

**NARCO REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN AND  
TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVE, FILM, AND ONLINE MEDIA**

by

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This dissertation theorizes the political meaning of contemporary “narco narratives” from or about Mexico. It challenges “the narco-realist thesis,” that is, the increasingly common notion that the Mexican drug trade/war constitutes a privileged framework for interpreting Latin America as a whole. The novels, films, and online media analyzed hereing avoid the narco-realist reduction of the Hemisphere to the image of a Narco-Mexico and instead set themselves the task, at once subtler and more ambitious, of using themes of drugs and violence as a kind of magnifying glass through which to perceive, for instance, the nature of power and violence in general or even the ontological basis of reality itself. “Chapter One” equates aesthetics with ontology and explores the inherently narcotic nature of power and sovereignty in *Trabajos del Reino* by Yuri Herrera and *La vida es sueño* Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The second and third chapters expand definition of “narco narrative” by exploring “pharmacological” themes and concepts in narratives about Mexico but not directly related to drug trafficking or violence.

“Chapter Two” offers analyzes how Jorge Baradit's neo-fantasy novel *Ygdrasil* contributes to the critique of the common apocalyptic interpretation of drug-related violence in Mexico, suggesting that any real apocalypse would derive from capitalism, not the supposedly radical evil of narcos. In “Chapter Three,” Bernard Stiegler's “pharmacological critique” of capitalism is used to analyze the political ontology of late capitalism in the films of US Latino director Alex Rivera. “Chapter Four” theorizes and the role of the environment in grass-roots resistance to cartel violence as manifested in Youtube video testimonies by drawing on theories of “object-oriented ontology.”

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## INTRODUCTION

The figure of the Latin American militant actor, though showing signs of resurfacing in Bolivia's indigenous movement, Chile's student movement, Brazil's recent protests, Colombia's agrarian strikes or Mexico's education protests and #YoSoy132 movement, the recent protests in Venezuela or, perhaps more polemically, the self-defense groups in Michoacán—just to name a few exemplary sites—still, for the most part, lies relatively dormant. At least, that is, in the hemisphere's aesthetic imagination. There are, as yet, few artistic representations of the new kinds of subversive political actors emerging in contemporary movements.<sup>1</sup> The ever-present Che and Marcos t-shirts notwithstanding, the aesthetically hegemonic antinomic figure in Latin America seems increasingly to be the narco. This is most obviously the case in México, where there has been an explosion of “narco-literature” and “narco-cinema”, with *narcocorridos* enjoying widespread popularity for over thirty years now. Narco themes have also loomed large in novels by Colombian writers like Fernando Vallejo, Jorge Franco Ramos, and Juan Gabriel Vásquez, for example, or in films ranging from the indie classic *Rodrigo D, no futuro* to the international collaboration *María, llena eres de gracia*. As Jorge Volpi has put it, “La literatura del narco’ se ha convertido en el nuevo paradigma de la literatura latinoamericana (o al menos mexicana y colombiana): donde antes había dictadores y guerrilleros ahora hay capos y policías corruptos; y, donde antes prevalecía el realismo mágico, ha surgido un hiperrealismo fascinado con retratar los usos y costumbres de estos nuevos antihéroes” (“Cruzar la frontera”).

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<sup>1</sup> A notable example is Argentine director Santiago Mitre's 2011 film *El estudiante*.

Volpi has argued that so-called narco literature is less an actual genre than a marketing ploy, on the part of publishers, and, on the part of critics and academics, a nostalgic attempt to revive the idea of “Latin American Literature.” He has lamented the fact that, in the minds of readers in the Global North, “Latin American Literature”, once equated with magic realism, is now coming to be seen as synonymous with narco-literature, in spite of the fact that “sólo se haya reflejado en la ficción de Colombia, México y, en menor medida, Centroamérica” (74). Volpi ascribes the international appeal of narco-literature, like guerrilla novels or dictator novels before them, to “la necesidad de exotismo de *Occidente*” (74). “Para los nostálgicos”, he writes, narco-literature “significa la resurrección de *América Latina*” (74). According to this view, there is a perverse logic at work in “the West”, which locates the essence of the Latin America in the present-day horrors that attend narco-trafficking and the so-called drug war. The hope would be that, although the essence is terrible, at least there is still an essence—maybe, just maybe, some of the hopes that were formerly hung on the idea of “Latin America” (whether “orientalizing”—“We know we are civilized because we can see they are barbaric”—or emancipatory ones—“The revolution will spread from Latin America to the rest of the world”) are still worth believing in, as long as “Latin America” still exists. Volpi is right to call attention to the problematic uses that the notions of “Latin America” and “Latin American Literature” have been put to. Surely we can do better as critics than to reduce the aesthetic diversity and sociopolitical complexity of an entire hemisphere to facile and self-serving notions of continental essence (represented, as the case may be, by the figure of the dictator, the *guerrillero*, or the narco).

In other ways, however, Volpi’s criticism is off the mark. First of all, while much of the literary and political criticism produced outside Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries is supported by departments of “Latin American Literature” and presented in forums convoked

under the same name, numerous critics, at least since the postcolonial and subaltern turns of the 1980s, have long since complicated or undermined such essential notions. Second, narco themes are by no means restricted to the artistic and pop-cultural representations of Mexico, Colombia, and Central America. Such topics have been taken up by writers like Cristián Alarcón in Argentina, Tito Gutiérrez Vargas in Bolivia, while also figuring centrally, for example, in Brazilian *baile funk* music and in Brazilian movies like *Cidade de deus*, and *Tropa de elite* (*I and II*). Of course, the prevalence of narco themes throughout the hemisphere does not justify sweeping generalizations equating “Latin American Literature” with narco-literature (not least because drug-related issues also populate art and media in the northern part of the hemisphere, as well as in other parts of the world). But it does suggest that drug-related issues are much more of a real transnational concern than Volpi seems to think, when he suggests that the current popularity of all things narco is reducible to the West’s exoticizing gaze. Rafael Lemus’ verdict that authors of narco-novels merely cynically cater to the current tastes of the literary market seems equally reductive.

Other writers have taken issue with the use of the label “narcoliteratura,” including many of those considered to be its foremost practitioners, like Juan Pablo Villalobos, whose critique is based on a literary-historical argument. In his article “Contra la narcoliteratura,” Juan Pablo Villalobos, author of the hugely successful satire *La fiesta en la madriguera*, declares himself against the reduction of an extremely diverse body of texts to a single genre simply on account of a few shared themes and figures. For Villalobos, the problem is not, as Volpi would have it, that so-called narco literature keeps the moribund notions of Latin America and Latin American literature on life support but rather that the attention paid to narco literature as “the next big thing” obscures the profound continuity between contemporary authors—a number of whom happen to write about drug trafficking, violence, and related themes—and the luminaries from



Latin America and elsewhere who preceded them. Villalobos highlights the case of Yuri Herrera, who has been hailed as one of the most important young Mexican writers, specifically Herrera's *Trabajos del reino*, a novel about a narcocorrido composer and his cartel patrons (which will be the focus of my first chapter):

Decir que *Trabajos del reino* es una narconovela es negarle su filiación: la prosa elegante de Herrera se inserta de manera contundente en la rica tradición novelística latinoamericana del siglo XX, de la que supone una continuidad. Herrera pertenece a la estirpe de Miguel Ángel Asturias, Augusto Roa Bastos o Juan Rulfo y se erige como un heredero directo de la literatura del boom, igualmente influido por la tradición narrativa norteamericana. (“Contra la narcoliteratura”)

Both Villalobos and Volpi would like to do away with the term narco literature, but for Villalobos, the point in doing so is to pursue exactly the kind of misguided gesture—i.e. tracing a genealogy between boom-era Latin American literature and contemporary literature dealing with narco themes—that Volpi reads into the widespread use of the term itself.

One of the central questions behind this dissertation is whether the current popularity of narco-themed narratives and the widespread use of the term “narco literature” to refer to them can actually be reduced to the nostalgia of those who yearn for a coherent Latin-Americanness, the cynical marketing tactics of profit-hungry publishers, or to simple next-big-thingism. Surely, cynicism and opportunism play enough of a role in the narco-cultural boom for us to wonder, along with Andrés Neuman, whether “hay más entusiasmo que indignación hacia los crímenes, escándalos y catástrofes”, whether this “bibliografía denuncia un negocio o funda otro” (García Díaz “El narco”). However, it is surely also the case that narco literature and *narcocultura* generally have gained so much traction throughout the hemisphere, at least in part, because they resonate with those who to some extent recognize themselves in the contemporary concerns,

anxieties, and aspirations to some extent in the narratives of vulnerability, violence, and unlikely personal victories. These affects are what the diverse populations of the hemisphere share—even if they share little else, as Volpi argues—during this historical moment. Rather than a spurious “Latin-Americanness,” the inhabitants of the continent share a common experience of life in the Global South (which, pace Volpi, still very much includes Mexico). Narco literature and narco culture *articulate the affective texture of the Global South*. Hermann Herlinghaus’ crucial contribution to contemporary Latin American literary studies has been precisely to signal and describe ways in which the affective realities of the Global South are expressed in today’s narco narratives.<sup>2</sup>

If Volpi’s proposal that nostalgia drives the fascination with *narcocultura* is compelling, it is perhaps for reasons other than the ones he suggests. Instead of a stubborn unwillingness to abandon a pseudo-Bolivarian vision of “Latin America” (“If cultural identity or political ideology no longer unite us, at least drugs, corruption, and violence do”) a more likely explanation for the current tendency to view the Hemisphere as a narcosphere is that it serves as a convenient alibi for a still dominant mood of depoliticization. If nostalgia plays a role, it is not so much to impose an idea forged in the past (“Latin America”) onto a present (of crime and violence) that resignifies and, thereby, reproduces it. Rather, if nostalgia motivates the equation Latin American Literature = Narco-literature or Latin America = Narcosphere, it is the same nostalgia that characterizes what John Beverley has called the “paradigm of disillusion.”<sup>3</sup> If Latin America is now nothing but a post-political drug world, then repentant radicals and reformed militants can safely pine for a past full of revolutionary potential, in which emancipatory collective action still seemed possible, while “knowing” full well that such notions are now

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2 See Herlinghaus’ *Violence Without Guilt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Narcoepics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

3 See the chapter “Beyond the Paradigm of Disillusion: Rethinking the Armed Struggle in Latin America” in his *Latinamericanism after 9/11* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011).

obsolete in the face of transnational criminal conspiracies traversing government and illicit institutions.

However, while this explanation may account for the interest of a certain demographic of readers and (especially) critics in narco-literature and *narcocultura*, it fails to account for the fascination of others, especially younger readers and audiences who have no personal ties to the revolutionary movements, or the authoritarian reactions they provoked, that characterized for so many the “Latin America” of the latter half of the twentieth century. Structures of disillusion cannot account for the rise of the figure of the narco in literature and media, especially when considering readers and audiences who were never “illusioned” in the first place. Of more importance is the affective pull of such figures themselves as it expresses itself within the political and socioeconomic realities of the present.

This is not to say, as Lemus has suggested, that narcoliterature’s popularity is due primarily to its facile realism, its supposedly unreflexive and apparently uncritical representations of the corruption, violence, and inegalitarian mafiocratization<sup>4</sup> of contemporary life in Mexico and elsewhere in the hemisphere. For Lemus, narcoliterature’s fatal artistic flaw —“Es abrumadoramente realista, y su realismo abrumadoramente inconsciente” (39); “Hay una realidad y se la copia. Hay pobreza y se la denuncia. Hay narcotráfico y se lo retrata” (Lemus 41-42)—is simultaneously the source of its market success. The remedy, according to Lemus, would be to formalize the present reality (“encarnarla”) instead of merely representing it,

Dejar de escribir literatura sobre el narco y escribir narcoliteratura. Emular lo que se retrata, ser el retratista y el modelo. Llevar el realismo hasta el extremo: no copiar una realidad, volverse ella. Sólo se capturará al narcotráfico si se remeda formalmente su violencia. Una prosa brutal, destazada, incoherente. Una estructura delirante. (Lemus 41)

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow the term “mafocracy” from Anabel Hernández (See *Los señores del narco* (Mexico City: Random House Mondadori, 2010), pp. 36, 576).

But this argument—that a narco reality is best embodied in a “delirious structure”—is based on the supposition that narco-ness—or *El Narco* as it is commonly referred to in Mexico—is

En principio, el puto caos. O eso. Un elemento anárquico, desequilibrante, destructor. Una Organización contra de lo organizado. El desgobierno. Antes de fijar su propio orden, mina otro. Sus lecciones son las del nihilismo: el dominio de la violencia, la futilidad de la vida, la victoria de la muerte. Ésas y esta otra: la incoherencia. No hay justicia ni armonía en su imperio. Se muere porque sí, se mata por lo mismo. Las causas y las consecuencias no están trenzadas. Hay un balazo y después otro. Sólo eso: actos, acción sin argumento. Todo, incluso el poder, sobre todo el poder, es efímero: nada se consolida, nada permanece. Impera la irracionalidad, el vacío. (40)

Therefore, if narco-literature is to “embody” a narcoized reality, it must be chaotic, anarchic, incoherent, irrational. Bolaño’s *2666*—which in US and European markets has come to figure as the ultimate narco-novel (while readers in the South tend to resist forcing it into a genre whose borders it unquestionably overflows)—probably comes closest to Lemus’ ideal. In it, the intractable, chaotic violence of the US/Mexico border exerts a warping force not only on the narrative content of various stories spanning the twentieth century but also on the form of the novel, a hulking mass of structures and styles that seem to mushroom and proliferate of their own accord, resisting linear navigation and rational resolutions.

Without a doubt, irrationality and nihilism circulate through the structures of narco power dominant in Mexico and in other parts of the hemisphere—and thought, theoretical or aesthetic, must be supple enough to account for such forces. But it is a mistake to reduce narco power to a principle of chaos and to restrict the thought that would think it to the mimicry of anarchy. Doing so betrays the Lemus’ political theology and implicitly situates the present in according to eschatological terms and resurrects the civilization vs. barbarism rhetoric (which is also always a

rhetoric of civilization vs. nature). Eduardo Antonio Parra, in response to Lemus, attributes such a stance to “la visión histórica y superficial de la clase media cuya información proviene de la prensa y la televisión” (61), a middle class usually situated at a safe geographical distance from the hotspots of narco violence. “¿Cómo funciona el narco?” asks Parra. “En el norte se sabe, porque la vida está inmersa en él, porque todos tenemos algún conocido que milita en sus filas, que su universo muestra una lógica interna, un férreo sistema de valores—contrarios a los de la sociedad, pero valores al fin—, una coherencia inamovible” (61).

According to Parra, many works of narco-literature maligned by critics like Lemus, instead of naively realistic representations of present realities, actually offer subtle accounts of the logic and values that undergird a narco power that only seems totally irrational and nihilistic when viewed from a safe distance. Where Lemus sees thoughtless narratives built from melodrama and *costumbrista* mimicry, in which a recognition of the difference between reality and artifice is glaringly absent, Parra perceives language that “sólo aparenta ser coloquial” but that is rather “creativo, eficaz, poético, aunque provenga del habla popular” (60). The best narco-literature

evita también las reflexiones teóricas dentro del relato y los relatos-problema, carentes de vida, donde los personajes son el pretexto para que el autor satisfaga su necesidad de deslumbrar a los lectores con su erudición, su ingenio y los chispazos de su inteligencia. La literatura es artificio, sí. Mas el artificio se despliega no sólo en la concepción de un rompecabezas, sino en cada uno de los elementos del relato: lenguaje, técnicas adecuadas, estructuras, trazo de los personajes, reflejo de la condición humana: el significado total del conjunto. (60)

Parra’s wager, then, is to take the narcos at their word. If they themselves speak and act in the name of clearly defined logics and values (or at least appear to do so to the subjects of their

power—appearance will be a crucial concept in the argument that follows below), then writers seeking to accurately portray and/or critique their world, and the power that structures it, must not make the formalist fallacy of considering a structure homologous with an imputed principle of chaos to be sufficient and ignore dealing, at the level of content, with the language, images, and concepts in which such logics and values are articulated. Even if we grant Lemus the proposition that narco power is chaotic and irrational, there is no guarantee that a structural embodiment of its attributes will produce a more critical or contestatory text than one based on realist representation. More important than a literary structure isomorphic with the putatively irrational and anarchic structures of narco power—for which, according to Parra, the narrative should never be reduced to a mere occasion—is that a text be able to *think* narco power, by whatever means (formal, narrative, stylistic, etc.) necessary. The real question for narco literature is not whether it can “embody” (either formally or representationally) the new kinds of power that weigh on ever more inhabitants of the Global South (which are also resurfacing—or maybe never really disappeared—in the North) but, rather, whether it can *think* such power on its own terms.

I am not only interested in how narco narratives articulate power but also in how they may draw out the hidden emancipatory impulses in the overwhelmingly negative and desperate affective worlds they portray—and the main purpose of this dissertation is to highlight such instances and to try to rescue their political potential from being lost through their reduction to the apparently apolitical (or anti-political, depending on the commentator) genres of narco literature and narco culture, as I will explain below in this introduction and at length in the chapters that follow. However, these emancipatory impulses, which I hope to flesh out, are often only visible against the sense of social, political, and economic exhaustion and impossibility that characterize most narco narratives most of the time, a sentiment perhaps best articulated by a

character in Arturo Pérez Reverte's *La reina del sur*, while reflecting on a line from Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*: "*Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre. Hijole. Los personajes de aquella historia estaban todos muertos, y no lo sabían.*" The inherent irony, of course, is that this realization could apply to virtually all of the characters that populate the narco literary and narco cultural landscape, the realization that the characters in all these stories essentially already dead without knowing it. Most often this death-in-life reality is depicted through narratives of narco-trafficking hubris, corruption, revenge, and the violent consequences of dumb luck in the face of which the entire social sphere is vulnerable. But there are also narco narratives, which I will consider in detail in "Chapter Two" and "Chapter Three" below, that express this apocalyptic mood as the result of much broader socio-economic forces beyond the exigencies of the drug trade. My basic argument in these chapters will be that the narcotization of individual and collective experience is due not merely to the power of local narco caciques but also, and perhaps more primarily, to the globalized capitalism that calls them into existence. The apocalypticism and fatalism (or more abstractly, the futurelessness) pervasive in much of what has been designated as narco literature, which was once a magic realist conceit in works like Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, now simply expresses a terribly banal fact of life for ever wider swaths of the Hemispheric and Global South.

One way to understand the emergence of literature dealing with themes of drugs, corruption, and violence is as a response to the question: How to represent the widespread sense of terminal decline, political impasses, psycho-affective exhaustion, and social closure in the Global South (as well as, increasingly, in the Global North, at least since the financial crisis of 2008). Narco literature's social and political critiques are much more nuanced and substantive than critical condemnations like Volpi's or Lemus' would have it. As Diana Palaversich explains, "Mexican and Mexico-related narcoliteratura coincides with the Colombian literature in which

narcos are viewed not as an embodiment of evil, as some simplistic positions would have it, but rather as a symptom of the much deeper social problems affecting the continent” (Palaverisch “Politics”). Indeed, many narco narratives do endeavor primarily to describe contemporary social problems (like inequality, geopolitical imbalances, unjust legal structures, corruption, etc.), but they also simultaneously deal with the question of evil. I would modify Palaversich’s observation slightly to argue that a common concern of most narco narratives is to highlight and explain the connection between the “embodiment of evil” and “deeper social problems.”

Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* is obviously the first work that comes to mind when speaking of the connection between evil and structural, historical social problems. While no one, as far as I know, has been willing to reduce Bolaño’s magnum opus to a mere example of narco genre,—even though its internal center of gravity is the archetypical narco-literary setting, Ciudad Juárez—it has, on the other hand, become one of the main reference points in debates both about the state of contemporary Latin American literature and about the fate of Latin American society in the face of the new forms of violence and evil typified by the experience of Ciudad Juárez. *2666* is a sprawling mix of surrealism, road novel, true crime, dark comedy, mystery, World War II chronicle, thriller, detective fiction, not to mention a revival of the nineteenth century realist and philosophical novels. It could be summarized as a sort of psycho-affective archeology of the twentieth century. If, as Bolaño seems to imply, the last century represented the end of the great (or infamous) utopian projects, if it turned out to be not just the end, but the dead end of history, what are the consequences? What are the consequences for the remnants of the modern subject when no one believes in progress anymore? What does this historical dead end mean for art and literature? How does it affect those places and people for whom the promise of modernity turned out to be nothing but an unchashable raincheck? Is there something like a force of evil that either led to or emerged out of this dead end? If so, what is the relationship between this force of evil



and the broader social forces that shaped the century? These are some of the questions the novel suggests to the reader by confronting us with scene after scene of first-world decadence (in the figures of petty, careerist academics, and bored and unmoored, nihilistic artists) third-world hopelessness and humiliation (in the figures of persecuted Ukrainian Jews, talented but socially immobile or washed-up Latin American artists and philosophers, masses of Mexican women who can only look forward to a life of subsistence wages in border-town assembly plants, if they're lucky, or domestic violence or an ignominious death in the desert, if they're not), and, finally scenes of violence that span the century and the globe from North to South.

The novel consists of five parts: "The Part About the Critics", about opportunist intellectuals who build their careers on the literary and actual physical search for a German writer pen-named Archimboldi, who prefers to remain out of the spotlight; "The Part About Amalfitano", about a Chilean professor who has suffered professional embarrassment in Spain and must migrate to a hellish Santa Teresa, Bolaño's fictionalized version of Ciudad Juárez, because it is home to the only university that will give him work; "The Part About Fate", about an African American sports reporter sent to Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match but who quickly gets engulfed by the city's subterranean violence; "The Part About the Crimes", which assiduously details well over a hundred murder scenes in a dry police report style, while interspersing an account of the fruitless efforts (or non-efforts) of a series of detectives, along with the media-police campaign to scapegoat a German expat as the city's sole serial killer; and, finally, "The Part About Archimboldi", in which we are finally treated to a biography of the enigmatic author, from his itinerant youth, through his bewildering experience as a Nazi infantryman, his ethical and intellectual transformation after immersing himself in the journal of a recently executed Jewish revolutionary and writer, his subsequent self-fashioning into a post-war avant-garde novelist, and finally, his decision to go to Santa Teresa to see what he can do for

his nephew, the probably deranged but likely innocent scapegoat from “The Part About the Crimes”. In other words, all roads lead to Mexico, or Santa Teresa/Juárez more specifically. The city serves as a kind of quilting point for the twentieth century in the novel, though it is never really clear why or how. Or, to use a metaphor that shows up again and again in the nightmares and apocalyptic fantasies of the novel’s characters, it appears as a kind of abyss, a void, or black-hole exerting a nefarious gravitational pull on the rest of the century and its inhabitants.

In this light, Bolaño would seem to be one of the foremost proponents of what I call the narco-realist thesis, that is, the two part thesis that consists, first, of the notion—implicit in many mainstream analyses, political and economic policies, and, as we have already seen above, in the very fact of narco literature’s popularity—that drug-related violence, particularly in Mexico, has become the privileged lens through which to perceive the true nature of contemporary Latin America (and perhaps the world as a whole, which is the thesis advanced by Italian journalist Roberto Saviano in his book *Cero, Cero, Cero*, about transnational drug trafficking, in which he claims that Mexico is essentially the new center of the world, and, second, of the notion that using the tools of realist narration is akin to polishing this lens, that this is an effective way of bringing Latin America into the sharpest focus possible. Or rather, to use one of Bolaño’s own metaphors, realist narrative representation polishes our contemporary social mirror. For Bolaño, this mirror is located in Mexico, specifically ciudad Juárez, which, in his last interview, he famously called “nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, el espejo desasosegado por nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos” (*Entre paréntesis* 339).

However, Bolaño never seems to arrive at a final verdict on the narco-realist thesis. He never makes a clear pronouncement on whether he views it as a socially and politically harmful distortion of the present or simply the frightening truth. In fact, Bolaño’s novel (unlike his final

interview) never actually articulates the narco-realist thesis. As Gabriel Osorno explains, Bolaño's novel insists on "el valor de cierta narración exhaustiva, hasta maratónica, cuando se hace lo que en apariencia es imposible de hacer: hablar del narcotráfico sin mostrar narcotráficantes" (*Alguien limpia* 20-21) (which resonates with Yuri Herrera's omissive style in *Trabajos del reino*, the focus of my first chapter). *2666* suggests the narco-realist thesis over and over without ever clearly stating it, forcing one to ask whether it is a valid evaluation of the contemporary world or, rather, a nightmarish alibi dreamed up by one's unconscious in order to avoid a true engagement with that world. The open-endedness and, above all, the irony with which *2666* narrates the conspiracies it posits at the center of the century that culminates in Ciudad Juárez, reinforces the uncertainty, even undecidability, of the narco-realist thesis (I will return to the theme of conspiratorial thinking about Mexico in "Chapter Two" on Jorge Baradit's *Ygdrasil*).

While Bolaño's novel refuses to pass any decisive verdicts on the social and political meaning of contemporary Latin America, and Mexico in particular, it has, since it exploded onto the literary scene in 2004, begun to make unspeakable violence speakable again. By doing so it has helped counteract the tendency Jean Franco sees in so much recent political theory and commentary about Latin America, which tends to make the continent's "crimes unspeakable" (*Cruel Modernity* 248). The problem with this approach, Franco argues, is that it renders such crimes "mystical, outside the bounds of political action" (248). If *2666* has any political significance, then, it lies in its ability to demystify hell, to make it into something this-worldly and, therefore, at least potentially within the reach of political action. For Bolaño, Juárez is not a simple embodiment of absolute evil but a symptom and a warning, an example of what can go wrong when entire categories of people finally assimilate the fact that there is no future for them in the contemporary social configuration, a situation that could spread unless we start asking

ourselves the right questions about the cultural, ethical, political, and historical confusion we inherited from the twentieth century. The novel doesn't pretend to trace the exact causes of this situation, the reasons the inhabitants of the present have for doing evil. But it does suggest that there are reasons, some affective (maybe they yearn for the sense of power, control, or autonomy unavailable to them through mainstream means), some rational (it is, alas, a rational choice to become a drug trafficker or assassin if the only other option is hunger), others unfathomable. 2666 posits the apocalyptic state of no future as a *fait accompli*, at least for some people in some places (and wonders whether this is actually the case for everyone everywhere), and in doing so impels us to ask why? How? The novel prods us to try to understand the context and structure of this hopeless state, to try to fathom the inner workings of our present-day evils. It invites us to hypothesize that evil is less supernatural and incomprehensible than banal and intelligible (this idea is hammered home most effectively at the inevitable moment that reader gets bored with the dozens upon dozens of crime scene reports). And finally, in response to that fundamental political question, Is it possible to change this situation, to inaugurate a different kind of time?, the novel suggests this is only possible if we are first willing to seek to really grasp this situation, to engage in the anti-onto-theological task of understanding "los circuitos en que se mueve el horror, distinguir la metodología del mal", which, Juan Villoro explains, "son formas de comenzar a refutarlos" (Braithwaite 13). Or, as Bolaño puts it, only if we have the courage to "adentrarse en la oscuridad con los ojos abiertos y [mantenerlos] abiertos pase lo que pase" (*Entre paréntesis* 149). 2666, if nothing else, offers us the opportunity to practice keeping our eyes open.

Other contemporary writers (like Saviano, whom I mentioned above) are much more willing to explicitly affirm the narco-realist thesis and literally locate in Mexico the beginning of the end of modern society as we know it, Charles Bowden being one of the most well-known

among them. On the one hand, Bowden offers straightforward socioeconomic explanations for the violence in Juárez and the rest of Mexico: “Killing is not deviance, it is a logical career decision for thousands floundering in a failing economy and a failing state” (*Murder City* 74). There are reasons, material facts behind what appears to many to be simply the earthly arrival of an otherworldly evil. And yet, in Bowden’s view, these reasons and facts and the violence they give rise to eventually add up to something qualitatively different, “a new way of life, one beyond our imagination and the code words we use to protect ourselves from life and violence . . . . And the violence has not an apparent and simple source. It is like the dust in the air, part of life itself” (22). Above, I mentioned Franco’s critique of the apolitical, mystical view of violence and her suggestion that, if making violence unspeakable is the problem, the solution would be to render it speakable again. Yet, in Bowden, unflinching descriptions and clear-cut explanations lead inexorably to the experience of inexpressibility. Description and interpretation are only preliminary steps in an ultimately anti-hermeneutic process that places the reader or onlooker in a kind of pure presence or sheer reality.

At times, Bowden seems to sense that the most appropriate medium for transmitting the experience of inexpressibility, the quickest route to sheer reality is photography rather than writing. This sense is best expressed on the first page of his *Dreamland*, where he describes the uncanny experience of seeing the future flash ahead of itself in the abiding present of a photograph. A photojournalist friend “turned on a lamp and held a color slide to the light: a black hand reached out of the sand dune just beyond the city. Of course, I knew about the bodies coming out of the sand, often with money in their mouths. Everyone knew about the bodies. Still, that black hand gave me pause. The photographer believed it was deliberately left reaching out of the dune, left to beckon the curious and the ignorant and the idle to a new kind of reality” (1). This is a common theme in Bowden (as well as other contemporary writers and artists whose

work deals with violence in Mexico, for example, Teresa Margolles), namely, the apparently unbridgeable gap between a new reality that announces itself through a kind of sign language of body parts, urban wreckage, and desert wastes and the verbal languages we have at our disposal, which, since they are tethered to the old reality, are incapable of translating the material sign language of the new. For Bowden, rather than calling for an interpretation, the human detritus of Mexico's current drug trade/war forces a *choice* upon us: "We must ask ourselves this simple question . . . . Is this the freak show or the future? Are these men monsters or the coming human beings?" (116). For his part, Bowden is clear that he thinks what we behold before us is "a new kind of reality", in which, as he fatalistically explains "everything is impossible except the status quo" (130).

There is an imbroglio of realisms in Bowden's work. First, we see an inclination toward realist representation (an aesthetic realism), which here is less a matter of mimesis than of letting things or facts speak (or remain silent, as the case may be) for themselves (hence the pride of place implicitly granted to photography). This realist representation leads to an interpretation of empirical reality—that "a new kind of reality" has made its debut in Mexico—and a related ontological assertion, namely, that reality is not one, that there are kinds of reality, and that one kind can be replaced by or radically reconfigure itself into another. Both of these realisms (representational and ontological) are linked to a political realism, namely, the widespread notion that "everything is impossible except the status quo" (whether or not this statement is true, Bowden acknowledges that it is the dominant ideology, and that, though we may wish it were not so, this ideology is here to stay for a long while—at least until we face up to the "new" reality). (A central aim throughout this dissertation will be to point out similar entanglements of realisms in the texts, films, and videos I look at, with an eye ultimately to the political implications of these entanglements.) The goal of Bowden's journalism is not so much to objectively describe

the social, economic, and political situation but rather to use language to bring the reader closer to the things themselves, which do not respond to description or analysis but proclaim themselves as what they are. In this way, his work resembles not only other contemporary narco narratives but also resonates with wider trends in recent philosophy and art away from the Lacanian/Zizekian/Badiouian inflected theories in which realism articulates a “belonging to the Real” and instead toward conceptions according to which realism means “dealing with the things themselves” (Garcia, *Forme et objet* 10).<sup>5</sup>

Like the artist Teresa Margolles, whose installations incorporate the remains of victims of drug-related violence in Mexico, for the purpose of letting these remains “speak” for themselves, Bowden’s writing seeks to lock the reader’s gaze on the current state of the world, on what is actually there, not what we wish were there. Bowden’s books pursue the Lukacsian realist objective of representing, as George Steiner puts it, “the vital particularity of physical and material processes” (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 12). And yet, his ontologically-oriented method constantly tips over into onto-theological, apocalyptic interpretations. However, what may seem like an contradiction between method and interpretation is actually a consistent (if contestable) constellation of realist concepts, namely, that in the case of Mexico, by “dealing with the things themselves” (through realist representation), we learn that reality can change (an ontological claim), but that it has recently changed so radically that it has become impervious to any efforts to further change it (a political claim). Bowden intends this articulation to be a corrective to the onto-theological view, which really expresses our “need to believe” that Ciudad Juárez, or México in general, “is a spot of unique evil, a place where hell boiled over and the hot lava of sin became visible and forced us all to denounce evil and fix our crooked ways” (*Dreamland* 146). Bowden’s brand of realism is meant to demystify these places, to show that

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5 These trends go by the names of “speculative realism” and “object-oriented ontology.” I will elaborate further on these philosophical frameworks in “Chapter One” and again in “Chapter Four.”

“the killings were simply stated facts without apology” (146). And yet, this process of demystification, of laying bare “stated facts” and things as they are, leads in the end to another kind of mythology, that of the “the coming human beings” and the “new kind of reality” that, according to Bowden, we are still woefully unable to understand, let alone respond to. As Jean Franco puts it, “Bowden himself seems fatalistic. It is as if an evil wind has blown over the city, as if he is the lone rider putting himself in danger, wandering around the perilous city, interviewing assassins. He talks not of an apocalypse but of a new and deadly form of everyday life” (*Cruel Modernity* 232). I would say that the mythological core of Bowden’s writings consist precisely in equating this “new and deadly form of everyday life” with the apocalypse.

This mythological, apocalyptic interpretation of contemporary Mexico and Latin America (which is the main theme of "Chapter Two") is generally a view of the South *from* the North.<sup>6</sup> Latin American authors of narco narratives actually tend to resist this temptation. As Palaversich explains, they are “less interested in mythologizing the traffickers than in addressing the issues that mark Mexican society: the social injustice seen in the marginalization of the poverty of the majority, and the corruption, opulent lives and impunity of state officials and drug bosses” (“Politics”). In Palaversich’s view, contemporary narco narratives are, on the whole, less about an unstoppable—i.e. ultimately incomprehensible, mythological—tide of drugs, corruption, and violence sweeping over the Hemisphere, as the narco-realist thesis would have it, than the social structures, affective milieus, and economic conditions that fertilize such phenomena.

Slavoj Žižek has described the HBO series *The Wire* (about drug trafficking in Baltimore) as an exemplary case of contemporary “TV realism,” but this is “less an objective realism (a realistic presentation of a social milieu) than a subjective realism, a film staged by a precisely

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<sup>6</sup> Though it also exists in certain writers working south of the border, for example, in Homero Aridjis’ novels *La zona del silencio* and *Los perros del fin del mundo*. However, apocalyptic representations of Mexico tend to serve ironic ends in Latin American writers. Such is the case in *Ygdrasil*, by the Chilean writer Jorge Baradit, which I will turn to in "Chapter Two."



defined actual social unity” (*The Year* 92). If some contemporary Latin American narco narratives fall short of realist representation’s political potential, it is not because, as Lemus argues, of the simple fact that they make use of a realist style, but perhaps because their realism is incomplete or insufficiently developed. For example, a novel like Elmer Mendoza’s *El amante de Janis Joplin* (which I will comment on further in "Chapter Four"), tends more towards an “objective realism” rather than a “subjective” one to the extent that it ignores a “precisely defined actual social unity” in favor of “a realistic presentation of a social milieu.” The novel’s protagonist, David, is buffeted by the particulars of his social milieu—rural poverty, small town rivalries, regional migration, the influence of North American pop culture, institutional corruption, guerrilla warfare, and state repression—which ultimately lead to his demise, without his ever understanding how these various particulars form a social unity. This kind of narco narrative resembles the naturalist and modernist literature critiqued by Lukács. According to Lukács, naturalism remained mystified by an indecipherable material reality, offering only descriptions of particular objects (including human beings as objects) rather than the social structures and networks in which these objects gain meaning. For Lukács, this tendency attained its culmination in modernism with writers like Joyce and Kafka, who articulate the experience of alienation, of the powerlessness of modern people in the face of objects and structures that have become opaque and untouchable to them through processes of reification. Lukács identifies in Kafka in particular a “mood of total impotence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible power of circumstances” and explains that “this experience, this vision of a world dominated by *angst* and of man at the mercy of incomprehensible terrors, makes Kafka's work the very type of modernist art”, an art that produces “a primitive awe in the presence of an utterly strange and hostile reality” (36).

A “mood of total impotence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible power of circumstances . . . . a primitive awe in the presence of an utterly strange and hostile reality,” such descriptions apply perfectly to the affects that undergird the narco-realist thesis and the literature and analyses (e.g. Bolaño, Bowden, Mendoza) that seem to maintain this thesis. Might it be possible, though, to engage these and other narco narratives without contributing to the narco-realist thesis, to read and think with the former *against* the latter? This will indeed be my primary goal as I take up the novels, films, and videos that form the focus of the chapters that follow. By doing so, I hope to arrive at an understanding of what “literary experiences, condensed in an imagination of the Global South, [can] teach us, not in terms of representations of ‘otherness’ or ethics of compassion, but regarding our dominant Western situation in the present world, its severe limits, and its mistaken assumptions” (Herlinghaus, *Narcoepics* 117), with a special eye to that particular mistaken assumption, the narco-realist thesis. In this way, this dissertation will expand upon Hermann Herlinghaus’ groundbreaking work and contribute to a new understanding of contemporary narco narratives that questions the narco realism that supposedly reveals things in the present as they are, as constitutive of a new reality, but that often winds up re-mystifying Mexico and Latin America in spite of itself. My contribution will help displace the common approach that views narco narratives simply as a replacement for magic realism (which some critics welcome and others decry), an occasion for projecting our hyperbolic hopes or our worst fears onto the southern half of the Hemisphere.

I will accomplish this task in two ways: first, by focusing on works that either clearly critique the narco-realist thesis or that subtly subvert it even while they appear to assume it; and, second, by bringing paradigmatic recent narco narratives into dialogue with other works about contemporary Mexico that on the surface have little or nothing to do with narco-related issues (specifically a neo-fantasy novel and a sci-fi film, which are particularly well suited to thinking

beyond the narco-realist thesis to the extent that they do not limit themselves to a realist description of the present). Both aspects of this approach will contribute to a re-politicization of so-called narco literature. Instead of underlining the arbitrary boundaries or artificial nature of the genre with the intent of jettisoning the “narco” predicate (a gesture that has already been repeated many times by many writers and critics), my dissertation broadens the definition of what can count as a narco narrative while also giving these narratives the chance to speak against or beyond the narco-realist thesis.

In “Chapter One,” “*La vida narca es sueño*: On the Pharmacology of Power in Yuri Herrera’s *Trabajos del reino* and Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*,” I read Herrera’s novel about a cartel employed *narcocorrido* composer and the circles of power he runs in not as a quasi-*costumbrista* description of cartel culture and everyday narco life but rather as a political allegory for contemporary Mexico and Latin America generally. Herrera’s novel offers a profound meditation on a situation increasingly common across Mexico and other parts of the Global South in which the biggest challenge to emancipatory politics, rather than state totalitarianism, or even the society of control, is the return of the sovereign in the voids left by an absent state. Herrera’s novel represents and critiques the revival, in the guise of narco power, of very old paradigms of sovereign power. By placing him alongside Calderón, I show how Herrera’s novel articulates a fundamentally baroque political aesthetics, as well as how this political aesthetics ultimately undermines the power of the sovereign, whether in early-modern Spain or in postmodern Mexico. In this chapter, I also expand the meaning of “narco narrative” by deemphasizing the theme of drug trafficking (which is implied but never explicitly mentioned in the novel) and instead highlighting the novels “pharmacological” themes and ideas, broadly defined. For example, power functions in Herrera’s novel according to a “dialectics of intoxication” (a term I borrow from Walter Benjamin and Hermann Herlinghaus). I repeat this

gesture—i.e. bringing a text under the umbrella of “narco narratives” on account of its pharmacological themes—in Chapters Two and Three as well.

In “Chapter Two,” “No Future: Conspiracy, Pharmacology, and Apocalypse in Jorge Baradit’s *Ygdrasil*,” I offer an analysis of how the Chilean author’s science fiction novel explodes the narco-realist thesis through an extreme ironizing of conspiratorial interpretations of contemporary Mexico. Baradit’s novel suggests that it is less Mexico’s current situation itself (corruption, violence, and the country’s subsumption into the globalized economy) that threatens to precipitate an apocalyptic outcome (defined as a lack of future) than our apolitical, mystifying interpretations of that situation. Drawing on theoretical concepts from Evan Calder Williams and Bernard Stiegler, I interpret Baradit’s novel as suggesting that, rather than the impenetrable conspiracies of the illicit drug economy, it is contemporary capitalism itself, whose material mechanisms and processes exert a pharmacological force that deprives individuals of the ability to relate to the future, in other words, that traps them in an apocalyptic present (which may have already been consummated).

In “Chapter Three,” “Neuronal *Testimonio* and Pharmacological Deproletarianization in Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*,” I continue to draw on Stiegler’s pharmacological critique of contemporary capitalism in order to elucidate the “ecosistema del mal y la violencia estructural que significa la frontera” (Herrera “Escrito en la frontera”) as this is represented in Rivera’s science fiction film. *Sleep Dealer* challenges the narco-realist thesis by, among other things, resisting the view, common in Bolaño and Bowden, of the border as an exception—a void, or black hole—that threatens to engulf and destroy the global socioeconomic order and depicting it instead as *the* paradigmatic site of that order. Rather than the drug traffickers, *sicarios*, and other menacing figures who haunt the desert wastes surrounding the *maquiladoras* that dot the borderland, it is the *maquiladoras* themselves, and the pharmacological (in Stiegler’s sense of

poisoning the social being of human individuals) technologies and productive processes located therein, that present the true challenges to any emancipatory political in Mexico, Latin America, or the rest of the contemporary world.

In "Chapter Four," "The Political Aesthetics of the Land in Contemporary Representations of Narco Violence: Ontology of Vulnerability and Object-Oriented Resistance," I return to source materials that deal directly with the subjects of drug trafficking and drug-related violence, specifically, Angel Nacaveva's novel *Diario de un narcotraficante*, Elmer Mendoza's *El amante de Janis Joplin*, and various Youtube video testimonies about grass-roots resistance to cartel violence in Michoacán. Here I make explicit a question that remained implicit in first three Chapters: how would our understanding of the political meaning of narco narratives change if we approached them less as examples of literary realism (that is, of neo-*costumbrista* representation or the "realistic presentation of a social milieu" (Zizek)) and instead examined them for any philosophically realist arguments, or rather, any ontological assertions, they might contain? Approached in this way, the novels and videos I consider in this chapter exceed the limitations of what Zizek's "objective realism" and instead, by way of their implicit ontological assertions, articulate a "subjective realism" of *objects*. Specifically, these texts and videos suggest an ontology according to which both humans and nonhuman objects (like "the land" or the myriad objects that make up what is often referred to as "the environment") appear equally as political actors potentially capable of forging alliances in order to struggle against the violence and exploitation of the drug trade/war.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ***LA VIDA NARCA ES SUENO: ON THE PHARMACOLOGY OF POWER IN YURI***

#### **HERRERA'S *TRABAJOS DEL REINO* AND CALDERON'S *LA VIDA ES SUENO***

“Invulnerability does not occur in nature; it has to be produced artificially.”

Adriana Cavarero

Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* is a contemporary narco-narrative capable of theorizing the new kinds of power emerging at the margins of the globalized world's mainstream institutions—which margins, as they become increasingly synonymous with the Global South (that is, with the global majority) are beginning to appear more like the new center. The novel is often referred to as a touchstone for what narco-literature at its best can be. Herrera eschews neither realist representation nor formal experimentation but rather utilizes both to weave a sparing, almost lyrically narrated allegory of power set in that paradigmatic scene of state absence, the northern Mexican borderlands. But it is an allegory of power that can also be read as a psychologically realist account of individual subjection and (at least the beginnings of) emancipation. The affective contours of the attraction of sovereign narco-power take shape in the story of the protagonist Lobo, a homeless musician and *narcocorrido* composer nicknamed the Artist by the cartel patrons who later take him in. Herrera's novel offers not only an allegory of these new figures of power and the subjugating and depoliticizing attraction they exert on marginalized subjects like Lobo but also, and more interestingly, it presents a nuanced meditation on the mechanisms through which this attraction works. In this way, it resembles that classic baroque

allegory of power, Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño*. In fact, as I hope to show below, both texts articulate a theory of power in which both sovereignty and subjection function by way of a mechanism of *intoxication*. I will seek to elucidate Herrera's theory of narco-power by analyzing several points of resonance between his novel and Calderón's play. Doing so will allow me to argue that it is not just that the new sovereigns of the South happen to be narcos but, rather, that sovereign power has itself always been narcotic.

### **The Baroque Pharmacology of Power**

If Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* resembles a baroque text, it is not because of any stylistic traits. It has none of the syntactical games or symbolic puzzles that characterized Hispanic baroque literature. Indeed, Herrera's economical, *mot juste* style is in many ways the antithesis of baroque literary aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Herrera's novel coincides with certain baroque political aesthetic schema. In a description of another narco-narrative<sup>8</sup> that applies equally well to *Trabajos del reino*, Hermann Herlinghaus, whose Benjaminian theory of intoxication I draw on in this chapter, explains that the text "foregrounds the 'drama of intoxication,' a scenario that is evocative of the 'Baroque drama' yet devoid of a Baroque aesthetic of excess" (*Narcoepics* 115). Instead of the serpentine syntax of a Calderonian work, Herrera employs a frank style to approximate, as he says, "la presencia de la realidad en mis novelas, y del lenguaje que se habla en la calle" (González Veiguela 43). However, his aim is not to simply "reflejar la realidad tal y como es" but rather to use the images and expressions of everyday reality—beginning with the common usage

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7 But neither does it resemble other examples of "narco-realist" works, with their descriptive inventory of local detail or convocation of real-life characters or socioeconomic situations. In fact, Herrera has noted that it was his intention to omit any overt reference to actual people and places and to avoid the use of terms like "narco", "narcotraffic" or even "drugs" (See interview with Herrera in Zunini, "Escrito en la frontera").

8 The reference is to Alonso Salazar's *Pablo Escobar: Auge y caída de un narcotraficante* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2002).

of the term “rey” to refer to a cartel leader—to highlight the ways in which “los capos del narcotráfico reproducen esquemas antiquísimos en el modo de ejercer el poder, que comprende también las reacciones de los demás frente a ese poder” (43).

Though Calderón’s and Herrera’s styles couldn’t be more different, their political aesthetic arguments—the fundamentally baroque schema of the relation between art and power articulated by each of their works—are essentially the same: that sovereign power is a function of the relationship between thought and perception. Or, more specifically, that the origins of the distribution of power in any given situation can be traced to certain mechanisms of psychotropic transformations that affect the way perception is conceived—power is tied to the realization, or the failure to realize, that perception is not an epiphenomenon but rather a part of the real, or, as Timothy Morton would put it, that the “aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension” (20). From a baroque perspective, it is this transformation of thought’s relationship to perception that either empowers or subjects. As Walter Benjamin famously put it, “Spirit—such was the thesis of the age—shows itself in power; spirit is the capacity to exercise dictatorship” (*Origin* 98). The word translated as “spirit” is the German *geist*, which could also be translated as “mind,” “intellect” or, as the John Beverley translates it, “wit” (47). According to baroque thought, one acquires power as one hones one’s wit.

According to baroque thought, mind acquires wit, grows more witty, shrewd, *ingenioso*, through a variety of exercises, including the deciphering of challenging literature. In a baroque world in which all things are quickly becoming disenchanted, relativized, dissimilar—the West after its first colonial encounters that is—such wit, such a capacity to survey and navigate the world becomes the *sine qua non* of effective action, of power. Beverley has explained that according to baroque political aesthetics, what renders the mind of the reader/potential sovereign—*el letrado*—powerful is not a difficult baroque text’s resemblance with the real per se, but



rather that the reader's mind—his wit or *geist*—is transformed by the reading process, becoming more *ingenioso* and *discreto*, prepared to interpret and influence a world that remains opaque to those less possessed of a sovereign relationship with perception (57, 61-62). Literature and art are more like weight lifting than science.

Or more like dreaming. In *La vida es sueño*, Segismundo's psychotropic transformation, which culminates in his assumption of sovereign power, happens by way of an intoxication that is mistaken as a dream. But this would only be a misinterpretation if "dream" is taken literally. Instead, *sueño*, dream, reverie, could be taken as a generic term for the psycho-aesthetic sphere within which wit develops; the frame of mind that allows consciousness, intelligence, to be assembled, disassembled, and reassembled in novel ways; a psycho-affective and political disruption of what Jacques Rancière would call the "distribution of the sensible;" the plane within which one is and from which one returns transformed, after which transformation it might be said, "Tu ingenio a todos admira" (194). *Sueño*: a moment of dis-illusion, *desengaño*, during which the truth of a situation is unveiled—which truth, however, can be hidden again within one's own mind, out of others' view, and used to create new illusions (as Lope de Vega would have it, "engañar con la verdad"). "¿Qué os admira? ¿qué os espanta / si fue mi maestro un sueño?" (Calderón 195). Indeed, since the source of power, the teacher of the sovereign, is in every case a dream, a disorienting and reorienting—intoxicating—experience of *desengaño*.

In this light, literature, or art in general, is a kind of psychotropic agent capable of giving access to a dream state with the potential to infuse one with new power over the everyday world upon returning to it. This is not the banal notion that literature, or art in general, grants a momentary escape from mundane existence, flights of fancy to brave new worlds that are only ever fanciful. Rather, literature, during the baroque, is that which actually shapes consciousness, molds it into a form capable of powerful perception. A truly baroque dream-technology is more

about transformation than transportation, and if the themes of journeys, shipwrecks, lonely wanderings are essential to baroque literature, it is not so that the reader can experience travel vicariously, but rather so that the mind may receive the tracks of such trips.

Instead of literature or art, the agent of Segismundo's intoxication is a literal intoxicant, the "apacible bebida" containing the "tirano poder" and "secreta fuerza" of "algunas hierbas" (117) that king Basilio orders Clotaldo to administer. This soporific potion allows him to enter a liminal state in which, while not literally a dream, as Basilio would later claim, everything is up in the air. When Segismundo awakes for the first time in his new courtly surroundings, neither the fate of the stars nor the right of blood are taken for granted any longer. Basilio hopes that his son's passage through intoxication will have freed him from external determination, thereby allowing him to reveal himself for what he really is. As we know, the experiment goes badly and, convinced of his son's inherently tyrannical nature, Basilio has him drugged again and returned to the tower. But Segismundo has been irrevocably transformed. He is now discontented, restless, and willing to lead the popular insurrection that arrives in the third act to liberate him.

However, it is crucial to note that the prince's newfound confidence, arrived at through intoxication and *desengaño*, is not based on a certainty of his royal right. Quite the opposite. He may feel indignant about his imprisonment, but he remains unsure to the very end about which reality was truly real: "Yo sueño que estoy aquí / destas prisiones cargado, / y soñé que en otro estado / más lisonjero me vi" (157). Even in his moment of victory he admits "estoy temiendo en mis ansias / que he de despertar y hallarme / otra vez en mi cerrada / prisión" (195). Segismundo has been willing to act, to fight for the throne, precisely because he knows now that nothing is certain. "¿Qué es la vida? Un frenesí. / ¿Qué es la vida? Una ilusión, / una sombra, una ficción, / el mayor bien es pequeño; / que toda la vida es sueño, / y los sueños, sueños son" (157). This should not be read as mere moral relativism, an excuse for the *carpe diem* ethics

apparently expressed by the prince's final verses: "que toda la dicha humana, / en fin, pasa como un sueño. / Y quiero aprovecharla / el tiempo que me durare" (195). The more fundamental revelation is *ontological* and not moral. Segismundo comes to realize that there is no ontological hierarchy in the relation between *vida* and *sueño*. Life is a dream as much as dreams are dreams—which is not to say that nothing is real, but that all real things are dreamlike. *Sueño*: the general term for the real such that subjectivity and perception belong to it rather than being unreal or illusory epiphenomena. *Sueño* is equivalent to the aesthetic dimension as such, which, as Morton puts it, "is a place of illusions, yet they are real illusions" (*Realist Magic* 18). Or, to borrow Graham Harman's terminology, *sueño* is the general term for the real such that "causal relations between non-humans" should be treated "no differently from human perception of them" (*The Quadruple Object* 5). According to Harman, all things (both human and nonhuman, material and immaterial, and "objects have reality at many different scales, not just the smallest" (Cohen 106). Furthermore, "objects withdraw from all types of relation, whether those of human knowledge or of inanimate and causal impact" (106). However, objects are not *completely* withdrawn from human knowledge (just as they are neither completely open nor closed to relations with other objects). Rather, as Adam Miller has put it, "all objects are engaged in the work of both resisting availability and making available what is resistant" (49). All things are resistantly available, which means that nothing can be completely accessible (to a sovereign, for example) and that everything is open to perception and representation (for Harman, all relationships between objects, including, say, a collision between two billiard balls, consists in the mutual representation of the objects involved)—in other words, aesthetics=ontology.

Segismundo's princely power springs not so much from a sovereign will, bolstered by the notion that, all things being illusory, he is as justified as anyone in venturing to grab his father's scepter. Rather, he becomes powerful to the extent that his thought is capable of grasping that

what is and what appears to be have the same ontological status, that *vida* is *sueño* and vice-versa: *desengaño* *ontología*. His sovereignty is a function of the *ingenio*, *discreción*, and *prudencia* that give him the confidence to govern reality and that inspire in others the illusion of his natural superiority and their own unavoidable subjection. Segismundo's power is not, in the end, justified by the fact of his victory itself but rather by his awesome ability to find a way out of the plot's unresolved royal and romantic complexities (how to address Basilio's unjust actions, Rosaura's grievance, the love triangle between her, Estrella, and Astolfo, the matter of the rebellious soldier). He is considered powerful because of his ability to see, or at least appear to see, what others cannot, and then put everything in its right place, or at least appear to. Clotaldo, by contrast, is the archetypal courtier, whose inability to navigate the complexities of the world supposedly betrays his naturally inferior status, the givenness of his subjection to the sovereign who can decipher the puzzles of reality. He frets over the seemingly intractable complications woven in the first act: "¿Qué confuso laberinto / es éste, donde no puede / hallar la razón el hilo . . . . Descubra el cielo camino; / aunque no sé si podrá, / cuando en tan confuso abismo / es todo el cielo un presagio, / y es todo el mundo un prodigio" (116). Segismundo, on the other hand, assumes his power not so much through military victory but rather by offering ingenious solutions to the complications that led to the conflict in the first place (pardoning his father, arranging Astolfo and Rosaura's union, marrying Estrella, and imprisoning his erstwhile collaborator). "Tu ingenio a todos admira / ¡Qué condición tan mudada! / ¡Qué discreto y que prudente!" (195). This is the cause of the others' wonder and admiration and the source of his power. In place of a confusion to be solved by searching for signs above or below what presents itself to the senses—Clotaldo's "cielo" as "presagio" and "mundo" as "prodigio", which he suspects could signal the way out of the "confuso laberinto"—Segismundo, the Prince, sees a play of appearances to be manipulated through cunning thought. *La vida es sueño*'s baroque

political aesthetic thesis is that power is attained not by using positive science to break through perception and arrive at ‘real’ truth but by employing *las ciencias humanas* to form a reality out of what appears to be, a sovereign operation justified by the idea that what appears as well as who/what perceives both already belong to what is.

In summary, according to Calderón’s characteristically baroque conception, power is a function of a psychotropic transformation, induced by intoxication, through which the sovereign subject grasps that his interventions in the real are grounded ontologically by the fact that these interventions (along with the appearance, perception, and subjective manipulation they entail) are immanent to the real. Put more plainly, if through the psychotropic transformation occasioned by intoxication the subject gains control over perception—meaning both increased reflexivity vis-à-vis the relation between thought and perception and greater ability and confidence to manipulate the perception of others—then the perceiver moves into a position of sovereign power. If, on the other hand, the transformation leaves the subject mystified by the workings of perception, in awe of what he perceives and how he perceives it, then that subject becomes subject to sovereign power. In either case the mechanism is the same. Something—art, drugs, any agent of intoxication— triggers a transformation in the way perception is thought, and this can be experienced one of two ways: as clarifying or confusing, illuminating or obfuscating. It must be noted, however, that perception is not restricted to the (human) subject side of a subject-object relation. Rather, all relations between objects are perceptual relations, since no object is fully accessible to any other object, whether that other object be human or nonhuman. In other words, as Morton might state it, the aesthetic realm is the ontological realm, and anyone or anything with wit sufficient to make this realization and exploit it could be called sovereign.

All of this resonates with what Benjamin calls “the dialectics of intoxication” (*Selected* 210), which Hermann Herlinghaus has expanded upon in his recent analyses of the global

distribution of power and affective marginalization.<sup>9</sup> “Is not perhaps”, wonders Benjamin, “all ecstasy in *one* world humiliating sobriety in the world complementary to it?” (210). At first glance, Benjamin’s conjecture might seem to echo the musings of so many other theorists of drug experience, most of whom have been concerned with the essentially Kantian question of how drugs mediate our relationship to the real, how they modify our (in)ability to access the thing in itself. Mystically inclined drug theorists from Aldous Huxley to Terrence McKenna and Daniel Pinchbeck have enthusiastically affirmed that certain psychotropic substances allow consciousness to circumvent the Kantian problem of access entirely. These substances, particularly psychedelics, supposedly remove the limitations of subjectivity and reveal a real beneath the everyday reality of normal perception. On one reading, Benjamin’s statement might seem to anticipate such notions, the world in which intoxication is experienced as “ecstasy” being the world of everyday perception while “the world complementary to it” would be the world of the really real, to which intoxication affords the “sobriety” of direct access. It is not difficult to see how such putatively radical views actually reproduce the Western metaphysical tradition’s underlying ontotheological presuppositions. This is surely not what Benjamin means. But neither is he merely restating the widespread view—where positivist scientific consensus and modern common sense coincide—according to which intoxication involves not a departure from the normal structures of subjectivity but rather their intensification. According to this view, the psychotropic transformation of perception and thought occasioned by intoxication are not qualitatively different modes subjective experience, just a *more* subjective ones—hallucinations and delusions being the most subjective experiences of all. The usually unacknowledged and thoroughly post-Kantian

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<sup>9</sup> See especially the section “A War on Intoxication: Affective Marginalities and the Examination of Experience” in the first chapter of *Violence Without Guilt: Ethical Narratives from the Global South* and the chapters “Pharmakon’ and ‘Pharmakos’: Prolegomena for a Janus-Faced Modernity” and “Aesthetics of Sobriety: Approximating Narratives from the Hemispheric South” in *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*.

corollary of this view—i.e. that normal and intoxicated thought and perception exist along a continuum of subjective experience—is that that subjectivity itself is always at least partially hallucinatory and delusional. This idea—which under the label of “correlationism” has recently been attacked by various speculative realist thinkers—<sup>10</sup>implicitly entails that nothing knowable is real and that nothing real is knowable. Both of the theories of intoxication just outlined—the mystical and the positivist—are essentially correlationist to the extent that they retain the Kantian notion of the real as the inaccessible “thing in itself.” While the mystic believes intoxication catalyzes a transcendence of the subject and direct access to the real, the positivist (and modern common sense) sees subjectivity folding in on itself in intoxication, increasing its distance from the real. In either case there remains a correlationist dichotomy between the world of thought and perception and the World of the real.

But Benjamin is trying to describe a dialectic, not a dichotomy. To understand what he means by “dialectics of intoxication”, one must be careful to note that that the worlds he speaks of are not adjacent but “*complementary*.” I want to suggest that there is an ontological assumption implicit in his choice of words, one which undercuts the world/World, (subjective) reality/(absolute) Real dichotomy common to both the mystical and the positivist views of intoxication described above. The complementarity of worlds revealed, for Benjamin, through the dialectics of intoxication necessarily implies their ontological homogeneity, the fact that they do not exist hierarchically in relation to each other but rather “horizontally,” along the same—the only—plane of being. It is not the case that there is a world of subjectivity and perception and an adjacent objective, absolute, real World beyond perception made more or less accessible by

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10 Philosopher Quentin Meillassoux coined the term “correlationism” in his *After Finitude*. It has since then become both a rallying point and a point of contention for speculative realists and “object-oriented ontologists” of various stripes. These thinkers use the term correlationism to refer to the post-Kantian tradition in modern thought according to which the key question with regard to reality is the question of how human subjects can gain access to real objects. The correlationists’ answer, according to Meillassoux, is that human subjects *cannot* access real objects but rather only their subjective perceptions or projections of such objects. All that philosophy can do, then, is try to think the relationship, the correlation, between the subject and its perceptions, projections, constructions, etc. In otherwords, ontology is an illegitimate pursuit for correlationists who rather privilege epistemology.

intoxication. Still less is it the case that intoxication reveals a meta-World encompassing perceptual worlds and the Real. Rather, according to the ontology implied by the dialectics of intoxication, indefinitely many complementary worlds, in which appearance and perception are on equal ontological footing with objectivity, *are all there is*.<sup>11</sup> *La vida es sueño*.

The sovereign realizes, as Markus Gabriel has put it, that “the world does not exist” and that all there is are worlds of perception, or better, what Gabriel would call “fields of sense” (“Meaning” 75). This, as Gabriel points out elsewhere, is equivalent to Hegel’s “*das Sein ist Schein*” (*Transcendental*), being *is* appearance. The sovereign’s power does not consist in his ability to rise above these worlds or fields of sense, to use his *ingenio* to consolidate all worlds of perception into a meta-World. Such is impossible. Rather, his power is a function of his ability to deftly navigate and manipulate, interpret and create, these worlds of perception or fields of sense, while his subjects mistake this skill for mastery of a World in which they continue to believe. The absolute power of the prince derives from his understanding—arrived at through instructional, initiatory intoxications—that the absolute exists dialectically across worlds of perception and not above or below them. Sovereign is he who aligns his thought to “dialectical thinking,” which in Benjamin’s words, is “the organ of historical awakening” (*Arcades* 898). If *la vida es sueño*, it is, again, not because nothing is real but because all real things are dreamlike: “Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel noticed—by cunning” (898). Sovereign power is the shrewd (*ingenioso, discreto, prudente*) power that makes use of the dialectic of intoxication to assimilate and be assimilated into the process by which being cunningly awakens itself through the continuous dreaming that gives rise to the proliferation of complementary worlds of sense that constitutes an open-ended existence.

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11 To be clear, this does not mean that only the perceptual or subjective exists, nor does it entail the old postmodern banishment of the absolute or objective. Rather, the point is that the relational and the absolute both belong to the real.



However, power by intoxication is never completely sovereign power; intoxication itself always retains a level of sovereignty over the intoxicated. Intoxicating agents, dream-technologies, do not merely produce power, as Clotaldo reminds us, they are themselves powerful: “la virtud de algunas yerbas / cuyo *tirano poder* / y cuya secreta fuerza / así el humano discurso / priva, roba y *enajena*, / que deja vivo *cadaver* / a un hombre, y cuya *violencia*, / adormecido, le quita / los sentidos y potencias...” (121, my emphasis). It is poison as well as potion, inoculation in the positive and negative sense—the *pharmakon* of Plato and, later, Derrida. While it commandeers consciousness, it jettisons bodies off into the realm of what Agamben's Benjamin inspired concept of “bare life.” The drug alienates (“enajena”) mind from body, discourse from matter, sense from the sensible, throws all of these up in the air for the taking—“quita / los sentidos y potencias” in order to offer them back to the most cunning. It is how consciousnesses and bare-life fall back into place during and, especially, after intoxication that determines to whom power will fall—the first minds to follow the thieving path of the drug itself through the night of intoxication will be the ones to catch bare-life still sleeping and unawares and will have power over it. Of course, there is danger in this, since one never knows, before entering the leveling field of intoxication, whether others will awake faster than oneself. Hence the trope, ubiquitous in the narco-narratives increasingly popular on both sides of the border, of the narco who never touches the merchandise, who leaves it to others to “poison” themselves. Sovereignty eventually sobers up, while the subjected remain mystifyingly intoxicated—the narcotized are subjected to the narco.

*Sueño*—the *potentially* illuminating state of intoxication—is dialectical; it simultaneously divides and binds the *ingenioso* from the alienated, sovereign from the subjected. In principle all can accede to such a state, but most, most of the time, do not actually *see* with the new kinds of sobriety to be had there. If they did, it would be called emancipation (more on this below). And

because only some, most of the time, develop the shrewd powers of perception that permit them not only to decipher the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 12) but to become *distributors of sense, manipulators of the sensible*, these few come to be seen—according to the baroque thesis making a comeback in the realm of the narco—as ‘natural’ leaders while the rest are regarded as naturally in need of guidance through a perplexing World.

In Calderón’s play, it is not *sueño* itself that invests Segismundo with power but rather his passage into/through intoxication, catalyzed by the potion, which transforms the way he thinks of the relationship between perception and being, and his own relation to this relation, which is now active and sovereign rather than passive and subjected. But even more important is how his transformation transforms others’ perception of him. “Sueña el rey que es rey, y vive / con este engaño mandando” (164). Ultimately, legitimacy matters much less than the perception of legitimacy on the part of the governed, those who have been *subjected* and not *subjectified* by intoxication.

### **La vida narca es sueño**

“Observaba fijamente al Rey. Se lo bebía.”

Yuri Herrera

*Discreción, prudencia*, wit, these qualities, so highly regarded during the Baroque and again now during the era of the narco, are regarded as the hallmark of *ingenio*, evidence of a sovereign essence. But what is the basis for such discretion? Is the appearance or performance of prudence and discretion another source of intoxication, one that subjects others to he that appears to judge and act well? Is it precisely this ability to appear thus that is called *ingenio*, wit? “Que estoy soñando, y que quiero / obrar bien, pues no se pierde / obrar bien, aun entre sueños” (172). These

verses contain more of a Machiavellian realism than a Pascalian wager. “A reinar, fortuna, vamos; / no me despiertes si duermo, / y si es verdad, no me duermas. / Mas sea verdad o sueño, / *obrar bien es lo que importa*; / si fuere verdad, por serlo; / si no, por ganar amigos / para cuando despertemos” (175). “Obrar bien”: not (only) to do good but to act well, shrewdly, cunningly, tactically, intoxicatingly. Today’s narcos “obran bien” not only when they redistribute wealth or build up infrastructure in poor communities, as they are occasionally known to do, but also, and especially, when they act consistently, even violently, keeping to the logic and values that structure their outsider kingdoms. Their shrewdness, and the ruthlessness through which it is expressed, is a technique for intoxicating (in a subjecting way) the people they would govern. If one can induce admiration and deference in the people, as Segismundo does, one can indefinitely defer the revelation of the secret that there is, in fact, no essence of sovereignty, only a shift in perspective that allows one to assume the nothingness of the dream in such a way that keeps others dreaming, that keeps them from awakening to the fact that they all are equally capable of assuming this position and “obrando bien” themselves, shaping and inhabiting their own dream-worlds of sense.

In this light, the narco would be the modern sovereign who rules not only by controlling the flow of narcotics but also by fully embracing the fundamentally narcotic nature of power—who comprehends that life is a dream, with all the nuance this expression has taken on up to this point in my argument. If the mystical view of intoxication corresponds to priestly power and the positivist view to the power of the expert, the dialectical view corresponds to sovereign power. That the Latin American narco—and no longer, say, the dictator or, even less, the militant—is the modern figure most closely resembling the sovereign may account for its attractiveness. More and more people feel awe and deference toward him precisely to the extent that they suspect the term “drug *lord*” is no longer just a metaphor.

Yuri Herrera's allegory of power in *Trabajos del reino* subtly describes the mechanisms by which the *engaños* of sovereignty structure the relations of power between contemporary drug lords and their subjects. The novel's protagonist Lobo grows up living a precarious and itinerant life after his parents abandon him to his fate while they leave, definitively, to test their own luck to the on the other side of "la línea." All his father leaves him is an accordion and the solemn charge, "abrácelo bien . . . que este es su pan" (16). And bread is about all he manages to get as he bounces from bar to bar, singing for tips, only stopping occasionally to *cartonear*, that is to rest for a moment in his cobbled-together cardboard home. "Desde que sus padres lo habían traído de quién sabe dónde para luego abandonarlo a su suerte, la existencia era una cuenta de días de polvo y sol" (10). Not surprisingly, then, Lobo considers his first encounter with the narco that would become his benefactor as utterly pivotal. One night, working the crowd at a bar just like any other, he lays eyes on a man like no one else. As the narrator describes it, Lobo "comprendió que este día era el más importante que le había tocado vivir" (10). This is not only because he has finally met someone with the ability to lift him out of poverty and precariousness but also, and more importantly, because this person has the *power* to give sense to his world. "El hombre tomó asiento a una mesa y sus acompañantes trazaron un semicírculo a sus flancos . . . . Era un rey, y a su alrededor todo cobraba sentido . . . . Jamás antes había estado próximo a uno de los que hacían cuadrar la vida" (9-10).

Lobo is as awestruck—"admirado" in Calderón's language—by this king's sense-giving presence as Segismundo's subjects are when he finally allocates to each their 'rightful' place in the kingdom. Like these subjects, Lobo considers this proof positive of the King's *natural* sovereignty: "Él sabía de sangre, y vio que la suya era distinta. Se notaba en el modo en que el hombre llenaba el espacio, sin emergencia y con un aire de saberlo todo, como si estuviera hecho de hilos más finos. Otra sangre. El hombre tomó asiento a una mesa y sus acompañantes trazaron

un semicírculo a sus flancos” (9). And it is this realization that simultaneously allows Lobo to perceive his own natural essence, the role he is to play in a world newly filled with sense. This happens when the King, observing a scuffle between Lobo and a drunk who refuses to tip for the song he requested, impassively approaches the recalcitrant drunk, shoots him in the stomach, pulls a few bills out of the dead man’s pocket, hands them to Lobo and, full of confidence and control, commands, “Cóbrese, artista” (13). From this moment on, Lobo will be known as the Artist, a title he instantly accepts as preordained, and for this reason “ninguna otra fecha significaba nada, sólo esta, porque, por fin, había topado con su lugar en el mundo” (14).

The baroque political aesthetics implicit in this scene (though not in the syntax or style of its narration) should be readily apparent. It is the relation between art and power, or rather the King’s ability to perceive the special nature of this relation, that shapes the contours of the Artist’s new world. Lobo is interpellated into the place of the Artist, his world restructured, in the moment the King recognizes the meaning of his talent, when he witnesses the King justify his exercise of sovereign power—here exemplified by “the right to take life or let live” (Foucault 136)—by his ability to recognize the value and power of art.

More importantly, one should note the pharmacology of power at work in the scene, specifically, the way that the King’s performance of the political aesthetic recognition initiates a process of intoxication within Lobo/the Artist. “Lobo cogió los billetes sin mirarlos. Observaba fijamente al Rey, *se lo bebía*” (13, my emphasis). Lobo becomes intoxicated by the King’s powerful performance of aesthetic perception and takes this as evidence, first, of the King’s sovereignty and, second, of the naturalness of his own subordinate place. On one level, this is simply a confirmation of something he already thought he knew, i.e. that there is a natural order to the world. Prior to meeting the King, he simply believed that his natural place was placelessness, precariousness, destitution. On the street, Lobo “aprendió las siguientes verdades:

Estar aquí es cosa de tiempo y desgracias. Hay un Dios que dice Aguántese, las cosas son como son” (17). His first encounter with sovereignty is intoxicating to the extent that it seems to reveal that the King has access to a truer perception of the world, a more real reality. The ontology of Lobo’s world remains the same while its existential content, its distribution of the sensible, is shaken up and rearranged in this unexpected dreamlike experience in a nameless bar. This dissonance between his inherited ontology and its newly derived existential consequences triggers the beginning of an intoxication that, as long as it lasts, will transform Lobo from an itinerant artisan into a courtly Artist and subject to the Sovereign.

It will become clear below that the pharmacology of power in *Trabajos del reino*, though it concerns kings and courts, is subtly different from the baroque version articulated in Calderón’s play. In both works, the Sovereign stands not by virtue of his subjects’ rational choice to enter into a social contract but instead persists in power as long as they remain in awe, intoxicated by the perspicacity he performs. Such is the psychotropic dialectic of sovereign power: subjects remain subjected to the extent that they perceive a superior power of perception at work. Rather than Carl Schmitt’s famous definition, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (5), sovereign is he who is perceived to be exceptionally perceptive. The source of power slides from the person of sovereign, the site of his will, to the diffuse site of the collective perception of his subjects. As we will see, Herrera’s novel shows how the King can only execute his sovereign decrees—proclaiming states of exception, dividing the world into friends and enemies, giving and taking life at will—only as long as his subjects subject themselves to the exceptional status they impute to him.

The better part of *Trabajos del reino* is devoted to describing the time the Artist spends inebriated by his image of the King, intoxicate by what seems to be immediate access to the real. As Lobo, the itinerant artisan, he had assembled songs from the images of other peoples lives as

they appeared to his marginalized perspective. “Del amor no sabía nada pero estaba al tanto; lo mentaba en medio de dichos y saberes, le ponía notas y lo vendía. Pero era una repetición lo suyo, un espejo de la vida que le contaban. Aunque tenía la sospecha de que algo más podía hacer con las canciones, ignoraba cómo arrojarle, porque ya todo estaba dicho” (18). Now, sensing his destiny as an Artist, he wants to sing reality as it is. But first he must experience it first hand. So, soon after their fateful encounter in the bar, the Artist makes his way to the *narcorrancho* where the King holds court. In this palace, the Artist expects to find the true residence of the real, the center from which sense and order irradiate to structure the world. In the wasteland where there used to be only “un basural, una trampa de infección y desperdicios,” there now rises up from the desert “un faro” radiating the King’s glory (20). “Estas eran las cosas que fijaban la altura de un rey: el hombre vino a posarse entre los simples y convirtió lo sucio en esplendor. Al acercarse, el Palacio reventaba un confin del desierto en una soberbia de murallas, rejas y jardines vastísimos. Una ciudad con lustre en la margen de la ciudad, que sólo parecía repetir calle a calle su desdicha. Aquí la gente que entraba y salía echaba los hombros para atrás con el empaque de pertenecer a un dominio próspero” (20). If the Artist knows this is where he needs to be, it is less for the material security he will enjoy here—which, however, he by no means takes for granted: “Durante esos primeros días casi lo único que hizo el Artista fue comer” (30)—than for the hope of belonging to the order that reigns within such as “dominio próspero.”

Among the splendors of the palace, what stands out to the Artist is “sobre todo, gente” (19). “Cuánta persona cubriendo a zancadas las galerías. De un lado para otro en diligencias o en afán de lucir. Gente de todas partes, de cada lugar del mundo conocido, gente de más allá del desierto. Había, verdad de Dios, hasta algunos que habían visto el mar. Y mujeres que andaban como leopardos, hombres de guerra gigantescos y condecorados de cicatrices en el rostro, había indios y negros, hasta un enano vio” (19). What most impresses him is not the exotic origins of

the figures in this baroque tableau but rather the fact that each of them has a clearly defined place in the world of order presided over by the King. No one goes by their proper name. Rather than the uniqueness of their identities or personal histories, what defines them is place function in the kingdom, the roles designated by their titles: *el Rey*, *el Heredero*, *la Bruja*, *la Niña*, *la Cualquiera*, *el Gerente*, *el Gringo*, *el Joyero*, *el Periodista*, *el Traidor*. As with the real-life narcos who tend to go by titles and nicknames, it is as if this practice reinforced the belief that the positions they occupy correspond to a preexisting taxonomy of power, which the King apparently has the power to access and transpose onto his surroundings by naming roles, distributing sense and, above all, purpose. It is in recognition of this power—which in another era would have been called *ingenio*, *discreción*, *prudencia*—that the Artist decides to offer his services to the King and sing his praises: “Es nuestro padre y un Rey / Y por esta que es muy bueno / Bajo su brazo es de ley / Cumplir los trabajos del reino // Unos te quieren huir / Otros te echan montón / Será porque a todos les diste más que dinero ambición” (106).

It is the mirage of an oasis of order—King, palace, kingdom—in a desert of disorder (a thoroughly baroque image) that keeps the Artist intoxicated, in thrall, in place, in line. This is how Herrera accounts for the contemporary force of the figure of the narco. What we look for in the narco is not an experience of delirium, an escape from the rigidity of society into the anarchy that Rafael Lemus describes as the narco’s essence (40). Rather, it is mainstream society itself that is thoroughly anarchic—thirty-plus years of neoliberalism having caused “all fixed, fast-frozen relations” to be “swept away” and “all that is solid” to melt “into air” (Marx and Engels 70)—while the narco offers the reactionary hope of holding on, as Eduardo Antonio Parra puts it, to “una lógica interna, un férreo sistema de valores . . . una coherencia inamovible” (61). The fierce violence he unleashes starts to seem like a small price to pay for the promise of order and prosperity he appears to offer.



The irony, of course, is that the contemporary cartels in many ways resemble the transnational corporations that opened up the power vacuums they now seek to occupy. They orchestrate global supply chains and distribution networks, and they prey on the precarious, summoning surplus populations into service and then literally disposing of them, even more cynically than the industries from the North that hide behind the plausible deniability made possible by the geographical and temporal distribution of their violence. But even this behavior can appear as evidence of sovereign exceptionality, as the Artist sees it in Herrera's novel: "Si algo entendía es que en el trance de vivir uno hace daño, tarde o temprano, por eso mejor decidir de frente a quién se lo hace, como obraba el Rey. ¿Quién tenía esa bravura para aceptarlo? ¿Quién aceptaba el calvario por los demás? Él era su manto, la herida que se agranda para que al resto no duela" (48). Not ruthlessness but *prudencia*. Not madness but a sovereign sobriety "que a todos admira," a wit or shrewdness that intoxicates and subjects those who witness it.

As the Artist assimilates into the Kings court, his admiration only grows deeper. He revels in the strength that to which his artistic service gives him access, a strength which in turn further bolsters the King—a feedback loop of power. "Para esto servimos — dijo el Joyero — , para darle poder. A solas, ¿qué vale cualquiera de nosotros? Nada. Pero aquí somos fuertes, con él, con su sangre... ¡Y que nadie se haga ilusiones de arrebatarle nada al señor!" (65). Knowing that his art strengthens the King, and that the King's power in turn empowers him, is what motivates the Artist to compose, perform, record, and broadcast like proclamations the *narcocorridos* recounting his Sovereign's exploits.

At this point in the story, while he happily plays his ordained role in the kingdom, the Artist believes that his art is powerful because it sings of the King's powerful actions. And he considers his art full of truth because the actions that motivate its composition, since they directly determine the shape and meaning of the reality around him, are the truest, realist things

he can imagine. He sees a clear difference between the court Journalist's function and his own, between persuading others to ignore the truth and artfully letting them perceive it: "Para entretener a los necios con mentiras limpias el Periodista tenía que hacerlas parecer verdades. Las noticias verdaderas eran cosa de él, materia de corrido, y había tantas por cantar que bien podía olvidar las que no servían al Rey" (37). The Artist still does not understand that he himself manipulates the world with his art, shapes the perception of his listeners so that the King appears to them as he sees him. He still does not want to understand, since the stability of the order of which he finally forms an integral part depends on his not understanding. Or he is afraid to understand, which, as will become clearer below, amounts to the same thing. The disloyal scheming of certain other courtiers seems almost incomprehensible to him, unnerving and *unreal* to the extent that they question the reality doled out by the King, and for this reason he repudiates it utterly. This loyalty, his willingness to accept his own subjection not only as natural but also perversely empowering, eventually earns the Artist the King's trust: "A nadie le tengo la confianza que a usted le tengo. — Y, por si fuera poco, añadir —: Hay otros que de plano no tienen llenadero, usted en cambio sabe cuál es su sitio, se contenta con lo que le toca" (98). For this courtly Artist, intoxicated by the power of a narco-realist order, there is no higher honor.

If the Artist were to stop singing, the King's sovereignty would die out like an echo. The King knows this, as he himself, during a moment of crisis, will later admit to the Artist: "Para estar donde yo estoy no sólo basta ser un chingón, eh, hay que serlo y hay que parecerlo. Y yo lo soy . . . pero necesito que mi gente lo crea, y ese, pendejito, ese era tu trabajo" (114-115). But as of yet, the Artist still cannot decipher the meaning of his own song. And so his accordion weighs him down instead of setting him free. Rousseau's famous dictum applies: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." And these chains are due as much to our inability to cunningly escape our own intoxicated state—or to assume the power of it, that is, pass through the

intoxication of intoxication into the sobriety available therein—as to the ability of the rulers to shrewdly assure that we persist in it. Our chains are due as much to our *desire* to be oppressed as to the desire of the rulers to oppress. Most of the time we desire to see ourselves governed by an *ingenioso*, admirable Prince—we love his power. Deleuze and Guattari, following Wilhelm Reich's critique of Nazi Germany, refuse “to accept ignorance or illusion on the part of the masses as an explanation of fascism” and instead demand “an explanation that will take their desires into account, an explanation formulated in terms of desire: no, the masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they *wanted* fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for” (*Anti-Oedipus* 29). Ignorance and illusion do not explain fascism, but intoxication is not exactly ignorance or illusion; rather, it is the dream-state that dis-illusions and looses the desires that have hitherto remained hidden. Through the disillusioning process of dreaming these desires can either be forced deeper into the unconscious, where they tend to reproduce subjection, or they can break through into consciousness, in which case they become powerful, subjectifying—Segismundo awaking into another confused dream in his father's court vs. Segismundo actively living a waking dream in battle; Lobo imbibing the King's intoxicating power to dub him an Artist vs. the Artist sobering up to the illusion of the King's sovereignty and the reality of his own freedom as a thoroughly transformed Lobo (we will see how this plays out below).

Ignorance and illusion are excuses, alibis for not having understood the real meaning of the intoxicating *sueño*, which could be described, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, as the realization that “there is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring-production that is mere fantasy on the other. . . . The truth of the matter is that *social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions*” (29). The dream is not fantasy, not desire as fantasy (there is no such thing), but the state that reveals

desire and the social as what they are, and what they are is all there is. Dream-technologies, like literature, drugs or the spectacle of sovereign power can facilitate this realization, and illusion, *engaño*, is merely an excuse for not coming out the other side of intoxication positively transformed—like Segismundo, who, realizing that all there is are worlds of perception structured by a creative desire that belongs to being, sets out to transform the former by shrewdly infusing it with the latter. Or more than an excuse, the illusion of the powerless is taken as proof positive of their natural inferiority, a justification of the *desengañado*'s right to rule over them.

In the era of the narco—and it is the virtue of a work like Herrera's to help us see this—intoxication could perhaps be related with fear in the way Spinoza understands the latter with regard to power. As Étienne Balibar explains in his commentary on Spinoza, “the whole of history is conditioned by *the fear of the masses*: both the fear they themselves feel and that which they inspire in others” (39). Power is exerted to stave off what is feared in the people, and it is tolerated by the people out of a desire to avoid what they fear in each other as well as themselves. And if there is a power dialectic of intoxication—if it can both subjectify (render powerful) and subject (render powerless)—maybe it is fear, ultimately, that decides how it plays out in a given situation. Those who are afraid of passing through intoxication will remain powerless under illusion (or will claim to) while those that pass through without fear will shed illusion and assume power (in the form of sobriety if not sovereignty).

In *Trabajos del reino*, the Artist lives intoxicated by power in his day-to-day courtly existence. And yet, in his attitude toward psychoactive substances—the literal drugs never explicitly named in the novel but obviously crucial to the Kingdom—we see the beginnings of his own sovereign potential, which will eventually develop into a full-blown emancipatory course of action. Such is his antipathy to drugs that he will not even take painkillers for the migraines that frequently incapacitate him. “Qué receta, qué se iba a tomar el Artista. Él ni agua

tibia se empinaba, porque entendía: Aguántese, las cosas son como son. Que otros hallaran ungüentos para la congoja o para el cuerpo, no juzgaba; él prefería gobernar solo sus entrañas. Ya había probado menjurjes . . . . Tanta alarma le dio no saber de su cuerpo que decidió no volver a meterse venenos por mejor promesa que hicieran” (43). The simple remedy that the court Doctor eventually prescribes for the Artist’s headaches—a pair of glasses—prefigures the subtle shift in perspective that will wind up transforming the Artist completely. Both remedies, even though they involve no drugs, are pharmacological to the extent that they function by influencing the subject’s experience of intoxication, the way in which they inflect his perception of the power relations in which he is enmeshed. When entrusted by the King to carry out a mission to infiltrate a rival cartel and find out the identity of a Traitor, the Artist is surprised by a realization that will ultimately upset the order of the Kingdom more than any traitorous conspiracy ever could. Once inside the other cartel’s court, “el Artista observaba y observaba con los lentes nuevos que le había mandado el Doctor, y eso es lo que le brincó: *que todo era igual* (102). Everything was the same, which means, of course, that nothing in his King’s court was as it had seemed. If this ersatz rival kingdom could *appear* to be just like the real Kingdom—if it had the same power to intoxicate—then what the Artist had always interpreted as the naturalness of the King’s order, the sense he gave to the world, could just as well be nothing but appearance, artifice. “Tuvo una visión minuciosa del rostro del Rey, como con una lupa le vio la consistencia floja de la piel, de una constitución tan precaria como la de cualquiera de las personas en este lugar. Disimuló que el hallazgo lo fulminaba” (102). He understands now that these two kingdoms are actually competing spheres of sense rather than, on the one hand, the true Kingdom in tune with the order of a univocal World and, on the other, a counterfeit kingdom of illusion. But what the Artist really comes to see, so sharply through his new glasses, more than the leveling relativity or relationality of the two rival kingdoms, is the mechanism by which this ontological parity is

reflected and refracted by the artifices of the astute manipulators of sense who aspire to sovereignty. Their ability to take senselessness and summon it into a world of sense—which is misperceived by their subjects as the power to align themselves with the natural order of the World—itself *depends* on the relationality of the matters they manipulate.

The apperception of the ground of appearance and perception opens up the possibility for the intoxicated subject of the Sovereign to assume the position of sovereign subject of intoxication. This is Benjamin's "humiliating sobriety": to understand *how* intoxication works *from within*. In these circumstances, it entails a realization that power is not an artificial reality imposed onto the world from above but a consequence of the fact that artifice is real. Artifice is the mechanism by which worlds of sense relate to one another, temporarily hold together through perceived analogies or repel each other through perceived dissimilarities. Real artifice leaves open the real possibility for power to develop in at least two different ways: as subjecting or subjectifying, dictatorial or emancipatory. In either case, the subject of power comes to a reflexive understanding of artifice—i.e. sobriety—through a psychotropic transformation occasioned by an agent of intoxication, that allows him to wield artifice with a level of sovereignty.

The Artist's achieves sobriety when he learns to experience the emancipatory aspects of his intoxication. The Artist's shift in perspective—after which he begins to privilege the power of art over the art of power—could not have occurred without the underlying affective transformation that made him susceptible to it. At first, one kind of affective perception inclines him to apperceive the Kingdom as a natural World. Passing from the precariousness of the street to the prosperity of the Court, the Palace's splendor always glinting in the corner of his eye, the intoxicating jostle of the celebrations continually convened to honor the King—"Las parejas se entallaron y el Artista se encontró rebotando entre brazos y caderas. Sabroso desconcierto,

sintió” (21)—all of these things predispose the Artist toward accepting the King’s version of what it all meant. Later, it is another kind of affective pull—love—that triggers the reversal of this perspective.

The Artist first falls in love with another courtier of a similarly low stature, the Girl, who, like the Artist the King ‘saved’ from the streets—which in her case meant being conscripted as one of the Court’s resident prostitutes. The Artist feels totally at ease with the Girl, not only on account of the easy intimacy they achieve, but also because he senses they are equals—both servants whose natural role is to honor and empower the King—and that, therefore, they belong together. Soon, however, another woman attracts his attention, and if he decides to pursue her, it is only because the way the Girl refers to her as “la Cualquiera”.<sup>12</sup> If, like the Girl, this other woman is ‘just’ a “whore,” a “whoever,” an anyone and a no one—that is, if she belongs to the same category in the hierarchy of the Kingdom that he does—then the Artist would be justified in pursuing her (his morality is oriented toward what the he thinks King would consider appropriate and not what previous fidelities demand of him). As it turns out, though, the Cualquiera is not no one. She is in fact the daughter of the Witch, the King’s consort. But by the time he has learned her ‘true’ role, it is too late, he is already in love. And this time, the force of his emotions keep him from being content with his allotted place in the Court. A distant courtly love of the Cualquiera is out of the question. It is this experience of overwhelming desire—a desire that is at odds with the order of things in the Kingdom—that leads the Artist to suspect for the first time that something originating in him, his desire, may be as real as the order emanating from the King.

Desire throws the Artist and his World into crisis. As the Journalist foresees, “Yo a usted lo veo hecho pura pasión, y si un día tiene que escoger entre la pasión y la obligación, Artista,

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<sup>12</sup> I leave *la Cualquiera*’s epithet untranslated to preserve the dual meaning of “anyone” and “whore” or “slut.”

entonces sí que está jodido” (95). If, by way of a Pazian rhetorical analysis, we take the language of this observation as more than vulgar slang, we can see that it contains the assumption of a kind of ontological realism that will soon overturn the Artist’s royalist metaphysics. Perhaps we could read “entonces sí que está jodido” not as the obvious outcome of the choice between “la pasión y la obligación” but as its necessary precondition. That is, the very fact of being in a position to choose between desire and duty implies that the Artist and his World have already been *jodido*—penetrated, traversed, split in two—by desire. Desire splits what had appeared as the World *tout court* and creates a condition in which the Artist can straddle the line between a world of intoxicating power and “one complementary to it,” the latter offering a “humiliating sobriety” according to which the former reveals its contingency and artificiality and then, crucially, choose between them. This is not to say that desire reveals one reality that is more real than the other but, rather, that it sunders the World into competing worlds, that it signals that the real is always up for grabs. Desire reveals what had always been there: a chink in the real that assures that, even though both may exist, it will always be possible to choose between Kingdom (sense and order imposed from above and acquiesced to from below) and kingdoms (sense and order created collectively in an open-ended fashion).

Or that there will always be a danger of one collapsing into the other. The appearance of a World depends on the play of perceptual worlds; the continued existence of the Sovereign’s Kingdom depends on “los trabajos del reino.” The artificial World sustained by the cunning of the King can continue to cohere only so long as his artists keep producing the artifice that holds it together. The Artist finally learns this when, in order to lend an air of believability to his cover as a defector to another court, he composes a new *corrido* for the rival capo. What he thought would be a cunning act of loyalty to his true King turns out to subvert the latter’s power entirely. In order to exist, the King and his Kingdom must *appear* to be what they are—“hay que serlo y



hay que parecerlo” (114)—and making them appear this way is the Artist’s job—“ese, pendejito, ese era tu trabajo” (115). When the King summons him to a meeting and then flies into a rage about how the new *corrido* has undermined his image—which is his power—the Artist realizes he has been introduced to a “misterio,” that the relation between him and the King “había pasado a otro ámbito, más derecho, en el que compartían una visión más acabada del mundo y que admitía intercambiar espejos como el que el Artista había construido” (113). This more complete view of the world consists precisely in the understanding that the world is incomplete, that the play of appearances, “espejos,” *belongs* to the real. And to the extent that the Artist deals directly in the construction of appearances, he has power over the King, who lacks this ability. And so, like Segismundo sentencing the soldier who had been his co-conspirator to a life in prison because he shares the emancipatory secret of how kingdoms are made and unmade, the King decides it is time to dispose of the Artist. An Artist who has sobered up to the intoxicating power of his own art is no longer a subject but a potential rival, a budding sovereign in his own right.

Facing the muffled fate of former courtiers who had become either useless or too autonomous, the Artist takes advantage of a propitious interruption in his interview to escape the palace, not alone but with the Cualquiera. In their wake, the Kingdom crumbles. Without an aesthetically constructed aura to legitimate his self-proclaimed sovereignty, the King is left vulnerable to the machinations of traitors and rivals. When the Artist arrives at a safe place with the Cualquiera and he realizes that their escape has been successful, the Artist momentarily doubts his newfound independence.

Milagro, murmuró, y la sensación de que algo estaba mal lo hostigó, un estribillo que repetía que de cuando acá él tenía derecho, que estaba tomando lo que no era suyo, sino de aquel que lo había auxiliado. La idea estuvo a punto de quebrarlo por un instante, mas algo reventó adentro de sí que ahora le llevó a los labios la palabra No: No tiene imperio

sobre mi vida, no acepto que me digan qué he de hacer. Era una verdad que ya sabía en sus entrañas, pero que no había sido capaz de nombrar. La revelación le hizo sentarse sobre la cama. Así se quedó mucho tiempo, sintiendo cómo crecía el espacio alrededor suyo, y presintiendo cómo la Cualquiera podía llenarlo en cada palpitación. (124)

I want to suggest that this epiphanic moment, in which the Artist feels the full affective force of the truth of his freedom, serves as an image of the sovereign power of collective action (vs. the power of the Sovereign). The artist realizes that, beyond the contingent fact of its success, what their escape manifests is that the real was never fully present in the power of the Sovereign. Potential worlds always haunted the World of power from within. And all that was necessary to reveal this was a will to exceed the limits of his individual rights, as decreed by the Order of the Kingdom, and a choice to embark on a path of collective creation with an other, an anyone, *una Cualquiera*. In this sense, I agree with Elena Poniatowska's otherwise too rosy assessment that Herrera's work is fundamentally about "la independencia frente al poder" and the thesis that "todos podemos ser autónomos si nos lo proponemos" (*Trabajos*).

The Artist and the Cualquiera's shared flight serves as an image of the kind of collective action that both triggers and transcends the destruction of the Power/Sense/World that it flees. In Deleuzian terms, their "line of flight" is what was always immanent in the World that only cohered as long as the former was not identified and traced into the worlds whose existence it presupposes. This is not to say that the King's artificial kingdom and the power pervading it were not real—anything that appears to exist, that appears in existence, is real. The King's kingdom and power are artificial in the sense that they appear (i.e. exist) according to the mechanisms of artifice. They were real as long as artifice—represented by and embodied in the Artist—assured their continued appearance. "¿Quién era el Rey? Un todopoderoso. Un haz de luz que había iluminado sus márgenes porque no podía ser de otro modo mientras no se revelara lo que era"

(Herrera 126). And when the artist's artifice no longer made him what he was, what he was became "un pobre tipo traicionado. Una gota en un mar de hombres con historias. Un hombre sin poder sobre la tersa fábrica en la cabeza del Artista" (126). What is crucial is that the King's Power was subject to the Artist's power to make power appear. The pivotal moment, when the Artist fully assumes his freedom, is when he allows himself to feel "esa potencia de un orden distinto al de la Corte, la maña con la que desprendía las palabras de las cosas y creaba una textura y un volumen soberanos. Una realidad aparte" (126). The open-endedness of the creation of sense, the way that words and things can be pulled apart and put back together endlessly and *ingeniously* to make new worlds—by way of the Artist's "maña" (skill, *engaño*, *artificio*)—this is what is sovereign and not the King's will to enforce an order, a univocity of sense, a World.

Two things in the conclusion of *Trabajos del reino* imply that the "potencia de un orden distinto al de la Corte," the sovereign power of sense making, is available to all. First, the Artist does not take his ability to wield artifice as a confirmation of a preordained place in the hierarchy of existence. To the contrary, once he has passed through the intoxication of power and come to a realization of the artificiality of the World of the Court, he relinquishes his title as Artist and reassumes the proper name Lobo. He realizes that it was not because he possessed the superior gifts of a natural-born Artist that allowed him to undermine the King but rather the simple skill of an inconsequential—but not impotent—artisan. Second, unlike Segismundo, who in the end exercises the power of his sobriety to fix the roles of those around him, Lobo acknowledges the Cualquiera's right to self-determination, to be her own artisan of sense. Even though he still desires her, he does not try to impose the sense he would like to give that desire but rather consents to the Cualquiera's wish to set off and try living her own life far from the Kingdom where her role had always been dictated to her.

Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino*, much more than a mere work of narco genre, is a prime example of what Paz Soldán calls the contemporary "novel of power," which elaborates "mechanisms to understand how power functions in Latin America" (28). Herrera's novel, which has been hailed as the pinnacle of narco-themed novels, paradigmatically represents a contemporary situation in which "los capos del narcotráfico han sustituido a los dictadores en la literatura latinoamericana" (Rodríguez Marcos). "In Herrera's novel," explains Edmundo Paz Soldán, "we are far removed from state power. Here, there are neither presidents nor ministers . . . . More than a failed state, what we have here is an absent state" (27). In today's world, we are dealing less with the failure of the state to provide welfare, security, etc. (or with the failure of past revolutionary projects aimed at establishing a state capable of doing so) than with the *success* of neoliberalism, effected through state policies aimed precisely at abandoning territories and populations to their own fate. What in the Global North we experience as ubiquitous precariousness and vulnerability to nominally legal corporate and financial power, in the South is also experienced as subjection to extralegal, non-state sovereigns. Paz Soldán explains that the "absence of the central [state] power" in *Trabajos del reino* has been replaced by "the local power of narcotrafficking", a power that appears anachronistically in the figure of "the King who makes and unmakes, and the court [which] forms around him" (27).

Herrera's novel serves to demystify our fascination with the narco-sovereign—to sober us up to the meaning of our intoxicating fear/admiration of such a figure—by laying bare the mechanisms of his power, which are also the mechanisms by which he can be rendered powerless. Instead of resurrecting outmoded figures of resistance (like, say, the twentieth-century militant) to oppose to the untimely Sovereign, Herrera portrays a form of freedom proper to the present moment. Namely, the passage through intoxication, in this case induced by the very

image of the narco-sovereign, into a sobriety that grasps the power of collective creativity, to which Power has always been subordinate.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**NO FUTURE: CONSPIRACY, PHARMACOLOGY, AND APOCALYPSE IN JORGE**  
**BARADIT'S *YGDRASIL***

It is now commonplace to frame the horrific spread of drug-related violence in contemporary Mexico in quasi-apocalyptic terms. *No Country for Old Men* (both the novel and the film) is a good case in point: a laconic figure appears in the borderlands, seemingly out of nowhere. His killing spree north of the border is only tangentially related to the drug money he seeks to recover. His violence is motivated rather by an inscrutable, radical evil. Similar narratives are increasingly typical in other Hollywood films,<sup>13</sup> TV series,<sup>14</sup> and mainstream journalistic accounts.<sup>15</sup> It is as if contemporary Mexico were something like a portal through which an obscure force has broken into the world, the epicenter of a spreading apocalypse. Political and media discourses on both sides of the border repeatedly couch the so-called Drug War in terms of a battle between good and evil, like the War on Terror before it. Consequently, a militaristic response is presented as the only valid course of action. In other contexts, the narco-apocalypse framework is inverted: for example, at least one capo—Nazario, of the Knights Templar cartel—has come to be venerated by some as a quasi-messianic figure.<sup>16</sup>

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13 Oliver Stone's *Savages*, David Ayer's *End of Watch*, and, especially, Ridley Scott and Cormac McCarthy's *The Counselor* are paradigmatic examples.

14 Most notably AMC's *Breaking Bad* and, to a lesser extent, FX's *The Bridge*, but also in exploitation documentaries like The History Channel's *Gangland*, and National Geographic's *Border Wars*.

15 The “barbarians at the gates” motif is now ubiquitous on Fox News, CNN, and local news broadcasts, especially in border states.

16 See “In the hot land, Mexicans just say no to drug cartels”. The famous precursor would of course be Pablo Escobar in Colombia.

My basic point in this chapter is that the narco-apocalypse framework is distracting at best and, at worst, seriously counterproductive to any attempts to understand and begin to counteract the extreme violence currently ravaging Mexico. Jean Franco has offered an important critique of the apocalyptic view of violence in Mexico and Latin America in general, noting that this view tends to make today's crimes and violence “unspeakable”, and that to do so renders them “mystical, outside the bounds of political action” (*Cruel Modernity*). A better approach would be to analyze the situation in terms of political economy. And while there is no dearth of political and economic analyses of the drug trade/war, many of these come up short to the extent that they too presuppose a kind of apocalyptic narrative, as Julien Mercille has noted.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, most of these accounts attribute the problem to conspiratorial actors—first, the cartels and, second, corrupt Mexican officials—with inscrutable motives that cannot be reduced to mere greed or economic self-interest. In other words, like the narco-apocalypse narrative, such analyses understand drug-related violence as resulting from a clash of “good” agonists (US government and law enforcement as well as non-corrupt Mexican officials) motivated by a commitment to the rule of law and the stability of political and economic institutions and “bad” antagonists (cartels, gangs, corrupt Mexican officials) driven by greed, a desire for power or respect, bloodlust, or just sheer evil. Ultimately, those belonging to the latter group, like the “terrorists” who justify the war on terror, are viewed as conspirators plotting not just to turn a profit but to undermine the core values of “our” society.<sup>18</sup> Mercille notes that such approaches inevitably obfuscate the real causes of the hellish situation, which, he argues, only come into view through the lens of critical political economy.

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<sup>17</sup> See Mercille, “Violent Cartels or US Hegemony: The Political Economy of the 'War on Drugs' in Mexico” (1638-1639).

<sup>18</sup> It is instructive that, since the declaration of the Mexican War on Drugs in 2006, drug traffickers and cartel members have increasingly been labeled as “narco-terrorists”. The point here is not to question whether or not such figures seek to terrorize the general population (they do), but to ask what political function the term serves in justifying a militaristic response to contemporary drug trafficking and violence.

A political economic perspective would not necessarily dismiss the narco-apocalypse model altogether. Instead of disregarding apocalyptic appraisals of Mexico, a critical political economic approach might fault them not for exaggerating but rather for *falsely limiting the scope of the apocalypse*. Surely, the current situation in Mexico is extreme.<sup>19</sup> But the narco-apocalypse narrative goes wrong when it represents drug-related violence as the marker of the *beginning* of a regionally specific epochal shift rather than the *extension of an already apocalyptic, global social reality*, especially when it attributes a regional (though supposedly spreading) apocalypse to the will and actions of a handful of outlaws and other conspirators instead of situating it within its material, socio-economic context.

What if apocalypse is actually already at hand and is in fact global in scale? Evan Calder Williams asks us to entertain this possibility in his study of contemporary apocalyptic genre films. Against the grain of other analyses, Williams views his examples not as fantasy rehearsals of what could go wrong in real life but rather as the cultural reverberations of what *already has*. According to Williams, we are already experiencing the consequences of a “capitalist apocalypse” (3). By this he means that we are living in a kind of end times and also that it is readily apparent what brought this about—i.e. capitalism.<sup>20</sup> More specifically, capitalism has shaped a world in which time itself has effectively come to an end, which is not far from Fukuyama's famous “End of History” thesis. But where Fukuyama sees utopia, Williams sees nothing but apocalypse, “the revelation of nothing but nothing changing” (219). Simply put, Williams' point is that global capitalism will never evolve into something else of its own accord: “*No future comes to mean no way out* (227).

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19 The appearance of almost ritualistic violence; the sheer scale of it, with numbers of murders and disappearances unseen since the Latin American dirty and civil wars of the twentieth century; the fact that the state *has* in fact lost effective control of portions of its territory, economy, and population all suggest that we are witnessing something new, that structural collapse is not inconceivable.

20 Indeed, according to Williams' precise definition, the cause must be apparent, revealed (according to the etymological meaning of apocalypse—*apokalypsis*, revelation, uncovering), for any such period to constitute an apocalypse. Not all ends (crises, catastrophes) constitute an apocalypse. The latter must always be “an end with revelation, a 'lifting of the veil’” (5).



Others have made similar arguments about the detemporalizing effects of contemporary capitalism but have extended them beyond the hellish, marginalized zones within the global distribution of what Williams calls “combined and uneven apocalypse” (11). Douglas Rushkoff, for example, has argued that the present-oriented technologies and practices of the globalized economy have brought about not “the end of times *but the end of time*” (“Turtles from the Shells”), and this, crucially, holds for all subjects of the capitalist order—that is, for everyone.<sup>21</sup> Bernard Stiegler, who I will return to in more detail below, bases his critique of political economy on the notion that the functioning of capitalism as a whole is currently predicated upon a cancellation of the future—this detemporalizing process is both the effect of the economy on the modern subject as well as the basic condition for the contemporary reproduction of capital. Viewed from this perspective, an apocalyptic Mexico is not the origin or culmination but rather merely a regional manifestation of an already consummated global apocalypse.

I will use this concept of a capitalist apocalypse in what follows in order to draw out what Frederic Jameson would call the “political unconscious” of Jorge Baradit’s 2005 science fiction novel *Ygdrasil*, a wildly imaginative, Mexico-centric apocalyptic fantasy. More specifically, I will seek to identify the logic of an already-consummated capitalist apocalypse underlying both the plot and the narrative structure of Baradit’s imagined apocalypse while also considering certain concepts implicit in the text that could be useful for a critique of the real-world’s apocalyptic state.

In many respects, Baradit’s novel presents itself as a perfect example of traditional (that is mythological) apocalyptic genre. Its hallucinatory explosion of eschatological images—supernatural beasts, trans-dimensional demons, hellish visions—resembles nothing so much as the Revelations of St. John. But mystical reverie is only one element of Baradit’s repertoire,

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21 For an extended consideration of this idea, see Rushkoff’s recent book *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Current, 2013).

which also draws heavily on sci-fi, cyberpunk, esoterica, and conspiracy theories of various stripes. *Ygdrasil* narrates an epic struggle of conspiratorial forces for control of a networked world that makes our current stage of techno-globalization look utterly parochial. At some vaguely defined point in the future (apparently the late twenty-first century) technological advances have made possible a truly universal network linking together not only the biological and technological spheres but also the spiritual. Information, value, and power flow freely through an unimaginably complex and interconnected amalgam of not only circuitry, software, and radio signals, but brains, bio-architectural structures, and astral planes. In this world, humans can communicate with computers as easily as, say, individual biological cells can talk to the spirits of the dead.

Most denizens of this world are unaware of just how advanced and pervasive this network is becoming. Only the plotters and conspirators we meet in the text—Mexican politicians and soldiers, financiers, a juggernaut corporation, a union turned religious cult, as well as an intergalactic shaman and a trans-dimensional demigod—have any inkling of what the network could become and what would be at stake in gaining control over it. Presumably, such actors are privy to the content of a viral code intercepted around the end of the twentieth century (which serves as one of the novel's pseudo-epigraphs), apparently by a secret cadre called Los Perfectos:

Guiamos el desarrollo de la red como se cría al verdadero hijo de Dios. Planeamos su desarrollo como una copia de la estructura neuronal de un santo. Cada nodo diariamente incorporado es una letra del conjuro definitivo. Cuando la última palabra sea agregada, el Altísimo tocará esta obra de sacra artesanía con su dedo hirviente y se alzarán viva, levitando sobre las cabezas de los hombres, entonando una letanía electrónica en nota sol. Todas las mentes se sincronizarán en el tono emitido desde el cielo y serán infectadas de amor a Dios. El alma de la

humanidad se elevará en una sola mente, se hará carne y cable como un gran insecto, orando en código binario y comunicando directamente a la corteza cerebral el infinito rostro de Dios. (12)

Though none of the competing conspirators understands the exact meaning of this Borgesian communiqué, they do understand that the technological infrastructure of their world (which is increasingly becoming their world, *tout court*) is on the verge of a qualitative transformation, and each is plotting to precipitate this transformation and to be in a position to exploit the power of the resulting bio-techno-spiritual totality.

The first conspirators we learn of, a military commander named Pablo Ramírez and Miguel Alvarado, a politician, have been assigned by the Mexican government to head up a secret mission to investigate a series of paranormal anomalies in the Sonoran Desert.<sup>22</sup> They have reason to believe that these are due to some kind of experiment involving an unimaginably destructive new technology, though they are unsure of who exactly is behind it. The only lead they have are records of transactions through the Banco de México that register the importation of medical equipment around the same dates as the anomalies in Sonora.

Mariana, the novel's protagonist, belongs to the masses of those who, being excluded from conspiratorial knowledge, are unaware of the apocalyptic potential of the grand network they are enmeshed in. Their ignorance is due, in no small part, to the fact that they are consumed by the local, figurative apocalypses already at hand in their own hellish daily lives. Mariana, we learn, fled her home town, an economically devastated Santiago, after killing her father, who nearly succeeded in turning her into a revenue producing *perra*—a lobotomized, dismembered sex slave, “un producto artesanal típico de los suburbios de Santiago de Chile” (46-47). She winds

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22 The setting for these anomalies obviously bring to mind the empirical fact that the extreme violence currently sweeping over Mexico first became visible in the Northern Mexican states—most infamously with the hundreds of unsolved “femicides” starting in the early 1990s—as well as with the narco-apocalyptic representation, mentioned above, of these regions as the stage where a radically new, almost otherworldly evil is making its debut.

up in Mexico where she gets hooked on a powerful street drug called *maíz* and supports herself, and her habit, as a hired killer. One day, she is unexpectedly torn out of her reality—“su infierno personal. La muerte diaria, cocinada en el óxido de la droga” (16)—when, based on her reputation for ruthlessness, she is conscripted into Ramírez and Alvarado’s team and forced to carry out a dangerous mission to infiltrate the Banco de México’s computer servers. She is able to break into the bio-architectural structure housing the bank’s headquarters where she proceeds to hack into the files related to the events in Sonora. But she is soon detected by bank security and, the next thing she knows, she is lying naked on a large conference table, at the mercy of the thirteen men seated around her. It is not clear who they are—perhaps the directors of the bank, or “Los perfectos” alluded to in the pseudo-epigraph above. These mysterious men proceed to ritualistically rape, torture, and disfigure her, finally tossing her lifeless body into a nearby river.

At this point, the story goes from outlandish to downright delirious. A strange trans-dimensional being—a kind of humanoid arthropod called a “selknam”<sup>23</sup> who describes himself as part of a universal immune system, “un anticuerpo que el universo produce cuando se le infecta una herida” (44)—plucks Mariana from the river and, through a set of strange rituals, raises her from the dead. Still reeling from her resurrection, she asks the selknam why he saved her. As he explains, “Se está produciendo un grave problema en este lugar del Universo, un problema generado por tecnología humana que debo descubrir y eliminar” (44), and for some mysterious reason, the selknam cannot accomplish this without Mariana’s help. And so, Mariana passes from being the puppet of a regional political plot to an active partner in a cosmic conspiracy.

Baradit’s story of apocalyptic conspiracy recalls certain strains of recent Latin Americanist political theory. For example, as Bruno Bosteels has observed, for many Latin Americanist political theorists today, it seems much more plausible to posit the absolute ubiquity of

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<sup>23</sup> The Selk’nam were a native people of Tierra del Fuego mostly wiped out by settlers and sheep farmers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among other things, they were known for their elaborate ritual body painting and costumes used to represent spirits in initiation rites.

conspiracy than even the mere possibility of collective action,<sup>24</sup> which echoes Frederic Jameson's famous remark that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. There is, beyond the pun, a deeper connection between Jameson's remark on today's apocalyptic limitations of the global political imagination and Bosteel's observation on the prevalence of paranoia in Latin America. Each articulate a certain hopelessness or, more specifically, a putative *knowledge* of hopelessness: a subject assumes access, through some revelation, to a privileged knowledge—or, more precisely, a knowledge *of* the existence of privileged, conspiratorial knowledge—that severely limits her own subjectivity, her powers of (political) action. Bosteels' analysis emphasizes contingent causes of the contemporary tendency in political thinking to see conspiracies everywhere.

In a really globalized world, the truth appears to be on the side of paranoia. From all sides a vague sense of persecution is proliferating, based on the suspicion of an enemy both global and diffuse. After a moment of decline, there comes the moment of overcompensation in the invention of secret and clandestine plots, just as the incredulity toward the 'grand narratives' of modernity is followed by an obsessive accumulation of what we might call postmodern 'global fictions'—that is, paranoid stories about the conjuring tricks of the other, which are reproduced ad nauseam both on the side of ultracapitalists and inside the new antiglobalization movement. (273)

This "overcompensation" by conspiracy theory arises not only with a general decline of a West projecting its paranoia onto ubiquitous "terrorists," but also, and even earlier, within the specific context of the failed radical projects of the 60s and 70s in Latin America and elsewhere. "From

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24 See Bosteels, "From Complot to Potlatch" in *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012). The argument takes its point of departure from Ricardo Piglia's "Teoría del complot". Recently, Žižek has also used this formulation (apparently paraphrasing Bosteels) in analyzing the HBO series *The Wire*, which, he argues, calls for "going beyond the individual hero, towards a collective act that, in our present conditions, can only appear as a conspiracy" (98).

the revolutionary prescription, still active in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we thus move to the time of terror via a paranoid vision of society in the neoliberal era of capitalism. Paranoia would appear to be the far extreme of the irrevocable defeat of that prescription ” (275). John Beverley has termed this sense of irrevocable defeat common among contemporary Latin American intellectuals (many of them former militants) “the paradigm of disillusion”.<sup>25</sup> This paradigm has retroactively understood the downfall of the revolutionary projects of the 60s and 70s not as a defeat but an internal *failure* due, at best, to a misappraisal of a virtually invincible foe (i.e. capitalism and its statist custodians) or, at worst, to mistaken ideological premises.

I return to these issues below but posit a different kind of connection between conspiratorial thought and the apocalyptic experience of no future. I agree with Bosteels and Beverley that conspiratorial thought is an alibi for the failure of political will, but for slightly different reasons. I do not think that we should see the “paradigm of disillusion” or rampant paranoia as mere ideology covering over the political possibilities latent in the present, which can be cast off through a critical reappraisal of past defeats. Rather, the contemporary conspiratorial mindset accurately grasps the temporality structuring our current socioeconomic system—it is *true* that no future exists within this system—but fails to perceive the origins of this temporality. In other words, the future is presently lacking not because someone has hijacked it but because our material reality, the techno-economic fabric and the practices of our everyday lives, have cancelled the future—in fact, they are *contingent upon* this cancellation.

This will be the ultimate implication of *Ygdrasil*, but it is still unclear at the point where we left the story. Finding herself apparently on the upward swing of a Jungian hero’s cycle, Mariana finds that she is able to leave her *maíz* habit behind and also resolve the deep-seated traumas of her youth. With a newfound confidence, she embarks on a new mission with her guardian selknam to resolve the technology-produced problem is responding to as a cosmic leukocyte. To

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25 See Beverley's *Latinamericanism after 9/11* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2011).

this end, she cautiously reestablishes contact with Rodríguez and Alvarado, who inform her that their new objective is to gather information on NATO, which they now know is behind the experiments in Sonora. She is to hack into their intranet and retrieve a file with the apocalyptic name “Operación Patmos.” Aided by an injected serum containing nanobots and mescaline, she navigates NATO’s cyberspace and, in a landscape that is part virtual reality interface, part psychedelic trip,<sup>26</sup> successfully locates the file in question. The information it contains is terrifying. There is in effect a vast plot involving NATO and spearheaded by, of all things, the Chrysler corporation, to develop a powerful new technology called the “Empalme Rodríguez,” named after the prophet who foresaw its development, a kind of splice between the physical world and the astral plane that would deflect the souls of the recently deceased from their passage to heaven and redirect them into machines, specifically, NATO weapons and the vast Chrysler infrastructure.

En cuanto al procedimiento, el proyecto era básicamente un constructo tecnológico capaz de ensamblar un tubo al costado de la Gruta de las Almas para desviarlas, por ese empalme, hacia una cadena de producción industrial donde fueran encarnadas una a una en los procesadores de última generación . . . el secreto de la Nato era nada menos que el próximo salto en la escala tecnológica humana, y la esclavitud digital para miles de almas. [120]

This, the selknam informs Mariana, is the “proyecto que está dañando la estructura de las cosas en esta parte del Universo. La tecnología que vinimos a buscar” (116).

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26 Think *Tron* meets Borges on acid. Consider the description of Mariana's journey through NATO's cyberspace, which manifests itself as “una selva tropical de cuatro metros de ancho por ocho kilómetros de largo. De un lado se extendía un mar lechoso, y del otro un desierto de arena de cuarzo. Todo tenía una inclinación de seis grados: la bóveda celeste giraba a gran velocidad . . . más adelante hay un claro circular. En medio yace una esfinge, un león con cabeza de águila. Es el software de seguridad, y el paso más complicado de la operación. Me tomará un tiempo procesar la pregunta que nos hará. Es aleatoria; cambia cada cinco segundos y la esfinge alterna los idiomas e inventa unos nuevos en los que las palabras tienen otro significado y se explican por su contexto. Puede reescribir la Divina Comedia, o mezclarla con el Quijote para producir un nuevo acertijo. Es capaz de reconstruir toda la historia del hombre sobre el hipotético caso de que Julio César no hubiese sido asesinado, y preguntar por un hecho doméstico e improbable ocurrido en el siglo dieciséis de esa historia imposible. Es una esfinge de última generación...” (108-109).

The revelation that Chrysler is the key player in this nefarious plot to completely dominate the trans-dimensional network may strike the reader as a bit ironic, to say the least. How could it be that one of the paradigmatic players of the era of Fordist production has become the most powerful entity in this acutely post-Fordist, networked trans-dimensional world? As it turns out, the Chrysler of the future is not the moribund, regressive company it was in the late twentieth century. The company “había sido pionera en el desarrollo y aplicación de nuevas tecnologías de transporte de información, y fueron sus investigaciones en tecnología de conectividad lo que transformó la red mundial de datos en un organismo eficiente” (79). Given its central role in the constitution of the new hyper-networked world, the Chrysler corporation is no longer “simplemente una compañía de transportes de dimensiones descomunales” but has become, in addition, “una empresa con características de estado soberano” (79). In fact, the company has literally built up a sovereign territory comprised of a massive artificial island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

But perhaps this re-imagining of Chrysler is more than an ironic jab at the real company's anything but sovereign, or even solvent, current situation. In Baradit's world, the most spectacularly advanced networks imaginable coexist with the most regressive forms of conspiratorial power. Chrysler's dominance seems to suggest that these two things are not mutually exclusive. This is not the utopian world imagined by so many cyberfuturists in the 1990s, when a still-new internet inspired hopes that the social world would necessarily come to embody the principles of a distributed, horizontal, protean, anonymous, and egalitarian global network. Rather, it is a world in which such a network lends itself all too well to the kinds of conspiratorial power that preexisted the age of connectivity.<sup>27</sup> The world of *Ygdrasil* is a world in

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27 Real-life counterparts would include China's “networked authoritarianism” (see Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked* (New York: Basic Books, 2012) pp. 31-50)) or, more obviously and closer to home, the US's recently exposed PRISM program, which has been built upon the government's previous efforts to attain TIA, or “total information awareness.” Additionally, the Silicon Valley tech firms that have engineered the “big data” sets that these government surveillance programs mine could also be conceived of as conspiratorial, not only for their collusion with intelligence agencies but also for their efforts to monopolize the both the material and immaterial



which the supposed chasm between older, hierarchical forms of production and power and newer, horizontal ones has been bridged by the realization that these things never were irreconcilable.

In other words, the network in *Ygdrasil* is completely compatible with conspiracy (something we are beginning to suspect of real-world networked technologies). The structural condition for this compatibility is the fact that the great majority of people are reduced to a nodal existence, with no possibility of gaining a network-administrative perspective. Global connectivity has lead not to greater freedom but rather to the subjugation of the masses, the dissolution of one-time subjects into the objective technologies they once wielded. Only those privileged or ruthless enough to have gained access to conspiratorial knowledge can manage to maintain minimal distance from the network and, therefore, occupy a network-administrative position. Chrysler's apocalyptic Empalme Rodríguez technology would simply take this situation to its logical, if horrific, conclusion: humans would no longer be merely virtually indistinguishable from their networked technologies but rather literally one with them, the souls of the dead being condemned to an eternity of nodal existence. This is basically Taylorization made absolute—it is no longer just the bodies (practices) and minds (knowledge) of the worker that become mechanized, but their very souls—and it is only appropriate that Chrysler, a holdover from the Fordist era of production, be the agent of its absolutization.

Here again we are faced with the figure of no future. Not only are we dealing with the kind of voiding of the future entailed by all conspiratorial thought, which I outlined above ( i.e. the basic notion that history is out of one's hands). Rather, what is at stake in the plot to develop the Empalme Rodríguez is the future of futurity itself. More specifically, it is wholly uncertain whether any but the privileged circles of conspirators will ever have any possibility of ever escaping the present network, the present *of* the network. All entities, living or dead, human or 

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infrastructure (hardware, software, patented algorithms, etc.) of today's networked world.

nonhuman, would henceforth exist only to perpetuate an eternity of the networked present. The network would thus embody the positive existence of no future, that is, of apocalypse.

Incidentally, for another group angling for control of the network—the union-cum-religious cult representing the workers of Chrysler’s “Sección 14”—such an outcome represents a longed-for millennial bliss rather than a terrifying damnation. Section 14 represents the operators of the company’s intranet, “navegantes expertos [que recorren] las carreteras informáticas llenos de espíritu santo, potenciados con mescalina suministrada por vía intravenosa” (78). Led by a psychotic, ascetic prophet called El Imbunche,<sup>28</sup> the union/cult is organized around the myth that

La red estaba encinta y había que ayudarla a dar a luz. Una guerra santa les permitiría a todos renacer en la red, liberados de la carne, con sus patrones de memoria impresos directamente en el ciberespacio, para existir sin límites entre sus códigos infinitos. Sería una existencia en éxtasis permanente, absorbida por una conciencia electrónica única, colectiva; el orgasmo electrónico en una frecuencia aún por revelar. ‘El cuerpo es ilusión, la verdadera existencia es digital’, rezaba un párrafo del Libro. (78)

Here Chrysler’s sinister neo-Taylorism is turned on its head. Far from total alienation, the dissolution of the individual worker into the network represents liberation into “una conciencia electrónica única, colectiva” (78). Or rather, total alienation *is* the strait gate leading to eternal emancipation.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding this apparent common interest, we learn that Chrysler management has come to view Section 14 as a threat to the company’s balance of power and stability of

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28 The name comes from a mythical creature in the mythology of the island of Chiloé in Southern Chile. El Imbunche is a human who has been dismembered and monstrously reassembled by witches and who wanders the island as a kind of zombie in search of human flesh.

29 A post-humanist spin on Marx’s view that only the destructive force of capitalism could clear the way for a future emancipation. One might call it the ‘Zuckerbergian theology’ of contemporary capitalism.

production. And since this would entail more than reassignment or even layoffs and precarious unemployment—“su destino” rather would be “los depósitos de cadáveres” (81)—El Imbunche decides it is time to declare the prophesied holy war against the Chrysler corporation. While preparing for the attack, he is visited by an immortal being named named Tangata Manu.<sup>30</sup> He reveals to El Imbunche that Mariana is a crucial figure, not only for Alvarado and Rodríguez’s mission, but more importantly for the Chrysler corporation itself. For some mysterious reason they need her cooperation in order to finish their ultimate project, a machine called the Ygdrasil.<sup>31</sup> The horrific Empalme Rodríguez technology turns out to be only a means to an end, a tool needed for the construction of something even bigger and more nefarious.

After they form a tenuous alliance, El Imbunche’s helps Mariana enter another ecstatic techno-psychedelic trance, which allows her to interface with Chrysler’s heavily guarded cyberspace. She breaches a series of firewalls and security programs and finally gains access to the Ygdrasil file. What ensues is a Borgesian revelatory moment. She learns that for centuries Los Perfectos have been building, through trial and error, an assemblage of machines and biological organisms, using heterogenous methods like art and astrology, science and games of chance, all the while “intentando duplicar la mecánica de la divinidad. Suponen que agotando la combinatoria de procesos en algún momento se toparán con una revelación” (197). Though their aims are secret, they nevertheless made use of public means: “Al parecer, miembros de los Perfectos situados en puntos de poder promueven la inclusión del concepto de red en el paradigma de la humanidad del siglo veinte; lo hacen a través de la poesía, la política internacional, la tecnología y la lectura de sueños (198). Mariana learns of the mystic Matías

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30 In Rapa Nui mythology, the Tangata Manu was the ritual head of the bird-man cult. In the *Ygdrasil*, the shaman Tangata Manu is “un chamán que orbita la Tierra a trescientos kilómetros de altura” and is essentially a mechanism of cosmic stabilization, “parte de una foma mayor, un nodo que contribuye a estructurar el cosmos, así como un átomo es parte de una molécula. Debe haber uno como él cada cierta distancia para sostener la forma del Universo con su vibración y su oración” (66).

31 Yggdrasil is the axis mundi Old Norse mythology represented by a tree of life on which Odin is said to have hung himself in self-sacrifice.

Rodríguez, who in a vision saw that the ultimate purpose of the network “es conectar todas las máquinas entre sí para producir un *ánima mundi* artificial, una mente planetaria que le agregue a la Tierra conciencia de sí misma” (199). According to Rodríguez, humans are only transitory beings whose purpose is to give rise to “el Mesías, un metahombre hecho de todos los hombres” (199). In the early twenty-first century, “Una delegación de los Perfectos se dirige al Tíbet para consultar con el Dalai Lama la posibilidad de encarnar almas en computadores” (200), and that shortly thereafter, “Un consorcio anónimo adquiere la totalidad de las acciones de la gran empresa Chrysler” (200). She is shown that “el Directorio finalmente concluyó que el objetivo del Ygdrasil no era distinto del de cualquier ser vivo: ser” (204), after which they began to develop the Empalme Rodríguez in order to accomplish this Frankensteinian goal.<sup>32</sup>

The Ygdrasil is the global network's axis mundi.<sup>33</sup> Mariana and El Imbunche know that the only way to stop Chrysler is to sabotage this machine, and so the prophet willingly sends his followers on a suicide offensive merely as a decoy to allow Mariana to break into its core undetected. The company, for its part, welcomes the huge casualties sure to ensue in the battle,

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32 In a Borgesian fashion, all of this is paratactically interspersed with short chronicles of disparate historical events like: “C.G. Jung, a principios del mismo siglo, relaciona la serpiente con las funciones más básicas del cerebro humano”, “Jorge Luis Borges escribe el cuento ‘Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’” (197) or “En una fecha no establecida de fines de siglo, un gobierno del antiguo bloque comunista inicia investigaciones sobre el impacto de la actividad poltergeist en los flujos de electrones al interior de ambientes controlados” (199). More than situating the conspiratorial history within a wider context or, these side remarks pull the wider context into the conspiracy. All history is the history of the Ygdrasil and, in the end, the Ygdrasil will literally become everything.

33 It would be a travesty to leave out Baradit's description: “El Ygdrasil es un estructura desaforada y monstruosa que nace desde el suelo marino del océano Atlántico. Tiene raíces que se conectan a electrodos enterrados en los chakras de la Tierra, y brazos de cobre subterráneos que llegan hasta los polos. Durante cientos de años, los constructores del Ygdrasil han cultivado este hongo bioelectrónico con tecnologías experimentales que tienen como primer principio de desarrollo la intuición y la videncia. Contiene componentes extremadamente variados. La miscelánea incluye a bandadas de golondrinas clavadas vivas a placas de circuitería para regular la actividad síquica de los componentes humanos. Catedrales románicas y arena del Kalahari dibujan un gran mandala en la base, pabellones llenos de ancianos entonan un mantra para mantener vibrando delgadas láminas de cobre cargadas de recuerdos sintéticos. Gruesos axones de médula animal enhebran la estructura como enmarañada cabellera; pilares huecos, llenos de niños en coma, conducen los campos de información estática a través de su sistema circulatorio. El sistema operativo está suspendido en una niebla de comportamiento biológico; niebla que arrastra patrones en la estructura de sus partículas en suspensión, utilizadas para transmitir datos respirables por operadores, datos comunicados por osmósis a su torrente sanguíneo. La parte de su estructura que está sumergida sirve de atolón a numerosas especies marinas; la estructura sobre la superficie está erizada con brotes de peyote. La resistencia que regula la energía-información que se desplaza desde la parte sumergida a la parte superficial es la catedral de Cuzco” (201-202).

since it plans to use the souls of the fallen fighters to jumpstart the Ygdrasil machine and, in the process, “despertar a la Chrysler . . . dotarla de alma y extenderla a través del mundo” (254).

Mariana, apparently against all odds, successfully makes into the heart of the machine, where she believes she will be able to destroy it. But before she can do so, the shaman Tangata Manu reveals himself as a previously unknown variable. He reveals that he has been secretly guiding Mariana all along to fulfill her destiny, which is to be the centerpiece or motherboard of the earth-machine the shaman is about to switch on. She, along with the rest of the conspirators at turns aiding and manipulating her, had unwittingly been advancing the plans of Tangata Manu, who, in his own words, is an “arquitecto que quiere ver finalizada su obra, nada más. Este es sólo otro proyecto biotecnológico, en el marco de un plan muchísimo mayor” (255). Even those supposed archi-conspirators, the Chrysler corporation and Los Perfectos, were nothing but pawns: “Ellos piensan que han estado manejando los acontecimientos a su favor durante los últimos tres mil años, y que todo culminará hoy, cuando los senderos que se bifurcan vuelvan a convertirse en uno. Pero se equivocan. El Ygdrasil fue desarrollado por ellos no *para* ellos” (254). Having played their unintentional role as construction contractors for the Ygdrasil, they too will be consumed by it, instead of controlling it for their gain, as they had planned. What none of the conspiratorial actors had suspected was that their effort to gain power over the emerging biotechnical totality was doomed from the beginning, since all of them—their plans, objectives, actions—were always inherently internal to it. And to their surprise, and humiliating horror, Tangata Manu reveals that great earth-machine is nothing but a component in a much vaster cosmic apparatus, “una pieza de nanotecnología a punto de ser puesta a funcionar” (259) within “máquinas hechas de galaxias” (255). Mariana here finds that instead of fleeing her fate as a *perra*, she had unknowingly been running headlong towards it. To bring the Ygdrasil online, Mariana's brain, body, and spirit must be soldered permanently onto the machine's neural

circuitry, fixed to the machine-tree like Odin hanging from the Norse's mythological Yggdrasil. “En ese instante dos arpones penetraron sus oídos y Mariana se vio izada a seis metros de altura. Allí, suspendida, le arrancaron piernas y brazos, la cautizaron con hierros al rojo vivo y la incrustaron con ganchos de acero al mecanismo que colgaba en el centro del útero. Incrustada como una joya. La joya del Ygdrasil” (256). The Ygdrasil is complete. “El Tangata Manu informa que la pieza número 369 está operativa. La red para correr información funciona perfectamente” (260). The earth-size machine momentarily gains consciousness before collapsing under the realization that not even it is the real protagonist of this story. Like the human souls subordinated to the network, the mind of the machine itself is merely instrumental (possibly incidental) to its real purpose. The shaman Tangata Manu “remolca todo el sistema solar hacia un punto desconocido, lejos de los rastreos de la oficialidad. Lleva este microprocesador de Brahma al lugar donde máquinas hechas de galaxias fabrican al golem impostor, el futuro líder de la rebelión contra el dios agónico” (260). In the end, this cosmic conspiracy trumps all of the merely local, self-interested ones.

However, the conclusion does not necessarily confirm the conspiratorial logic, apparently structuring the novel up to this point, according to which the truth is to be found in the intentions of who or whatever happens to be situated at the top of the conspiracy food-chain. Instead of regarding Tangata Manu’s cosmic engineering project as the “true” conspiracy superseding all the rest, we ought to ask ourselves whether there is any reason to treat this one as at all different from the previous conspiracies, each of which turned out to be merely instrumental moments in the development of the autonomous network. All of the other conspirators thought they were steering the network toward a state of totality over which they could reign as sovereigns only to be humbled into place as fixed nodes in a still larger, hitherto inconceivable totality. Why would we not expect that the “máquinas hechas de galaxias”, of which Tangata Manu is a contributing

engineer, to eventually be revealed to be merely another node in yet another, even more comprehensive network, a meta-cosmic one made not of galaxies but of multiple universes—and why would we expect it to stop there (if anything, the novel has conditioned the reader to engage in such wild speculation). In *Ygdrasil* we witness *mise en abyme* of conspiracies so absolute that the very kind of sovereignty implied by the concept of conspiracy flips over into its opposite. Plots, intentions, agencies become topographically situated, the merely instrumental moments of self-consciousness of what are in reality fixed nodes. Real intention is forever deferred, or distributed through a limitless, and absolutely networked, reality. What none of the story's conspirators suspects is that existence is networked through and through, that there is no archi-conspirator, that the self-organizing, self-regulating networked totality they thought they could hold at arm's length and manipulate is as big as being itself.

On this reading, what *Ygdrasil* describes is not the ubiquity of conspiracy but rather the complete node-ification of existence. The self-regulating network—embodied first in the image of the Ygdrasil machine and, in the end, by the shaman's multi-galactic machine—is not an all-encompassing totality shaped and disciplined by a conspiratorial sovereign. If it is true that not even Tangata Manu's is the ultimate conspiracy, then it would seem that there are no sovereigns anywhere, not even any true conspiracies, rather only nodes of greater or lesser importance. This kind of nodal networked existence does not allow for any true change and, therefore, no real futurity. In other words, if anyone/thing is steering the network, it is the network itself. And only in the direction of self-preservation—that is, it will never transform itself into something other than the network that it is. One way to understand the “rebelión contra el dios agónico” (260), mentioned at the end of the novel as the product the “máquina hecha de galaxias” is producing, is as a rebellion against the very notion of agonism, against the idea that any agency could transform (the networked) reality into anything other than what it already is. As such, it is the

rebellion of the network against futurity itself. If there is a true apocalypse in *Ygdrasil*, it is not to be found in the catastrophic battle for control of the world/network, the end of human civilization, or even the truncation of spiritual existence. *Ygdrasil*'s universe is apocalyptic to the extent that it becomes utterly devoid of futurity. Just as Mariana is encrusted like a jewel into the heart of the Ygdrasil machine, the Ygdrasil, and in fact the entire earth, is set irrevocably into place, node-ified, to serve as a giant modem within a cosmic network.

To reiterate, this apocalyptic voiding of futurity from existence is not the culmination of a diabolical scheme, though it includes or subsumes the latter as a subordinate element. If existence is nodal through and through, then conspiracy, diabolical or otherwise, could only ever be an illusion, a mystification, a misunderstanding of the way things are. If conspiracy is not what brings about apocalypse, then the cause of no future must be sought elsewhere—i.e. not in the mechanisms of an eschatological narrative culminating in the consummation of a conspiracy. The ultimate powerlessness of each character in *Ygdrasil* obtains less from the fact that there is always someone else one step ahead, more powerful, acting on behalf of an even larger conspiracy, than from the fact that the shape of their collective reality seems determined in advance by the structure of an always preexisting network.

And yet, there are also hints in the novel that, even though the trajectory of the universal network escapes the grasp of any particular conspiracy, it was not entirely predetermined, that this is not a hyper-structural condition but that the absolute end of history was actually historically contingent. The historical conditions for the emergence of a detemporalized network (a network that permits no future, only the infinite reproduction of its own present) can perhaps be deduced from the few glimpses the reader gets of the daily lives of Mariana and the other human characters prior to being pulled into the cosmic epic of the Ygdrasil. These characters are already engaged in practices and enmeshed in social mechanisms that would have already voided



the future. For example, there is generalized dependence on pharmacological substances, which seems to function as a mechanism for reproducing and perpetuating the techno-social structure poised, as we know, to universalize itself. Early in the story, Mariana's addiction to *maíz* that allows her (and, presumably, many others) to endure—merely endure and not challenge in any way—the hellish social environment produced by oppressive governments and nearly omnipotent corporations. Even those occupying privileged positions within the system, like the politician Alvarado, must rely on drugs to maintain their place—in his case stimulants allowing him to keep up with the pace of the executive class.<sup>34</sup> As is the case in today's late capitalist system, characterized by relentless demands for endless flexibility, the system in which Alvarado lives and works would fail without such drugs keeping the psyches and bodies of its constituent subjects. Such pharmacological practices detemporalize subjects' experience to the extent that

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34 Consider the following description of Alvarado's daily routine, which is obviously a thinly-veiled critique of the repressed pharmacological foundation of today's mainstream economy: “A las ocho de la mañana apareció Alvarado con una taza de café en la mano . . . La noche había sido larga y el sueño corto, de modo que el café tendría un par de polizones disolviéndose clandestinamente en el fondo de la taza. Nada anormal, apenas el rito diario de la clase ejecutiva, incapaz de renunciar a ciertos químicos a esas alturas imprescindibles para sostener el ritmo endemoniado que exigían las responsabilidades laborales. Todos en el gobierno apoyaban la lucha contra las drogas, pero todos sabían que sin ellas, con los hombres agotados e imposibilitados de contener el estrés y la exigencia de forma natural, el sistema derrumbaría. Los destinos del país estaban en manos de una banda de drogadictos obsesos, necesariamente relacionados con y chantajeados por hermandades del comercio ilegal” (29). Drug traffic and use is not an anomaly or byproduct of the global economy restricted to deviant or marginalized populations but a *structural condition* of that economy itself. For a consideration of this issue in Latin American politics, economic, and culture, see Hermann Herlinghaus, *Violence Without Guilt: Ethical Narratives from the Global South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Narcoepics: A Global Ethics of Sobriety* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Beyond the ubiquitous caffeine-alcohol cycle undergirding the workweek the traditional workweek, real-life examples of 'productivity-promoting' pharmacology currently include the use of more powerful stimulants and “nootropics” like amphetamines (especially the off-label or illegal use of *Adderall* and similar ADHD medications) and modafinil (*Provigil*, an anti-narcoleptic). The use of such drugs is nowadays becoming almost a necessary prerequisite for certain positions requiring executives to work as long as twenty hours a day (see Michael Arrington, “How Many Silicon Valley Executives Are Hopped Up on Provigil?”). Similar patterns are increasingly common in other jobs and at universities, as workers and students struggle to stay competitive in an ever more precarious economy. The crucial point, for my purposes, is that this ought to be considered a pharmacological response to an apocalyptic society, in which previous economic temporalities have been rendered obsolete. How else should we view the push to extend work into 'leisure time' (think work-related smartphone and email mail use 'off the job') or the evisceration of job security than as a voiding of the future, a prolongation of the economic present?

One more point to be made regarding the issue of labor-enabling pharmacology is that, though universal, it is not globally homogenous. That is, different demographics depend on different substances in order to endure the physical and psycho-affective burdens of the socio-economic environments in which they live. *Cocaleros* in Columbia's Putumayo or Bolivia's Chapare regions chew coca leaves; homeless street children huff glue.

they tie users to the current techno-economic configuration and prevent them from constructing any alternatives to it.

It may seem arbitrary to fixate on such details, apparently incidental to *Ygdrasil's* epic clash of conspiracies. However, they in fact encapsulate the logic of futurelessness structuring the novel's central plot. What ultimately produces apocalypse in *Ygdrasil* is a generalized condition of techno-pharmacology. If, as mentioned, the conspiratorial plots that proliferate in the novel turn out to be nothing but fantasies, it is because all of the conspirators had misconstrued their relation to the technologies they had presumed were under their control. In fact, in each case, they were being controlled by the technologies themselves. Or rather, in each case they relinquished control to these technologies in a pharmacological way. Bernard Stiegler uses the term “pharmacology” to mean “the condition of duality in which something is both poison and cure, bringing both benefit and harm” (Galloway 25). Stiegler updates Plato’s critique of the technology of writing and applies it to our use of all technologies in the contemporary capitalist world. These technologies (like cell phones, search engines, the internet as a whole, etc.), in the name of expanding memory, thought, and communication, actually tend to promote a process Stiegler calls “hypomnesia,” by which human know-how passes into the machines. Like Plato, Stiegler argues that, inevitably, the “*exteriorization of memory is a loss of memory and knowledge*” and that, furthermore, this “has today become the stuff of everyday experience in *all* aspects of our experience” (29). But the really crucial point he makes is that “more and more often,” this process manifests itself “in the feeling of our powerlessness, if not our *impotence*, indeed of *obsolescence*—at the very moment when the extraordinary *mnesic power* of digital networks makes us aware of the immensity of human memory, which appears to have become infinitely recoverable and accessible” (29-30). In Stiegler’s view, all of this “amounts to the everyday and perceptible aspect of . . . a vast process of *cognitive and affective*

*proletarianization*—and a vast process of the loss of knowledge(s): *savoir-faire* [i.e. practical skills, etc.], *savoir-vivre* [knowing how to live, by which he specifically means the ability to desire], theoretical knowledge [*savoir théoriser*], *in the absence of which all savor is lost*” (30).

Though he does not use the term, this is Stiegler's essentially *apocalyptic* critique of present-day political economy. The contemporary subject is cognitively and affectively incapacitated, unable to cultivate a meaningful and intentional relationship *to the future* and, therefore, unable to truly *care about* or *care for* the world. From Stiegler's perspective, it is not difficult to imagine how humans, having lost their ability to care for the world, might, as a result be apocalyptically overwhelmed by it.

Could we not read the failure of the various conspirators in *Ygdrasil* to harness the power of the global network in this light? What Stiegler argues leads in real life to a “*cognitive and affective proletarianization*” (30), is in Baradit's novel the same force that undermines every conspiratorial subject (i.e. those subjects still supposed to maintain an autonomous existence vis-a-vis the total network engulfing the rest of a lobotomized, powerless human mass). When those who seek to steer the network according to their own interests—like Rodríguez and Alvarado's team, El Imbunche's cult or the Chrysler corporation, ultimately fail in their attempts—it may have less to do with another actor's superior knowledge than their own lack of knowledge. It is less a matter of defeat than of being left behind by a network they cannot govern because they can no longer care for it, because they have allowed the knowledge required to do so to be hypomnemmatized. Perhaps even Mariana's defeat could be traced ultimately to her reliance on hypomnemata. All of her efforts to undermine the expansion of the enslaving global network are themselves dependent upon hypomnematic technologies. She possesses in advance none of the knowledge necessary for her missions and instead must rely on the various pharmaka provided by her accomplices—mescaline, nanobots, transfusions of DNA, and other psychotechnologies

containing computer access codes, network maps, mission directives—in order to engage the system, even in an antagonistic way. Just as she could only endure her existence within (or at the margins of) the system through the aid of *maíz*, it is only possible to work against the system through similar pharmacological mediators. And just as her previous *pharmakon* of choice destroyed her life even as it enabled it, the quasi-technological *pharmaka* that allow her access to cyberspaces and infrastructures she hopes to subvert ultimately leave her tragically powerless before them.

In *Ygdrasil*, those who believe they know how things really work do not actually possess such knowledge; instead, what might potentially or ought to be "known" is but inscribed in the psycho-technical objects the subjects wield. Furthermore, these characters cannot conceive of what to want, what to desire. In Stiegler's terms, they have lost their *savoir-vivre* in addition to their *savoir-faire*. Conspirators like Rodríguez and Alvarado or Los Perfectos think they desire the development of the network, that it can proffer them unlimited power, but in retrospect, it becomes clear that they are merely *driven* to<sup>35</sup> work toward this end. In the case of El Imbunche's cult, it is evident that this is a death drive. The reproduction/repetition of the total network implies the complete dissolution of the individual subjects driven to advance it. What they experience as a desire (for new technologies, configurations of power, etc.) is in fact a drive toward a repetition of the same, i.e. of the already existing bio-technological network. Not a qualitative transformation of their reality but merely another, more pervasive iteration, in which their latent impotence/passivity will be translated into actual fact, materialized as they, body and spirit, are soldered into the structure of a universal network "desarrollado por ellos no *para* ellos" (254).

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35 Stiegler claims that within a generalized pharmacological condition, desire risks dissolving into drives. The consumption of commodities, for example, generally involves drive, since it is a matter of repetition (moving from one commodity to the next, indefinitely), whereas desire resists repetition, as it is irreducibly future-oriented (i.e. ultimately unfulfillable).

If no future has become a permanent reality in *Ygdrasil*, it has as much, or more to do with the way that the present had already become inescapable in the lives of the story's protagonists than with the way the future has been corralled by plotters, seized by the most cunning conspirators. In other words, it is not that Mariana, or anyone else, might have preserved earth's future if only she had not been tricked and manipulated by the shaman Tangata Manu. In Mariana's world, and in her own subjectivity, no future was already a *fait accompli*.

There is, of course, no easy way to translate *Ygdrasil* into a straightforward political analysis of contemporary Mexico. Such a reading would fall into the mode of apocalyptic-conspiratorial thinking the novel subtly critiques. However, certain useful concepts can be derived from the logic of *Ygdrasil* relevant to such an analysis. First among them would be the notion, outlined above, that the apocalyptic narrative does in fact contain a kernel of truth—in Mexico, as in much of the rest of the contemporary world, no future has a positive existence. But this narrative remains politically meaningless as long as it seeks to explain the end of the future with the tools of conspiratorial thought—i.e. conspiracy theories (e.g. that the country's woes can be reduced to the intentions of a handful of combinations) as well as conspiratorial plotting and planning (that the problem can be solved through the concerted effort of groups of motivated politicians, police or activists). The conspiratorial interpretation makes it impossible to grasp a really-existing no future by mistakenly supposing that the future is being held hostage by rival conspiracies. *Ygdrasil*'s thoroughgoing pessimism—its image of an apocalypse that marches on *in spite* of conspiracies, be they human or supernatural—suggests instead a dismissal of conspiratorial thought based not on a revival of optimism but rather a full acceptance the reality of contemporary apocalypse, meaning, specifically, the reality of no future. From such a perspective one might begin to imagine an immanent approach to political possibility that would require passing through the really-existing apocalypse at hand.

*Ygdrasil* prepares the reader to extract the core of truth from the narco-apocalypse narrative and reinscribe it within a more accurate account of what might be called a global *pharmapocalypse*. By taking a supposedly regional, Mexican apocalypse and universalizing it—meaning not that it begins in Mexico and spreads outward but that the same apocalyptic processes are at work in Mexico as in the rest of the world—Baradit’s imagined End invites us to reconsider the available interpretations of a contemporary Mexico ostensibly on the verge of collapse. To be sure, *Ygdrasil* is not intended to offer any clear critiques of real-life political or socio-economic issues. But it does suggest that our collective fear of political paralysis, socio-economic chaos, ecological collapse—in sum, our sense that the present may be inescapable, that no future is a reality here and now—may have less to do with a supposed lack of imagination or optimism vis-a-vis the future or, alternatively, a putative inability to settle accounts with the past, than with our refusal to sufficiently analyze and critique the material causes (practices, processes, mechanisms) of an ineluctable present.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**NEURONAL *TESTIMONIO* AND PHARMACOLOGICAL DEPROLETARIANIZATION**  
**IN ALEX RIVERA'S *SLEEP DEALER***

Alex Rivera's recent science fiction film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) engages a number of concepts from contemporary theories of biopolitics and cognitive capitalism (which I will lump together in this chapter as "post-autonomist" theory) while also complicating them from a Latin American, or, more specifically, bordered Global Southern, perspective. The film presents a narrative and visual articulation of the insuperable interdependence of material and immaterial production, thereby challenging the common interpretation of post-autonomist theory according to which the immaterial production is supposedly about to liberate us from exploitation inherent in material production. As Luis Martín-Cabrera explains, Rivera "establishes a dialogue with post-autonomous thinkers, while exposing the limits of their assumptions by showing how technology and cognitive labor may actually reproduce forms of colonial exploitation and oppression rather than leading to automatic liberation from the shackles of physical labor" (590).

*Sleep Dealer* portrays a transnational dystopia structured by a techno-economic imperialism in which powerful United States business and governmental interests extract enormous value from Mexican worker obliged by the economic policies set in place by these same interests to sell them their labor: privatizations of communal resources and public services, the unification of currencies and markets, the expansion of state surveillance and repression, and the militarization of the border. In other words, the situation looks a lot like our contemporary post-NAFTA hemispheric reality. In keeping with a venerated science fiction convention, Rivera

unfolds a narrative in which the socioeconomic nuances of the present are made clearly legible in a vision of the excesses they could lead to in an imagined near future. In his own words, Rivera's speculative intention is to use "the genre of science fiction to flash forward five minutes or five years to look at the politics between the United States (and Mexico) if they keep going the way they're going today", a conceptual experiment that in the film gives rise to "a sick and twisted spin on the American dream" (Marez v). This consists in a situation in which the privatization and liberalization of the NAFTA is expanded and enforced by professional paramilitary forces. Many Mexicans are forced to migrate in search of sustenance, but instead of crossing a fully closed and militarized border, they settle for work in the numerous "*infomaquilas*" that surround border cities like Tijuana. Nothing is made in these factories. Rather, workers plug in *Matrix* style to a network that allows them to operate machines and robots on the other side of the border. The work that the old "*braceros*" used to do as guest workers in the United States is now done by the prosthetic arms of remote "*cybraceros*."<sup>36</sup> What used to be the secret desire of North American capital is now a mere banality assured by technological innovation and the economic 'necessities' that follow from it. As one character puts it, "Este es el sueño americano. Le damos a Estados Unidos lo que siempre han querido: todo el trabajo sin los trabajadores."<sup>37</sup>

The story of Memo Cruz, protagonist and narrator, begins in the village of Santa Ana del Río, Oaxaca, where the river referred to in the name of the town, which once upon a time provided ample irrigation for his family's ancestral lands, has been dammed and its water

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36 The "'Bracero' Program, which lasted from 1942 to 1963, was a legal arrangement that allowed thousands of Mexican workers to enter the United States with provisional work permits. It was controversial because these contingent workers lacked virtually any rights or protections and because their deportation was often unpredictable and unfair. Rivera references this program in his first film short, "Why Cybraceros?" (2005), a parody of the promotional materials for the old program that presents itself as an actual advertisement for a new company set to offer robotized labour remote controlled by Mexicans in Mexico. Rivera received a number of inquiries from potential customers who failed to grasp the satire.

37 We should not fail to note in this quote a commentary on the supposed 'neutrality' of technology. Here, as in our contemporary economic situation, technological changes often serve as the pretext under which the owners of capital and their state stewards implement profoundly racist social and labor policies which otherwise would be indefensible. In this way, people whose presence used to be considered 'undesirable'—on account of their race, ethnicity, culture, religion or class—simply become 'unnecessary'.



commercialized in order to meet the demands of California's desert metropolises. The familial *milpa* has dwindled due to the high price of water for local consumption, and if Memo's father continues to cultivate it, it is basically for symbolic reasons. When Memo asks his father why he refuses to leave in search of better opportunities, the latter explains that their future belongs, or belonged, to the past: "Tuvimos un futuro, estás parado en el. Cuando ellos obstruyeron el río, cortaron nuestro futuro . . . tal vez [la milpa] no parezca mucho, pero es nuestro." If they no longer have a future, at least they have the memory of having had one, a nostalgia they can lean on as long as they hold on to the land that still belongs to them, however unviable it may have become in their ultraliberal world.

But Memo is not convinced. Despite having grown up in the periphery of the global economic system, he is a true digital native. He has no time for the past nor for the future. He is most at home in the pure present structured, among other things, by the reality shows he and his brother watch, like *Drones!*, which broadcasts live the missions of corporate mercenaries in the US who fly remote-controlled drones over the border to eliminate "bad guys" such as the so-called "aqua-terrorists" from the EMLA (Ejército Maya de Liberación del Agua). Memo also understands that he lives in a globalized world ("Por lo menos sé que el mundo es más grande que esta milpa, papá") and that in that world one must connect in order to survive—connect, that is, to the global economy. And in *Sleep Dealer* connecting means *literally* connecting global markets and value flows through the techno-somatic nodes that all workers—from the *cybraceros* in the *infomaquilas* to what in our day we have taken to calling the "creative class" or the "cognitariat" (designers, writers, creators of internet 'content', and so on)—must have implanted in order to secure the jobs they need to survive. Memo knows, or thinks he knows, that notions like "self-sufficiency" or "local economy" have become meaningless. To be disconnected—whether in the name of nostalgia or false optimism—is to be ignored, moribund and, finally,

dead. In other words, he understands the biopolitical reality of his world, the incontrovertible fact that the econo-political order can grant one life, but only if one self-imposes the techniques and mechanisms of control that mold the corporality and subjectivity necessary to accede to this order.

This knowledge manifests itself in Memo in the form of a profound desire to connect with, or at least relate to, people and places far away from the village where he feels abandoned. At night, he fires up a perfectly cyberpunk homemade contraption that allows him to hack the satellites that transmit everything from the disembodied labor power of the Mexican “*nodaleros*” working in the *infomaquilas* to the phone calls they make to their families back home and the remittances they wire them. Memo listens in on their conversations and longs for the moment when he too can get nodal implants and get connected. But one night, his unauthorized splice is detected and identified as a terrorist threat. He hurries and disconnects, but it is too late. The next day, while watching *Drones!* at a friend’s house, he realizes that the target of the day is his own house in Santa Ana. He takes off running to warn his father, who is still at home, but just before he can, a drone contracted by the local water company swoops overhead and destroys his house and kills his father. He is devastated, and his family, having lost their only provider, will soon be destitute. Memo’s dream to get nodes and connect to the global economy has become an absolute imperative.

Memo decides to leave for Tijuana in search of work. Along the way, he meets Luz Martínez, who will become his counterpart in the amorous subplot. Luz is a consummate cognitarian. She works as a “writer,” which entails uploading visualizations of selected memories along with dictated narrations to an online “mercado de memorias” called “Trunode,” which is essentially the logical extension of the social networks that today summon the prosumer subject to “share”/valorize their experiences and perspectives (this exploitation of psycho-

affectivity, as we saw, is one of the key themes in Baradit's *Ygdrasil*, in which dreams, orgasms, even peoples very souls become the sources of energy for the universal machine that evolves out of the global economic apparatus; it is also a key concern of the post-autonomist theories I will engage with below). It may be a bit of an overstatement to say she "works" as a writer, since her day-to-day life is highly precarious—but so it is already with our contemporary "creative class." It may be that she has a passion for writing, but in the end, being creative is an obligation. On account of various economic forces—an all-too-realistic-example: every time she turns her computer on she is accosted by video messages from collections agencies threatening to liquidate her belongings if she does not start making payments on her student loans—it is just as necessary for her as it is for peasants like Memo to connect to the global "immaterial labor" market. But instead of selling the disembodied force of her bodily movements, like the *cybraceros* in the *infomaquillas*, she directly sells her affects and the semiotic content of her subjectivity, a subjectivity that is simultaneously molded by her relation with the means of connecting with the market. There is a stunning scene in which Luz is dictating her first encounter with Memo when the *Trunode* software client interrupts her and demands, "Repite los últimos diez segundos. Por favor, di la verdad. [Repeat the last ten seconds. Please tell the truth.]" This is a perfect representation of the kind of control proper to what theorists have called "cognitive" (Berardi) or "communicative capitalism" (Dean): what the present econo-political order requires are not restrictions upon interiority but rather the transparent and incessant communication of interiority through the networks that constitute this order. Total transparency amounts to absolute surveillance, which in turn makes possible the complete commercialization of every aspect of human life.

Apart from its function as bearer of the obligatory Hollywood romantic arc, the relationship between Memo and Luz, among other things, serves to counteract the reduction that

many post-autonomist thinkers seem to make by considering immaterial production to be not only predominant in certain regions of the world but as increasingly identical with the global economy as such. While it is true that technological innovation and technology in general are giving rise to new forms of labor and opening up new spheres of life up to valorization, it is of course not true that material labor has been superseded. Critics like Jodi Dean have noted how notions such as “‘cognitive capitalism’ [make] the world appear smarter than it is, as if intelligence replaced manufacturing when in fact manufacturing was pushed out of some countries and onto others in search for ever cheaper labor, when factory work was becoming all the more brutal and massified even if less visible” (De Boever y Neidich 70). Contemporary theories of immaterial capitalism tend to obfuscate the latter’s inextricable material complements (not to say substrates)—which apart from physical labor also include natural resources, ecology, and energy—as well as the unequal distribution (along principally racial and ethnic lines) of material and immaterial production and consumption in the global economy. This unequal distribution clearly maps onto the relationship between Luz (white, educated, middle class representative of immaterial production from Mexico’s metropolitan center) and Memo (indigenous, un-/self-educated, peasant representative of material production from the peripheral South), whose interdependence becomes one of *Sleep Dealer*’s central themes.

For Martín-Cabrera, this central theme is also the main argument of the film in that it challenges those that perceive in the recent mutations of global capitalism the imminence of “the autonomy of labor, the ‘communism of the commons,’ or a new revolutionary dawn of the multitude”, affirming instead, “the interrelation of material and immaterial labor coalescing around a neocolonial historical formation” (592), which is situated paradigmatically along the border between the United States and Mexico. According to Martín-Cabrera, it is essential to understand that “in Rivera’s account, immaterial labor is not autonomous from material

production, but rather a function of material production that intensifies the extraction of both material and immaterial labor at the same time that it reproduces neocolonial forms of subjection” (592). Additionally, he signals that this is really nothing new, that is that we should not understand cognitive capitalism as a rupture with the previous system but rather as a continuation and intensification of tendencies that have characterized capitalism since the nineteenth century, especially in light of the fact “technology has been traditionally introduced in production so that the capitalist can appropriate the greatest quantity of living labor in the minimum possible amount of time” (592).<sup>38</sup>

However, post-autonomist theorists (including Hardt and Negri) do not exactly argue that immaterial production has come or is coming to completely replace material production.<sup>39</sup> Nor do they argue that recent political, socioeconomic, and technological transformations depart from the well known cycle of capital’s internal revolutions. Martín-Cabrera’s objection to Hardt and Negri is precisely that they mistakenly believe this cycle is finally reaching its limits—or, more specifically, that their faithfulness to Marx’s messianism outweighs and undermines their

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38 I agree that in general every technological innovation introduced by capitalism continues to have as its principal purpose the progressive appropriation of surplus value, in its absolute form (the effective prolongation of the working day, outside of the official work schedule, which has resulted from normalization of smartphone use, for example) as well as its relative form (as is seen in the growing automation of ever more industries that increases productivity relative to human labor input or, on the other hand, social networks that multiply immaterial temporalities and thus open new semiotic spheres to the extraction of surplus value). Nevertheless, it is a little curious that Martín-Cabrera would resort here to the tactic of claiming that Marx already predicted what is happening today, the common nothing-new-under-the-Marxist-sun gesture, when the aim of his critique is to challenge “the notion that the ‘communism of the common,’ as Hardt calls it, relies on the substitution of politics and potentiality with an immanent logic of contradiction” (589), the idea that we can trust that Marx and Engels were right when they argued that what capital “produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers” (50). In other words, if the problem with post-autonomists like Hardt and Negri is their faith in a Marxist eschatology that postulates an inherently self-destructive capitalism, along with the apolitical messianism that this implies (and, again, I agree with this critique)—or rather, their faith that the new (a “communism of the common”) will finally arrive *precisely because there is nothing essentially new* about contemporary capitalism—if this is the case, then it seems self-defeating to oppose to them a very similar faithfulness to Marx (even if Martín-Cabrera’s hews a little closer to the grain).

39 Such simplistic interpretations are clearly based on selective readings of post-autonomist texts. Hardt and Negri, for example, offer several clarifications of their argument regarding the contemporary *hegemony* of immaterial labor and production: “This is not to say, we repeat, that the conditions of labor and production are becoming *the same* throughout the world or throughout the different sectors of the economy. The claim rather is that the many singular instances of labor processes, productive conditions, local situations, and lived experiences coexist with a ‘becoming common,’ at a different level of abstraction, of the forms of labor and the general relations of production and exchange—and that there is no contradiction between this singularity and commonality” (*Multitude* 114).

faithfulness to his analysis. I sympathize with this critique to a point, but a more effective one might draw on Moishe Postone's critique of analyses focused on the supposed limits of capital, which, based on a close reading of Marx's later works, argues, basically, that the problem with capitalism is not that it will continue to run up against its own internal limits and produce endless crises, but rather that its productivism is quite literally limitless—what must be abolished, according to Postone, is productivism itself.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Martín-Cabrera's other point about the post-autonomists' dismissal of material production—or, more specifically, that they fail to recognize and think through (to paraphrase Lenin) the combined and uneven distribution of material and immaterial production—is off the mark and distracts from the actual nuances of the relation between material and immaterial production in many of their theories. Consider for example Paolo Virno's observation:

In contrast to Taylorism and Fordism, today's productive reorganization is selective; it develops spottily, unevenly, flanking traditional productive patterns. The impact of technology, even at its most powerful point, is not universal. Rather than determine a univocal and compulsory mode of production, technology keeps alive myriad distinct modes of production, and even resuscitates those that are obsolete and anachronistic. Here is the paradox. This particularly vigorous innovation involves only certain segments of the workforce, constituting a sort of "umbrella" under which is replicated the entire history of labor: islands of mass workers, enclaves of professionals, swollen numbers of the self-employed, and new forms of workplace discipline and individual control. The modes of production that over time emerged one after the other are now represented synchronically, almost as if at a world's fair. This is precisely because cybernetic and telecommunications innovations, although directly involving only a part of active labor,

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40 See Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (London: Cambridge UP, 1993) and Juan Duchesne-Winter's "Marxismo no-tradicional" (unpublished manuscript).

nonetheless represent the background condition of this synchrony of different patterns of work. (Hardt and Virno 18-19)

If there is a problem with the analysis of the present that Virno and his fellow post-autonomists make, it is not that they fail to perceive the combined and uneven global distribution of the material and the immaterial but, if anything, they tend to offer an incomplete picture of the exact nature of the *combinatory* forces that keeps the uneven distribution together. “So what unites the software technician, the autoworker at Fiat, and the illegal laborer?” asks Virno,

We need the courage to respond: nothing unites them any longer with respect to the form and content of the productive process. But also: everything unites them regarding the form and content of socialization. What is common are their emotional tonalities, their inclinations, their mentalities, and their expectations. (19)

A more useful critique of post-autonomist theories of material and immaterial production, rather than merely reemphasizing the continued importance (not to say primacy) of the material, would involve acknowledging the accuracy of their analysis of the affective and cognitive commonalities uniting material and immaterial laborers while rejecting the notion that “nothing unites them any longer with respect to the form and content of the productive forces.” To the analysis of affective and cognitive phenomena common to all workers in their process of socialization, we must *add* an analysis of the *continuity* of the form and content of material and immaterial productive processes. My interest in *Sleep Dealer* lies in the fact that it articulates just this kind of double analysis.

Martín-Cabrera is correct in arguing that capital’s grave-diggers will never of their own accord fall into the grave they themselves are digging, that we cannot expect the internal contradictions of capital to produce what only concerted political action could achieve: the end of capitalism. But on the other hand, perhaps he underestimates the capacity of capital to

overcome not only economic (i.e. internal) tensions but the (putatively external) political attacks mounted against it. It may in fact be that capital has already birthed its own grave-diggers, but it marches on in spite of them as an undead zombie. What is more, it may be that the true political problem of our day is to figure out how to overcome a situation in which the same parasite that animates a zombie capitalism also infects us each of us individually (or to use Virno's terms, how to escape a situation in which the form and content of the productive process is indistinguishable from the form and content of the process of socialization; for Postone, the problem is not how to replace the current mode of production with a less alienated or less privatized one but rather, since, as he argues, the characteristic mode of production of capitalism is productivism as such, how to transcend productivism itself). I do not want to extend the zombie metaphor too far, since it does not figure explicitly in Rivera's film. The concept of parasitism, on the other hand, does, but not in terms of infection. Rather than invisible germs, parasitism in *Sleep Dealer* functions through pharmacological elements (which, as will become clear below, include not only 'drugs' but also techniques and technologies) that circulate through markets and society and take hold of individual bodies and brains, rewiring them to become economically, libidinally, and politically dependent and inert.

Returning to the relationship between Luz and Memo, I want to emphasize that more than a repetition of the old inter-class romance cliché, and beyond simply communicating the relatively banal idea that immaterial production can never totally free itself from material or physical production, their love serves to uncover a new dynamic that *traverses* material and immaterial production, or more specifically, that shows that both have always been and continue to be inextricably linked, to aspects of the same productive totality. They are not inseparable simply because they are inseparable (because of the simple fact that immaterial production is unthinkable without some kind of material production as a substrate) but because they share a



common animating principle. In *Sleep Dealer*, this common principle is what Bernard Stiegler would call the contemporary “pharmacology of capital” (*New Critique* 71).

A pharmacological critique of contemporary capitalism questions, among other things, the adequacy of terms like “cognitive capitalism” for representing today’s econo-political reality. It echoes Dean’s judgment that “‘cognitive capitalism’ overplays immateriality even as it brings materiality, meat bones, and blood back in via the emphasis on brain” (De Boever and Neidich 70). Rivera’s pharmacological critique acknowledges the dynamics of the present situation in which precariousness and marginality force the contemporary socioeconomic subject to submit to the demands of an increasingly immaterial affective market (that is, to both its productive and consumptive demands). But it goes a step further by suggesting a bio-materialist analysis of the way such dynamics and demands function at a corporal, presubjective level. In its future history of the present, *Sleep Dealer* postulates that it is impossible to understand the recent mutations of capital and their concomitant subjective transformations without analyzing the neurophysiological mechanisms that mediate the relation between these two spheres of socioeconomic life. Without such an analysis, it would likewise be impossible to appreciate the political potentialities—or the lack thereof—of the current socioeconomic configuration. The political significance of the film lies not (only) in its emphasis on the interdependence of material and immaterial production and the need to create solidarities across the gulf separating a visible cognitariat inhabiting the Global North and an anachronous and mostly invisible proletariat relegated to the Global South. Nor does the film’s political thrust lie (only) in its implicit critique of the political miscalculations that result from theoretically privileging the Northern side of this division. Rather, *Sleep Dealer*’s primary political importance is that it offers a speculative theory of a “proletarian

pharmacology”<sup>41</sup> that traverses the North-South division, localizing today’s key contradictions not in the only abstract subject, nor only in the emotional or cognitive subject, but also, crucially, in the bodies and brains of individuals that, until they manage to destroy the internal mechanisms of their proletarianization, will never be able to crystalize into a post-capitalist collectivity. In sum, *Sleep Dealer* is a film about the kinds of oppression and resistance that correspond to a *neuro*-affective (and not just affective, cognitive or immaterial) capitalism.

Already in the title of the film can we perceive the contours of a pharmacological theory of the socioeconomic processes. In the opening sequence, we learn from the narrator that the node workers have nicknamed the *infomaquilas* where they work “sleep dealers”, because “si te sigues trabajando, te colapsas.” However, the narcotic effect of the *infomaquilas* is not reducible to the mere physical fatigue the workers experience. More importantly, the techniques and technologies that the workers interface with in the *infomaquilas* actually transfigure their cerebral and mental state, intoxicating them or sending them into a dream state. “A veces”, Memo tells us, “durante los turnos largos, alucinábamos.” Not only would they begin to dream after falling asleep on the job; they would also hallucinate while they worked. In both cases, the essential thing is that labor in the *infomaquilas* is narcotic—it induces a soporific state in the body and mind and, as we will see, eventually leads to the atrophy of both. It is a form of labor that annuls the partial freedoms of, on the one hand, traditional industrial production—in which, Marx observed, though the worker is forced to synchronize the movements of his body with the rhythm of the assembly line, his mind remains relatively free—as well as of, on the other hand, immaterial or cognitive production—in which, notes Bifo, the mind or soul is what must subject itself to the pace of production while the body remains relatively unrestrained. For Memo and his fellow workers in

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41 The reference here is to Stiegler's concept of the “pharmacology of the proletariat,” which I will draw on extensively in what follows.

the Global South, these two forms of production coexist and, therefore, cancel out any kind of freedom (mental or bodily) within production.

In other words, their situation borders on a total Taylorization of the human, and this during a supposedly post-Taylorist era. This process can be seen as much in Memo's life and in Luz's. Both are forced to devote almost all of their waking lives to production (primarily affective/cognitive, in Luz's case, and in Memo's, physical and affective/cognitive at the same time). Persecuted by her debtors, Luz must treat the totality of her life as a valorizable resource, each experience as a marketable narrative for the *Trunode* network (where her 'exotic' experiences are consumed primarily by inhabitants of the Global North). This economic obligation (to narrativize her life and, then, 'share'/commercialize it) defines her relationship with Memo from the outset, it being her hidden motive for befriending him and helping him transition to Tijuana, get nodes, and find work. In this way, she represents the voiding of the "everyday life" that figures so centrally the theories of Debord, Lefebvre, and De Certeau. The concept of everyday life refers to those corners of life still unoccupied by capital—in other words, to something that may have still existed thirty or forty years ago but that today, as John Crary has recently noted, has been eviscerated by the explosion of communicative capitalism.<sup>42</sup> Luz personifies the typical subject of cognitive (Bifo) or communicative (Dean) in which personal experience (its phenomenological, symbolic, and affective aspects) becomes the site of production in what Bifo calls "the social factory" ("Cognitarian Subjectivation").

Memo also works in this social factory while, as we already know, simultaneously working in the physical factories that dot the borderlands. In reality, the labor he carries out in one sphere is not qualitatively different from the work he does in the other—his is that double

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42 "As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond corporate intrusion" (75). Crary bases his critique on the idea of "societies of control" famously put forward by Deleuze in the early nineties. See pp. 68-76 for an extended discussion of late capitalism's conquest of everyday life.

life that characterizes not only the borderlands but the entire Global South). He is obligated to synchronize his bodily movements with the rhythm of industrial production while at the same time he must, like Luz, “move” his thoughts and affects in keeping with the rate of immaterial or symbolic production. What I want to emphasize here, though, is that what is extracted from him is not only surplus labor time but also, perhaps mainly, his knowledge or know how and his desires.

In one of the film’s most memorable scenes, Memo gets his first look at the inside of an *infomaquila*, where he sees his soon-to-be coworkers connected at the notes in their arms and necks to cables hanging from the roof, pantomiming various physical tasks—as if they were picking fruit, carrying crates, welding beams, and so on—without touching a thing or taking a step. The crew chief and tour guide of this “sueño americano” points out a few of the *nodaleros* and explains that “José está en un matadero de Iowa, y María es niñera de una niñita en Washington”, while Memo and the other new recruits “van a estar en una chambota en San Diego.” The important thing to note here is that the robotic *brazos* that do the work on the other side of the border, the mechanical hands that manufacture, would be useless—and more importantly, *valueless*—without the animating gestures and movements of the *cybracero* workers to the South—that is, without the knowledge and desires that, along with their time, they contribute to the process of production.

Presumably, somewhere in the economic backstory of *Sleep Dealer* there was a push toward automation designed to counteract, on one hand, the tendential fall in the rate of profit<sup>43</sup> and, on the other hand, the progressive demands of workers—<sup>44</sup>in other words, for the same reasons that today material production is becoming increasingly automated. And it is likely that

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43 Stiegler explains that the pharmacologization of the proletariat is capital’s answer to this inevitable tendency. See *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

44 Post-autonomist theories privilege workers struggles over economic crises as the true catalyst of the internal revolutions of capital.

*cybracero* labor, more than a simple result of North American racism and jingoism, was developed in answer to insurmountable limits of automation. These limits are currently a function of the fact that there are still simply too many a machine cannot do, or cannot do as cheaply, as a human worker—at least somewhere in the world. Such things include the creative and symbolic activities that occupy the today’s cognitariat but also the deployment of basic human know-how (for example, the infinite subtleties involved in taking care of “una niña en Washington”) and, more importantly, the reproduction of human desire, the most elemental driving force of the economy. In *Sleep Dealer*, node workers contribute what is lacking in an economic apparatus that has reached the current limits of any posthumanizing process: knowledge and libido (which again recalls the Ygdrasil in Baradit’s novel which, in order to move autonomously beyond its human-guided, conspiratorial prehistory must nevertheless continue to consume human libidinal energy).

In such a situation, machines and robots are not the prostheses of the workers. To the contrary, the workers are the prostheses of the machines and robots and, in the last instance, of capital itself.<sup>45</sup> The *cybracero* is a distributed cyborg, an transnational organism consisting of technological mechanisms, human knowledge and desires, and the impersonal agency of capital. The *nodaleros* working in the *infomaquillas* represent the fact that, even though the force of production—based in the general intellect—is no longer “reducible to ‘simple labor,’ to the pure

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<sup>45</sup> However, we should not let the parasitic extraction of cognitive and libidinal energy obscure the fact that more traditional forms of physical Taylorization (which almost completely ignore the cognitive and libidinal capacities of the worker) are still being used to mitigate the limitations of automation. One only need think of how whole populations in South Asia are conscripted by transnational capital for the mechanical capacity of their bodies, which in certain industries (above all garment assembly) is much cheaper and efficient than the automated alternatives. Also emblematic is the assembly labor in the *maquillas* strung along the US-Mexico border. Similar productive techniques are also present in the contemporary Global North. For example, in Amazon’s gargantuan distribution centers humans are employed essentially for the dexterity of their fingers and hands, because there are, as of yet, no viable robotic alternatives capable of handling the wide array of products and packages of varying sizes. Therefore, Amazon simply treats its workers like the machines it wishes already existed: all of their movements within the warehouses are predetermined by computers to increase their efficiency (which, nevertheless, still means they walk an average of 24 kilometers in a shift), they are not permitted to talk to each other (since their utility consists solely in their dexterity), and, not least, they are paid wages that could realistically only satisfy the physical needs of a robot. See Spencer Soper, “Inside Amazon’s Warehouse” and Mac McClelland, “I Was a Warehouse Wageslave.”

expenditure of time and energy” (Virno 21), neither is it reducible to cognition, communication or desire. Their form of labor is a compromise between two impossibilities: on the one hand the complete technologization of the general intellect and desire and, on the other, the total deskilling and delibidinization of the human being. In other words, *cybracero* labor is a compromise in the face of the impossibility of absolute proletarianization.

However, while *cybracero* labor can never surpass these extreme limits, it clearly leans toward technologization, that is, toward deskilling and delibidinization. Absolute proletarianization is an unreachable asymptote towards which, nevertheless, the arc of capital tends indefinitely. Stiegler refers precisely to this process with his concept of the “pharmacology of capital.” To summarize his analysis, in the contemporary capitalist system, which is increasingly based on informational and communicative technologies, there is a continuous tendency toward what he calls (making a clear reference to Derrida) “grammatization” (*New Critique* 10). In other words, human knowledge and know-how is in the process of being progressively inscribed or incorporated into the technological interfaces we use to accede to the global economy—and which it uses to gain access to us. As I explained in the last chapter, Stiegler calls this a “pharmacological” process that functions by way of “hypomnesis”, meaning, again, that the “*exteriorization of memory is a loss of memory and knowledge*” (29). For Stiegler, this produces a double proletarianization, cognitive and affective (30).

I have already summarized Stiegler's take on how today's new technologies and economic practices are contributing to a loss of knowledge and practical ability, *savoir-faire*. Likewise, our *savoir-vivre*—our ability to desire and orient our lives intentionally toward an object of desire—is diminishing. In part, this is due to the impotence we feel as we see ourselves losing our knowledge and know-how in the face of now nearly omniscient technologies (29-30). More fundamental, though, as Stiegler points out, is the short-termism inherent in today's digital

communications technologies. This short-termism—which tends increasingly toward an absolute presentism—is manifested in the productive process through the imperative to be perpetually accessible, connected, always working, communicating, and “sharing” (the dominant temporality that Crary has recently theorized in his *24/7*). Additionally, according to Stiegler, this short-termism is readily apparent in the move away from a temporality associated with economic investment (which at least implies futurity, care, and cultivation) toward a temporality of speculation—i.e. the major temporal transformation characterizing the last thirty years of global neoliberalization. A perfect example of this shift is high-frequency trading—made possible by innovations in computing and the extension of fiber-optic and microwave communications networks—which the time between ‘investments’ made automatically by a financial firm’s proprietary algorithms and their returns to such a small interval (a few milliseconds) that it basically gives rise to a pure speculative duration. In both cases, the upshot is that alternative temporalities collapse into one in which there is no moment but the present of capital.

For Stiegler, the catastrophic effect of this short-termism/presentism is that it annuls the possibility of care. He means this in a basically Heideggerian sense: from the simultaneous collapse of the temporal and affective worlds results a state in which the human subject can no longer affect or be affected<sup>46</sup>. The explosion of the present implies the implosion of desire.

The pharmacological relation between worker and technology in hyperconnective capitalism is perfectly summarized by a word of caution that Luz, acting as his “*coyotek*”, gives Memo while she prepares to install his nodes. “Cuando te conectas al otro lado,” she tells him, “tu cuerpo se conecta a una máquina. Es una conexión de doble vía. A veces tú controlas a la máquina, y a veces la máquina te controla a tí” (which she understands well, her own actions

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46 A good example of this is the so-called Flash Crash of 6 May 2010, when the Dow Jones Index fell 1000 points in a matter of minutes, not due to a rogue trader but rather to a *rogue algorithm*. The market shot back up to baseline just a few minutes later, again, not because of human intervention, but because a technical failure caused the system to automatically reboot. How can one care for a world that completely escapes the limits of our perception and influence?

being largely determined by the demands of the *TruNode* network she connects to for her precarious livelihood). The ambiguity of agency here described condenses the meaning of idea of drug or *pharmakon*. It is not that the *pharmakon*—which could just as well be a technological apparatus or media image as a psychoactive substance—takes complete control of the subject (as the misguided mainstream understanding of addictive drugs would have it).<sup>47</sup> Rather, there is more of a cyclical and unstable flow or feedback loop of knowledge and desire that constitutes a common will between a human user and a *pharmakon*—but this flow tends to redefine the human counterpart in the pharmacological relationship and reaccumulate agency in the non-human counterpart (the *pharmakon*, i.e. the drug, machine, image, etc.).

The literal connection that the *nodaleros* in *Sleep Dealer* have with their technological *pharmaka* evokes the theory of “desiring machines” in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*. In this case, the robots on the northern side of the border, along with the networks that unite them with their operators, would be the machines that interrupt the libidinal and cognitive flows of the *nodaleros* that putatively control them, converting them into services, products, and, in the end, value. As Matteo Pasquinelli notes, Deleuze and Guattari are perhaps too focused on the supposedly infinite productivity of such relations (or, more specifically, the networks of desiring interrelation in which they are situated). According to Pasquinelli, we must not ignore moments and sites of “negentropy” (205) in this process. We must always remember that certain machines “like organic cells, consume and dissipate energy, but at the same time they are able to accumulate, condense and store energy” (205)—that is, some machines not only produce but also *capitalize*. Instead of conceptualizing the media and technologies of contemporary capitalism as “information channels, body prostheses and mimetic devices”, we ought to think of them as “libidinal organisms, more specifically, as symbionts, or even better *libidinal parasites*, under the

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47 For an empirical refutation of this mainstream view, see Carl Hart’s *High Price: A Neuroscientist’s Journey of Self-Discovery that Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society* (New York: Harper, 2013).



concept of the extraction and accumulation of libidinal surplus-value” (207). In this light, the *cybracero* technologies in *Sleep Dealer* must be understood not only as means of remote production but also as sites of accumulation, constant capital in which the abilities, knowledges, know-how, and desires appropriated from the Mexican *nodaleros* is crystallized.

At first, this relation could be mistaken for a balanced symbiosis: capital’s machines and mechanisms consume the practical and libidinal energy of the *nodaleros*, and the *nodaleros* consume, if not the products of their *cybracero* labor, then at least a not insignificant portion of profits in the form of their wages. However, the actually parasitic nature of the relation manifests itself (besides the obvious inequalities between the *nodaleros* and the North American owners of their means of production) in the progressive physical and mental exhaustion of the workers, that is, in the “sleep” that the *infomaquila* “deals” them. This fatigue or psychosomatic dissolution is the residual effect of the process of the parasitic accumulation, the biological manifestation of the transfer of their abilities and desires to the networked technologies animated by them. It is, in sum, the external evidence of their pharmacological proletarianization.

One way to interpret the plot of *Sleep Dealer* is as a traditional addiction narrative: at first, Memo experiments with “gateway drugs” like the his lo-fi hacking or the visual spectacle of hyperconnective capitalism on *Drones!*. These first incursions into the pharmacopeia of capital inoculate him with an affective compulsion to go deeper and deeper into the economic system, a compulsion that he vocalizes in the moment of ecstasy he experiences when getting his nodes installed, “¡Por fin puedo conectar mi sistema nervioso al otro sistema, la economía global!”. From there he moves on to a period of apparent self-control that quickly disintegrates into a dangerous dependency. He feels compelled to spend more and more time connected and working for the welfare of his family, whose situation is going from bad to worse on account of the same hyperconnected and neoliberal capitalism in which Memo is quickly losing himself. What he,

like all migrant workers, had hoped would turn out to be a symbiotic relation has revealed itself as the parasitism that it always has been. Physically and psychologically exhausted, unable to revitalize himself in the *infobars* where *nodaleros* come after work to take energizing shots of “*teki*,” he has a revelation: “Me estaban robando la energía y mandándola lejos. Lo que pasó con el río me estaba pasando a mí.” Memo’s realization encapsulates the pharmacological nature not only of his individual life but of the world itself in which he lives. The pharmacological relation is inaugurated when a putative symbiosis becomes destabilized and turns into a parasitism in which one of the former symbionts becomes a parasite/drug and the other a host/user. Parasitism, rather than alienation, is the paradigmatic relation of hyperconnective capitalism. This resonates, again, with Postone’s reading of Marx, in which the only subject within capitalism is capital itself, a subject which develops itself not primarily on the basis of alienated private property but rather of its ability to extract an unlimited amount of value from human and non-human entities alike (regardless of whether these exist within a private property or a socialist regime).

Capital may alienate, but first and foremost, it (including the technologies and techniques that partially constitute it) is an *alien subject*, a *parasite*, a *pharmakon*. This idea is clearly articulated by Beatriz Preciado in her analysis of today’s biopolitical and pharmacological capitalism, which, as she explains, no longer produces “*things*” but rather “mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions and conditions of the soul” (108).<sup>48</sup> In this socioeconomic configuration, the products of capitalist production are not the actual substances sold under the name of Viagra or Prozac but rather the pharmacological subjectivities that these convoke, “subjectivities defined by the substance (or substances) that dominate their metabolism,

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48 In her essay, Preciado refers to a “pharmaco-pornographic bio-capitalism”, since her objects of analysis are, on the one hand, pharmaceuticals and, on the other, pornographic images. Both are considered to be privileged technologies in a hypermodern socioeconomic system in which sexuality no longer exists as an essence but rather as the object of a ubiquitous “*sexdesign*”. “There is nothing to discover in nature, there is no hidden secret. We live in a punk hyper-modernity: it is no longer about discovering the hidden truth in nature; it is about the necessity to specify the cultural political and technological processes through which the body as artefact acquires natural status” (108). Reading it in light of Stiegler’s theory, I consider pornography in Preciado’s model to be a subcategory of the *pharmakon* in general.

by the cybernetic prostheses and various types of pharmaco-pornographic desires that direct the subject's actions and through which they turn into agents" (108). The real products of contemporary capitalism, which are simultaneously sites of production, consumption, and valorization, are affectively determined subjectivities: "Prozac© subjects, cannabis subjects, cocaine subjects, alcohol subjects, Ritalin subjects, cortisone subjects, . . . Viagra© subjects" (108). In the case of *Sleep Dealer*, the *pharmaka* that convoke the subjectivities of Memo, Luz, and other characters are technological and mediatic rather than drugs. The important thing is that in each case the subject/product functions to transfer value—or, more specifically, to transfer cognitive and libidinal surplus value from the consumer/user/host (i.e. the human counterpart of a pharmacological subjectivity) to the drug/technology/parasite (the *pharmakon* or non-human element of the pharmacological subjectivity) where part of this surplus value becomes capitalized or reified.

In summary: pharmacology = parasitism = proletarianization. This equation, implicit in the presuppositions and narrative of *Sleep Dealer*, resolves any apparent divorce between material and immaterial production. And it does so without simply inverting the supposed contemporary subordination of the material to the immaterial. Instead, it testifies to the "metabolic" relationship between material and immaterial production, which, contrary to many interpretations of their work, various post-autonomists have emphasized. Pasquinelli, building on Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of "the crystallization of time," describes the materiality of immaterial production (and, conversely, the immateriality of material production):

Out of any virtual-reality dream, back to the analogue world, each media assemblage becomes a large or small vortex of accumulation, *each device an energy parasite*. Time and desire are attracted and crystallized, and then transformed and condensed into other forms. It has to be clearly pointed out that parasites are never 'immaterial'—they always

transform our fluxes into something tangible. Netporn converts libidinal flows into money and daily siphons a huge bandwidth on a global scale. Netporn transforms libido into pure electricity: exactly as file-sharing networks are reincarnated as an army of MP3 players, Free Software helps to sell more IBM hardware and Second Life avatars consume as much electricity as the average Brazilian. Libidinal surplus is extracted and channelled across the technological infrastructure and invested back into the infrastructure itself, into the imagery or into other devices connected to and dependant upon that network. Accumulation of libidinal surplus is easily turned into money, attention, visibility, spectacle, material and immaterial commodities. (209-210)

Far from being a phenomenon/epiphenomenon or infrastructure/superstructure relation, the link between semiotic or immaterial production (typified for Pasquinelli by “netporn”) and the material (computers, software, power plants) is *itself* material, metabolic. If there is an ‘infrastructure,’ it would be the human bodies from which the vast material/immaterial capitalist apparatus extracts desire and knowledge.

In this light, *Sleep Dealer* resembles another sci-fi allegory of contemporary capitalism, *The Matrix*. In both movies, the important thing “is less the virtual reality game than the parasitic role of the digital world above human bodies” (Pasquinelli 208). In both, the utopia of total connectivity between human minds internal to the digital virtual world can only exist on the basis of the extraction energy from catatonic (in *The Matrix*) or progressively soporific (in *Sleep Dealer*) bodies. What in *The Matrix* is allegorical—advanced capitalism functions *as if* it were technological parasite—in *Sleep Dealer* is literal—advanced capitalism *is* parasitic. The warning of both films is that “accumulation still runs despite, or possibly thanks to, digital *commonism*” (Pasquinelli 208). Thus they articulate a properly Global Southern apocalyptic corrective to the messianism of the multitude that certain post-autonomists, namely Hardt and Negri, profess

(though not others; Pasquinelli is elaborating upon Lazzarato after all). In other words, nothing assures that the “communism of the common” (Hardt 12) immanent to contemporary capitalism will prevent the imminent arrival of an ultra-capitalist post-humanism.

Returning to Stiegler’s notion of pharmacological proletarianization, one could say that the general tendency toward hypomnesia—that is, the exteriorization and accumulation of libidinal and cognitive forces in technological and mediatic apparatuses—undermines or negates the emancipatory potentials of a global, hyperconnective capitalism. If put in terms of habit, the problem is that, beyond the fact that the habits of precarious workers like Luz and Memo are synchronized with the rhythms of the market and the state, such individuals are in the process of losing the ability to form other habits that would allow them to live outside the system that daily consumes physically and mentally. Their oppression is not reducible to the necessity of submitting to the physical and temporal demands of precarious work nor to the social fragmentation and decollectivization that these imply. In fact, Luz, Memo, and Rudy Ramírez (the mercenary who killed Memo’s father) eventually connect with each other and manage to carry out a spectacular militant action through the same communicative technologies that serve as the means of their exploitation. (I will explain below how the film’s truly revolutionary or emancipatory moment is not so much this militant action as the inauguration of new habits and practices that follows from it). The problem is not that they lack the means for occasional contact or even solidarity. The problem is that they are forcefully collectivized by the dominant means of production and communication (a situation which, contrary to what Marx believed, and Hardt and Negri continue to believe, will never flip over into emancipation or communism). Stiegler’s point is that the technological processes through which hyperconnective capitalism convokes this forced collectivization effect at the same time a pharmacological proletarianization that deprives individuals of the practical and libidinal capacity to collectivize in any other way—

that is, a way that would not, in the end, reproduce the capitalist relations and mechanisms that brought them together in the first place.

It is not at all certain that the new proletarians<sup>49</sup> like Luz or Memo would know (cognitively or libidinally) how to live an emancipated life. It could very well be that, in the near future portrayed in the film, it is no longer possible to disarticulate themselves from hyperconnective capitalism. Bifo has emphasized the urgency of our historical moment, in which, perhaps, it is still possible to withdraw from capitalism, or at least survive its collapse, still possessed of our knowledge and desire.

Just try to imagine this scenario, which is not so unlikely: the financial system of Europe totally crashes, national states stop paying wages to public workers, and all of a sudden money loses its grip on the social mind. Would our skills, our knowledge, our competences be cancelled by this sudden apocalyptic event? Not at all, of course. We would be the same as we are now. Engineers would be able to build bridges, doctors would be able to heal sick people, and poets would be able to create their imaginary worlds. Exactly like now, and possibly better. The crumbling of the form [of capital] would not effect the content [of the general intellect]. But the agony of the capitalist form, if protracted in time will slowly but steadily dismantle the social content, and it is already doing this. (De Boever y Neidich 28)

What Bifo calls the dismantling of the “social content” of the general intellect is essentially the same as what Stiegler calls the *hypomnesis* of *savoir-faire* (knowledge, know-how, practical cognitive forces and abilities) and *savoir-vivre* (desire, libidinal forces and abilities), the pharmacology of contemporary capitalism. But Stiegler ups the stakes by indicating that the risk

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49 I use the term “new proletarians” instead of “cognitarians” in order to avoid the latter’s implicit privileging of immaterial over material production. The point is to emphasize that *all* workers—including consumers, since today in today’s economy consumption form of productivity—are compelled by a pharmacological capitalism to render their knowledge and desire to a metabolism of value that transcends the difference between material and immaterial production.

remains the same in a “healthy economy,” or, as Postone would argue, even in a socialist economy to the extent that it is still productivist, which is to say, still parasitical—which any economy based on the value regime is of necessity.

*Sleep Dealer* suggests the same by representing a process of pharmaco-technological proletarianization that worsens to the degree that transnational hyperconnective capitalism becomes stronger. The former has intensified to such a degree that a *cybracero* like Memo becomes noticeably diminished, physically and psychologically, after only a few days on the job. It is to this—the fact that pharmacological proletarianization occurs within such a contracted period that it becomes perceptible to the individual undergoing it—that the *nodaleros* refer with the term “sleep dealers.” They experience their proletarianization as a figurative sleep—the fading of their practical and libidinal capacities—<sup>50</sup>and also as literal exhaustion due to the simple fact that they must spend a majority of their waking lives working. Both kinds of sleep hinder the possibility of resistance. On the one hand, the *nodaleros* possess fewer and fewer tools of resistance (their abilities and desires), although, on the other hand, even if they did possess them, they lack the time to resist. These facts combine to dissolve their relation to the future, which is necessary for any sort of political action.

A possible resistance, in *Sleep Dealer* as in our own hyperconnective capitalist world, would need to involve more than the change of habits, as Bifo and Jon Beasley-Murray suggest. Both have expressed, on the one hand, doubts that the present capitalist configuration could ever give rise to an emancipated multitude (contrary to Hardt and Negri’s hope) and, on the other hand, an awareness of the difficulties confronting any attempt to precipitate a movement capable of destroying or transcending capitalism. What is necessary, before any biopolitics in which new

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50 The *nodaleros*’ loss of practical abilities is typified by the fact that, as Memo the narrator observes, sooner or later “te quedas ciego.” Libidinal collapse is central to the scene in which Memo and Luz make love for the first time. Luz wants to connect her nodes to Memo’s during the act, explaining that “si los nodos sirven para algo es para romper con [la] distancia, para conectarnos, para podernos ver.” Perhaps more likely would be the explanation that Luz can no longer achieve sexual enjoyment without the technological mediation of the nodes in which her desire is crystalized.

habits could be formed, is a transformation of our socio-technological “ecology” that would correct the hypomnesic or parasitic pharmacological imbalance that presently characterizes it. Such a transformation must necessarily accompany any change of habit if the gulf between the present and the future is to be closed. Only a simultaneous transformation of socio-technological ecology and habit could restore the possibility of acting intentionally toward the future, that is, of acting politically. For Bifo, the first step “will be the disentanglement from the present stressing concatenation,” from what he calls the “form” of capital and what I am calling here our socio-technological ecology, while the second step “will be the neural reframing of the relation with the infoshpere” (De Boever y Neidich 20), a transformation that would obstruct the transferal of the intellectual and libidinal “content” of our habits to the *pharmaka* we engage with on a daily basis. “The generation of a Form that is more likely to foster the development of the potencies of the Content can only happen by dissociation, and disentanglement of the potentiality of the content from the entangling Form” (30).

Obviously, things are not so simple. The relation between habit and context or socio-technological ecology—the pharmacological relation—is not straightforwardly causal; it would be difficult to imagine a transformation of context without a prior change of habit, and vice-versa. But even if one could circumvent this circularity (or dialectic), even if it were possible to “withdraw” and begin an “exodus,” as Virno puts it (Hardt y Virno 197), this would not necessarily imply that one would know how to live during and after withdrawal or exodus. Bifo admits the dilemma: “In our present condition a question arises: is disentanglement still possible, when the mind of the social organism has been deeply infected by the viral proliferation of double binds?” (De Boever y Neidich 31). That is, is the mind (the social as well as the individual mind) is already irredeemably captive to a pharmacological or parasitic relation with



its socio-technological ecology, emptied of its *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*? Have we already passed the point of no return in the process of pharmacological proletarianization?

Bifo seems to trust that if only we could provoke a rupture between the social mind and the capitalist form that restricts it then the social mind would begin at that moment to reconfigure itself otherwise, in an emancipated way. He refers to this process of liberation and reconstitution with a term borrowed from Gregory Bateson, “schismogenesis,” meaning “self-organization of the contents after their dissociation from the entangling Form, and proliferation by contagio (affective, informational, aesthetic contagion) of the new Form that is generated by the schism” (De Boever y Neidich 31). This process, he believes, will not follow from a grand political action, since, as he laments, “politics has broken down,” but rather emerge out of “chaoids” that will be introduced into life, which will be incompatible with the semiotic field of contemporary capitalism and which have nothing to do with “the sphere of will and political decision, they belong to the sphere of art, education, and therapy, where sensibility is shaped” (21).<sup>51</sup> If such a notion fails to convince, it is due to a problem that, as Malcolm Harris explains, “Berardi can’t escape:”

if capitalism has subsumed our desires so completely that we must escape it at all costs, or live forever swamped in misery and psychic pain, then how could we want to leave? If we as capital’s subjects would simply choose to resubjectify ourselves when he suggests it, then that would be a clear sign we’re not so damaged after all, that semiocapital’s grip over our desires was not so strong we couldn’t just walk away. Unfortunately, Berardi’s analysis of the situation is too convincing to make his solution believable. (“Bifo Says Relax”)

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<sup>51</sup> This is, in other words, basically the kind of cultural studies politics that Jon Beasley-Murray convincingly criticizes in his *Posthegemony* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010).

If political will is an obsolete force, as Bifo maintains, so is the aesthetico-affective or libidinal impulse which he thinks will introduce chaoids capable of changing the dominant paradigm, the form of contemporary capital that parasitizes the general intellect. In sum, his solution falls short, as Harris suggests, because it does not grasp the totality of the situation that his analysis so convincingly theorizes. I want to suggest that what Bifo leaves out of his theory of the social mind and its liberation, even in spite of his call to “focus on neuro-evolution and develop forms of action aimed to shape it” (De Boever y Neidich 19), is the social *brain*.

Bifo recognizes that the brain (and its mental correlates) responds in its neuroplasticity to the socio-technological context and that to transform the former one must bring about change in the latter. In the words of the neuroscientist Bruce Wexler, who Bifo cites, “man is the animal who shapes the environment that shapes his brain” (10), and to challenge contemporary capitalism it is necessary to take an active role in this shaping process. Bifo clearly understands this, but his approach falls short to the extent that it prioritizes an engagement with the semiotic aspects of our environment and believes that technological change will naturally follow from it. His assessment of the material aspect of or socio-technological ecology is limited to the vague call to leave it behind, “disentangle” or “dissociate” ourselves from its current configuration: “the first step . . . will be the disentanglement from the present stressing concatenation; the second will be the neural reframing of the relation with the *infosphere*” (20, my emphasis). The problem here is the sequencing (“first . . . second”). What is necessary is rather a dialectical approach to reorienting the the semio-technical sphere, a *simultaneous* rewiring of the social mind and the social brain.

The usefulness of Stiegler’s pharmacological theory here comes from its capacity to explain the mechanism of our “entanglement” or, rather, the entanglement of our knowledge and desires (which together constitute “the social mind”), our brain (which is inherently individual),

and our technologies (which are not exactly a “social brain,” since in the present historico-economic conjunction they act more and more like a parasitic supersocial and post-human brain). A pharmacological analysis suggests that any disentanglement or reconfiguration must involve not only a semiotic struggle carried out at a certain distance from the socio-technological context (with the hope that it would eventually transform this context) but also and simultaneously a meticulous material/technological reengineering. Like Bifo, Stiegler speaks of the need for “sociotherapy” (36), but he recognizes that this therapy must involve more than an aesthetico-affective readjustment, a collective “talking cure” for the post-situationist era. Such post-autonomist solutions tend to leave unresolved the opposition between the “infosphere” and the infrastructure that supports it—the “technosphere,” if you will. Or if it is true that some of them theorize their interaction at an analytical level, they often reconstitute the opposition when it comes time to propose solutions or remedies. In the end, they view the technosphere as here to stay—moreover, certain post-autonomists treat the technosphere as a quasi messianic (and therefore untouchable) presence, since the infosphere that has emerged from it has an emancipatory potential (a general intellect that in theory could be rescued from its current technological chains through primarily cognitive, aesthetic, and communicative struggles). Stielger’s sociotherapy would proceed otherwise, necessarily analyzing the relation between the cognitive, the affective, and the technical—i.e. the pharmacological relation—on a case by case, apparatus by apparatus, mechanism by mechanism basis. It would entail a patient diagnosis and readjustment of each pharmacological relation that has degenerated from a symbiosis into a parasitism.

Although Stiegler does not put it this way, his theory conceptualizes global hyper-connective capitalism as an ecology, specifically, a material-immaterial or bio-psycho-digital ecology—in short, a pharmacological ecology. With “ecology,” I mean to refer to the network of

relations that constitutes the globalized system, which tends towards an imbalance caused by the process of proletarianization described above. This conceptualization avoids an error that Stiegler locates in Marx and many of his inheritors (including, in my view, Bifo), namely, that “Marx himself fails to think the hypomnesiac character of technics and human existence, which accounts for the fact that he is unable to think human life as *ex*-istence and hence for the fact that, like Plato, he continues to *oppose* the dead to the living” (36). A pharmacological analysis, by contrast, perceives the active nature of dead or inanimate things, particularly technology, which is neither a repository nor merely a vector of human intelligence and affect. Or more specifically a pharmacological analysis reveals how technological actors (according to the object-oriented ontology that tacitly informs this dissertation, all objects, including technological ones, are inherently active) become unavoidably parasitical under the value regime of capital.

From this perspective, one can evaluate the pharmacological relations of contemporary capitalism—those which exist between bodies or between bodies and images, bodies and technologies, images and images, images and technologies, technologies and technologies—in terms of their relative levels of symbiosis or parasitism. In this light, it is not useful, when speaking of resistance, to set up dualisms between the material and the immaterial nor much less between bodies and technologies or bodies and mediatic images. Resistance cannot be reduced neither to a withdrawal from the world of digital communication or from nor to a renunciation of the transnational material economy—at least not if the goal is to substantively challenge or undermine capitalism itself. According to a pharmacological diagnosis, resistance would entail no less than a *deproletarianization* of our relationship with our *pharmaka* (be they immaterial or material, semiotic or technological, since each of these belongs to the same ecology). This is not to suggest that a total “depharmacologization” would ever be possible. The relation between human beings and technology is irreducibly pharmacological—knowledge and desire inevitably

become incorporated into the *pharmaka* that constitute our semio-technical environment, or rather, that participate in our semio-technical ecology. However, it is entirely possible to regulate our symbioses and keep them from becoming highly parasitic (or “toxic” as Stiegler would put it, making a clear reference to our current relation with our financial technologies).

We can now return to *Sleep Dealer*, after this theoretical digression, and perceive in the actions of Memo and his collaborators, a sober plan of resistance as deproletarianization. The central process in this project of resistance, which is prefigured in the very name of the protagonist, is remembering.

On first glance, this project seems to have much in common with the politics of memory that has been predominant within the post-dictatorial activism of so many Latin American countries. When towards the end of the film Memo and Rudy Ramírez conspire together to attack the company that has privatized Santa Ana del Río’s water, what motivates them is the memory of a shared irrepressible trauma. Memo wants resolution for the death of his father and also needs to solve the his family’s financial problems, for which he feels responsible. For his part, Rudy can no longer rationalize killing Memo’s father, the excuse “only following orders” having lost its absolving power after he comes to know Memo’s story through the memories he buys from Luz on *Trunode*. The weight of the trauma finally drives Rudy to leave his job as a mercenary and cross the border in search of Memo and atonement. The force of the same trauma that predisposes Memo to accept Rudy’s offer to help him somehow. The traumatic memory motivates both of them to assume a high risk and break into the *infomaquila* where Memo works so that Rudy can hack the nodal network and hijack a drone, fly it remotely to Santa Teresa, and bomb the dam that has obstructed the water and, therefore, the lives of the local peasants. They resolve their shared trauma using the same means (nodes, networks, and drones) it was originally caused by—where life was taken, it is now restored. In one of the final scenes, we see Memo’s

mother and brother on the screen of a video call, ecstatically recounting the unexpected destruction of the dam. Memo's brother pulls the webcam out of the phone booth to show him the water overflowing the ruins. There are smiles, rejoicing, and resolution all around.

On one level, it is true that what unites Memo, Rudy, and Luz, what collectivizes them, is their fidelity to the memory of a shared trauma. But on another level, their act of resistance goes beyond the kind of psycho-affective resolution proper to the politics of memory as it is traditionally understood. In other words, their resistance has less to do with a politics of memory than with a political remembrance, or rather, a deproletarian remembrance. What is really crucial in the sequence that culminates in the destruction of the dam is the way in which the actors involved emancipate themselves from the pharmacological parasitisms that had subjected them to specific technologies and socioeconomic forces.

What is it that Memo and his comrades remember? How do they become deproletarianized? Since "the proletariat are those economic actors that are without knowledge because they are without memory" (Stiegler 35), deproletarianization would necessarily imply the acquisition of knowledge through the recuperation of memory. This does not mean recovering the memory *of* something (a trauma say) but rather the *power* of memory itself. Memory, as I refer to it here, means the *ability* to memorize, that is, to retain practical and libidinal intelligence, know-how and desire, instead of letting these be completely externalized or parasitized by the techniques and technologies of hyperconnective capitalism. This capacity to memorize, as Stiegler notes, is inseparable from the ability to care for the world in which one lives. Memo and his collaborators remember the capacity to memorize and the ability to care.

What I want to emphasize here is that this process implies a human will at the same time that it convokes non-human agencies. In other words, political will (Memo, Rudy, and Luz's desire for justice and their shared drive to act in concert) *emerges* from the caring collectivization

of human and non-human actors, a reconfiguration that de-parasitizes their shared relation and turns it instead into a symbiotic one. One could conceptualize this transformation using the notion of *testimonio* and its function in revolutionary processes or resistance movements. In the politics of memory as it is traditionally understood, *testimonio* is a semio-affective artifact that originates in a communicative subject who witnesses to an unjust or traumatic event and that, ideally, inaugurates a solidary collective focused on addressing in the present the consequences of the past.<sup>52</sup> The process involves individual affectivity and communication between individuals. In the case of *Sleep Dealer*, the *testimonio* that convokes a political collective originates not in a human subject but rather in non-human or pre-subjective agents. This is the case, at least, with Memo, who is politicized by a pre-semiotic, *neuronal testimonio*.<sup>53</sup>

Like other *cybraceros* and *nodaleros*, Memo undergoes a progressive physical and mental decline over the course of his time in the *infomaquillas*. I have suggested that his increasing fatigue attests to a parasitic or pharmacological process through which his cognitive and libidinal capacities become literally incorporated into the machines and networks he is obligated to connect to (“Me estaban robando la energía y mandándola lejos”, as he puts it). Of course, in addition to this subtle parasitism, his fatigue is also due to the simple fact that Memo must work at a relentless pace and for inhuman durations. He submits to the *infomaquilla*’s bottom line in order to gain the means of reproducing (and redeeming) his family’s material and affective life as well as his own. He therefore lives most of the time beyond his psychoneuronal limits, which is evident in the fact that, like his coworkers, he often falls asleep on the job. I want to suggest that this simple ‘act’ is not merely a sign of severe exhaustion but rather the first external indications of a presubjective resistance already taking place at the neuronal level.

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52 For an influential analysis Latin American *testimonio* of the 70s and 80s, see John Beverley’s *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004).

53 Luz and Rudy connect through the by now traditional means of sharing narrative memories via social networks.

At the subjective level, Memo is willing to submit to the infinite flexibility required of him by his precarious situation. The problem is that his neurological system, though surprisingly “plastic,” as Catherine Malabou would put it, is not infinitely flexible. Slavoj Žižek has asked “What is to be done to avoid the consciousness of the brain coinciding directly and simply with the spirit of capitalism?” (56). Malabou’s answer is that we should allow the brain to exercise its own powers of resistance against such consciousness, because even if we wanted to believe that we could adapt mentally and physically to the contemporary economy’s imperative of infinite plasticity, the brain itself would disabuse us of such a notion. This is precisely what happens when Memo and his coworkers involuntarily fall asleep on the job. Their brains respond to the impossible ideal of infinite flexibility in the *infomaquila* (and the hyperconnected capitalist economy in general) with a realistic, if unconscious, recognition of the limits of their own neural plasticity. To the requirement to be productive “24/7” (the eternal duration of the economic present demanded by the present capitalist system), their neurons respond with sleep, which should be understood as a kind of biological strike against unrealistic working conditions. In *Sleep Dealer*’s nodal economy, as in today’s hyperconnective capitalism, rest, sleep, and dreaming are practically prohibited. Such unproductive states are considered incompatible with the temporality of the hyperconnected economic present that is now dominant in the globalized world. By falling asleep, Memo awakes to the real resistance that his brain (as well as the subconscious parts of his psyche) puts up against the economic exigencies his conscious subjectivity would like to adapt to.

Like most other subjects of hyperconnective capitalism, Memo tries to repress this presubjective resistance to flexibility—that is, to the normative economic value underlying contemporary processes of proletarianization—with pharmacological antidotes. In other words, rather than actively trying to deproletarianize his relation to the technological *pharmaka* of the



contemporary capitalist system, he seeks to adapt to his progressive proletarianization by depending on ever more pharmacological substances, specifically, *teki*, a kind of digital psychoactive drug. The implicit hope is that such substances, available in the bars frequented by the *cybraceros*, will allow users to attain the goal of total flexibility—or at least prolong the illusion that such flexibility is attainable. For Memo and his fellow *cybraceros*, as for us in the present, there is no shortage of such *pharmaka*, neither in mainstream nor “informal” marketplaces. At the infobar, Memo can just as easily have a drink as plug in to one of the bar’s *teki* cables, both of which offer their own kind of post-work restoration (significantly, these bars also serve as fronts for the back alley business where the *coyoteks* implant newly arrived migrants with the nodes they need to work in the *infomaquilas*). In reality, though, both drugs serve merely to reproduce pharmacological proletarianization and, therefore, the late capitalist mode of production it undergirds. In short, this kind of drug use functions to perpetuate the ideology of the infinitely flexible individual, which, according to Jodi Dean, has always been a pathology necessary for the functioning of capitalism and the neutralization of the collective forces that would resist it (De Boever and Neidich 73). This artificial support of individuality, or, more precisely, the pharmacological supplementation of the consciousness of individual subjectivity, muffles the testimony of the pre-individual constituents of the mind and the body. It suffocates the neuronal *testimonio*.

But this is an unsustainable practice. It leads inevitably to the decisive moment in which one must either respond to the testimony of one’s own psychoneuronal system—that is, allow oneself to be convinced and transformed by the plastic materiality that cannot and will not adapt to the ideology of infinite flexibility—or give in to the total proletarianization that leads, in the end, to subjective decomposition and physical failure. A traditional politics of memory cannot help the subject here, since what must be remembered is not just a fateful or traumatic moment

but rather something that, on account of its presubjective status, one can have no real memory of. What needs to be remembered, recalled, or better, reappropriated, is the capacity to memorize itself, which is the capacity to act in a deproletarian manner.

The fateful moment arrives for Memo when he is working alone one night, toward the end of a double shift. A few days prior, he had seen a coworker suffer catastrophic brain damage as the result of an electrical surge in the *infomaquila*'s network. Memo finally understands he has reached his own psychoneuronal limits when he collapses on the job and has an immersive dream. He had had hallucinations before while working—usually involving fleeting images of family, home, and *milpas*—but this time the symbolic content of his dream exerts a transformative force. At first it seems the robot he is controlling has fallen from high up on the building it is constructing. Memo sees the ground rushing up toward him through his prosthetic eyes, but just before hitting the ground, the scene abruptly transitions and he is now flying at great speed just above the surface of the river that once fed the fields of his home town in Oaxaca. He suddenly wakes up and finds himself hanging by the nodes from the cables of the *infomaquila* and instantly understands the decision the dream has presented him with. In the following scene, we see Rudy Ramírez driving from San Diego to Tijuana to look for Memo, which, along with Memo's dream, marks the sequence that will culminate in the destruction of the Santa Ana del Río dam.

It is crucial that Memo's transformative dream did not occur during a normal nights sleep but rather during a moment of total physical and mental exhaustion on the job. This fact suggests a sort of agreement between the semiotic content of the dream and the material limits of the brain and body that generate it—the brain and body resist by failing, and the mind translates this failure into a dream narrative that points both to its cause and its potential remedy. In other words, through his dream Memo becomes subjectively aware of the presubjective resistance of

his brain/body. This process is what “neuronal *testimonio*” designates. One could say that this scene articulates an affective crystallization, the moment in which an affective force traverses and unites the constituent parts of his neuronal testimony—i.e. the physical fact of exhaustion at the limits of flexibility and the dream image that this triggers. Memo becomes conscious of both the psychic and corporal elements of his being that resist the socioeconomic situation that his hitherto capitalist subjectivity demands of them.

I want to suggest that this affective crystallization—which reveals the true relation between his exhaustion and his dreams—constitutes a kind of translation of a presubjective neuronal testimony to the semiotic language of conscious subjectivity. With a little metaphorical license, one could see a certain resemblance between this process and the way a textual *testimonio* works. One could imagine the neuronal structures of the brain as equivalent to the subaltern or indigenous enunciator of a *testimonio* who speaks a language foreign to the subject that interprets it. This non-semiotic “language” is interpreted by an intermediary (as was often the case with the *testimonios* that came out of the civil and dirty wars of the 70s and 80s), but instead of an anthropologist, it is the psychological apparatuses of the unconscious mind that “translate” the messages of the brain/body into a language the conscious mind can understand. This metaphor is meant to articulate a process of *internal collectivization*—a collectivization of what is usually understood as the human elements (consciousness) and the non- or pre-human elements (e.g. neurons) that coexist within the same “individual”—that transforms Memo into a subject capable of collectivizing *externally* with other people. In other words, the neuronal testimony initiates a process of deproletarianization (of disconnecting from a technological parasitism) that in turn makes resistance and revolution possible. As I already indicated, it is only after he “hears” and understands the neuronal testimony enunciated by the constituent parts of his individual body—

the moment in which he *re-members* these corporal elements—that Memo makes contact with Rudy, his soon-to-be collaborator.

It is important to note that the dream images that punctuate Memo's workday, his momentary flights from network of 24/7 labor, always have to do with collective desires and not merely individual longings. The central figure is the family and communal life of his home town: "A veces, se me olvidaba donde estaba y todo volvía: mi hogar, la casa donde crecí, en Santa Ana del Río." It might seem that this is a simple case of nostalgia or, more significantly, the forceful irruption of the unresolved trauma that initiated Memo's narrative arc. However, I want to suggest that these memories and images go beyond the tired trope of trauma/resolution. Rather, they represent the subjective translation of a programmatic message emitted by Memo's brain/body as it reaches its own limits—that is, as it presents its own non-negotiable point of resistance. In other words, these agricultural and communal images, rather than simply serving to remind Memo and the audience of the origin of his current dilemma, suggest the kinds of practices that he would have to take up (again) in order to consummate the resistance that his brain/body demands and, more importantly, turn this resistance into the practical basis for an alternative mode of life. They are images of what, paraphrasing Malabou, he would have to give his brain (i.e. a non-parasitic pharmaco-technical environment) so that his brain can give him what he needs (a deproletarianized subjectivity).<sup>54</sup>

The "memory" suggested by Memo's name refers consists not only of his memories of an oedipal family life, the simple but happy peasant existence to which he cannot return. It is rather a *material* memory, the memory imprinted on his cerebral structures and neural patterns, which were formed and embodied through years of non-capitalist practices. Memo's brain demands a

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54 Or, recalling Wexler, Memo's brain calls for him to reassume an active role in shaping the environment that shapes his brain.

return not so much to the peasant lifestyle per se as to the possibility of reviving a practice motivated by a projective desire instead of the parasitic agency of capital.

Only a practice oriented toward a future can open up a time and space for individuation and, what is most important for Memo, political subjectification. It is precisely this kind of practice, according to Stiegler, that the pharmacology of contemporary capital suppresses by fostering, instead of practice, a drive towards an immediate, hypomnesiac identification with the present configuration of the semio-technical network. This annulment of the possibility of practice proceeds by way of the *hypomnesis* of knowledge and desire and culminates in the cancellation of individuation. And since transindividuation—or collectivization—has a dialectical relationship with individuation, the absence of future-oriented practices not only sabotages the personal life of the individual but political life in general. Stiegler's point is that an individual that does not know how, through her practice, to desire cannot successfully enter into the collective relations necessary to care for the world.<sup>55</sup> There is no desire without practice, and without desire there politics—the process of changing the present state of things—is impossible.

Even though in *Sleep Dealer* the first site of resistance is the individual (emerging from the pre-individual neuronal structures and affects), the aim of this resistance is not a return to the liberal ideal of autonomous individuality. Rather, the goal implicit in Memo's neuronal *testimonio* is a transition to collective life based on concrete practice instead of the proletarianized repetition to which he is submitted in the *infomaquila*. The hyperconnective *infomaquila* mode of production (or even, as Postone would say, productivism as such) interrupts individuation by distributing the individual subject into a network of instantaneous connections. The crucial point is that this type of connectivity *does not* constitute a collectivity (and to think that it does is a serious flaw in many of the post-autonomist theories mentioned above).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp. 35-42, 107, 118-126.

<sup>56</sup> Bruno Bosteels critiques Hardt and Negri in particular for making this mistake. See "From Complot to Potlatch" in Bosteels' *Marx and Freud in Latin America* (London: Verso, 2012), especially pp. 285-287.

Connectivity in and of itself presents no obstacles to the parasitisms of contemporary capitalism, that is, to the latter's tendency toward de-individuation and proletarianization (which in the end are essentially the same thing). Understood in this way, connectivity functions as a the mechanism through which the individual adapts to and, thereby, dissolves into the imperatives of the contemporary economy. Collectivity, on the other hand, presupposes a process of individuation through which the subject is structured by an attention to individual physical and affective needs. Bifo is right to declare that "the practice of happiness is subversive when it's collective", but we must add, with Jason Smith, that today "happiness is collective only when it produces singularities" (De Boever and Neidich 41). Pure connectivity destroys collectivity.

It is possible to perceive in *Sleep Dealer* a distinction between the search for personal happiness as an end in itself and the practice of collective happiness that necessarily implies real deproletarianization/individuation. This process is typified by the amorous relation between Memo and Luz. Up until the epiphanic moment when Memo finally hits his limits and becomes aware of his neuronal *testimonio*, their relationship functions as a *pharmakon* that allows each of them to adapt to demands of the hyperconnective economy in which they are enmeshed. The relationship provides Luz with the semio-affective material she needs to participate in the online memory market while for Memo it serves as a palliative, restoring a portion of the libidinal force that is appropriated from him at work. In both cases, the relationship allows them to ignore the contradictions and limits of their proletarianized condition, thus deferring the moment of any possible resistance. By contrast, the relation of solidarity that materializes between Memo, Luz, and Rudy, after Memo's epiphany, entails a collectivity based on a future-oriented collaboration that has the effect of deproletarianizing and individuating all involved. By acting in concert to sabotage the dam in Santa Ana del Río, each of them finds a line of flight from the proletarianized present—that is, their collaboration opens a space and a time (a futurity) in which

they can develop new practices that will in turn instill in them knowledges and desires instead rather than alienating these from them.

Herein lies the true significance of the final sequence of the film. We see Memo cheerfully walking along a dirt road hugging the border fence, carrying two large buckets full of water. His voiced-over narration explains that Rudy “nunca pudo regresar a su casa. Yo tampoco. Pero tal vez hay un futuro para mí aquí, a la orilla de todo.” The next shot shows Memo watering a newly-planted *milpa* in the dusty no man’s land that separates the slum he lives in from the wall that separates everything from the North. These images suggest that he plans to take up the agricultural practice that he had always resisted when his father was still alive. But if this is so, it is not out of a sense of nostalgia or a desire for redemption. Neither does Memo harbor any illusions of being able to simply supplant hyperconnective capitalism with a kind of neo-agrarianism. I disagree with Joshua Clover, for whom the film’s political message ultimately falls short “because its victory is nostalgic” (8). For Clover, Memo’s planting a new *milpa* is at best a symbolic act, “community agriculture standing both for a better world and for The Real” (8), and at worst a plainly ideological gesture that resonates with today’s prevailing “green” (and profoundly conservative) obfuscation according to which one must simply “return” to the local or organic in order to resolve the social contradictions of globalization.<sup>57</sup> Rather than an ideological regression after a sublime experience with transnational solidarity, I see an image of precisely what would be necessary to prolong such an experience, to transform it into a form of life. The agricultural turn at the end of *Sleep Dealer* does not represent a merely symbolic action but rather a material return to a form of practice with the power to reopen the experience of

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57 Levi Bryant explains the problem with the green obfuscation: “Popular ‘green’ ecological discourses tend to speak as if negative feedback loops are the *truly* natural, such that positive feedback relations that push things out of homeostasis are deviant aberrations that are *unnatural*. This suggests a *teleological* conception of nature where nature perpetually strives for equilibrium, akin to a god providentially organizing the world for certain ends. If everything is interrelated, then all is somehow a part of a comforting, unifying One. This Nature is disturbingly similar to neoliberal economic theories holding that unregulated markets always wisely correct themselves and are best at providing for all” (“Black” [as in black ecology] in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2014).

future-oriented time and desire, the possibility of a deproletarianized life and, therefore, of politics. I see a radical gesture that demonstrates a profound understanding of the fact that in order to remain in the spatiotemporal gap opened up through his act of sabotage, Memo would have to enter into a practice (a projective one, implying an extended temporality and an intentionality toward the future) that would consummate the process of deproletarianization only initiated through his militant gesture. Memo responds to his neuronal *testimonio* with a reflexive program of deproletarianization.

It is useful here to remember, as Crary notes, that Marx argued agriculture “could never be the sphere in which capitalism starts, the sphere in which it takes up its original residence” (Crary 62). This is due, among other reasons, to the fact that the temporality proper to agriculture is strictly incompatible with the temporality of capitalism. Thus it was necessary to destroy the agricultural forms and *rhythms* of life before capitalism could take root, as Marx explained in his famous exposition of “primitive accumulation” in the first volume of *Capital*. “The first requirement”, according to Marx, “was the dissolution of the relation to the earth” (Crary 63). This is not, of course, to say that Marx posited any sort of mystical union or communal telluric essence prior to the sundering forces of capitalist expansion. Rather, a relation to the earth entails concrete material relations that give life a temporal rhythm incommensurable with the cadence of capital. In *Sleep Dealer*, agricultural practice, far from signifying an escapist and impotent ideology, represents an intentionally-inhabited *anachronism*, the reflexive reintroduction of an extended temporality (in which intentionality toward the future is possible) in the interstices—represented here by the slums sandwiched between the *infomaquilas* and the border—of a properly *atemporal* (given its thoroughgoing presentism) capitalist system.

By the end of the film, Memo understands that his original marginalization and poverty, as well as his subsequent exploitation in the *infomaquilas*, was not due to a lack of connections to



the global economy but rather to the fact that he had actually always been thoroughly connected and (peripherally) integrated into it. His profound desire to have nodes installed and consummate the connection was already proof of this. He realizes that if his father wanted to hold onto the past—in the form of his struggling *milpa*—perhaps it was neither out of nostalgia or conservatism but rather a desire to resist the total dissolution of his relation to non-capitalist rhythms of life in the name of interconnection, globalization, or, as the older term would have it, development. If it is true, as Crary argues, that today “the conditions of communication and information access on an everyday level ensure the systematic erasure of the past as part of the fantasmatic construction of the present” (45), then in order to undo the injustices that exist in the present, one must reestablish ties with what is not present. And if Memo’s father obstinately refused to abandon his *milpa*, perhaps it was not because he was desperately trying to hold on to the last remaining image of the past in the present (which would be a purely ideological gesture) but rather because he wanted to prolong a material practice capable of resisting the temporal collapse of past and future into the present, which capitalism (especially in its hyperconnective incarnation) inevitably produces. When in his final narration Memo explains that the future that he hopes now awaits him is “un futuro con un pasado”, the past he is referring to is not an atavistic or identitarian past but rather simply *the past of practice*, a temporality in which the past exists precisely because the future also does. We could also understand the “past” as the knowledge and desire that are able to accumulate in an individual, and that form the foundation of subjectification, only to the extent that the individual is able to inhabit a projective practice.

Memo understands that there is no going back, that it would be absurd to think it possible to return to a primitive and disconnected state, and this is exactly what he does not intend to do. For him, the choice is not between a connective and post-political modernity and a political premodernity. In the last line of the film, Memo clarifies that there will be a future “with a past”

for him only “si me conecto... y lucho.” At this point it becomes clear, as the image and sound quality start to shift, that this whole final sequence consists of narrated memories that Memo is in the process of uploading to *Trunode* or some similar network. The camera zooms out and we see a computer screen flashing images of small corn plants sprouting from newly-watered earth. This immediately transitions to a shot of Luz and Memo walking at dusk along a canalized river somewhere in Tijuana, perhaps plotting future collective actions and then, finally, a shot of the militarized border over which a drone flies into the setting sun.

*Sleep Dealer* offers a response to a question recently posed by Stiegler: “What relation to technics and to technologies would enable us to think the reconstruction of a global future?” (*What Makes Life Worth Living* 10). Such a relation would have to be a deproletarianizing one. The only future possible, as Memo comes to realize, is “un futuro con un pasado”—as long as for “past” we understand the knowledge and desire that accumulate through practice and resist the pharmacological capitalization of the present.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF THE LAND IN CONTEMPORARY  
REPRESENTATIONS OF NARCO VIOLENCE: ONTOLOGY OF VULNERABILITY  
AND OBJECT-ORIENTED RESISTANCE**

**Representing Victims of Narco Violence**

In 2009, the well known Mexican artist Teresa Margolles represented Mexico at the Venice Biennale with an exposition called “¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?”. Margolles’ work implores the public to look beyond the silent statistics and engage directly with the lingering bodily presence of the victims of the narco-violence ravaging her country.



Fig. 1 *Cleaning*. Teresa Margolles, 2009.



Fig. 2 *Vaporización*. Teresa Margolles, 2002.

Unlike the yellow journalism that, while also focusing on victims, contents itself with tallying body counts, or the *nota roja* tabloids that can profit off gore only by creating a distancing effect between victim and spectator, Margolles' pieces create a material contact between the two—take, for example, the installation “Cleaning” in which relatives of people who have died as a result of the drug war mop the floors of a Venice pavilion with a mixture of water and blood taken from crime scenes; or an earlier installation, “Vaporización”, where the spectator enters a dimly-lit room filled with the vapor of water used to wash corpses in Mexican morgues—the contact between living and dead, victim and onlooker here becomes quite literal.

Victims are usually approached quite differently in the exploding body of texts commonly (though problematically) referred to as “narco-literature.” As the critic Diana Palaversich has

pointed out, many, or perhaps most, of the contemporary literary representations that take drugs and violence in Mexico as their primary subject matter tend to focus not on “the victims but [on] the killers and perpetrators of violence” (“¿Cómo hablar del silencio?”).

There are a few notable exceptions to this rule, including, most famously, 2666, Bolaño’s sweeping novelistic history of evil in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel centers on a 347 page chapter that chronicles in forensic detail the scenes of hundreds of femicides in his fictionalized version of Ciudad Juárez. At their best, exceptions such as this one<sup>58</sup> exhibit, as Palaversich puts it, “an exemplary ability to sympathize and to put oneself in the place of the other”, which, she continues, “distinguishes them radically from most other literary texts that deal with [narco themes] and which tend to convert the national tragedy into *thriller* or *noire*, the dominant variants of Mexican narco-narrative” (“¿Cómo hablar?”). On the whole, then, it would seem that most narco-themed literature is characterized less by a concern for those who suffer than a sort of sympathy for the devil, or, as the writer Juan Villoro has put it, the “anthropological empathy of those who interpret crime as a form of tradition” (in Palaversich 4).

### **The Land as Victim**

For the remainder of this chapter, I want to consider the general absence in most narco-narratives of one victim in particular, namely, the *land* or, more generally, the *environment* as victim of narco-violence. The land/earth (*la tierra*)—both as “nature” and as the substrate of agriculture and source of subsistence—is, for the most part, conspicuously absent. If the land does figure prominently in narco narratives, it is perhaps most often as a “no man’s land”—for example, the ubiquitous image of the desert and borderlands as an unforgiving and chaotic liminal space, as if

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58 Palaversich also cites Victor Hugo Rascón Banda’s *Contrabando* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2008.) and Diego Enrique Osorno’s *Un vaquero cruza la frontera del silencio* (Mexico City: Conapred, 2011).

violence were somehow directly proportional to temperature or lack of rain. Through a kind of geo-social phrenology reminiscent of Sarmiento's analytically in *Facundo*, violence, depravity, chaos, are commonly represented as the natural social consequences of the physical features of a region that resembles nothing more than a black hole. This black hole metaphor is ubiquitous in contemporary representations of Mexico from both sides of the border—it is a constant trope in the FX television series *The Bridge*, for example; Charles Bowden, who has become something like the North American voice of Juárez, makes frequent recourse to the metaphor in *Murder City*; Palaversich has noted how the Mexican writer Homero Aridjis “makes repeated references to Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez as centers of evil from which vice spreads out to the rest of the country” (“Politics” 100); and, of course, there is, again, Bolaño's *2666*, in which voids and black holes abound.

In Bolaño, the landscape, in particular the Sonoran desert, is a ubiquitous presence, not as a victim, however, but as an aggressor, a source or even a perpetrator of violence (the characters frequently dream of gaping craters that open up to swallow people alive). This trope, while it is usually intended to call our attention to the severity of the country's current plight, in fact tends to impede accurate analyses and effective political responses since it occludes the very spaces where the real mechanisms of the drug trade are located and where the material conflicts of the Drug War are actually taking place—the black hole metaphor turns these real places into an unspeakable realm beyond the reach of political action. Of course, this metaphysical or quasi-mystical marriage between land, violence, and death has many precursors in Latin American literature: Sarmiento's *Facundo*, Rivera's *La vorágine*, Quiroga's short stories, and, within the Mexican literature, Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, just to name a few of the most obvious examples.

In short, it is rare for a narco-narrative to deal with the material realities of the relationship between drugs, violence, and the environment without suggesting a metaphysical reduction of

the former two to the latter. And one of the points that I want to make, if it's not already clear, is that this obfuscation of the environment or the land can be considered of a piece with a wider tendency in narco-literature, namely, that, like other victims of narco violence, the land itself takes a back seat to the simultaneously compelling and repulsive stories of cartel clashes, ingenious capos, ruthless sicarios, stealthy traffickers, cynical cops, corrupt officials, and so on.

However, just as there are a few notable exceptions in which the voice of the victim takes center stage, there are also a handful of narco-narratives in which the environment or the land figures more prominently and in a more positive light. This is actually the case in what is perhaps the first Mexican narco-narrative, Angel Nacaveva's semi-fictional 1962 text *Diario de un narcotraficante* (*Diary of a Drug Trafficker*). In the text—which is a mix between chronicle, memoir, and novel—the narrator, A. Nacaveva, who refers to himself as a “militant” journalist (365), decides to go undercover as an apprentice to a narco acquaintance in order to later write the “true story” of the burgeoning Mexican drug trade. But this inaugural narco-narrative bears little resemblance to the *narcoliteratura* that has since become so popular. Here violence mostly remains at the level of threats and insinuations (except, notably, for Nacaveva's trip across the border, where he is detained and tortured by the American police). In fact, what strikes the reader is how *boring* the life of a mid-century narco is. For example, secret cantina meetings (a narco narrative convention) abound, but rather than being sites where scores are settled, profits are burned, and appetites quenched, in *Diario* these are just places to kill the time between the unglamorous tasks of mid-level traffickers. What time Nacaveva and his partner/mentor Arturo actually do spend working is divided between visiting their peasant suppliers of raw opium and refining this into heroin in Arturo's garage

*Diario* sheds light on “the actual world of peasants who cultivate psychoactive plants deep in the rural areas of the northern Mexican *sierras*”, which makes the text fairly unique among

narco-narratives, since, as Hermann Herlinghaus continues, this “realm is mostly absent in mass-media-based depictions of the illicit business” (55). The popular media and a majority of contemporary narco-narratives focus on scenes of urban violence while portraying environments like the Sinaloan *sierra* or the Sonoran Desert in overly shadowy hues—the former appearing as a land where not only poppies but the narcos themselves spring from the ground and the latter as kind of saturnine monster who devours its offspring. Nacaveva’s *Diario*, on the other hand, brings into focus the rural communities that first appeared as relatively peaceful spaces where, in a time before the Drug Wars, peasants and narcos enjoyed a more or less mutually beneficial relationship and the presence of the State in the rural spaces of narcotics production was slight. Later these same places would become “the main target of ‘*socio-ecological*’ *cleansing* carried out by the belligerent operations of the war on drugs” (Herlinghaus 55), most notably of *Operación Cóndor* (which I will return to below). Nacaveva portrays this as a time when peasants viewed the narcos as less of an existential threat than a convenient source of agricultural capital and the drug trade a boon to the rural economy.

Not only do Nacaveva’s peasants and narcos see their collaboration as good for business but also, crucially, good for the land itself. The profits that the poppy harvest produces allow the *serrano* peasants to invest in what have otherwise become unproductive lands. Their predicament had been dire: “estábamos sufriendo mucho, la milpa se la acabó el chapule, no vamos a tener nada o casi nada de pizca,” as one rural town elder puts it, but now, thanks to the business the narcos bring in, they can “pensar cómo sembrar la tierra” (171). Some time later the narcos come back for more raw product and notice that there is “alegría en la casa, se nota que han comido bien” (105). This affective outcome justifies the whole business in Nacaveva’s eyes, who notes, “Estas son puras ganancias” (105). Not only is there no harm done, but everyone and everything—including the peasants’ land—benefits from the drug trade.



Whether or not this is an accurate picture of the social relations of production within the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican drug trade is not really my concern here. Rather, I merely want to use Nacaveva's text as an example of what the drug trade could once have at least been *imagined* to be: a mutually beneficial collaboration between producers, merchants, and the land—an image that today has become inconceivable. However, the fact that the older, more humane form of the drug trade is now inconceivable should not be taken as evidence that today's drug trade is unfathomable, as the black hole interpretation would have it. We should resist the temptation to interpret Mexico's slide from an illicit yet rule governed, internally ordered, and minimally violent drug trade to a brutally chaotic competition between would-be narco monopolies in the same way we understand the global transition over roughly the same period from a stable Keynesian mixed economy to today's convulsive and crisis ridden free market—that is, as a gradual corruption caused by more or less opaque intrusions of greed at the individual level and quasi-mystical irruptions of chaos, disorder, decline, evil, at the level of society and environment. Rather, both transitions should be understood within the context of specific economic and cultural changes at the level of system and ideology.

Nacaveva represents a bygone drug trade that could only have existed under a bygone economic conditions. The sociologist Luis Astorga explains that

There was an early process of "naturalisation" of drug trafficking in some regions of Mexico. Anybody could be a trafficker. A brother, a cousin, a friend, a neighbour, a friends friend. In rural areas with few people in the villages it was very easy to know who cultivated illegal plants. They needed legal cultures to survive, and illegal ones to live a better life. An important and interesting reason to accept the coexistence with traffickers was the absence of drug use and abuse, specially opium and its derivatives. They produced for the market abroad, not for local consumption, except perhaps for marijuana

which was used for medical or recreational purposes. Another reason was the level of violence. In small towns, it was more difficult, although not impossible, to resort to violence because almost all the inhabitants were related. There was room for everybody in the drug business, so it was not necessary to fight to death to get a share of the market. (Astorga “Drug Trafficking in Mexico”)

Astorga explains that during this less violent period “Traffickers’ ethics were more related to the logic of the economy than to law or religion” (“Drug Trafficking in Mexico”)<sup>59</sup>. Here one must be careful to note that “the economy” in question was not the same as today’s neoliberal, globalized economy. What Astorga refers to as the “‘naturalization’ of drug trafficking” took place alongside, or better, within, a developmentalist capitalism based, among other things, on the core concept that there indeed was “room for everyone” within the socioeconomic system. This key spatial metaphor has been replaced with another one within today’s globalized neoliberalism: rather than “room for everyone,” the basic assumption underlying contemporary economics is that there is “room for no one”, or at least only room for very few. This shift in fundamental spatial metaphors was a conceptual correlate of the sociopolitical transformation through which the developmentalist Third World became the neoliberalized Global South. And, as writer and critic Cristina Rivera Garza explains, it is this transition that in turn paved the way the “the emergence of a ferocious group of entrepreneurs of global capitalism known generally as *el Narco*” (13)

A survey of narco narratives over the last three decades or so shows a parallel shift in the way the relationship between narcos, *campesinos*, and the land is represented. Rather than following the traffickers up into the rural zones of the *Sierra Madre*, where opium and marijuana are cultivated, novels like Leonides Alfaro’s *Tierra Blanca*, for example, narrate the flight of

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59 The preeminent fictional narration of this transition from low-intensity to high-intensity drug trafficking in Mexico (including the DEA’s involvement in this transition) is Don Winslow’s *The Power of the Dog* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

*serrano* peasants down into cities like Culiacán, where they hope to become traffickers themselves and not just suppliers. In part, this change can be explained by the affective attraction of the ever more visible figure of the narco, of his lifestyle, the power he wields, and so on.

Just as important, however, is that, over the course of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, it simply makes less and less sense to remain on one's land. One of the main factors contributing to the increasing unviability of the peasant lifestyle during this period was, of course *Operación Condor* (not to be confused, in spite of certain shared goals and tactics, with the more famous Operation Condor, the collaborative effort among South American dictators to repress leftist movements, which began around the same time). Like its South American namesake, the *Mexican* Operation Condor aimed to root out leftist guerrillas. Its other main objective (the official one) was to stamp out the burgeoning drug business, especially in places like Michoacán and Sinaloa (which, interestingly, have been the sites of the State's most recent incursions against *el Narco*). Aside from the direct physical violence and disappearances carried out by the military (coincidentally under the direction of Jesús Hernández Toledo, the general who led the massacre at Tlatelolco on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1968 and later the invasion of the UNAM), the other principal tactic was to eradicate opium and marijuana crops which were becoming the main cash crops in the targeted regions.

Operation Condor, while it was fairly effective at quashing guerrilla cells, did little to weaken the cartels and the drug trade they controlled (which, of course, have only grown stronger since). As Gabriela Polit Dueñas explains “not even the military would dare go into the large [cartel-run] planting fields in the mountains of the Sierra Madre,” not least because of the growing ties between cartels (especially the Sinaloa cartel) and State officials (particularly in the PRI). Rather, Polit Dueñas continues, “small producers and independent farmers [are] the ones who [suffer] the most” as a result of the “army raids—which [most people consider] government

propaganda” (25). The parallels between Operation Condor and Felipe Calderón’s, and now Enrique Peña Nieto’s, War on Drugs should be obvious.

Above all, Operation Condor resulted in the massive displacement of peasant farmers from their lands and the entrenchment in those very lands of the narcos who once contracted their former inhabitants.<sup>60</sup> If the land has less of a presence in the narco narratives written after this transitional period, it may have something to do with the fact that it plays less and less of a role in the lives of the people who have been forced to descend from the *sierra* into the cities. Additionally, writers may have also neglected the representation of drug producing rural spaces because of the simple fact that most of them have no real access to these places, they having become highly dangerous zone off limits to those not involved with the cartels occupying them.

It makes sense, then, in light of the sociopolitical changes that cut certain rural areas off from the general public and displaced their former inhabitants, that representations of drugs and violence would begin to focus much more on the more accessible urban spaces to which the former farmers migrated, and that when narco narratives represented rural zones at all, these would appear increasingly shadowy and mysterious. It also makes sense that writers would focus more on the heady atmosphere of cities like Culiacán or the various border towns where former farmers migrated—during Operation Condor and continuing through the privatizations of the 1980s and, especially, the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. An explosively violent atmosphere developed in these towns as portions of the urban population, without the prospect of gainful employment, began seeking their livelihoods as drug traffickers. The story of the poor *serrano*,

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60 It is interesting to note here how this supposedly political and military operation actually helped carry out a process of privatization of illicit businesses parallel to the privatizations of communal and state-owned resources being carried out all over Latin America at the time. One could argue that there is in fact little difference between, say, the auctioning off of public resources and industries to multinational corporations under the umbrella of state terror and repression in Pinochet’s Chile, and the consolidation of control by the Sinaloa cartel and other budding organizations over former communal lands [*ejidos*] during the traumatic period presided over by Luis Echeverría in Mexico. In both instances, what Naomi Klein would call “the shock doctrine” spurred the transfer of common resources into the hands of private business interests, the only difference being that, in Mexico, these were illicit businesses.

who may have once been considered a victim but who now, in the city, fights his way to top and becomes the master of his own destiny (and now the victimizer of others), becomes one the central themes of narco culture, *narcocorridos*, and narco narratives (both fiction and non-fiction).

There is one well-known narco narrative, Elmer Mendoza's 2001 novel *El amante de Janis Joplin*, which narrates the Operation Condor period in Sinaloa, that ignores the perversely thrilling triumphs of the dubious winners of the drug trade to focus instead on its losers. The novel tells the story of David, a poor *serrano* who, because of his goofy appearance, is considered by his fellow townspeople to be the village idiot. After a dance one night, the son of a wealthy land owner (and also apparently a narco) accuses David of having made an advance on his girlfriend and threatens to kill him. In an effort to defend himself, David (who, like his biblical namesake, has a pretty good arm) throws a rock and accidentally kills his attacker. As a result, he is forced to flee to the city of Culiacán and seek refuge with his relatives. From there, David embarks on a series of picaresque adventures in which he shows himself to be much more clever and talented than everyone thinks. Because of his great arm, he finds himself playing baseball on his uncle's traveling team (the title of the book comes from an unexpected sexual encounter with a Janis Joplin look-alike during a trip to Los Angeles). David has an uncanny ability to escape from seemingly hopeless situations, a skill he puts to use helping his cousin El Chato, a leftist guerrilla, escape his constant pursuer, the military official, Mascareño. Mascareño subsequently mistakes David for a militant, and David is forced to run again, this time to a fishing village on the coast, where he becomes an adroit seaman. This new skill proves useful to his old friend and former teammate El Cholo, an aspiring narco who enlists David to sail a shipment of marijuana to the US. However, in spite of all his hidden natural abilities, David

seems unable to escape his fate as a victim, and he is finally arrested and imprisoned by Mascareño.

It might appear that, in *El amante de Janis Joplin*, David's intelligence and will are ultimately impotent in the face of the social, economic, and political forces personified in El Chato, El Cholo, and Mascareño. One could even argue that his fate as a victim is determined by his original social position in his hometown in the Sierra Madre—a landless peasant and day laborer from a powerless family, he was vulnerable from the very beginning to the ambitions and interests of the new landed elite (the narcos, that is) and the State and military institutions that had cleared the way for them.

Yet, in the end, the character of David resists this reading. Mascareño, the military official, has cultivated a deep-seated hate for David and plans to eliminate him by taking him up in a helicopter, castrating him, and throwing his body into the sea. But just before Mascareño can carry out the second step, David decides to reassert his own agency in the face of a gruesome and utterly humiliating execution, and instead commits suicide by leaping from the helicopter, ceasing, at least in this last moment to be the victim the actions of others had hitherto defined him as.

In this way, the character of David in Elmer Mendoza's novel prefigures the characters in the novels of Yuri Herrera, a young writer many readers and critics now consider to be the most accomplished Mexican author dealing with narco-related themes. Herrera's texts, like Teresa Margolles' installations, train the readers eye on the hopeless and the helpless in a world defined by violence—we might say these works constitute a turn toward *los de abajo* in the literature and art dealing with the world of *el Narco*. Except that, by contrast with much of Margolles' work, these underdogs have a voice of their own, and they show themselves to be much less helpless than one might suspect—Herrera's characters refuse to be reduced to mere victims.

I have already discussed Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* in detail in the first chapter. I merely want to mention him here as a contemporary literary echo of what appears to be a wider aesthetic and sociopolitical trend in which those who used to be largely invisible—invisible, that is, to the extent that they were primarily represented as helpless victims by the dominant representations of drugs and violence in Mexico—are not only reasserting their visibility but also rejecting the label of victim by asserting their capability as social and political actors in a grass-roots struggle against the cartels as well as the other stakeholders, official or otherwise, in the drug trade and the so-called war against it. The phrase “grass-roots struggle” here is intended as something of a pun, since several of the recent movements—for example, the now well-known self-defense groups springing up in small towns all over Michoacán—highlight the centrality of the land in the struggle against the cartels and their corrupt institutional collaborators. What I want to argue is that within these budding movements, the process through which former victims assert themselves as actors collectively able to transform the dire social, political, and economic situation in which they find themselves involves, in turn, a recognition of the land itself as a political actor (this is one of the main ontological assumptions of those instances of resistance to narco violence that are, at least in part, motivated by environmental concerns).

The example of the indigenous P'uhрэpecha town of Cherán in Michoacán is paradigmatic in this regard. Cherán is home to what is generally considered to be the first community self-defense group organized against narco violence (many of the other self-defense groups have cited the P'uhрэpechas of Cherán as their source of inspiration). Cherán is also interesting in that its self-defense organizing has been more overtly political than in other towns, having developed as it did out of a collective decision to declare the community's autonomy and its right to self-determination in light of the inability, or unwillingness, of municipal, state, and federal institutions to intervene against the incursions of the La Familia Michoacana cartel into their

communal forests and the expropriation of their timber resources (La Familia, which has since morphed into the Knights Templar cartel, like cartels in other parts of the country, basically started diversifying its business model, branching out from the production and trafficking of drugs to, among other things, extortion, kidnapping, and, crucially in Cherán, illegal lumber harvesting).

Aside from inspiring the organization of self-defense groups elsewhere, Cherán also triggered a flurry of online discussions, documentaries, and art. For example, a short documentary on Vice.com asks in the tag line whether these are “The New Zapatistas?” The comparison is indeed intriguing (though it may simply have been intended as link-bait). Here is what appears to be another autonomist movement comprised of people refusing to be displaced from their lands, even in the face of severe threats to their livelihood, and their lives. Where the Zapatistas stood their ground against neoliberalism—in particular, the post-NAFTA flood of US subsidized corn that caused so many other peasant farmers to call it quits and make for the *maquiladora* factories in the new tax-free zones along the northern border—the people of Cherán refused to relinquish their lands and resources to the forces of *narcoliberalism*<sup>61</sup>. Surely there are far more differences than similarities between Cherán and the Zapatista communities of Chiapas. But the comparison does highlight how, among other things, a commitment to the land served in both instances to catalyze a local collectivist movement against forces of violence that had previously seemed intractable, beyond the reach of direct political action, or even otherworldly in their ferocity.

Or at least, this is how much of the wider public has understood and represented Cherán—and these dynamics of representation, what we could call the shifting political aesthetics of *el*

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61 Luis Astorga coined the term to refer to the resemblance between cartel business practices and those of mainstream capitalist entities. Polit Dueñas has also used it to refer to the State's protection of the narcos' ultra-free-market practices. See Astorga's *Mitología del “narcotraficante” en México* (Mexico City: IIS-UNAM/Plaza y Valdés, 1995) and Polit Dueñas' *Narrating Narcos* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2013).



*Narco* in México, is what I am personally most interested in, including how the members of the self-defense groups represent themselves, online through social media. All of this representation and self-representation of the self-defense groups has sparked a lot of back and forth online as well as in the mainstream media as commentators try to argue to establish a hegemonic interpretation of what exactly these groups really are. Are they politically motivated freedom fighters? Are they secretly working for rival cartels? Now that the federal government is trying to create alliances with the so-called vigilantes, will they turn into Colombian-style paramilitary groups? There is also the question of whether the importance of these self-defense groups has been overblown as images and representations of them have taken on meme status.

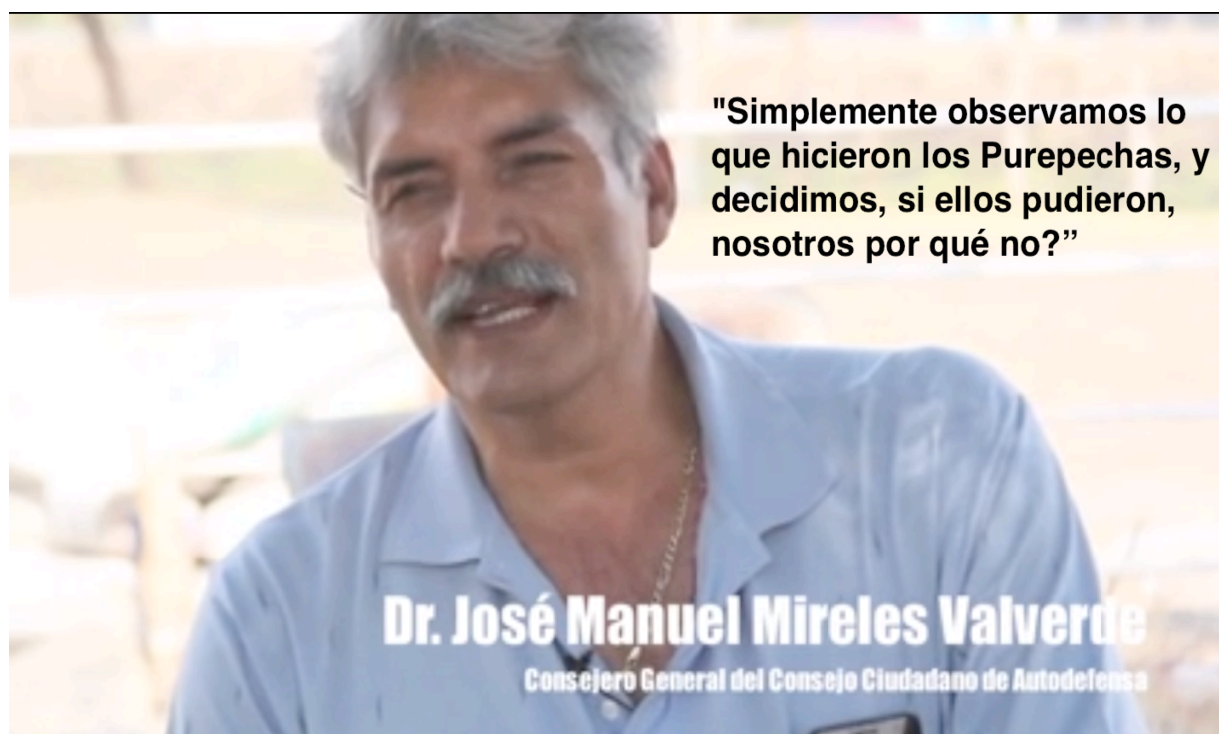


Fig. 3 From “Caballeros Templarios en Michoacán Testimonio Autodefensa Ciudadana”

The interpretation I am attracted to draws connections between the more recent self-defense groups and the earlier events in Cherán, and emphasizes the defense of the land as a central motivation for taking up arms against the narcos. This idea comes up in several

testimonies on Youtube, such as, for example, a video titled “Caballeros Templarios en Michoacán Testimonio Autodefensa Ciudadana,” in which the leader of the *Consejo Ciudadano Autodefensa* of Tepaltepec states how they simply followed the example of the people of Cherán, taking up arms not only to defend themselves and their families but also their avocado and citrus crops, that is, their livelihood. (However, as self-defense groups multiply, I do think will also be useful to distinguish, as several commentators have suggested we do, between mere vigilantes and *comuneros*, that is, the more intentionally political or collectivist bodies of community justice, like the one in Cherán.)

This interpretation of Cherán as the epicenter of resistance against narco violence, the idea of the origin that bestows both a political and a kind of environmentalist meaning on (at least some) of the self-defense groups that have come after, can be seen, for example, in a music video dedicated to Cherán, Michoacán by the AHO Collective (Jorge Hueso, Hector Guerra, Lengualerta, Roco Pachucote, Moyenei, and Rubén Albarrán). In the intro (which I will return to in more detail below), a text scroll lays out the context in which the Cherán movement arose, noting that after 27,000 hectares of forest had been reduced to 7,000,

Con menos de 13,000 habitantes, Cherán se levanta contra el crimen organizado y la tala clandestina. La iniciativa fue de las mujeres. Atrincherados desde el pasado 15 de abril [2011], se destierra a la Policía y al Gobierno local por corruptelas y apatía ante la problemática. Cherán unido implementa una Comisión General que ‘autogobierna’ y una ronda comunitaria que ‘autoprotege’ cuyos miembros voluntarios tienen un periodo rotatorio. ‘Vecino con vecino. Cuadra con cuadra.’

In the song that follows, the members of the AHO Colectivo take turns rapping and singing a tribute to the Cherán movement. Each artist emphasizes a kind of ontological equivalence of the people of Cherán and the land they defend. For example, Jorge Hueso against a backdrop of lush

vegetation and forested hills, asserts that the land, just like those who dwell on it, has fallen victim to “intereses monetarios” (clearly referencing both multinational agricultural corporations as well as the more obvious narco organizations), which actually “mataban a la tierra.” Hector Guerra, the next artist, likewise places violence against humans and violence against the environment on the same plane by using a paratactical phrasal structure: “Han matado a mi padre. Han matado a mi brother. Han matado a todos los pinos” (which also suggests a filiation between humans and nonhumans that could be considered a precondition for the kind of political cooperation between them that I will describe below). Later in the song, Roco Pachucote sings that “el corazón de la tierra se escucha en el llamado de Cherán,” who, “defendiendo el bosque, luchan por la vida, paz y dignidad.” Pachucote’s lines suggest the idea (which I will also return to below) that the land offers a kind of testimony through the actions of those who seek to defend it. In the final verse, Rubén Albarrán’s lines, sung in the first person, assume the perspective of Cherán’s trees: “Mil hachas no podrán y me alzo con mis ramas, alas de esperanza y dignidad / Mil balas no entrarán mi tronco corazón resistirá.”



Fig. 4 “Me alzo con mis ramas” from “Cherán”

The key arguments of the song and video could be summarized as follows: that the land itself can no longer abide the violence and exploitation of the narcos, that it offers its testimony against it; that it is possible to recognize the land as a social being and potential political actor in its own right; that, therefore, it is possible to enter into an alliance with the land against violence; that this is what the people of Cherán have done; and lastly, that this example can and should be emulated elsewhere. According to a sympathetic interpretation, like the one the music video offers, such actions entail not only an assertion of one's land rights but also of the rights of the land.

Most of these ideas are actually condensed into the intro to the video, in which a women, speaking in P'uhрэpecha, emphasizes the fact that the land itself bears witness against violence inflicted upon it. The Spanish subtitles read: “En estos días, estamos pasando por diferentes

cosas. Se está oscureciendo nuestro mundo. Nuestros pueblos, nuestras tierras están llorando, esperando que pensemos y no sigamos dañando los árboles. Que están preocupados y están llorando y nosotros no sentimos, no nos compadecemos.” The darkening of the world that the P’uhrépecha voice refers to is due, in large part, to the growing influence of *el Narco* in Mexico; this is the obvious subtext that need not be mentioned explicitly in this opening testimony. And yet, the voice testifies not only to the human suffering of the present moment, which is both ubiquitous and conspicuous (given the proliferation of representations in the mainstream media, social media, and the narco-propaganda promulgated through online platforms as well as the public display of the corpses of victims and accompanying narco comunicués), but also to the suffering of the land. Furthermore, the paratactical construction of the phrase “nuestros pueblos, nuestras tierras están llorando” implies, again, the ontological parity of “people” and “land.” Or rather, the voice testifies of the testimony of the people and the land, not only that these entities are suffering (“llorando”), but also that are calling out, making a claim on the listener (or listeners, the first person plural subject being implied in the verb conjugations of the subordinate clause of the third sentence of the quote) to “think” and “stop harming the trees,” which are “worried and are suffering.” There are a couple of surprising things here: first, the very fact that, in the face of the extreme violence of the drug trade/war in Michoacán, the testimonial voice would call our attention to the suffering of beings usually supposed to be insentient and, second, that this indigenous voice, which traditionally would serve as the source material to be mediated by a non-indigenous voice, here acts as the mediator for these literally voiceless beings.

The video “Cherán, Michoacán,” by the AHO Colectivo, serves the traditional function of *testimonio*, which, as aesthetic form and political performance, has allowed subjects previously reduced to victimhood to affirm their status as actors and protagonists of struggle. But it also serves as the vehicle for another kind of *testimonio*: *object testimonio*. Human voices speak of

nonhuman objects, like the land and trees, but they do not exactly speak on behalf of them. Unlike the anthropological voice mediating an indigenous *testimonio*, these human voices (at least the voiceover in the video's intro sequence) form part of a collective struggle *with* these nonhuman objects—the human Purepehca voice testifies of the plight of the forest, which needs no translation because it is plain for all to see. We could also say that, by forming a collectivity with the nonhuman actors that make up their environment, the human voice takes on a nonhuman character, so that what we are dealing with is less an object testimony by way of a subjective intermediary than a collective *testimonio*—where the collective is made up of humans and nonhumans (which, as Bruno Latour explains in *Politics of Nature*, all collectives really are).

### **Ontology of Vulnerability and Object-Oriented Resistance**

I began this chapter with a brief consideration of Teresa Margolles, whose art forces the viewer to pause and ask “¿De qué otra cosa podemos hablar?”—what else besides the victims of narco violence, that is, could we (or should we) be talking about? I also mentioned the critic Diana Palaversich's core question, “how to speak about silence?”—how, that is, to speak about the silence of the victims, their invisibility and voicelessness in many of the representations offered by narco literature and other cultural forms like *narcocorridos*. I then suggested that we should also keep the land (and other nonhuman objects) in mind when asking such questions, that we should consider the land a victim of narco violence. But after turning to some of the recent events in places like Cherán, Michoacán, and the way that these events have been represented, perhaps, instead of asking “what else we could talk about” or “how to speak about the silence,” it is time to start asking ourselves how to *listen* to those who refuse to remain victims, who, instead of worrying about how to represent their own silence, have simply begun speaking and acting, both for themselves and on behalf of the land. And we should listen not

only to what they are saying but also how they are saying it, with an ear to the ontological assertions implicitly contained in this how. By doing so, we can start to pick out a kind of “object-oriented ontology,” which in certain ways resembles some of the object-oriented or speculative realist frameworks that have gained traction in recent philosophical debates (which I mentioned above in “Chapter One”). Crucially, these ontological commitments come to bear on the way that, for example, the community of Cherán organized their resistance to narco violence.

It is a commonplace to note that violence entails a simultaneous dehumanization, that the subject of a violent act must other the object of violence. But what if this othering is not a mere delusion, which one must entertain in order act violently? What if violence actually reveals an ontological truth, namely, the fundamental reality of alterity, that all beings are truly others—in other words, that all beings are objects. In “Chapter One,” I briefly explained how, according to an object-oriented ontology, all objects are both resistant and available to each other, and that, therefore, an object is never fully knowable by another object, but neither is it unknowable (in other words, perception and representation—or aesthetics—is constitutive of all relationships). Here, we might say that the ontological condition of violence is that all objects are vulnerable (resistantly available) to each other.

In addition to the insights of contemporary object-oriented ontology, I am building here on Cristina Rivera Garza’s notion that the violence that has swept over Mexico in recent years lays bare certain features of the underlying structure of our existence, which, borrowing a formulation articulated by the philosopher Adriana Cavarero, she calls “*una ontología de la vulnerabilidad*” (86). This ontology is “*lo que nos expone a la dependencia del otro: tanto a su cuidado como a su ultraje*” (86). By referring to this as an “ontology of vulnerability,” rather than, say, a “state” or “epoch” of vulnerability, Rivera Garza implies that the threat of extreme violence that now defines the everyday experience of so many Mexicans (along with other inhabitants of the Global

South) is not a modern aberration or a contemporary exception but rather an essential quality of the real itself, or at least a fundamental feature of our relationship with the real. If this is the case, then the sleight of hand in a violent act is not the objectification of the victim of violence—the cancellation of her subjectivity, which is both the precondition and the effect of the violent act—but rather what we might call the over-subjectification of the perpetrator. That is, the perpetrator of a violent act others his victim not only by objectifying her but by over-subjectifying himself, that is, by proclaiming the other vulnerable to his act while denying his own dependency on the other.<sup>62</sup> Of course, this over-subjectification, does not render the perpetrator of violence actually invulnerable to the other, to care or violence of the other. Rather, it gives him the *sense* of invulnerability, which serves simultaneously as an affective impulse to act violently and as the affective payoff of the violent act.

But the real problem is how to resist violence, or how to remedy a situation characterized by extreme violence. The question of violence is different from the question of sovereignty, which I considered in "Chapter One", in that it does not depend on the misperception of the perpetrator of violence as the latter depends on the misperception of the sovereign by his subjects. The victim may very well see through the perpetrator's delusional over-subjectification and still be unable to escape his violence. One way to respond to the over-subjectified perpetrator of violence would be to use violence to force him to recognize his own vulnerability. This is certainly one way to understand the response of the self-defense groups I discussed above. Indeed, this is the dominant interpretation of such groups offered by most commentators, who refer to them as a "vigilantes" taking matters into their own hands and responding in kind to the aggression of the cartels, thereby depriving the narcos of their veneer of invulnerability. A

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<sup>62</sup> This should recall my argument in "Chapter One," according to which sovereignty is a function of a deception whereby the sovereign is perceived, by his subjects and/or by himself, as invulnerable, exempt from any reliance on anyone or anything else. However, the victim of violence is different from the subject of the sovereign in that she cannot neutralize the power of her attacker by refusing to recognize his delusional over-subjectivity (as, for example, the Artist in Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* does when he realizes that the sovereign's power depends on his subjects' misperception of its nature).



number of commentators have argued that the self-defense groups' use of violence automatically delegitimizes them, that by resorting to violence, even when it is defensive, they come to resemble those they are fighting, or even that they become indistinguishable from them, as if holding a *cuerno de chivo* were the same as *being* a narco.

According to an alternative interpretation, the one I argued for above, (at least some) self-defense groups are less concerned with waging a frontal attack on the cartels,<sup>63</sup> that is, with forcing the cartels to confront their own vulnerability, than with forging alliances with other vulnerable beings. In Rivera Garza's articulation, the "ontología de la vulnerabilidad," which is a "condición humana," entails the universal exposure of each not only to the "ultraje" (insult, offense, violence) of the other but also to the "care" of the other. Self-defense in contemporary Mexico could be understood not (only) as the violent response of victims to the violence of the narco other—for the purpose of exposing the latter's vulnerability—but (primarily) as a collective decision to acknowledge that, given the ontological fact of vulnerability, the only way to resist the "ultraje" of a certain other is to cultivate a care for *each* other.

As I already argued above, this forging of alliances with and care for each other is not restricted to the community of human others in the context of the self-defense movements in Mexico, at least in their early incarnations in places like Cherán. Resistance to narco violence in such instances entails a recognition of nonhuman others (the land, trees, crops) as actors and potential members of a collective. I would argue that, rather than reactionary vigilantism, environmentally-oriented self-defense movements, like Cherán, are examples of what Bruno Latour would call a "collective of humans and nonhumans" (31) whose purpose is not only to resolve an intolerable local situation but also to work toward the "progressive composition of the common world" (222).

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63 At least the earlier self-defense groups, such as the Cherán collective. Recently, however, some groups have gone on the offensive, particularly those involved in the recent "Battle for Apatzingán."

Rather than “environmentally-oriented” self-defense groups, it might be more accurate to call them “object-oriented.” Their approach is characterized less by a desire to protect the human environment than by a concern for the needs or interests of nonhumans, or more specifically, by a recognition of the fact that the interests of nonhuman objects have as much ontological purchase as those of human subjects. Or, echoing Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s work on perspectivism in Amazonian cultures (“Cosmological Deixis”), we might say that the kind of self-defense organized in Cherán is based, at least in part, on a recognition that nonhuman objects (whether sentient or insentient) “understand” themselves from their own perspective as subjects, and that from such a perspective humans appear not as subjects but as objects. Self-defense in Cherán, as well as in other contexts influenced by its example, rather than the mere defense of the human self, means the collective defense of *selves*, both human and nonhuman, each understood, both individually and together, as at the same time object and subject—self-defense of the collective of humans and nonhumans.

The Cherán model of self-defense offers a mild corrective to Rivera Garza’s formulation of the ontology of vulnerability. According to this model, the ontology of vulnerability does not apply only to humans (it is not merely a “condición humana”) but to humans and nonhumans alike, that is to all beings, all objects. In other words, the ontology of vulnerability is understood as a properly ontological—and not just existential—condition. The ontology of vulnerability is not just a human condition but a fundamental feature of reality itself; not only humans but rather all objects (that is everything and everyone) are dependent on others, exposed as much to their care as to the injury they can inflict. Perhaps the proper reaction to violence is not to call for human subjects to stop treating each other as objects but rather to acknowledge our common condition as objects, which means that we are vulnerable to all other objects, but also that we can enter into alliances and collectivities with all other objects—that we along with the nonhuman

entities that make up what we call the environment can minimize the “ultraje” of certain others by maximizing relationships of “cuidado” among us other others.

It has been common recently to question both the motives and the tactics of self-defense groups and accuse them of being incipient paramilitary organizations, fledgling death squads or, perhaps the most common accusation, of actually secretly working for rival cartels. However, these accusations have been vehemently denied by the self-defense groups themselves<sup>64</sup>. This knee-jerk reaction to the idea of armed-struggle, the tendency to immediately disqualify it as criminal activity, could be seen as part of what John Beverley calls the “paradigm of disillusion” in Latin America (which I have already referenced several times above). At this point, when speaking of them in general, one can only speculate on what the self-defense movements *will have been*. On the other hand, there is some cause to worry, especially now that certain groups have ceased to organize strictly in self-defense and have rather gone on the offensive. Still, it is, in my view, wrong to fault self-defense groups for having taken up arms at all and to depoliticize them by categorizing them as mere vigilantes. In light of my arguments above on the ontology of vulnerability and object-oriented organizing, we might say that the truly problematic moment is not when such groups take up arms but when they decide to start cooperating with the State, since the State, by definition, cannot recognize its own vulnerability. The State, since it must portray itself as a sovereign, cannot be organized in an object-oriented way. When Enrique Peña Nieto’s government recently reached out to self-defense groups in Michoacán and elsewhere in an effort to legitimize and institutionalize them, it implicitly demanded that they become party to the State’s sovereignty. We might argue that those self-defense groups that accepted this legitimizing demand essentially chose to break their alliances, based on a recognition of mutual

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<sup>64</sup> It has been common to note both the accusations and denials in recent mainstream newstories (See, for example, “Mexican vigilantes who ousted Knights Templar cartel could bring new violence” (*theguardian.com*), “Michoacan Vigilante Groups Collaborate With Mexican Government” (*npr.com*), and “Mexican Vigilantes Beat Back Ruthless Knights Templar Cartel” (*time.com*)).

vulnerability and dependency, with the other objects that had previously been members of their collective. If there is an emancipatory political spark in the recent self-defence movement—an indication that, against the narco-realist thesis, drug trafficking and narco violence may be within the transformative reach of collective political action—it may only continue to burn as long self-defense activists remain true to the object-oriented ontology underlying their alliances with their nonhuman co-actors.

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