

**ROBERTO BOLAÑO:
HORROR, BEAUTY, AND THE INFRAREAL**

by

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ABSTRACT

Routines of ignorance and inaction perpetuate destructive systems.

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PREFACE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2666, Roberto Bolaño creates Santa Teresa, an industrial town on the Mexican-American border where women and girls are routinely raped, murdered, and left in the desert or in garbage dumps. Bolaño's story is a kind of mystery, because it's not publicly known who's committing "los crimines," nor is it clear why nobody has caught them. Protestors demand an end to impunity.

Santa Teresa is analogous to the real-world town of Juarez – both names refer to the largest population center on the Mexican side of the border. The main difference between the two towns is this: the mystery of Santa Teresa will remain forever unsolved, but in the years since the publication of 2666 and the death of its author, the causes of the real-world violence have become clear. The suffering, however, continues.

I don't want to refer to the events in Juarez or Santa Teresa as "the crimes," because this defines the incidents in terms of legal transgression in a land where rule of law does not actually exist. Some people use the word "femicide," which literally means "the killing of women," but implies "the killing of women because they are women." This makes it a sort of hate crime, though I think the more appropriate parallel is to "genocide." You are looking at the systematic extermination of women.

The femicides appear chaotic, so "systematic" might seem like the wrong word. This localized violence looks like a storm: a conflux of factors that together create death. These factors constitute a machine for the killing of women or a machine whose byproduct is the killing of women or a machine that needs to kill women in order to continue existing in its present form.

In the same way a gas-powered automobile needs an exhaust pipe, the world needs Juarez. (I mean “needs” in the sense of logical necessity.) One can't simply plug up the gas pipe to stop carbon emissions and one can't simply stop the femicides. To stop the femicides, one would have to either transform the culture of Juarez or end impunity for the killers. The former is a gargantuan task (as I will demonstrate in "The Part About Power and The Female") and the latter, being directly related to Juarez's role as a conduit for drugs (as I will demonstrate in "The Part About Santa Teresa and Juarez"), is gargantuan also. What I'm describing is a matrix of interlocking bio-mechanical systems that happen to deposit their waste (i.e. their violence) in Juarez.

Where does Bolaño come into this? To investigate the femicides, he samples elements from modes we call "genre." Specifically, he works with detectives and horror. The use of horror is appropriate here not only because of the revolting nature of the subject matter, but also because that genre's golden rule is, "Don't show the monster." This is appropriate and even necessary because the massive indeterminacy of reality creates a situation in which it's impossible to show the monster. "The monster," I remind you, is probably not a literal entity – some cabal of rape illuminati or evil imperialist power or crime lord – it's a convergence of the darkest aspects of humanity. How do we fight our own weakness?

Onto this stage steps the detective. Bolaño invents a number of detectives, and he himself once said, "I should have liked to have been a homicide detective much better than being a writer. I am absolutely sure of that. A string of homicides. I'd have been someone who could come back to the scene of the crime alone, by night, and not be afraid of ghosts."¹ The joke, to me, is that Bolaño was solving a mystery the whole time, just on a larger scale. By examining the violence of Juarez, he examines the entire human mechanism of violence.

Is Bolaño's investigation successful? 2666 ends with the mystery unsolved, but it presents a wealth of evidence, mostly of the sort that a journalist, a sociologist, or a cop couldn't collect, and presents a framework for future investigation. The act of investigation itself, in a world of apathy, distraction, and masturbation, is productive whether or not the mystery is solved. Future investigators will find insight and passion here. Perhaps most essential are the cases where the texts call us to action. Bolaño's source for much of the real-world information used in 2666 was Sergio González-Rodríguez, a Mexican journalist.² González-Rodríguez appears to have obeyed the command that one of Bolaño's characters issues to the fictional Mexican journalist Sergio González: "I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh ... I want you to sink in your teeth ... stir up the hive."³ The work of the detective, like the work of the artist, is a collaborative project.

In his recent book, *The Femicide Machine*, González-Rodríguez has achieved a pretty clear perspective:

In Ciudad Juárez, a territorial power normalized barbarism. This anomalous ecology mutated into a femicide machine: an apparatus that didn't just create the conditions for the murders of dozens of women and little girls, but developed the institutions that guaranteed impunity for those crimes and even legalized them. A lawless city sponsored by a State in crisis.⁴

What does he mean when he says "territorial power" and "State in crisis"? A state is a political organization, considered to have sovereignty over territory. Gonzalez-Rodríguez is probably talking about Mexico. However, we should also wonder if "the State" as an ideological construct might be in crisis as well. What is "Mexico"? The loci of power in that country are the *narcotraficantes* and the Meridian Initiative (an alliance between Mexico and the United States, in opposition to organized crime, responsible for Operation Fast and Furious). In Mexico, idea of a "government authority" is borderline absurd because so many individuals in the employ of the

government serve other masters first. This is what creates the climate of impunity – the police and *narcos* are entangled in a drug-trade alliance, and the police will refrain from prosecuting the femicides so as to preserve that alliance. The state is no longer the sole hegemon of geopolitical structures.

Impunity is not the only environmental condition required for the femicide machine to evolve. Macho misogyny must be forged in the heat of extreme poverty. This all creates a climate conducive to the replication of an idea such as, "If you can get away with rape and murder, it's okay." Such an idea has strange corollaries. In Santa Teresa and Juarez, we find mixtures of the sacred and the profane, a bizarre zymology of ritual murder elevated to the status of art. This new religion is caught up with social and economic pressures to create a worsening or decaying cycle, a widening spiral.

Now we arrive at the problem of "the monster." The editor's epilogue to 2666 reveals that Bolaño's notes suggest "the existence in the work of a 'hidden center,' concealed beneath what might be considered the novel's 'physical center,'" and goes on to theorize that the 'physical center' is Sonora and the 'hidden center' is the date 2666 AD, a sort of vanishing point in the distant future.⁵ Natasha Wimmer, who translated the novel into English, said that the title of 2666 symbolizes a vanishing point and a "remote, incomprehensible malevolence."⁶ I once thought this "malevolence" was some idea Bolaño wanted to hint at, but I now suspect that it was the unreached objective of his investigation. Not that I fault him – a complete understanding of our own capacity for evil is impossible.

We can make some sense of all this if we take a look at what Distant Star's collaborative narrators Arturo Belano and Bambino O'Reilly write of an *estadounidense*: "like a true North American he had a firm and militant belief in the existence of evil, absolute evil."⁷ I don't want

to be such a person. In fact, at no point in this essay should you take me to really believe in evil or machines or nations. “Evil” can mean anything from the brutality of natural law (which I also don’t believe in) to the sadism of a psychopath who kills for art. “A malevolence” is simply an anthropomorphization of what’s really a field of destructive aspects of human psychology: greed, arrogance, apathy, schadenfreude, sadism, learned helplessness, the bystander effect, and ignorance, both of our own psychology and in general. It ascribes intentionality to a problem which is intentional only in a small number of cases, so as to make it easier to discuss in poetry. This should not be problematic, so long as you remember that this text aspires to be poetic rather than scientific.

What I mean to say is this: I'm not just writing criticism. I'm not just interpreting Bolaño. I take him to be saying, "Go out and investigate" or rather "You'll sleep better if you investigate more," but I don't intend to devote the entirety of this text to defending that assertion. Instead, I intend to go out and investigate. Bolaño provides us with numerous tools usable in this task, so I will, of course, continue to reference him. I'll also draw in figures like González-Rodríguez, people who can give us more information about the real-world problems we face, and so bring us closer to comprehending this remote malevolence.

II. THE PART ABOUT THE DETECTIVE AND THE LABYRINTH

I view criticism as a literary creation, not just as the bridge that unites the reader with the writer. Literary critics, if they do not assume themselves to be the reader, are also throwing everything overboard. The interesting thing about literary critics, and that is where I ask for creativity from literary criticism, creativity at all levels, is that he assumes himself to be the reader, an endemic reader capable of arguing a reading, of proposing diverse readings, like something completely different from what criticism tends to be, which is like an exegesis or a diatribe.

~ Roberto Bolaño, *The Last Interview* ⁸

It's difficult to know just how to read Bolaño because his works are so much about reading. Everyone is a reader, but only some people call themselves critics. In *The Part About the Critics*, the population of a literary conference is described:

what you might call rationalists, not in the philosophical sense but in the pejorative literal sense, denoting people less interested in literature than in literary criticism, the one field, according to them — some of them, anyway — where revolution was still possible, and in some way they behaved not like youths but like nouveaux youths, in the sense that there are the rich and the nouveaux riches, all of them generally rational thinkers, let us repeat, although often incapable of telling their asses from their elbows ... those eager and insatiable cannibals, their thirtysomething faces bloated with success, their expressions shifting from boredom to madness, their coded stutterings speaking only two words: love me, or maybe two words and a phrase: love me, let me love you, though obviously no one understood.⁹

To me, the joke is that these people believe in Literary Criticism and think that it's a field with certain unique properties (i.e. revolution being possible). Where do we draw the line between Literary Criticism and Literature? We shouldn't: these false unities are rendered insular and impotent by their own illusions of wholeness. Bolaño effectively straddles the division between

not only these two genres, but a third as well: poetry. He unites everything into everything, thereby dissolving it all into nothing: pure art. My work intends to do the same. Why play solely within the conventions of Criticism when those conventions have already been dissolved?

If I had been otherwise tempted to play "critic of critics," I'm saved by the relative dearth of English-language criticism on Bolaño. I'm also saved by my inexperience from the task tracking down all of his references. It simply isn't possible. I'll leave the complete exploration and mapping of the labyrinth to future explorers. I just want to plunge ahead and get as deep as I can. This is a preliminary investigation concentrating on the immediate implications.

The first problem is simple: "How do we read Bolaño?" Indeterminacy is everywhere, characters (especially critics) are routinely off-the-mark, metafictional exercises are concealed as psychedelic poetry, and vice versa. Theory blends with psychedelica to the extent that it's impossible to find anything solid.

I think the best way to get through the labyrinth, at least at first, is to take the author's cues on how to read the text. He offers cues and clues aplenty both in "Déjenlo Todo, Nuevamente" ("Abandon Everything, Again", aka "The Manifesto of Infrearealism")¹⁰ and in The Last Interview, but of course we're under no obligation to read as he wants us to. We should examine everything from different perspectives.

In performing this reading, I'm playing the same game that Bolaño plays in many of his works: detection. We examine reality and various texts and we're both engaged in the same or similar projects. That project is the opposition to evil by acquiring and arranging knowledge. Bolaño is the labyrinth builder, and the labyrinth is also a map and an ocean. I investigate the texts of Bolaño and others, these texts themselves being artifacts of past investigations, and leave behind my artifacts for future investigators.

The representations of Juarez that Bolaño received must have been disturbing to him. It is the instinct of the detective, however, to examine the disturbing artifact. This is partly because he feels a desire to plumb the depths, to not turn away from unpleasantness, and partly because he wishes to further his own art. The works of Bolaño are, in turn, a disturbing artifact I feel compelled to examine. In this way, the objects of horror become objects of art.

The first section of 2666, “The Part About the Critics,” focuses on three professional readers of Benno von Archimboldi. They try to track down the elusive writer, who is later demystified in the final book, “The Part About Archimboldi.” The critics, however, never locate him; it is the narrator who does the revealing. As they search for him, they come across a paper which tracks him from Germany to Italy and confirms that he bought a plane ticket to Morocco at a travel agency in Palermo. The paper’s author is called “The Serb.” Belano describes his text as,

ultraconcrete critical literature, a nonspeculative literature free of ideas, assertions, denials, doubts, free of any intent to serve as guide, neither pro nor con, just an eye seeking out the tangible elements, not judging them but simply displaying them coldly, archaeology of the facsimile, and, by the same token, of the photocopier. 11

It seems to me that it’s a joke on all of criticism and it carries to its (somewhat) logical conclusion not only the tendency for critics to pretend to scientific exactitude but the insularity of criticism in general. It’s a little horrific in the sense that it’s cold and mechanical and analytical, but it’s also beautiful in a way that’s difficult to describe. In this machine age, this age just years distant from the now-foreshadowed fusion of human and machine consciousness, why shouldn’t man’s gaze imitate the gaze of the camera? Why shouldn’t academics search for ever smaller niches into which to insinuate themselves so as to become masters of something?

The Serb's work, however, is not entirely mechanical. The distinction is between surveillance and investigation. The Serb's work is directed toward an end of his choosing, just as the camera lens is always directed by human intent. Both the Serb and the photographer contribute in some small way to the body of human knowledge, but the camera itself contributes only to human information. This is the archeology of the photocopier in two senses: the cold, lens-like method of reproduction and its place in the multiplicity of tightly-focused critical essays. The Serb's work might seem frivolous to us, when compared with Bolaño's concern with immediate and ongoing human suffering, but one must keep in mind that the archeologist tends to play a slower game than the detective.

Hermann Herlinghaus, author of Narcoepics, describes Bolaño's style as "sober," and I think this is getting at the same idea.¹² Most detectives aren't sober all of the time, but the best ones know that there's a time when sobriety is required. That is to say, the modern detective must have a good reason for choosing not to use the camera. Bolaño employs this style most notably in "The Part About the Crimes," which is stylistically related to the Serb's cold analysis, but directed by a defter hand toward a more important purpose.

The critics compare the Serb's paper to one written by a French critic about the Marquis de Sade which confirms that, "Sade had existed, Sade had washed his clothes and bought new clothes and maintained a correspondence with beings now definitively wiped from the slate of time." De Sade aestheticized perversion, but what is the Serb aestheticizing? It confers a certain nobility upon work which, in the face of absolute indeterminacy, strives nevertheless for the "ultraconcrete." The Serb is a detective, as is the Frenchman. In a way, their poetry (because they can't help but be poetic, even if they don't want to) is an aestheticization of mechanization. It is a modernity so hilariously sterile as to be brilliant, even if its authors did not intend it that way.

(This is where we must say, “Never mind, the author really is dead.”)

You’ve probably gathered by now that I don’t intend to maintain a “sober” style throughout this entire essay. The closest I’ll come might be in “The Part About Juarez and Santa Teresa,” which will deal with real-world events. Here I’m motivated by pragmatics: I care more about continuing Bolaño’s investigation than about promoting a certain reading of his work. The Serb’s text, in contrast, proves invaluable to the critics while the critics themselves are of questionable value to humanity. I don’t intend to be of much use to someone looking to “find” Bolaño, but I hope to be of use to anyone looking to oppose suffering.

In terms of planning out a critical methodology, there’s not much more we can gain from following Bolaño’s advice. Is a text “free of ideas” transcendent or impotent? Is “intent to serve as a guide” productive or misguided? Is it good to be, “an eye seeking out the tangible elements,” or should we strive for something higher? There’s too much indeterminacy in all of this: we must form our own conclusion. If we are to follow one of Bolaño’s directives, it should be the one from “Déjenlo Todo, Nuevamente”: “If the poet is mixed up, the reader will have to mix himself up.”¹³ That is to say, let’s not worry about planning things out too much.

I’d like to note one final joke on criticism, though this time I don’t imagine it’s a failure I’ll be avoiding. This is from the story of Efraim Ivanov, a Communist writer who successfully “plagiarized” the styles of Vladimir Odoevsky and Ivan Lazhechnikov, which he got away with in part because readers had forgotten both writers and “in part because literary criticism, as keen as ever, neither extrapolated nor made the connection nor noticed a thing.”¹⁴ Yes, I expect that in plenty of instances I’ll fail to extrapolate or make a connection. I’ll probably interpret something as a metaphor without realizing it’s actually a reference. Such failures, I hope, will be understood by future readers to be symptom of this exploration’s preliminary nature.

What I'm getting at is that there's actually little to say about my methodology. I'm not going to accept or reject "the archeology of the photocopier" and I'm going to occasionally shift into a more poetic style. "The Part About Juarez and Santa Teresa" draws from economics, a field that's simultaneously more concrete and more bullshit than literary criticism. Economies of power will prove especially important as we try to understand the reasons for horrors Juarez. To explain certain aspects of that tragedy, however, we require the aid of someone able to speak with less precision, and hence hopefully more truth, than an economist or a psychologist or a neurologist. We need a poet-detective.

We should start with Bolaño's fictional author, Benno von Archimboldi. As a child in Germany, he is fascinated by Animals and Plants of the European Coastal Region. In the war, he strides across no man's land like a diver on the bottom of the ocean. In an Allied internment camp, he murders a fellow prisoner who confesses to taking an administrative role in the extermination of a group of Jews. He writes books, most notably The Leather Mask, Rivers of Europe, and Bifurcaria Bifurcata. 2666 ends as he prepares to depart for Santa Teresa. Bolaño and Archimboldi have a great deal in common: both witness the falls of their homelands into fascism, both go to war in their youth, both are saddled with histories of suffering to assimilate, and both journey in their late days to Santa Teresa, where they hope to learn something about humanity.

The critics fail to locate Archimboldi because they search for him with the mistaken assumption that it is possible to really find a person. If they met him and spoke, would they feel as if all of their questions had been answered? Doubtful. Similarly, the relationship between reality and the text makes it impossible for either to produce an entirely accurate representation of the other. Criticism with pretensions of certainty is irresponsible; even the photocopier is not

perfect. The wise author creates intentional indeterminacy to mirror the indeterminacy of the world.

Consider the differences between Santa Teresa and Ciudad Juarez (which I'll discuss in more detail later on). Some of the things described in Teresa Rodriguez's Daughters of Juarez are more disturbing than anything Bolaño describes in "The Part About the Crimes," but in other instances Bolaño's vagueness leaves more up to the imagination. (Daughters was published in 2007, 2666 in 2004.) Both Bolaño and Rodriguez mention that the right nipples of a number of victims had been bitten off, so we can presume that Bolaño here drew inspiration from reality. What Bolaño either didn't know or declines to mention is that in real life a journalist found that "some of the gang members liked to wear the victims' nipples like trophies on chains around their necks."¹⁵ Holy shit, right? You can't make this stuff up. The one thing you'd probably not realize in reading "The Part About the Crimes," is that the reality is worse.

I suspect that part of the reason for the indeterminacy in Bolaño's work is that it protects him from being wrong. Even indeterminacy, however, isn't a perfect defense. He's still forced to leave out those details he didn't know. The mystery of the bitten-off nipples is left unsolved by necessity due to the author's own ignorance, which is due in turn to the fact that the truth had not yet come to light. He could only have solved that mystery by going down to Juarez and finding the necklace himself. That's a lot of work for a dying man, and it wouldn't have brought him much closer to the true root of the problem.

Let's let the mystery of the bitten-off nipples remind us not to be daunted by the scale of the horrors we're dealing with. Like any mystery, the question of "whence violence?" is simply a matter of missing knowledge. Unexplained, the missing nipples are the foul product of an unseen mechanism. Explained, they are perverse and sickening, but at the very least concrete. As a

psychology teacher once told me, "Awareness leads to control." The nipple-necklace is less horrific than the missing nipples because the necklace is an artifact that can be examined so as to produce concrete theories about the psychology, and so the causes, behind the violence. In the artifacts of violence, the products of ritualized violence, we find hints of the mechanisms producing said violence, and thus hope of mitigating it.

This is a mystery in which the detective cannot rule himself out as a villain and so must interrogate himself and his own process of investigation. For this reason, I must involve myself directly. The process of detection is itself a part of the great mystery. Bolaño's use of indeterminacy forces us to investigate our own processes of knowing: not just "How do we write?" but "How do we look?" and "How do we read?"

Oscar Fate is an American journalist, a sportswriter for a black magazine, sent to Santa Teresa to cover boxing. He becomes interested in investigating the murders. The aftermath of a boxing match sends him on a decadent journey through the city and he arrives at the home of Charly Cruz, where they watch a strange pornographic movie:

An old woman with a heavily made-up face looked into the camera. After a while she began to whisper incomprehensible words and weep. She looked like a whore who'd retired and, Fate thought at times, was facing death. Then a thin, dark-skinned young woman with big breasts took off her clothes while seated on a bed. Out of the darkness came three men who first whispered in her ear and then fucked her. At first the woman resisted. She looked straight at the camera and said something in Spanish that Fate didn't understand. Then she faked an orgasm and started to scream.¹⁶

First, let's note a couple of things in here. The first woman wears makeup. What is beneath it? That data was not recorded. Similarly: what did she whisper? What did the men whisper to her? She's called a "whore," but this is the word of a narrator close to Fate's point of view (as indicated by the fact that the woman's Spanish is not translated) and, as I'll demonstrate later,

Bolaño knew that “whore” is a word that’s easily deconstructed. Note also her apparent ambivalence regarding her situation and note also the suggestion that her life may be in danger. This, combined with the prevalence of illusion (the makeup and the fake orgasm), form an intellectual and emotional complex involving the relationship between violence, femininity, and the gaze.

The film continues:

After that, the men, who until that moment had been taking turns, joined in all together, the first penetrating her vagina, the second her anus, and the third sticking his cock in her mouth. The effect was of a perpetual-motion machine. The spectator could see that the machine was going to explode at some point, but it was impossible to say what the explosion would be like and when it would happen. And then the woman came for real. An unforeseen orgasm that she was the last to expect. The woman's movements, constrained by the weight of the three men, accelerated. Her eyes were fixed on the camera, which in turn zoomed in on her face. Her eyes said something, although they spoke in an unidentifiable language. For an instant, everything about her seemed to shine, her breasts gleamed, her chin glistened, half hidden by the shoulder of one of the men, her teeth took on a supernatural whiteness. Then the flesh seemed to melt from her bones and drop to the floor of the anonymous brothel or vanish into thin air, leaving just a skeleton, no eyes, no lips, a death's-head laughing suddenly at everything.¹⁷

The aforementioned complex is here brought to a climax. Note a complication of the indeterminacy: here, the viewer is unable to decipher the language of her eyes, the language of her body, older and more natural forms of communication than the spoken word. We already know that spoken language is fallible, but the failure of body language is more disturbing. When her flesh “seems” to melt from her bones, is this an effect visible on the film (i.e. a special effect) or is it something the viewer thinks he sees? What I mean is, during which act of communication is the seeming first introduced? Between the woman and the lens? During the editing process? Between the screen and Oscar? Or does it only seem that way to the narrator, Arturo Belano?¹⁸

To call the system a “perpetual motion machine” seems inapt if its explosion is imminent. I suppose what’s meant is a machine of actions and counterbalances. The pistoning organs so common in pornography. Pornography is emblematic of the subjugating system, the humiliating system, that promises economic advantage to lure one individual (the woman in this case, but the worker in other cases) into the power of another. This system collapses when the woman collapses, because it cannot exist without her. (I imagine an alternate vignette, a less pleasant but a more realistic one, where a new woman is brought in to replace the old one and the tape loops back to the beginning, continuing as long as the audience cares to watch.) The death’s head laugh at the end suggests that the destroyed woman leaves behind a curse more horrible than the suffering inflicted on her – or else achieves some sort of death-near realization.

The tape ends, as much of Bolaño’s poetry does, with a “zooming-out,” a collection of seemingly unrelated images, possibly scenes from Mexico City. I include it below, because with Bolaño it is really hard to know where to begin and end extracting quotes. Everything feels interrelated:

Then there was a street in a big Mexican city at dusk, probably Mexico City, a street swept by rain, cars parked along the curb, stores with their metal gates lowered, people walking fast so as not to be soaked. A puddle of rainwater. Water washing clean a car coated in a thick layer of dust. The lighted-up windows of government buildings. A bus stop next to a small park. The branches of a sick tree stretching vainly toward nothing. The face of the old whore, who smiles at the camera now as if to say: did I do it right? did I look good? is everybody happy? A redbrick staircase comes into view. A linoleum floor. The same rain, but filmed from inside a room. A plastic table with nicked edges. Glasses and a jar of Nescafe. A frying pan with the remains of scrambled eggs. A hallway. The body of a half-dressed woman sprawled on the floor. A door. A room in complete disarray. Two men sleeping in the same bed. A mirror. The camera zooms in on the mirror. The tape ends.¹⁹

This is a sort of putting-in-context of the other events. Suffering is just a thing that happens. It must be important, because otherwise the author would not devote so much time to discussing it, but it remains, nonetheless, one of the many states of experience. Somewhere an employee of the government, the government indicted in so much of the horror here, somewhere an employee of this government is staying up late to work. The vain, sick tree is an apocalyptic image, like the implosion of the sex-machine. But still there are scrambled eggs. (Scrambled by whom?) A world where women are sprawled for unknown reasons. They may be drunk or asleep, but their forms mirror the forms of the dead girls of Sonora. The camera zooms in on the mirror... but what does it see there? What exactly is reflected? It can't be just a mirror, something is always reflected. The camera zooms in on the mirror as a human might lean in to inspect itself more closely. What does a camera see when it looks at itself? The author does not tell us, and the tape ends.

So what is going on here? There is a definite element of sadomasochism involved. The woman does not quite seem to be a willing participant, but she is also somehow complicit in what is going on, this much is indicated by her smile at the end. In addition, she, like many of the Sonoran victims, is penetrated "three ways."²⁰ Has she embraced her subjugation? Is she complicit? Or is she just desperate? Juarez is rumored to be the source of numerous snuff films.²¹

This makes the suggestion that the woman may have been "facing death" especially ominous. She did not die, but others did. Others who might have been filmed on the same camera or with the same men or by the same director or on videos shown in the same house. She is caught up in it all.²²

A mural in that house's basement depicts the Virgin of Guadalupe offering riches ("a lush landscape of rivers and forests and gold mines and silver mines and oil rigs and giant cornfields

and wheat fields and vast meadows where cattle grazed”), with hands spread but one eye closed. This, like the laughing death’s head, suggests that what’s shown comes at a price. A curse? An entangling terrain? Or something about the audience, something about the act of taking or even just gazing with desire that could produce a dangerous change, a destabilizing change, and entrapment. The oppressor, you see, the one who watches or buys the snuff film or colonizes Mexico or fucks the old woman, the oppressor can be a victim as well. Or something about Mary, who gives all this away? Is she caught up in it as well? Does her passivity enable it?

What about Fate? If there’s a hero here, it’s him. He watches with horror, not pleasure. His gaze is engaging, challenging. He possesses the capacity for resistance. He decides to get out of the house, but first he has to rescue Rosa Amalfitano. She was brought there by her boyfriend, Chucho Flores, who had courted her with lavish gifts (i.e. economic incentives) and first made love to her at a seedy motel, “the kind of place rich men brought their whores.”²³ This is a kind of machine too. There exists a vast system which enables Chucho’s behavior. Rosa must be indoctrinated with a desire for the commodities Chucho offers and she must not be in an economic condition to acquire them herself. In this way, Chucho mirrors Espinoza, who courts a Mexican girl in a similar way. (This is a subject to which we will return in time.)

Oscar finds Rosa in a sort of drugged-out haze, but she is willing (maybe even eager) to leave with him. He has to knock a man down to get her out, and when he looks at the body he feels that, “He could have looked for hours.”²⁴ Another instance in which the viewer derives pleasure from looking (in this case a form of pride or sadism), and another instance in which that pleasure might come at a price: induction into a violent mode, a visceral mode, which might result in entrapment. Of course, Oscar has already decided that, in such an instance, violence is necessary and acceptable. Really, his gaze is a continuation down that path.

It is important to examine these things from different perspectives at the same time: both the visceral mode and the sober one. I strive for hyper-lucidity: simultaneous awareness of the mechanism of perception its object. We must be able to switch lenses at will.

I give you one final quotation, describing the feelings of the critics regarding the Swabian, a man who told them a story about how he once met Archimboldi:

the Swabian was a grotesque double of Archimboldi, his twin, the negative image of a developed photograph that keeps looming larger, becoming more powerful, more oppressive, without ever losing its link to the negative (which undergoes the reverse process, gradually altered by time and fate), the two images somehow still the same: both young men in the years of terror and barbarism under Hitler, both World War II veterans, both writers, both citizens of a bankrupt nation, both poor bastards adrift at the moment when they meet and (in their grotesque fashion) recognize each other, Archimboldi as a struggling writer, the Swabian as "cultural promoter" in a town where culture was hardly a serious concern.²⁵

This metaphor also feels inapt at first. How could the Swabian be Archimboldi's negative? He didn't give birth to Archimboldi. Except he does, in a way, because all the critics know of Archimboldi is the image the Swabian gives to them. Archimboldi is an artifact upon which the critics extrapolate, left behind by a man, or rather the memory of a man that fades as they forget him.

This functions similarly to the relationship between Bolaño and Belano: both young men in the years of terror and barbarism under Pinochet, both romantic dogs, both poor bastards adrift at the moment one creates the other. Belano is the negative: he remains on file, an unchanging text. Bolaño is a memory, a reconstructed image who grows larger and stranger as we add to him facets of what we presume him to have been.

III. THE PART ABOUT THE PHYSICAL CENTER

"Where widens the gyre?"

~ Anonymous

Why fictionalize Juarez? Bolaño often uses real settings or unnamed settings that seem to stand in for real ones (for example, the campground in Antwerp might be the same Barcelona campground where Arturo Belano worked, which might be based on a campground where Bolaño worked), but never to my knowledge does he wholly replicate a real-world setting and call it by a new name, except in this case. What is the difference between Juarez and Mexico City, which is reproduced by its own name in *The Savage Detectives*? The universe of Arturo Belano seems to be geographically identical to our own universe, except that it contains a city called Santa Teresa instead of our Juarez. This suggests a “physical center” to Bolaño’s work.

Santa Teresa is mentioned in *The Savage Detectives*. Ulises Lima claims that the Rimbaud poem “Le Coeur Volé” is about how Rimbaud was raped, while traveling on foot, by veterans of the 1865 French of the invasion of Mexico. He also claims that, during this war, a column sent to occupy Santa Teresa stopped sending back reports and the detachment sent to investigate was taken prisoner at Villaviciosa before solving the mystery. There they were raped and executed, except for three men who escaped, one of whom would live to tell the story. This is not the only case in which Bolaño constructs a (presumably) fictional history of sexual violence in the Sonora region, but that is a matter to which we will return in a moment.

Had Bolaño begun to plan 2666 at the time he wrote The Savage Detectives? Did he set aside the fictional city of Santa Teresa as a stub for future expansion? Dunno. These questions

aside, it seems to me as if Santa Teresa acts, in the universe of Lima and Belano, as a sort of epicenter of violence and violation. It is also a place of unsolved mysteries. This is the physical center to which a poet-detective would be drawn.

To that physical center is drawn the orphan boy Lalo Cura. Lalo is like the “crazy and timid Indian” proposed in "Déjenlo Todo, Nuevamente": stunned by world but not paralyzed by it, open to the ideas of others but not bound by them.²⁶ “Lalo Cura” becomes *la locura*, “the lunacy.” He seems at first to be the Kid archetype of the cowboy Western: a deadeye hired from an orphanage to act as a bodyguard for a narco. Soon, however, he goes to work as a police officer in Santa Teresa (an example of the “revolving door” partly responsible for the climate of impunity). Here he proves himself unusually dedicated to his work. He spends time reading manuals on criminal investigation even though the others mock him for it. As they discuss the crimes, the following exchange occurs:

How could Llanos rape her, one of them asked, if he was her husband? The others laughed, but Lalo Cura took the question seriously. He raped her because he forced her, because he made her do something she didn't want to do, he said. Otherwise, it wouldn't be rape. One of the young cops asked if he planned to go to law school. Do you want to be a lawyer, man? No, said Lalo Cura. The others looked at him like he was some kind of idiot.²⁷

No, he doesn't want to be a lawyer. He wants to be a detective. Lalo himself never solves much; the incompetence and institutionalized corruption is too much for one man to overcome. Yet he does serve to highlight the contrast between the attitudes of the other officers and the intellectuals of the modern west. We also see here the beginning of the deconstruction of the idea of “rape”: “rape” is just a word, and its definition is socially constructed. Lalo's definition is more “modern,” but the fact that it's entirely out of place in a Santa Teresa police department

makes him seem like a lunatic. Sanity is relative. Moreover, even his definition is lacking because he doesn't realize that not all rape requires force.

Now to expand upon the aforementioned history of rape and violence in Santa Teresa: Lalo Cura, in late-night dazes of intense studying, hears voices who tell him the story of his lineage: he is the product of one hundred and fifty years of rape, seven generations of raped mothers, all of whom lived in what would become the Chihuahua region. Lalo is not the first to be born of consensual sex, but the other, Rafael, died avenging his sister's rape. The story of Lalo's conception is this:

In 1976, the young Maria Exposito met two students from Mexico City in the desert who said they were lost but appeared to be fleeing something and who, after a dizzying week, she never saw again. The students lived in their car and one of them seemed to be sick. They looked as if they were high on something and they talked a lot and didn't eat anything, although she brought them tortillas and beans that she snuck from home. They talked, for example, about a new revolution, an invisible revolution that was already brewing but wouldn't hit the streets for at least fifty years. Or five hundred. Or five thousand.²⁸

She makes love to both boys and has a child who she names Olegario Cura Exposito, nicknamed Lalo Cura. Could these students be Arturo Belano and Ulysses Lima? This incident is not mentioned in *The Savage Detectives*, but it could very well have occurred. It would certainly explain Lalo's predilection towards detection.

What we have, then, is a fictional history in which sexual violence and subjugation figure at every turn. This establishes Sonora as an epicenter or gyre of destructive forces, often inflicted upon it by the world. To expand upon this situation, I will now examine the economic position of the Mexican border region.

Mexico is presently (in 2013) in an odd situation. It is a significant exporter, but has consistently low current account numbers. At the moment (2013), Mexico actually has a current

account deficit of 2.8 billion USD (down from a surplus of \$200 million in February of this year). This is probably because the nation's export profits are offset by a capital outflow of 9 billion USD. As a percent of GDP (-1%), this outflow is unhealthy but by no means the worst in the world (though it is rising).²⁹ But why is money leaving a country which exports so much? Historical data indicates that Mexico's trade balances have fluctuated but its current account has been consistently negative since the mid-eighties (with a plunge after the signing of NAFTA, probably because the minimal tax rates on corporations doing business in Mexico means that less money stays in the country).³⁰ The price of the peso against the dollar has been relatively constant since 2009 and Mexico's budget balance is negative, but better than most, so there has been little reason for capital flight. This suggests to me that Mexico's steady GDP growth in the years since the 1995 signing of NAFTA have been driven as much by consumer spending as by industrial production.³¹ This is consistent with anecdotes in Aihwa Ong's "The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity" describing factory masters who encourage their female employees to engage in extracurricular activities involving commodity-consumption and beauty competition (offering make-up classes, for example), while providing them with sexual and idealized images of beauty and stocking company stores with various commodities.³²

What's strange is the relatively high availability of capital in Mexico. Ten year government bonds are presently yielding at 7.75%. (This is very high.) This would be understandable if Mexico had debts to service or an economy to stimulate, but growth has recovered vigorously since 2009 and its debt-as-a-percent-of-GDP is a healthy-by-today's-standards 37. (Compare to Spain's 69%, the USA's 73%, and Japan's 200%.)³³ The high yield rates in Mexico might be a scheme to stimulate growth at the price of expansion of debt.

Expansion of credit balanced by a low spending-as-a-percent-of-GDP³⁴ is a pretty good plan for growth (or at least a common one), but it's not a good plan for improving quality of life or ending the drug war plaguing your country. Mexico's murder rate is 22 per 100,000 and Chihuahua's is 77. If Chihuahua was a country, that would be the second highest in the world, next to Honduras.

Ed Villiamy's article in The Guardian reports that,

It is beyond question that during its seven-decade reign over Mexico the PRI operated a modus operandi of conviviality with the cartels. The rationale was that individual politicians and law enforcement officers would benefit, of course, but there was a wider motive – that which in Italy is known as the *pax mafiosa*, the mafia's peace. Broadly speaking, this means that a modicum of understanding between the cartels and government – national, regional and local – allows for a sufficiently blind official eye to products rolling across the border into the US, in return for which the cartels maintain a balance of power between each other, respect each other's "plazas", or turf, and a general peace.³⁵

Might this peace have enabled the forming of bonds between police and narcos that later created the climate of impunity? The article goes on to add that the peace was broken when the US pressured Mexico to arrest Félix Gallardo, don of the Guadalajara Cartel. The result was a succession war and a modernization of the mafia model.³⁶ 60,000 have died in the drug war. A 2009 Pentagon study suggests that Mexico is, "at risk of becoming a failed state,"³⁷ though the Economist argues that this is "wildly wrong" and that the violence is "starting to abate."³⁸ I have seen no evidence to this effect. In 2012, the PRI regained power for the first time since 2000 with the election of Enrique Peña Nieto to president, but he promised to, "launch a new national-security strategy to reduce violence and fight drug cartels."³⁹ This suggests that the new PRI intends to depart from the party's old strategy of tacit peace with the narcotraficantes, presumably because of international pressure and the expansion of the criminal gangs.

Villiamy quotes Juárez journalist Ignacio Alvarez Alvarado as saying that the cartels

have substituted the old pyramidal chain of command for the same concession or franchising system as any other corporation... Like a good modern capitalist, the cartel outsources, it puts contracts out to tender, to give other people a chance to compete. They're a business like any other, and the cartels have got much more democratic in the modern, capitalist sense: outsourced, meritocratic and opportunistic...⁴⁰

I suppose you might call this, “Capitalism with mafia characteristics.” It seems to be another machine whose operation depends on its allowing the destruction of life to continue.

There’s evidence of something like this in Bolaño: certainly the holocaust counts, but the holocaust-machine seems primitive compared to the one at work here. Here, the operation is allowed to continue undisturbed because so few of the individuals caught up in the machine are aware of its effects or feel responsible for them.

Upon taking office, Nieto wrote for the Economist on his plans. He said that he intended to, “[establish] policies that foster competition in all sectors,” “labour reform” that will “increase flexibility without infringing the rights of workers,” expand public-private partnerships, “allowing Pemex (the national oil company) to remain an engine of development, without having to cede state ownership over our nation’s resources,” and to focus on international cooperation in terms of, “international migration, climate change, ... the fight against drug-trafficking and organised crime,” and “the co-ordination of economic policy.” Essentially a collection of vague promises of prosperity and a signaled devotion to a continuing neoliberal agenda. All this says to me one thing: Mexico is America’s bitch and it’s being fucked in the ass by NAFTA and our drug war, but it can’t do anything because its government is even more corrupt and incompetent than ours.

How did Mexico come to this? In, "Mexico: Entrenched Insiders," Albero Díaz-Cayeros argues that the "failure of the Mexican political-economic arrangement to produce a qualitative leap leading to sustained economic growth is related to a social arrangement that in equilibrium has allowed elites to successfully create mechanisms to produce and preserve many types of rents," most notably "derived from the control of natural resources such as oil in the public sector."⁴¹ Mexico is known for its public-private partnerships, a way to preserve state control of resources (and public control, in theory, but access to political power is too limited for this to really be the case) while still allowing development. Mexico's strategy is comparable to China's: a hegemonic political party maintains control over the natural resources worked by private corporations which, in reality, are mostly controlled by the same insiders who control politics.

This, at least, was the system under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which held power from 1929 to 2000, and has recently re-won the presidency due to the failure of Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) to create economic growth and win the drug war. Both parties, however, are "insiders," unlikely to make any major change.

Díaz-Cayeros also notes that, although Mexico is still a democratic system, most observers suggest that parties have become too indifferent to citizen demands, enjoying public financing, free access to media for their campaigns, and little accountability, since the decentralized political setting allows them to shift blame for policy failures to other levels of government.⁴² In 2666 and in Rodriguez, this lack of accountability most notably affects the quality of the police response, and it turn creates a climate of impunity. Do you see how the parts work together? Though practically no part of the machine intends to destroy life, all parts unintentionally function toward that end and some parts must do so viewing the resultant

suffering as a necessary evil. The Sonoran femicides, then, exist in a space enabled by broader socioeconomic conditions.

One way to solve the problem, then, would be to “shrink the pond”. This could be achieved by an expansion of public programs (which the Mexican government’s expansion of credit could enable, provided it’s willing to increase its debt load), direct military intervention (which has proved destructive and inflammatory elsewhere in the drug war), changes to NAFTA which make multinationals more responsible for the violence their industrialization creates (which seems politically unfeasible), to make it illegal for America to import from exploitative economies (i.e. those which demand labor without providing basic rights or rule of law; also a politically unfeasible measure), or even just to force the maquiladoras to pay more taxes (which some would argue defeats the point of NAFTA altogether). That’s to say nothing of the fact that the American economic system is itself exploitative, as access to information (declared by the UN to be a human right) is restricted on the basis of wealth and crimes are punished with fines. It is absurd to imagine that Mexico could extract the aforementioned concessions from American politicians concerned firstly (in public, at least) with keeping price levels low at home. This seems to put a damper on hopes for political-economic solutions.

This suggests that a radical approach is necessary. Protest group Ni Una Mas’ tactics of agitation are working in the right direction. Bolaño’s work is well suited for the construction of guerilla action. At a restaurant, Oscar Fate overhears a young journalist interview the renowned criminologist and professor Albert Kessler. (Kessler’s visit to Mexico is part of a much-touted exchange program, but he doesn’t know Spanish and is watched closely by the local law enforcement, so he gives a lecture and goes home without contributing much to the solving of the crimes.) He says:

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

A trip across the border might indeed be best. This invisible line, this arbitrary line that somehow says people on one side deserve rule of law and people on the other don't... The swarm of immigrant-hopefuls is no surprise. That the crimes have different signatures is less surprising. The scale of the murders is simply too great for them to be the work of a Jack the Ripper. The problem stems from the spread of an idea-virus that causes killing. This could be a gang ritual or a fad – something that spreads from person to person under the proper conditions.

But these things spread through society, so what does it mean to be "outside of society"? What is "society?" Kessler might mean "civilized" society, i.e. The First World, in which case the Roman metaphor makes sense. Prisoners of an empire, these Christians are lions too, devouring themselves and each other. To get out, to leave the arena pit and cross into the stands, would be "best" thing for the individual, but not really a solution to the whole problem. Thus the necessity of them all crossing at once – the populace moves into a political zone where laws are enforced, the idea-virus has no climate in which to replicate, and the spiral collapses. This is the sort of osmosis that would be natural, but national laws prohibit it.

El Cerdo (The Pig) is a university professor and the foremost Mexican expert on Archimboldi. He considers leaving Mexico, but reminds himself that "distancing oneself from power is never good."⁴³ He has power in Mexico and wants to remain. The powerless masses want to leave, but lack the resources necessary. Is it true that "distancing oneself from power is never good"? Well, it's true that the desperate Mexican masses would be safer on the American

side of the border, within the sphere of the epicenter of global power. Bolaño himself, however, was notably *déclassé*, so I'll that proximity to power is also proximity to illusion, a risk of intoxication.

Consider a press conference where a reporter brings up the alleged production of snuff films in Sonora and suggests that it's a symptom of corruption and the "problem of the drug trade and the heaps of money revolving around it." A general replies dismissively that, "he [doesn't] think corruption today was any worse than under past governments."⁴⁴ This sort of dismissal is the sort of intoxication to which I refer. From the position of power, one is inclined to view events historically or geopolitically. "People have always been starving, people have always been dying in wars," the line goes, as if that's some sort of argument against opposing direct or indirect violence. It doesn't matter whether corruption is worse than it used to be. It matters that there's too much corruption. Individuals in power are inclined to argue that the status quo should not change and those who have power maintain it only by the passivity of those who don't.

El Cerdo receives a call from Archiboldi, who has been accosted by several police officers. El Cerdo asks if they stole anything from him. No: they just wanted money. "'That's good,' said El Cerdo in German. 'That's progress.'"⁴⁵ This narrow-minded cynicism, this availability heuristic'd pretend-progress, is the symptom of a man too invested in the system to demand change. He considers himself, "the unknown soldier in a doomed battle against barbarism,"⁴⁶ though of course "barbarism" could mean anything. Pinochet's soldiers battled barbarism, in their own eyes. I see no hope in El Cerdo's elitism, defeatism, and arrogance. This is the impotent bourgeoisie paralysis enabling the problem itself.

These currents collide over Sonora. We have elements of culture suggested or hinted at: stubbornness, silence, piety, sacrophobia, gynophobia. We have economic interests, powerhouse monoliths of mind-boggling scale, imaginary political borders made real by the guns of their guardians, and the immediate realities of lives on starvation wages. Fate and Chucho drive through the city and Chucho turns on the radio:

Fate heard an accordion and some far-off shouts, not of sorrow or joy but of pure energy, self-sufficient and self-consuming. Chucho Flores smiled and his smile remained stamped on his face as he kept driving, not looking at Fate, facing forward, as if he'd been fitted with a steel neck brace, as the wails came closer and closer to the microphones and the voices of people who Fate imagined as savage beasts began to sing or kept howling, less than at first, and shouting viva for no clear reason. "What is this?" asked Fate. "Sonoran jazz," said Chucho Flores.⁴⁷

At the boxing match Fate's meant to cover, the Mexicans are sure their man will win. (In reality, the American wins with a knockout in the second round.) Before the match, they sing:

Three thousand Mexicans up in the gallery of the arena singing the same song in unison. Fate tried to get a look at them, but the lights, focused on the ring, left the upper part of the hall in darkness. The tone, he thought, was solemn and defiant, the battle hymn of a lost war sung in the dark. In the solemnity there was only desperation and death, but in the defiance there was a hint of corrosive humor, a humor that existed only in relation to itself and in dreams, no matter whether the dreams were long or short. Sonoran jazz.⁴⁸

This corrosive humor is the Virgin's wink, the death's head's laugh. A corrosive humor, a very Latin American sort of joke, a love of doom and a sense of incredible beauty in the apocalyptic landscape. Fighting a lost war by not fighting at all, fighting with faith or a burst of savage, directionless defiance at an enemy beyond comprehension, a monolith that rises above the clouds of its own creation and sends out mechanical spiders, invisible agents, invincible tides beyond even its own control to further ends as petty and animal as any we can imagine. The sound of warring factions of howler monkeys: humanity.

If there is hope, it comes from Oscar Fate and Lalo Cura and Sergio Gonzalez. Even that hope comes at a price. Fate writes an article about a Black Panther founder who gives a speech in a church. He describes the mother of another founder as faithful, industrious, kind, and common-sensical. Those four traits are stereotypically Mexican. She also works at a factory. All these things draw her closer to the Mexican mothers, the members of Ni Una Mas.

This mother is an example of why would-be warriors might choose passivity and silence. The successes of the Black Panthers came at a cost: the pain of those mothers who saw their children killed or imprisoned. “A mother is worth more than a Black Revolution,” says this Black Panther. All the same:

The Panthers had helped bring the change. With our grain of sand or our dump truck. We had contributed. So had his mother and all the other black mothers who wept at night and saw visions of the gates of hell when they should have been asleep.⁴⁹

The Panthers are warriors more than detectives, but their function is similar. They take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. This comes at a cost, as do all such wars, but a cost which perhaps is the only way to end Sonora and to end a new Auschwitz.

IV. THE PART ABOUT POWER AND THE FEMALE

When Elizabeth Norton leaves Mexico, she writes letters to Pelletier and Espinoza in which she says,

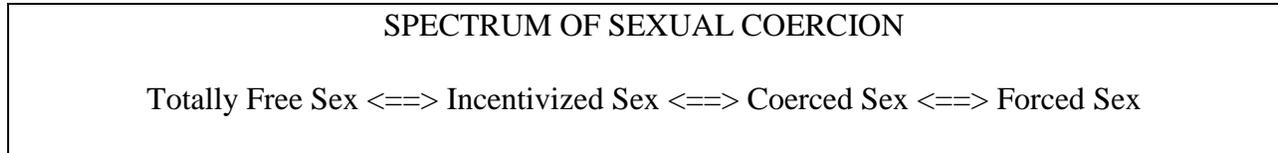
At moments I wished I hadn't left Santa Teresa, that I'd stayed there with you until the end. More than once I felt the urge to rush to the airport and catch the first plane to Mexico. These urges were followed by other, more destructive ones: to set fire to my apartment, slit my wrists, never return to the university, and live on the streets forever after. But in England at least, women who live on the streets are often subjected to terrible humiliations, I just read an article about it in some magazine or other. In England these street women are gang-raped, beaten, and it isn't unusual for them to be found dead outside hospitals. The people who do these things to them aren't, as I might have thought at eighteen, the police or gangs of neo-Nazi thugs, but other street people, which makes it seem somehow even worse.⁵⁰

One can safely presume that the suffering of homeless women in Mexico is a parallel journey. In a way, the street people are the residents of Juarez: outside of society and outside of the rule of law (see "The Part About Santa Teresa and Juarez"). They destroy each other and themselves: the starving lions in the Roman coliseum.

2666 addresses a case of systematic rape and murder, but does so in a way that deconstructs our concept of "rape." In one vignette, group of French explorers comes to a native village. Their leader shakes hands with one of the village men, who immediately shouts, "dayiyi!" and claims to be assaulted and degraded.⁵¹ "Dayiyi" has an uncertain definition. Its meanings include "man who rapes me," "cannibal who fucks me in the ass and then eats my body," or "man who touches me (or rapes me) and stares me in the eyes (to eat my soul)." If a handshake can be "rape," what happens to our definitions? This complicates matters, but actually makes the Sonoran femicides appear more serious because we can no longer define the crimes as

“crimes” (that is, as legal transgressions denoted by the words “rape” and “murder”), but rather as specific and unique cases of violence and suffering.

When “rape” ceases to refer to a specific category of behaviors, it begins to bleed outward, to grow and loom larger. To illustrate, allow me to construct the following rudimentary model:



Consider four situations, each with a man, A, and a woman, B:

- 1) **TOTALLY FREE SEX:** Here I mean “free” more in the sense of “libre” than “gratis.” A and B have sex purely out of mutual affection, totally without regard for any advantage one may confer upon the other. Given that human sexual attraction is based partly on perceived reproductive fitness, health, intelligence, competence, success, etc., this is probably unrealistic.
- 2) **INCENTIVIZED SEX:** B has material desires: some learned and some inborn. She wants things: luxuries or necessities, opportunities or commodities for herself or her family (commodities for which they have been taught desire). A offers her gifts on the explicit or implicit condition that he will receive sex in return.
- 3) **COERCED SEX:** B's family is destitute or starving. Her children can't afford education. A offers her gifts on the explicit or implicit condition that he will receive sex in return. A did not personally make B become poor, but he is invested in a system that maintains a certain balance of power.
- 4) **FORCED SEX:** A physically assaults B and forces sex upon her.

This suggests that all economically-incentivized sexual activity exists on the same continuum as rape. In situation three, B probably imagines that he is saving A from starvation, not threatening her with starvation. This is because the blame for her economic position does not fall to him, but rather to a system in which he participates. He does not feel responsible because, just as a corporation protects its members from risk, the machine protects its servants from guilt.

The question here is not, "Is gifts-for-sex a form of rape?" I don't believe we can draw a strict line between 'rape' and 'not rape.' What I mean to say is that most sex is somehow incentivized and a great deal of sex is coerced in a way enabled by socioeconomic systems. What occurs in Juarez is a "slide" towards greater levels of coercion than we consider acceptable. (I would argue that many conceptions of "acceptable" are already too high on the scale. The entire field of possibilities described in Situation 2 makes me uncomfortable.) This slide may occur because of the breakdown of rule-of-law and the climate of impunity. Situation 3 is common around the world and is normally considered legally, if not always socially, acceptable. Juarez is exceptional because there the power thusly gained over women so often transforms into Situation 4, physical violence. The problem may be that, in Juarez, no consequences are expected.

Both Rosa and Rebeca are in danger of sliding from coerced/incentivized sex into the sphere we call "rape." Note that both fit the victim profile perfectly: slim, young, and dark-haired. Chucho Flores courts Rosa with lavish gifts and brings her to a house where "they are all caught up in it," as Oscar Amalfitano, her father, says. She is only saved by Fate's intervention. Espinoza courts Rebeca by buying rugs from her, then fetishizes her and abandons her (see "The Part About New Chilean Poetry"). They first have sex alone in his car out in the desert, where she could easily "disappear." She is spared only because he chooses to spare her.

The process of entrapment in these cases begins with incentivized sex and slides in the direction of forced sex. (Of course, there may be force without any incentive.) Disparity of wealth or power enables the giving of incentives in all cases, but sometimes the additional component of desire is needed – desire for material goods, status, or even just food. Oscar Fate interviews the aforementioned Black Panthers founder, now turned author of healthy cookbooks, who says:

Useless things are forced upon us, and it isn't because they improve our quality of life but because they're the fashion or markers of class, and fashionable people and high-class people require admiration and worship. Naturally, fashions don't last, one year, four at most, and then they pass through every stage of decay. But markers of class rot only when the corpse that was tagged with them rots.⁵²

A kind of vanity. Planned obsolescence by way of going-out-of-fashion. A necessary component in a machine that needs to produce useless material in order to continue existing in its present form. The production depends on the use of human bodies as resources. It isn't just women who are victims of this economy, but it is women who are entrapped in this way in Sonora.

Men are entrapped in a different way. Psychologist Elvira Campos says, “As you're well aware, this is a macho country full of faggots. The history of Mexico wouldn't make sense otherwise.”⁵³ The disproportionate suffering of women could be the result of Mexican culture described in Bolaño and elsewhere as “macho.” Not precisely a “having something to prove,” but... many people are psychologically compromised because they believe in “the female” and “the male.” They believe there is a way things should be. But who are “they?” The ones doing the killing, but also the ones investigating it. They believe in “whore” and they believe that “a whore” is a woman who should do certain things or should have certain things done to her. Maybe machismo becomes gynophobia because the female has the ability to “disprove”

masculinity via rejection, manipulation, or cuckoldry. Control of the woman's behavior and body is necessary to preserve the "macho" image.

It's discovered that one of the murdered girls had disappeared after going home from a bar with a stranger. "Practically a whore, said the police."⁵⁴ Melissa Wright raises an interesting point in her essay, "Public Women, Profit, and Femicide in Northern Mexico." The term "public women" is used pejoratively in Mexico to link all women engaged in public or commercial work with prostitutes. Thus the maquiladora workers killed are victims of their "risky lifestyle" because they are "public women," whether or not they sell sex. (Also victims of the slur are members of movements protesting the femicides, who are accused of pursuing personal profit.) The police lump together victims and prostitutes, and take the next step of implying that the victims were killed because they were prostitutes, i.e. because their behavior deviated from the norm.

Fate and Rosa and Chucho and the rest of the caravan come to a restaurant called "El Rey del Taco," "decorated like a McDonald's, but in an unsettling way." "Some of the girls had tears in their eyes, and they seemed unreal, faces glimpsed in a dream. 'This place is like hell,' [Fate] said to Rosa Amalfitano."⁵⁵ A strange hell indeed. Maybe a border-hell. Maybe purgatory. Some place at the intersection of so many sufferings and humiliations as to be nearly incomprehensible.

There is the sense of America being The Sadist (a boxer famous for patiently and carefully annihilating a Mexican opponent)⁵⁶ and Mexico being Merolino (the defeated Mexican boxer whose match Fate watched),⁵⁷ ordered to prove something to his archetype. Macho-ness as a response to subjugation. "Almost all Mexican men are afraid of women," says Elvira Campos, "Gynophobia, and optophobia, fear of opening the eyes."⁵⁸ The latter is, in a figurative sense, an

answer to gynophobia, which, “In the literal sense... leads to violent attacks, loss of consciousness, visual and auditory hallucinations, and generally aggressive behavior.”⁵⁹ This is a sort of behavior we’re all too familiar with. Lalo and Oscar Amalfitano have their auditory hallucinations, the imagined ghosts of ancestors. The rest have their “violent attacks” or continued silence.

All this is the result of a peculiar intersection of power flows and social norms. In America, it is natural for “the female” to work. In Mexico, “the female” is still a role that’s strictly regulated. The woman's desire for agency and the family's need for income clashes with the culture's strict regulation of female behavior. Among the other phobias Elvira Campos lists is “peccatophobia,” fear of committing sins.⁶⁰ We here see a conflict between Liberal Values and The Church, itself a remnant of an older colonial period. At this this taco joint, this mockery of Mexico (a joint that apparently makes very good tacos), we see the horror of a female who believes she is Female, who works in a foreign hell without much hope for change. To the corporate master, the Female’s body is a resource to be used and expended if necessary, and for this purpose the female body, being easier to exploit, is preferred over the male one. To the Mexican Man, the Female’s body is likewise to be regulated, but in this case to avoid enflaming his peccatophobia. Unversed as he is in the tenants of Western Psychology, the Mexican Man prefers punishment to reward. For the lower-case female, the only recourse is resistance, be it though Ni Una Mas or something more extralegal.

Hell is a conflux of forces pulling the mind apart – a multiphrenia with immediate consequences. This hell’s for us as well, because every reader’s entangled in this thing. As you’ll see by the time we reach "The Part About the Basement," it is not enough to be not causing the evil. The aloof individual, the good German, is stil implicated in the violence. The remote,

incomprehensible evil is no longer so remote. We are within it... or rather, it has expanded (or our understanding of it has expanded) so that it's now everywhere. A matrix underlying "the real," its tentacles ensnaring us all and its tunnels suddenly visible in everything.

V. THE PART ABOUT NEW CHILEAN POETRY

Who is Carlos Wieder? The father of New Chilean Poetry, you may rest assured, is “a man and not a god.” We know this because the body of Angelica Garmendia (who Belano calls, “my adorable, my incomparable Angelica”) *is* found, even if the bodies of her sister and aunt are not.⁶¹ The Garmendia sisters were magnificent poets. As youths, they shared a poetry workshop with the implied authors of Distant Star, Bibiano O’Ryan and Arturo Belano, as well as Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. It was Ruiz-Tagle who would later take the name of Carlos Wieder and, as a member of a Dirty War death squad, abduct and murder the Garmendia family. Bibiano and Belano write Distant Star to chronicle their investigation of Wieder.

Perhaps Wieder wants Angelica's body to be found. Maybe it is just one of the many artifacts he intends to leave behind – like the photographs, the ones he shows to some officers of the Chilean airforce, some surrealist (or “super-realist”) journalists, and one woman, Tatiana von Beck Iraola, the military heiress “who went into the room expecting to see heroic portraits or boring photographs of the Chilean skies” at an exhibition that leaves some vomiting, some fleeing, and some lingering, dazed, with a sense of camaraderie. “Someone referred to an oath.”⁶² That is to say: Wieder makes a few converts.

This is New Chilean Poetry: the extermination of beauty and the aestheticization of that extermination. Before opening the door to the claustrophobic room that contains his photographs (he lets only one person in at a time, as “the art of Chile is not for herds”), he says that it is, “time to plunge into the art of the future.”⁶³ What exactly is depicted? The narrator reveals the content obliquely: some photographs showed objects or spaces, some were of the Garmendia sisters,

most were of women, and the women “had all been taken to the same place.” There was, “a progression, an argument, a story, both literal and allegorical.”⁶⁴

It is important to know that Wieder is not a god because, as Herlinghaus notes, "Brute violence, when it silences resistance, has a tendency to enter a delirium of being 'god-like,' spreading the poison of its own myth."⁶⁵ The monolithic power of the machine can make it seem invincible, unopposable. The Sonora femicides are an instance of such a myth where strange and practically-religious rituals begin to evolve. This complex of problems may seem so vast as to be insurmountable. It is the task of the detective to demystify this evil: thus the importance of Belano's investigation of Wieder.

We should not, however, take too much solace in Wieder's humanity. The evidence he leaves behind, the found body, is an artifact that spreads his poison in a new way – as poetry rather than mere force. By being human, Wieder infects humanity. If he were a god or even an übermensch (he is a man of steel but not an übermensch) he would become an ‘other’ and thus less threatening. By remaining human to some degree, he threatens all humanity in the same way the Sonoran femicides do: by making clear the bestial brutality of which the species is capable and by encouraging our indulgence in similar brutality.

This situation seems to blur the line between perpetrator and detective – that is, at least, when both make art from the same violence. Yet there is a difference between the two: Belano is not a murderer. Bolaño is not a murderer. All the same... does Wieder's depiction of violence differ from Bolaño's? Does it matter if the photographer of Wieder's exhibition is himself the killer? What about Ernst Jünger, who wrote about his experience as a German soldier in WWI in Storm of Steel and who appears as a character in Distant Star? I take his style to be matter-of-fact, neither glorifying nor condemning violence. What is the difference between Wieder and

Jünger? I don't think we're given enough information to really answer any of these questions. What's important is that Wieder is involved in his own sort of investigation.

Wieder, like Bolaño, is “undaunted . . . by incoherence.”⁶⁶ He performs his skywriting immediately prior to the photographic exhibition and in very poor conditions for flying. Few members of the audience are able to decipher the poem he writes, as the smoke is blurred and swept away almost instantly by the wind. In fact, there is some suggestion that the lines recorded in the book may be inaccurate.⁶⁷ In any case, Wieder is like Bolaño in that both accept indeterminacy and make use of it in their work. His admirable qualities make him all the more terrifying.

Part of Bolaño's method is to experiment with different positions from which to view the world's problems (contrast the psychedelia of *Amulet* with the analytical gaze of “The Part About the Crimes”). Herlinghaus calls this the search for “configurations that help articulate violence poetically, which is a matter of countering the powers of the oppressive ‘real.’”⁶⁸ That is to say, it is a means of opposing the infectious “myth” of violence, the capability of violence to silence dissent. I call the story of Wieder an “intellectual horror” in that it does not equal *Sonora* or *Auschwitz* in scale but rather contains a “tunnel” back to the remote malevolence, a suggestion about humanity that can be as disturbing as a tragedy of greater magnitude. This tunnel is useful to us because it allows us to examine the monster from another perspective.

If there were a real-life Wieder, we might think of him like Josef Mengele: his work would be horrific, but nevertheless a contribution to human knowledge, a contribution to the investigation. The artifacts he creates would offer us with insights, provided we be willing to tolerate their histories. Of course, Bolaño solves the problem of “history” by fabricating both art and artist, bringing us the photographic exhibition without the murders. He tells a number of

stories like this, stories about people creating art that would be impossible, impractical, or unethical for Bolaño to create himself. One such figure is Edwin Johns, the painter in 2666 who is best known for a self-portrait which includes his own severed and mummified painting hand.

His success leads to the birth of a new school called “English animalism” or “new decadence” and attracts numerous young artists to his poor neighborhood, which gentrifies rapidly. Here, as in Juarez, economic flows produce tides of irresistible transformation. As Wieder would say, “Death is resurrection.” The new decadents don’t know they are part of Johns’ art (who knows if Johns plans for them to be?), but their influx causes the destruction of the neighborhood as it had been and its rebirth in a new form. So Johns destroys two things he loves: his own ability to paint and the neighborhood that was his home. All artists enact transformations on reality, argues Bolaño, and all are caught up in the calculus of violence. The main difference between Johns and Wieder is that Johns is primarily self-destructive. Both, however, destroy what they love. That's what's most valuable.

Pelletier, Espinoza, Norton, and Morini go to visit Johns. He says, “the whole world is a coincidence,” “the manifestation of God . . . A senseless God making senseless gestures at his senseless creatures. In that hurricane, in that osseous implosion, we find communion.” Morini then asks him, “Why did you mutilate yourself?” to which Johns replies in a whisper that the reader never hears. He also insists that he is not an artist.⁶⁹

Note that “communion” is a word used by Wieder in his last skywritten poem. He writes: “Death is communion.”⁷⁰ But who is in communion with whom? The gangsters of Juarez find communion in blood. The Fascists of Chile and the Third Reich find communion in blood. But might Johns mean that all people find communion? Death, and the hurricane of death that is life, create a communion between all living beings.

Note also that this hurricane, this "osseous implosion" mirrors the form of González-Rodríguez's "femicide machine." It is a convergence of factors. Auschwitz and Sonora are coincidences, in a sense. What sort of god rules this universe? A more immediate question: what did Johns say to Morini? Why would a man who violently ended his artistic career (in what most people would call a clear exercise of agency) come to believe in coincidence and fate? How does Santa Teresa change if we think of it as a matter of coincidence or fate and not, as the humanist is inclined to, as a conflux of human weakness and malevolence? It is no longer a problem to be solved but rather a thing that happens, a part of reality. Part of the storm.⁷¹

There's a great deal at stake here. On one hand, Johns is clearly not a role model. While he's certainly a brilliant artist (whether he admits it or not), his philosophy seems anti-agency: would it not leave us all impotent, confined to various metaphorical asylums? Did he believe his self-mutilation to be coincidence or fate at the time he performed it, or did he only come to believe that later? Can it be both fate and a deliberate act of artistic transformation? Probably not. I suspect that Johns believes he's not an artist because art requires intentionality, which is impossible in a universe populated by senseless beings. To put it another way, nobody can be "artist" or "not artist" if everything is coincidence.

On the other hand, Johns' perspective allows us to re-envision horrific events as part of a greater whole, at once beautiful and terrible. I recall a passage from *Amulet*:

And when I heard the news [of a spurned man's suicide] it left me shrunken and shivering, but also amazed, because although it was bad news, without a doubt, the worst, it was also, in a way, exhilarating, as if reality were whispering in your ear: I can still do great things; I can still take you by surprise, you silly girl, you and everyone else; I can still move heaven and earth for love.⁷²

Here we see an ancient and essential poetic process: the weaving-together of good and bad into a manageable vision of reality. I suggest that Johns' hurricane of coincidence is an attempt to do

just this. I imagine that Johns' whispered answer to Morini's question, "Why did you mutilate yourself?" might have been something along the lines of either, "I just did," or "Because I thought it mattered."

How do we reconcile this totalizing vision with the search for a "remote, incomprehensible malevolence?" Well, Johns provides us with an alternative to his philosophy by admitting that a friend of his disagrees: "Suffering is accumulated, said my friend, that's a fact, and the greater the suffering, the smaller the coincidence."⁷³ In places like Juarez, the friend seems to argue, choices matter. Johns confirm my earlier suspicion that his own philosophy is anti- or post-humanist by saying that his friend, "believed in humanity, and so he also believed in order, in the order of painting and the order of words, since words are what we paint with."⁷⁴ Certainly language is not as orderly and systemic as it may at first appear. Bolaño knows this, and probably knows that for this reason it's hard to agree or disagree with Johns because it's hard to know precisely what he means by "coincidence." The killers and victims, perhaps, are equally senseless: a culture of bacteria in a petri dish, some dying and some reproducing. But if there is a vortex of death in one part of that dish... shouldn't we look more closely?

All that's available for examination are the artifacts that remain. Let's look at this issue of "communion" and this strange relationship between the sacred and the profane. Among the phobias listed by psychologist Elvira Campos in 2666, a set of endemically Mexican fears, is "sacrophobia," fear of the holy.⁷⁵ It seems intimately related to the Sonora femicides... but how? Keep in mind that sacrophobia is one element in a set of phobias so large as to be practically meaningless: for example, both agoraphobia and claustrophobia are included – perhaps they're symptoms of living in the vastness of the desert. But sacrophobia? I might call it a symptom of

Catholicism, a religion brought by conquerors to the Americas. We should look, therefore, at places where the holy converges with the violent.

The clearest situation is in Juarez itself, where women are punished for being outside the home. This is the product of a social conservatism that casts such women as "public." This in turn is a product of strict gender roles, an element of faith in culture. The transgression of the working woman thus becomes a sort of profanity. As in centuries past, individuals punish this transgression by violating the Fifth Commandment. Then again, given that the murders are performed mostly by gang members, it's likely that the individuals responsible set aside the Fifth Commandment long ago. The psychological complex, the conflux of forces, includes some deep-rooted cultural elements that falls under the umbrella of what we call "religion" or "faith," even if their mechanism of operation seems confusing or contradictory... or, perhaps, precisely *because* their workings are paradoxical.

Sacrophobia is linked especially to the criminal known as the Demon Penitent. This individual routinely urinates in churches. It seems as if his bladder is supernaturally large. The first incidents are violent, but as he perfects his technique he's able to do his work without interruption. The attacks on these churches, "got more attention in the local press than the women killed in the preceding months."⁷⁶ This isn't surprising. After all, the news media is known for caring more about a good story than the in-perspective magnitude of the events described. Why else would CNN.com's headline be, as I write this, "Convicted rapist caught after 35 years on the run" and not "6000 children starved today"?⁷⁷ This is part of the hurricane as well, you see: Weaknesses in the human brain (our general preference for stories and images over statistics) cause us to ignore the greatest cases of suffering in favor of the ones more easily digestible. I am aware of the irony, of course: the Sonora femicides are a drop in the bucket

compared to global starvation. All the same, they are important because they are a tunnel back to the greater evil. Journalists use this same argument to justify the promotion of relatable stories over important ones, but the real reason, one suspects, is market forces: page-views and ratings.

The story about the Demon Penitent is included in the fourth section of 2666, "The Part About the Crimes." It is interwoven with the tale of ongoing rape and murder. An experienced investigator, Juan de Dios Martinez, is assigned to the case of the Demon Penitent. An experienced investigator in an underfunded police department is dedicated wholly to solving the problem of urine on church floors. This is sacrophobia. The fear of offending the holy causes individuals to prioritize the afterlife over the present.

This leads us to a number of odd cases of ritualistic behavior in the murders. While reading "The Part About the Crimes," the aspiring detective may notice that a number of the victims have missing nipples. There is no answer in the text, and one could easily take it as another example of indeterminacy, an unsolved mystery, a perverse element added to highlight the barbarity of the crimes. One might not guess that the missing nipples were a real-life mystery, unsolved until a journalist found that "some of the gang members liked to wear the victims' nipples like trophies on chains around their necks."⁷⁸ This ritual is not explicitly religious, but it is part of a trend that seems to see the murderers elevate violence to the status of art: a trophy or a remembrance. This should not be surprising, as the operations of the gangs are based on faith, loyalty, silence, and fraternity: a distinct ritualistic culture evolves.⁷⁹

Other behaviors evolve also, this time freighted with religious imagery. Atop a hill overlooking Ciudad Juarez, a strange site is found: the bodies of two women, the remains of a bonfire, and a heart-triangle of 138 stones, each at least ten feet in length. When you add 138's digits together, you get 12, and when you add 12's digits together you get 3, the same as the

number of sides. This is thought to symbolize the Holy Trinity.⁸⁰ The apex of the heart points south and the cleft points north, towards America. Is this symbolic of the function of the gangs, the channeling of drugs from south to north? Why the heart? The sacred heart. Or, as Wieder, would say, "Death is love." What sort of bizarre murder cult could have created this fusion of faith and blood? Consider the ancient legacy of this artifact-space: it harkens back to a war between Catholic Conquistadors and practitioners of human sacrifice. This is the profound expression of a marginalized populace born and bred in violence. This is New Chilean Poetry.

VI. THE PART ABOUT THE BASEMENT

As Carlos Wieder's photographic exhibition wears on into the early hours of the morning, an air force captain says, "I advise you to get some sleep and forget everything that happened here tonight."⁸¹ The fact that anyone could sleep after viewing Wieder's photographs is as horrible as their content, because both facts are caught up in the same storm – the content could not exist if the silence did not enable it. It is more comforting at first to imagine the guests struggling to forget what they've seen, but the idea of humanity forgetting Weider's actions is just as bad as the actions themselves.

If Wieder is representative of a 'dark heart' of fascist thought (and human thought by extension), then the complicity of the captain, himself an officer of Chile's fascist military, is not surprising. He himself is not the executor of the horror, but he protects Wieder by urging the other guests to make peace with the photographs and try to forget them. This process, a sort of repression, is necessary in a world of not-Wieders. They can't stop him, so they are urged to accept him or join him. (Note that Belano later does stop Wieder by advising a detective named Romero, who finds and kills him. Or gives him a suitcase full of money. It isn't clear.)

The silent not-Wieder is exemplified by Father Sebastian Urrutia Lacroix, narrator of By Night in Chile. He begins that novel by stating that,

One has a moral obligation to take responsibility for one's action, and that includes one's words and silences, yes, one's silences, because silences rise to heaven too, and God hears them, and only God understands and judges them, so one must be very careful with one's silences. I am responsible in every way. My silences are immaculate. Let me make that clear. Clear to God above all. The rest I can forgo. But not God.⁸²

We soon come to suspect that this is not the case. Why would he be writing the book if he intended to forgo the rest of us? Father Urrutia is upset because of an encounter with a “wizened youth,”⁸³ who I suspect is Arturo Belano or Ulysses Lima, but who could also be a manifestation of the priest’s internal guilt, a result of the sickness from which he's dying. The book seems intended to justify its implied author’s actions.

Urrutia also justifies the actions of others. Later in life, he is a frequent guest at the parties of Maria Canales, a woman who loves writing but prefers the company of “painters and performance artists and video artists” because she finds them less intellectually intimidating. “Then she began to mix with writers and realized that they were not particularly well educated either.” Urrutia says this produces, “A very Chilean sort of relief.” A very bourgeoisie sort of relief, if you ask me. In any case, Maria Canales hosts fashionable parties for her artist friends and Urrutia, because he is by then a successful critic known by the pseudonym Ibacache, is often invited.

Maria Canales is married to Jimmy Thompson, an *estadounidense*. By the end of the book, Urrutia discovers that he is an agent of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, Pinochet’s secret police. This revelation occurs gradually. A drunken guest wanders down to Maria Canales’ basement and finds, in one room among many, a naked man, blindfolded and tied to a metal bed. He returns, suddenly sober, to the party, where he asks for a whiskey and drinks it in silence. Urrutia hears about this, years later, from a friend of a friend of the man. By then, Jimmy is gone.

Urrutia, because he did not know, considers himself absolved of all blame. What about his friend, the source of the story? Urrutia tells him to “go in peace.”⁸⁴ It’s unclear whether this other friend knew in time to intervene. It’s certain that Father Urrutia spent the years under

Pinochet (during which Jimmy was doing his work) invested in various scholarly projects and in teaching the General and his staff about communism.

The 'go in peace' is not the only instance in which Urrutia's function is to justify ethical failure. After he gains renown as a critic, Urrutia is approached by two men, Mr. Etah and Mr. Raef (i.e. "hate" and "fear") and is offered a great deal of money to go to Europe and study methods of maintaining churches. Urrutia accepts. In Europe, he finds that the primary threat to churches is the corrosive feces of starling doves and the primary means of defending against the doves is falconry. He visits a number of churches, each protected by a falconer-priest. One of the falcons is named Ta Gueule, which Urban Dictionary defines as a "French slang/argot expression to demand silence in a violent or immediate way."⁸⁵ The falcon does indeed silence the doves (though Urrutia, at least in Chris Andrews' translation, always refers to them as "starlings," possibly because Urrutia might wish to avoid the symbolic baggage of "doves"), striking like the "abstract idea of a lightning bolt" and Urrutia compares "the blood-stained flight of the starlings" with "the planet's femoral artery" "swelling" "in the sky over Avignon."⁸⁶

Urrutia meets another priest, Fr. Antonio, who now feeds his falcon sausage and mincemeat and whose cheeks are "hollowed by doubt and untimely repentance," because he has come to object to the killing of "earthly symbols of the Holy Spirit" by such an "expeditious" method.⁸⁷ Urrutia feels that Antonio and his falcon have both been weakened by their refusal to participate in the systemic destruction of life, a sentiment that echoes the fascist association of violence with strength (or death with regeneration and resurrection). In his recommendations regarding the maintenance of churches, Urrutia places "special emphasis on the use of falcons."⁸⁸

Jimmy Thompson, I suppose, is a falcon as well, though Urrutia's justification extends only to the people who didn't stop him, not to the man himself. (Though Urrutia is probably glad

of Thompson's work, as Allende's reign is a sort of bad dream for him.) However, the language he uses to describe the falcon Ta Geuele is adoring and, as we shall see, his stance towards Wieder is similar.

In Distant Star, the men searching for Wieder discover an anthology written by Ibacache, where, "Of the younger writers, the youngest was Carlos Wieder, and this was an indication of the hopes Ibacache had pinned on him."⁸⁹ (Further proof that even the most misguided individuals contribute to the great investigation.) No word on whether Ibacache knew about the photography exhibition. The passage on Weider "broke off abruptly, as if Ibacache had suddenly realized he was stepping into a void."⁹⁰ In a separate article, ostensibly about cemeteries on the Pacific coast, Ibacache describes a night conversation with a young man with a black trench coat and a hidden face who occasionally lapsed into "vulgar or violent language." It is unclear whether this figure was Wieder or "a figment of the critic's imagination."⁹¹ All this causes Wieder to become a mythic figure and redoubles the reach of his ideas.

What this suggests is that Urrutia is attracted at least to the surface of Wieder's work. The horror with which he reacts to the truth about Maria Canales' house (which we'll get to in a moment) suggests that he probably didn't know about the photography exhibition. Anyway, this attraction to the surface causes him to unknowingly mythologize (or contribute to the mythologization of) a horrifically destructive force. His investigation fails – whether out of a lack of will or improper foundation of knowledge we don't know (nature or nurture, that is, by which I mean luck) – and that failure constitutes one more gust of wind in the direction of the Chilean hurricane's continuance.

I've already mentioned that Father Urrutia tutored Pinochet and several of his generals on the subject of Communism, so there's only a little more to add in regard to the last major part of

his life. He is scared for a while that the public and his partners in criticism will censure him when they hear about the lessons. For a while, he hears nothing about it and thinks he is being shunned. Then he realizes nobody cares. He feels: "The country was populated by hieratic figures, heading implacably towards an unfamiliar, gray horizon, where one could barely glimpse a few rays of light, flashes of lightning and clouds of smoke. What lay there? We did not know."⁹² Urrutia, who complains about the illiteracy of the public, is right to be worried. The apathy toward his words and the apathy toward literature as a whole stem from the same gray complacency, the same silence, which leads the figures toward some apocalyptic future. What he does not realize (or declines to realize) is the degree to which he is apathetic as well.

Now we can move on to the real subject of this chapter: the basement. When Urrutia visits Maria Canales years later, when the parties are a thing of the past, she offers to take him down to the basement:

Do you want to see the basement? she said. I could have slapped her face, instead of which I sat there and shook my head several times. I shut my eyes. In a few months' time it will be too late, she said to me. By the tone of her voice and the warmth of her breath, I could tell she had brought her face very close to mine. I shook my head again. They're going to knock the house down. They'll rip out the basement. It's where one of Jimmy's men killed the Spanish UNESCO official. It's where Jimmy killed that Cecilia Sanchez Poblete woman. Sometimes I'd be watching television with the children, and the lights would go out for a while. We never heard anyone yell, the electricity just cut out and then came back. Do you want to go and see the basement? ... I must be off, Maria, I really have to go, I said to her... I squeezed her hand and advised her to pray... the stars twinkling far away, and she said, That's how literature is made in Chile. While I was driving back into Santiago, I thought about what she had said. That is how literature is made in Chile, but not just in Chile, in Argentina and Mexico too, in Guatemala and Uruguay, in Spain and France and Germany, in green England and carefree Italy. That is how literature is made. Or at least what we call literature, to keep ourselves from falling into the rubbish dump. Then I started singing to myself again: The

Judas Tree, the Judas Tree, and my car went back into the tunnel of time, back into time's giant meat grinder.⁹³

That sums it up, doesn't it? If Urrutia doesn't want to speak, he shouldn't look either. That makes it easier for him to do his job. Easier for him to say, "go with God" to men with terrible secrets. Better able to offer comfort to the operators of the meat grinder and the people who grant them impunity.

Offered a complete image of the evil he's aided, Urrutia chooses ignorance. He lies dying, examining a Chile that seems unfamiliar and repeating the phrase, "Is there a solution?"⁹⁴ He says, "An individual is no match for history. The wizened youth has always been alone, and I have always been on history's side."⁹⁵ That's the problem right there, and thus the solution, but he doesn't notice. Urrutia is a defeatist. He's looking for a solution, but he can't really care because he isn't willing to risk opposing "history." By "history," I take him to mean the weather, the zeitgeist, the storm that not even the evil metamachine can control.⁹⁶

The one who's alone, the one who resists history or doesn't believe in it, doesn't need external "solutions". Bolaño is working to build a solution. Urrutia goes with the flow and now he's been brought to the point where he can't get outside of it – swept out into the ocean. His conviction that one can't resist the current causes him to submit to it until he is brought to a place where his chance of escape is infinitesimal. He can't resist because he spent decades failing to try. He then does his job in silence as the meat grinder keeps spinning. This is precisely how literature is made. Without people like Father Urrutia and Pinochet, what would Bolaño have to write about? (Probably love.)

Luckily, Bolaño does provide us with an escape from this rather dark picture. At the end of the chilling "Part About the Crimes," Sergio González Rodríguez, Bolaño's real-life source for

much of the information included in that section, meets with a congresswoman who, determined to avenge the death of a friend, tells him, "I want you to write about this, keep writing about this... I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh... stir up the hive."⁹⁷ This is what Urrutia does not realize: the solution is not to 'find a solution' but to keep writing. Art is the solution. Resistance is the solution. Urrutia wrote not to investigate but to justify.

"Justify" to me signifies a particular psychological tactic: the burying of an idea for the purpose of comfort. Something is veiled because it pains us – but the pain is a warning. We numb it at our peril. We don't see too many stories about starvation on TV. This is a mass veiling, a mass justification. It sells because it preserves happiness, because it creates comfort and 'peace.' This is a problem of both supply and demand: people keep buying bullshit and people keep selling it. Urrutia's novel (and possibly his life) ends with, "And then the storm of shit begins."⁹⁸ Maybe it's because the meat grinder only keeps turning as long as the people at the cranks are eating each other's bullshit. This seems like the sort of cycle that's hard to stop, but then I realize: they're eating shit. The truth is more beautiful. The ocean does not care about shit. Bolaño give us tools that help us deal with this type of system and art as a whole has proved excellent at deconstructing just about everything. Surely humanity has something in its arsenal that can help it deal with these evil machines.

Amulet constitutes an examination of this sense of cosmic war. The titular amulet is the beautiful song of the beautiful Latin American children as they march down the valley and into the abyss.⁹⁹ Auxilio Lacouture, the book's narrator, writes:

And Remedios Varo, who is standing with her back to a picture, a picture covered with an old skirt (but that old skirt, it occurs to me, must have belonged to a giant), says that she has given up smoking, that her lungs are delicate now, and although she doesn't look like she has bad lungs, or has even seen anything bad in her life, I know that she has seen many bad things, the ascension of the

devil, the unstoppable procession of termites climbing the Tree of Life, the conflict between the Enlightenment and the Shadow or the Empire or the Kingdom of Order, which are all proper names for the irrational stain that is bent on turning us into beasts or robots, and which has been fighting against the Enlightenment since the beginning of time (a conjecture of mine, which the official representatives of the Enlightenment would no doubt reject), I know that she has seen things that very few women know they have seen, and now she is seeing her own death, which is set to occur in less than twelve months' time...¹⁰⁰

The sense of a binary cosmic war, good versus evil, Order versus Enlightenment, kingdom versus kingdom seems like a joke. Cosmic wars and black-and-white thinking are qualities of apocalyptic cults. Of course it's silly to believe in absolute evil. Of course it's silly to believe in malevolent machines. But there are termites aplenty (senseless as they may be) and I for one would prefer that the Tree of Life continue to stand. So what can we do? Keep enlightening, I guess.

Auxilia writes:

[Avenida] Guerrero, at that time of night, is more like a cemetery than an avenue, not a cemetery in 1974 or in 1968, or 1975, but a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else.¹⁰¹

I like to imagine that this is Urrutia's eye. At the end of his life, he can do little but contemplate the horror he's enabled, whether or not he realizes it. If you believe in reincarnation, the dead Urrutia might be both the corpse and the unborn child. (Metempsychosis, or transmigration of the soul, is mentioned repeatedly in *Amulet*.) Is he dispassionate? I don't know; I haven't read his criticism. But he's certainly dispassionate about the matters that are really important (or else his passion is outweighed by his fear).

Maybe he considers Chil  to be more important than the man in the basement. More likely, he considers himself to be more important than the man in the basement. (I'd like to call the combined philosophical position "fascist objectivism.") In any sense, he's typical enough: foisting off his humanity on abstractions and animal desires.¹⁰² He's a senseless figure as much as anyone else.

The year 2666, the cemetery long beyond the end of human foresight, the apex or epicenter or eye-of-the-storm beneath Santa Teresa, is the space from which
or through which
or to which the devil ascends.

We've finally come to the end. What's the point of all this investigation? 1) NAFTA is rape and murder, the drug war is rape and murder, and too much of what we buy or sell (or watch bought or sold) is caught up in a system that creates unacceptable suffering. (We might be more inclined to notice the 'vortexes' of intense or concentrated or dramatic suffering, but there are big, dark clouds of it all over.) Our weakness causes us to tolerate some evils we might otherwise resist or oppose. 2) Silence and sadism enable each other. Passivity creates impunity. "Awareness leads to control," said my old Psych teacher. Making people less senseless probably reduces suffering. 3) Why not oppose human suffering with everything we've got? We're not just warring factions of howler monkeys in the jungle, we're warring factions of howler monkeys all over the planet, armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons. Something must be done. I'm going to buy into less, sell out less, investigate, and enlighten more. This is the Enlightenment fighting the Order. (But of course, each subsumes the other, for this is an age without borders.)

The only way to deal with the suffering of the world is to engage with it, no matter how repulsive. That is to say, individuals must examine the horrific real in as many ways as possible,

from many different angles. The work of the real and fictional Sergio Gonzálezes gives us hope. On the other hand: complicit detective Ernesto San Epifano has a dream where he's driving the police chief's car and finds a body in the trunk, but is too scared to remove the black cloth bag covering its head. He gets back in and keeps driving. He, like Father Urrutia Lacroix, cannot stand to see his handiwork. Lalu Cura, meanwhile, sleeps well.¹⁰³

The factories pay no taxes. The police are underpaid. The gangs bribe the police, traffic drugs into the States, and rape and murder girls sometimes. The police leave the gangs alone. Everything continues.

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18 From Bolaño's notes on 2666: "The narrator of 2666 is Arturo Belano."

19 Op. Cit. 2666. Loc. 7691, 37%.

20 It's noted in 2666 that the Mexican police find the idea of "three way rape" (i.e. anal, oral, and vaginal) to be compelling to the extent that it becomes official terminology. Op. Cit.

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21 Snuff is an unethical artform by any standard but de Sade's, but it's a subject doubtlessly interesting for an artist concerned with the relationship between violence and the avant-garde. For more, look to The Part About New Chilean Poetry.

22 For an examination of what it means to be "caught up in it all" or guilty by association or silence, look to The Part About The Basement.

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- 60 Op. Cit. 2666, loc. 9052, 43%.
- 61 Op. Cit. Distant Star. Pg. 23.

62 Op. Cit. Distant Star. Pg. 82-6. (Might they be journalists de ultraismo? I'd have to get my hands on a Spanish copy to find out. I remember the Infrealists resolutely refusing to be called "the Mexican section of surrealism." Perhaps this was in Los Detectivos? It would make sense if they were Infrealist journalists. After all, the account is described as

"accurate" [Distant Star 83])

63 Op. Cit. Distant Star. Pg. 84.

64 Op. Cit. Distant Star. Pg. 88.

65 Op. Cit. Herlinghaus. Pg. 213.

66 Op. Cit. Distant Star. Pg. 82.

67 Op. Cit. Distant Star. Pg. 80-82. For reference, the full poem goes: Death is friendship / Death is Chile / Death is responsibility / Death is love / Death is growth / Death is communion / Death is cleansing / Death is my heart / Take my heart / Carlos Wieder / Death is resurrection

68 Herlinghaus 214

69 Op. Cit. 2666. Loc. 2295, 11%. 70 Op. Cit. Distant Star, pg. 80-82.

71 It might not be a coincidence, ironically, that the "hurricane" is "osseous." Herlinghaus reports that Bolaño worked closely with Sergio González Rodríguez while writing 2666. Rodríguez is the author of *Huesos en el desierto* (Bones in the Desert), a book about the Sonora femicides. (Op. Cit. Herlinghaus, pg. 633)

72 Roberto Bolaño. Chris Andrews, trans. *Amulet*. Loc. 131, 8%. 73 Op. Cit. 2666, loc. 2269, 11%.

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