heidegger hubiera tenido la mala pata de nacer en la frontera mexicano-norteamericana" (152).

¹²⁴ In this light Johns's self-portrait might be said to share one of the fundamental concerns of Duchamp's "Unhappy Readymade": i.e., of what gets elided in Romantic conceptualizations of artistic creativity as stemming from the subjectivity of the great individual artist.

¹²⁵ As Kate Jenckes notes in her magnificent reading of the avant garde in *2666* (Jenckes 2014), Johns's masterpiece is set off against his earlier works, which are concerned primarily with "pain" and its absorption by a certain "void" ("El dolor, o el recuerdo del dolor, que en ese barrio era literalmente chupado por algo sin nombre y que se convertía, tras este proceso, en vacío" [Bolaño 2004, 76]). In contrast to that previous work, which was largely ignored by the art industry, the enthusiastic reception of Johns's final self-portrait turns out to be mediated by a consumer desire for autobiography, a desire that remains constant despite a general decline in the prestige of humanistic inquiry in the world today, and which is consistent with the modern subject's narcissistic need for self-confirmation. If there is a ruptural potential in Johns's work, Jenckes notes, it is to be found not in his final, grotesque self-portrait—the artistic success of which is predicated on the commercial appeal a work that reflects the subject back to itself—but rather in the all-but-ignored desolate renditions of London streetscapes. My own reading of the Johns episode is largely in agreement with hers. The primary difference in how we read these scenes, it seems to me, has to do with our respective points of emphasis. Jenckes contrasts the critical potential of the (largely ignored) earlier works with the commercial destiny of the final self-portrait, which is well received precisely because it offers reassuring confirmation instead of disturbing questions. I believe we both agree, meanwhile, that the distinction between the earlier works—of which the art institution wants to know nothing—and the critically and commercially acclaimed self-portrait illustrates a historical tendency concerning the status of art and literature in late modernity. This is a gravitational field that exceeds the merits and abilities of any specific artist or author, and from which no creative figure or text can easily escape. Johns's prior works may well the avant garde tradition in their aesthetic composition and sensibility, and they may therefore participate in a search for rupture or interruption. But is such a composition still legible today? Can the ruptural sensibility still speak to us? And, if we answer "yes" to

those questions, could rupture still make a difference today? Those, in my view, are the truly unsettling questions posed by Bolaño's *2666*.

¹²⁶ The poet character is presumably modeled after the Spanish poet Leopoldo María Panero (1948-), whose work has been associated with the neo-avant garde "Novísimos" movement of the 1970s, whose contributors included Manuel Vázquez Montalban, Perre Gimferrer and others, and whose work was associated with a forceful rejection of familiar accounts of what poetry is and what it is good for.

¹²⁷ In "2666 and the End of Interruption" Gareth Williams (Williams 2014) proposes a related but not identical reading in the context of what he describes as the dissociative madness unleashed by global capital. For Williams, *2666* would stand as a formal testament to a time defined by the retreat or inexistence of the Lacanian big Other. Thus he finds himself in agreement with Levinson's position that *2666* presents a totality in which, like post-national capitalism, the relation between parts of the system remains unnamed and unsymbolized—resembling, I would add, a bad infinity more than a system. I am not as confident as Williams concerning what he calls the retreat of the "big Other," understood either as the imaginary embodiment of social authority in a specific figure (the big Other qua "subject supposed to know") or as the structuring authority of social and linguistic codes within the realm of intersubjective relations. While one could certainly argue that the weakening of modern social and political structures in the time of globalization and global war hastens the retreat of certain structures of meaning and authority, such a retreat does not necessarily mean that neoliberal order has managed to install itself in the absence of any ideology whatsoever. For example, as Wendy Brown has argued, it may be that the supposedly post-ideological order of neoliberal globalization brings with it a certain residual ideology under the signs of self-betterment for the market. I discuss this possibility at greater length in Chapter 1. In my view the notion of a "lack of lack" translates Levinson's and Williams's use of dissociation without going so far as to assert the withdrawal of the Other tout court.

¹²⁸ "Amalfitano had some rather idiosyncratic ideas about jet lag...He believed (or liked to think he believed) that when a person was in Barcelona, the people living and present in Buenos Aires and Mexico didn't exist. The time difference only masked their nonexistence. And so if you suddenly traveled to cities that, according to this theory, didn't exist or hadn't yet had time to put themselves together, the result was the phenomenon known as jet lag, which arose not from your exhaustion but from the exhaustion of the people who would still have been asleep if you hadn't traveled. This was something he'd probably read in some science fiction novel or story and that he'd forgotten having read" (Bolaño 2008, 188-89). Need one add that this "science fiction novel or story" that Amalfitano must have read and then forgotten having read is none other than Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"?