

AUTONOMY AFTER AUTONOMY, OR, THE NOVEL BEYOND NATION: ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S 2666

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396 “Let’s be radical,” writes Jorge Volpi in *El insomnio de Bolívar* (2009), “Latin American literature no longer exists” (165).¹ What was known as Latin American literature, he explains, emerged fully in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly with the Boom of the 1960s, “that nomadic brotherhood” whose works “crushed the obsolete bourgeois nationalism of their countries.” At the same time, insofar as writers such as Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa contributed to the creation of a “Latin American front with deep Bolivarian roots,” Volpi maintains that “[p]aradoxically, in escaping from their cages,” they also “contributed to founding a new nationalism, Latin American this time” (167). “The result,” he continues, “was a resounding success”:

[O]n the one hand, local media were once again satisfied to have a literature of their own, distinct from what was produced elsewhere, capable of providing a “unique identity” to Latin American nations as a whole; on the other hand, foreign readers, editors, and critics discovered a last redoubt of exoticism—of difference—within the increasingly predictable margins of Western literature. (Volpi 167-68)

The Boom, in this sense, not only contributes to the creation of a Latin American nationalism, but also gives rise to “literatura latinoamericana©” (as Volpi writes it), a market phenomenon that meets consumer demand at home and abroad. According to Volpi, this is the idea of a national literature against which a generation of authors born after 1960 will define their own work. Unlike their Boom predecessors, these more contemporary writers “have no Bolivarian aspirations and do not aspire to become spokespersons for Latin America” (Volpi 170). “Witnesses to the collapse of real socialism and to the discrediting of utopias, and increasingly skeptical of politics,” Volpi writes, “these authors seem to have finally freed themselves from any

national constraints" (168). What remains are novels "tracing a *hologram*," the "mystery of Latin America" (176). But if Volpi suggests that, in this way, writers such as Ignacio Padilla, Mario Mendoza, Cristina Rivera Garza, and he himself refuse to meet the literary market's demand for "exoticism" and Latin American "difference," he also believes that, while the Boom novelists had aimed for "literary purity," the writer's aspirations today include "money" (164). Considering the Boom has long been identified with what Angel Rama described as the moment of "literature's absorption within the mechanisms of consumer society" (53), we have every reason to be skeptical of this reading. And yet it is just as true that the Boom emerged in a period when "real socialism" and "utopias" to which Volpi refers not only lent credence to the Bolivarian aspirations of an earlier generation, but also sustained the belief, however impractical, in "literary purity," the belief in a literary autonomy understood today as the Boom's aesthetic ideology. For Volpi, then, it is as if what is to be found beyond the nation—beyond "national constraints"—is literature's more complete embrace of the market.

397

Importantly, Volpi notes that this contemporary novel finds its "best model" in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* (1998) and, above all, 2666 (2004). "After Bolaño," he observes, "writing with the Bolivarian conviction of the Boom has become irrelevant. This does not mean that Latin America has disappeared as stage or focus, but that it begins to be perceived with a *postnational* character, devoid of a fixed identity" (176). Thus, for Volpi, Bolaño offers a blueprint of sorts for the "postnational" Latin American novel. But if Bolaño would, for this reason, become the "guru of new generations" (171) of writers, in what follows, we will see that Bolaño's fictions also suggest that, far from resulting in a more complete embrace of the market, the hollowing-out of this "Bolivarian conviction" has instead given rise to the possibility of a literary autonomy after autonomy.

One of the many places where 2666 takes up art's relationship to commerce is the story of the fictional British artist Edwin Johns. In "The Part about the Critics," Liz Norton tells Piero Morini that Johns's 'masterpiece' "was an ellipsis of self-portraits, sometimes a spiral of self-portraits (depending on the angle from which it was seen), seven by three and a half feet, in the center of which hung the painter's mummified right hand" (53). Morini, for his part, tries to understand why the painter cuts off his own hand, and later, after visiting him in a Swiss lunatic asylum, tells Norton "he thought he knew why" (97): he did it, Morini explains, "for the money [...] because he believed in investments, the flow of capital, one had to play the game to win, that kind of thing" (97). Norton is not convinced. But why not? As the novel makes clear, Johns's paintings are everywhere caught up in processes for which the term "flows of capital" seems appropriate enough; and indeed, Johns's art is said to have not only "ushered in something that would later be known as the *new decadence* or *English animalism*" (52), but also attracted other painters, as well as architects and families, who would eventually transform the neighborhood in which he lived into "one of the trendiest neighborhoods in London, nowhere near as cheap as it was reputed to be"

(53). Situated within the circulation of symbolic and economic capital alike, what the novel describes as the “most radical self-portrait of our time” is ostensibly nothing more than a commodity; and like any commodity, it can be said to play a significant role in the valorization of capital. From the perspective of this same process of valorization, however, Johns’s masterpiece is no more significant—really, no different—than, say, a Hollywood blockbuster, a saw, or a hammer. To believe Morini’s claim—he did it “for the money”—consequently requires the critic to treat Johns’s “masterpiece”—and his self-mutilation—as a product of market-driven calculation like any other. And yet, since we never hear Johns’s response—after all, Morini only tells Norton he “thought [*creía saber*] he knew why”—it is not entirely obvious this is the case.

398 To be sure, the novel here dramatizes a common situation for critics, where artists are concerned. But while we rarely have any reason to decide whether writers and artists are in fact doing it “for the money,” it is no less true that 2666 is deeply invested in the question of the artwork’s status as commodity. Thus, the same motivations Morini believes animate Johns’s work will eventually find an equivalent in Benno von Archimboldi’s view of his own books, which he sees not only as a “game” but also a “business”: “a game insofar as he derived pleasure from writing, a pleasure similar to that of the detective on the heels of the killer, and a business insofar as the publication of his books helped to augment, however modestly, his doorman’s pay” (817). Nevertheless, as Sharae Deckard has shown in a brilliant reading of 2666, although Archimboldi’s story indicates that “[n]o artist dependent on material constraints, forced to mine his or her own experience and sell it as a commodity, can claim to be autonomous” (362), the novel is underwritten by a “formal embedding of the contradiction between [...its] own commodity status and its aim to produce an ideologically distantiated understanding of totality” (372). No doubt it is this “distantiated understanding” that the artwork’s assertion of autonomy had promised, and that Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, had seen underlying the “distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system” (95) that the cultural industry had effaced. That 2666 everywhere registers this contradiction between the artwork’s autonomy and heteronomy is undeniably true. As we will see, however, in staging this problematic, Bolaño’s work ultimately returns to the question of the “logic of the work”—the question of the artwork’s ontology and function—to demonstact how the claim to autonomy itself has become plausible once again.

At stake here is not *l’art pour l’art* alone, and, as contemporary discussions of the “problem” of world literature demonstrate, the question of the artwork’s autonomy is already the question of what the movement of literary forms and genres might tell us about the political and economic inequalities that have marked the world-system for some time now. Hence the three questions with which Pascale Casanova begins her essay “Literature as a World”:

Is it possible to re-establish the lost bond between literature, history and the world, while maintaining a full sense of the irreducible singularity of literary texts? Second, can lit-

erature itself be conceived as a world? And if so, might an exploration of its territory help us to answer question number one? (71)

For Casanova, the answer is to be found in what she identifies as “world literary space,” a “parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political domain, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature.” Such relative autonomy, she argues, constitutes world literary space as a “market where non-market values are traded, within a non-economy; and measured [...] by an aesthetic scale of time” (72). At the same time, it is not entirely clear what Casanova thinks mediates the relationship between this “non-economy” and the global economy; for this reason, we might agree with Ignacio Sánchez Prado when he notes that, for Casanova, “colonial relations appear to be traces that the field of power left in the autonomous system of literature during its moment of constitution and autonomy, but do not necessarily play a role in the processes of consecration within the literary system” (Sánchez Prado 27). Casanova, in other words, provides an incomplete picture of the relationship between the formation of world literary space and the development of the world-system—a relationship that seems crucial to our understanding of the novel today.

399

This becomes all the clearer when we consider that Casanova’s study extends primarily to a period in which the emergence of peripheral literatures were not only marked by an acute awareness of the manner in which relations within world literary space reflect and often contest unevenly developed relations within the world-system, but were also tasked with addressing and even compensating for such unevenness. Bolaño himself points to this dynamic when he notes that, in Latin America, “economic underdevelopment doesn’t allow subgenres to flourish. Underdevelopment only allows for great works of literature. Lesser works, in this monotonous or apocalyptic landscape, are an unattainable luxury” (“Reading” 57). But even as “the writer aspires to meet these expectations [...] reality—the same reality that has fostered these aspirations—works to stunt the final product” (58). Here, Bolaño would appear to echo Casanova’s claim that the “hierarchy and inequality” (Casanova 82) of world literary space redefines the distinction between dominant and dominated literature in terms of “greatest autonomy” versus “greatest heteronomy” (83). Thus, while the “great works” that Bolaño mentions offer some means by which to avoid what 2666 calls the “garbage pit of history” (228), they are no less subject to the demands that underdevelopment places on the Latin American writer. Yet in contrast to Casanova, Bolaño’s comments highlight the degree to which the options available within a zone of “greatest heteronomy,” such as the Latin American literary field, are underwritten by the ideology of modernization—a desire for a modernity, spurred on and at the same time circumscribed by the unevenly developed flows of global capital.²

But while Bolaño’s comments here speak directly to this dynamic, this is all complicated by the fact that 2666 approximates something like a vast compendium of subgenres, ranging from the historical novel and detective fiction, through the

thriller and Mexican narconarrative, to romantic comedy. So, while he believes that “[u]nderdevelopment only allows for great works of literature,” it is also true that 2666 flies in the face of this assertion by making such subgenres the raw material of a novel that imagines itself as a “great work,” an example of what, within 2666, the Chilean exile Amalfitano describes as “great, imperfect, torrential works” (227) such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Trial*.

In this way, Bolaño’s novel registers a shift within the political configuration of the world-system with far-reaching consequences for the literary. To understand how, we should begin with Carlos J. Alonso’s recent identification of “the novel without literature” (3). Drawing on the critic Josefina Ludmer’s account of “postautonomous literatures,” Alonso argues that the contemporary third-world novel poses a challenge to those approaches that have sought “to incorporate it into the larger history of the novel as a genre” (4).³ For Alonso, the comparative approaches endorsed by critics such as Fredric Jameson, Roberto Schwarz, and Franco Moretti “will not help
400 us navigate the non-Western novel in the age of globalization and its unrelenting commodification of culture.” This, he maintains, is plain to see in the case of the contemporary Latin American novel, which no longer seeks to “incorporate Latin American ‘reality’ in any meaningful fashion,” bearing witness instead to an “indifference to being consumed [...] as literature—as well as their ready availability to market-driven circulation” (4). In this sense, Alonso’s “novel without literature” is a novel that not only takes leave of the nation and Latin America, but also dispenses with any claim to formal and ontological specificity because it understands itself as a commodity (much like Morini understands Johns’ “masterpiece”); from this perspective, authors and even critics today only do it “for the money.” Alonso subsequently locates the origins of the “novel without literature” in what he describes as the “collapse” of the “autonomy of the literary field and all the claims that derived from it” (3).

Meanwhile, Alonso also maintains that the novels written in Spanish by writers such as Alan Pauls, Santiago Gamboa, Ignacio Padilla, and Jorge Volpi “mark their distance from the preceding novels of the Boom by taking leave from Latin American history and circumstance and by suffusing their texts with paradigms, categories, and even plots derived from mass media, the new digital technologies, and global networks of circulation and meaning” (4). In this way, the “novel without literature” ostensibly makes explicit a claim that Volpi only gestures toward: that the Latin American novel begins to be perceived as *postnational* at the same time it becomes *postautonomous*—twin developments that, according to Alonso, render previous modes of comparative analysis outmoded, if not altogether obsolete. He subsequently concludes by asking, “Does it make sense to speak of the novel when the claim for literary autonomy can no longer be sustained?” (5). In effect, however, he raises another question, recalling Volpi’s *El insomnio de Bolívar*: Does it make sense to speak of Latin American literature today?

Presumably, this collapse of literature’s autonomy would also entail the dissolu-

tion of the so-called “relative autonomy” of Casanova’s world literary space.⁴ Now, this dissolution is the scenario that has long defined artistic production within the centers of the global economy: a de-autonomization associated with what Jameson identified nearly three decades ago as postmodernism, or, the “cultural logic of late capitalism.” This may be why we cannot help but see in Alonso’s “novel without literature” shades of Jameson’s claim that “[t]he theory of postmodernity affirms a gradual de-differentiation [...] the economic itself gradually becoming cultural, all the while the cultural gradually becomes economic” (“Globalization” 449). From a certain perspective, then, the idea of a “novel without literature,” or of a postautonomous literature more generally, points to the enlargement of a dynamic to which Jameson’s concept of postmodernism refers: namely, capitalism’s ceaseless march across the globe into previously unincorporated enclaves of cultural production. This is this same de-differentiation between aesthetic and commodity production that, for Jameson, precipitated the rise of a situation within the first world in which “we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” (*Postmodernism* 21). What Alonso’s account suggests, therefore, is that the standpoint of the novel written by Latin Americans today is no different than that of the first world, and it is precisely this indistinctness that 2666 will often register in approximating the vanishing point of postmodernism’s own contemporaneity, a sense of the present no different than that of the commodity.⁵

401

In Bolaño’s novel, this sense of the present is embodied by the prostitute Vanessa, who, as the narrator explains, “never thought about the future [...] but only the present, the perpetual present” (84). That this description could just as easily apply to any number of characters in 2666 indicates the extent to which this perceived absence of any future or past underlies the novel as a whole. Thus, while driving through new housing developments in Santa Teresa, Marco Antonio Guerra insists, “People say these neighborhoods are the city’s future [...] but in my opinion this shithole has no future” (214). Meanwhile, Augusto Guerra believes literature “does have a future [...] and so does history,” but considering this comes from the disingenuous dean of the university’s Faculty of Literature, we have every reason to be skeptical. More importantly, it is this “perpetual present,” or conviction “that nothing would ever change” (638)—as Archimboldi’s father announces—that the novel evokes by way of the leitmotif of “boredom” in the epigraph taken from Baudelaire, “An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom.” This theme subsequently reemerges most notably in Lotte Reiter’s dream, in which she imagines seeing her brother, Archimboldi, walking across the desert she describes as “unfathomable *and* hostile,” but which the Archimboldi of her dream describes as “just boring, boring, boring” (879). One cannot help but think here of Francis Fukuyama’s notorious claim in 1989 that the “end of history” not only marked the conclusion of the cold war, but will also “be a very sad time.” “The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal,” he writes, “will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of

sophisticated consumer demands,” ushering in “centuries of boredom” (Fukuyama 18). Viewed from this perspective, the desert in Lotte’s dream begins to look like the landscape of neoliberalism’s vision of a world in which everything is a market; and indeed, in Latin America, the ascendancy of this vision was itself attended by the “collapse of real socialism and [...] the discrediting of utopias,” which Volpi believes marked the end of an earlier generation’s “Bolivarian aspirations,” replaced now by Fukuyama’s “economic calculation” and “satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands,” which Alonso in effect sees in the contemporary novel. And yet, what we see in 2666 is not the “postmodernization” of the novel; on the contrary, while Fukuyama also contends that “[i]n the posthistorical period there will be neither art nor philosophy,” Bolaño’s novel not only demonstrates the opposite—that art does, in fact, continue to exist—but also shows the degree to which the shift in Latin America’s cultural and historical situation that Volpi and Alonso outline marks not the triumph of capitalism, but its crisis.

402 To begin, it goes without saying that whether or not we believe that the work of art has always been a commodity like any other, what Alonso describes as the collapse of the “autonomy of the literary field” presupposes some prior moment when literature’s claim to autonomy was consistent enough to assume that a formalization of the literary field was possible; a moment, that is, when the question of differentiating between aesthetic production and commodity production was still on the table. But as Julio Ramos has shown, within the ambit of Latin America, autonomy has historically been much less a fact than a problem. Ramos explains that the “institutionalization of art and literature presupposed their separation from the public sphere, which in nineteenth-century Europe was already developing its own ‘organic’ intellectuals, along with its own administrative and discursive apparatuses” (xli-xlii). In Latin America, however, the “obstacles that confronted the institutionalization of literature paradoxically generated a literary field whose separation from the political sphere was incomplete and uneven” (xlii). Under these conditions, the impulse toward the autonomization of the literary sphere was immediately bound up with that desire for a modernization that was everywhere else denied, a desire to which, as we have already seen, Bolaño alerts us by claiming that “[u]nderdevelopment only allows for great works of literature.” In Alonso’s account, nonetheless, the contemporary novel written in Spanish by Latin Americans renders such unevenly developed flows of capital illegible, a view encapsulated in neoliberalism’s metaphor of the global market as the “tide that lifts all boats” or the “flatness” of its world.

For Bolaño, in contrast, the conviction that the problem of underdevelopment has been solved is treated as an error. This is most evident in the description of Santa Teresa offered by the character Chucho Flores in “The Part about Fate.” In Santa Teresa, Flores tells the African-American journalist Oscar Fate:

[w]e have everything. Factories, maquiladoras, one of the lowest unemployment rates in Mexico, a cocaine cartel, a constant flow of workers from other cities, Central American immigrants, an urban infrastructure that can’t support the level of demographic growth.

We have plenty of money and poverty, we have imagination and bureaucracy, we have violence and the desire to work in peace. There's just one thing we haven't got [...] Time [...] We haven't got any fucking time. (286)

Chucho suggests that Santa Teresa is out of time, in the sense of being in a place where time has ceased to progress and where the everyday rhythm of life itself has stalled to become part of what the novel calls the “perpetual present.” But Chucho also points to another sense in which Santa Teresa is out of time: for all its factories, maquiladoras, and urban infrastructure, none of these will lead to the development of Santa Teresa, Mexico, or the “developing world.” Fate himself acknowledges this when he thinks, “Time for what? [...] Time for this shithole, equal parts lost cemetery and garbage dump, to turn into a kind of Detroit?” (286). Thus, the illusion of the temporal simultaneity of the first world and third is ultimately revealed as the disappearance of time itself; the disappearance, in other words, of the sense of time long associated with the project of modernization, a project central to the Latin American nation-state throughout the twentieth century. What would have been seen, at some other moment in history, as a sign of the developing city’s march towards modernity here becomes nothing more than a source of frustration for a class of entrepreneurs, managers, and technocrats with nowhere to go. In the wake of this collapse of modernization, all that remains is a developmentalism without development, and if we can agree with the novel’s claim that the “secret of the world is hidden” (348) in Santa Teresa, it is because Bolaño’s fictional bordertown is one of the many black holes of global capitalism into which entire populations disappear—often in horrifyingly literal ways—and from which there is no escape, as the fate that befalls its female maquiladora workers and murder victims in “The Part about the Crimes” makes clear.

403

Indeed, their fate and the altered sense of time to which Chucho’s complaint attests find their origins in what Giovanni Arrighi has described as a “major reversal in the direction of global capital flows,” a reversal precipitated in the late 1970s and early 1980s by a crisis in the world-system. In Arrighi’s words, “the United States, which in the 1950s and 1960s had been the major source of world liquidity and of direct investment, in the 1980s became the world’s main debtor nation and by far the largest recipient of foreign capital” (21). This reversal subsequently resulted in “radical changes in the overall context of Third World development” (6), which culminated in the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s, as “the ‘flood’ of capital that Third World countries (and Latin American and African countries in particular) had experienced in the 1970s turned into the sudden ‘drought’ of the 1980s” (24). Following this drought, then, the illusions of developmentalism underwritten by “loan capital” offered on “highly favorable terms” (18) would eventually collapse under the weight of structural adjustment programs in line with IMF and World Bank prescriptions, which, shifting the burden of crisis onto the developing world, would radically alter, if not altogether eliminate, the conditions of possibility for economic modernization. As Arrighi makes clear, however, “while the new strategy did not deliver on its prom-

ises of development, it did [...] succeed in inducing Third World countries to adapt their economies to the new conditions of accumulation on a world scale” (23). No doubt NAFTA and the growth of maquiladora manufacturing along the US-Mexico border, which are central to 2666 and particularly to “The Part about the Crimes,” are themselves among the consequences of this crisis.

But insofar as the accommodation to these new conditions of accumulation rendered the developmentalist hope for success within that system—to say nothing of an alternative—impossible, it not only precipitated the dismantling of the political utopias that Volpi identifies with Latin America’s Bolivarian dream, but also serve, in *El insomnio de Bolívar*, as the origins of his claim that “Latin American literature no longer exists.” Volpi suggests as much when he notes that “for a Latin American, publishing with Spanish publishers [...] represents [...] the only way of escaping his or her national cages and of being read in other countries within the region,” and that the “cause of this phenomenon can be traced to the economic crisis of the 1970s, which
404 practically destroyed Latin America’s publishing industry.” For Volpi, the market is Spain, and Latin American writers are forced to adjust to the demands of the market if they wish to be read at all. From this perspective, the contemporary novel would appear to signal a further step in that “absorption within the mechanisms of consumer society” that Rama already saw in the Boom, a step, that is, toward the real subsumption of literature under capital. For all that, Bolaño’s novel nonetheless proposes that the consequences of this same crisis may ultimately provide the literary with an unexpected political valence in the form of an autonomy after autonomy.

Accordingly, where Alonso and Volpi only see something like the real subsumption of literature under capital, 2666 sees a disarticulation of autonomy and modernization, a process that is no less central to Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives*. While literature had been previously conceived as a means by which to achieve what, for example, Octavio Paz viewed as a compensatory modernity, this conviction vanished soon after a crisis within the world-system shattered any hope of successfully catching up with the first world. As we have seen, Bolaño maintains that literary genres such the novel had long been taken up in Latin America with an eye to addressing underdevelopment—via the production of so-called “great works”—though 2666 also makes it clear that once there is no modernity to get to, these same forms and genres can be appropriated and retooled for entirely new purposes. But this also means that the attention to formal concerns that Casanova considers constitutive of world literary space would no longer simply function as a source of symbolic wealth; and indeed, as Oswaldo Zavala observes, Bolaño’s fictions not only “subvert Casanova’s model” (652), but also cancel out the “anxiety of being contemporaries of all men, which, since Alfonso Reyes and Octavio Paz, has been the driving force of Latin American modernity, the elusive goal that incriminates, with its absence, the dysfunctional condition of the developing nation-state and its culture” (653). At the same time, and as the rise of Bolaño’s own stardom shows, this is not to say that commodities such as the bestseller will disappear; in fact, the future of the novel may be

one without literature. Nevertheless, as Nicholas Brown puts it in a related context, the “problem is that a world where the work of art is a commodity like any other is the world neoliberalism claims we already live in and have always lived in, a world where everything is (and if it isn’t, should be) a market” (Brown). And it is in this context that an attention to what Casanova calls the “irreducible singularity of literary texts” and what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as the “logic of the work” is transformed into a possible means of distinguishing—however minimally—artworks from commodities, a means, that is, by which the literary text can insist on its irreducibility to market-driven calculation.

Perhaps the political meaning of this commitment to literary autonomy is nowhere more apparent than in “The Part about the Crimes,” and particularly in its numerous descriptions of murdered women, whose presence in the novel is reminiscent of the mutilated and mummified hand that hangs in the center of Edwin Johns’s painting:

The body was found half buried some fifty yards from the road that crossed El Rosario and intersected a dirt track that ran from the eastern end of the Podestá ravine. It was discovered by a local ranch hand who was passing by on horseback. According to the medical examiners, the cause of death was strangulation, with a fracture of the hyoid bone. Despite the body’s state of decomposition, signs of battery with a blunt object were still evident about the heads, hands, and legs. The victim had probably also been raped. As indicated by the fauna found on the body, the date of death was approximately the first or second week of February. There was nothing to identify the victim, although her particulars matched those of Guadalupe Guzmán Prieto, eleven years old, disappeared the evening of February 8, in Colonia San Bartolomé. (545)

405

As Jean Franco observes, Bolaño here “parodies the language of police reports, whose pedestrian prose aspires to be ‘scientific’ but in fact forces the reader to imagine what the dry prose tries to cover” (240). But this also raises the question, to what end? For Franco, 2666 as a whole delivers a “devastating judgment of the ‘desert of boredom’ that needs an ‘oasis of horror’ in which pleasure and cruelty are inseparable” (245). And yet, there is an equally important sense in which this prose not only denies the reader such “pleasure,” but also marks the novel’s indifference to the reader’s experience altogether.

It is as if, for Bolaño, any attempt to manipulate what the reader feels reproduces the shortcomings that Adorno had long ago attributed to Sartre’s literary theory, namely that the point of Sartre’s “committed art” is “to work at the level of fundamental attitudes,” that is, “to awaken the free choice of the agent [...] as opposed to the neutrality of the spectator,” by way of which the “work of art becomes an appeal to subjects” that obscures the very reality in which the reader’s choice is supposed to intervene.⁶ Hence, Adorno’s claim that “[i]t is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads” (78). This is the politics of autonomous art, one that becomes plausible only after the foundering of national development projects, and insofar as Bolaño’s “dry prose” (Franco 240) marks a distance from committed works, it also

reveals that what 2666 wants readers to see in the descriptions of the Santa Teresa victims is something like a work of art.

But, Adorno also understood this “appeal to subjects” as incapable of keeping the work of art from “decaying into cultural commodities” (75); even when directed at more radical ends. For this reason, in stressing the contemporary novel’s “availability to market-driven circulation,” critics such as Alonso not only blur the distinction between novel and commodity, but must also read any given work as an appeal to consumers, even when this appeal is made on behalf of a politics. And if there is no reason to think that a Hollywood blockbuster, a saw, or even a hammer would not do just as well in a pinch, this is because, from the point of view of both committed art and the commodity, what the work says about itself is less important than what it might say to and about the reader or consumer. In this way, literary questions are immediately bound up with questions about who we are and what we feel. As a critic such as Franco suggests when she claims that “Bolaño recognizes that the killing
406 of women is one aspect of an entire culture” (239), the “misogyny that underwrites it” (241), and that for this reason the “accumulation of descriptions” (238) aims to work at the level of such “fundamental attitudes.” Yet, in refusing any appeal as such, Bolaño’s “dry prose” transforms this accumulation into the mark of its interest in the literary problem of representation, the question of how the artwork might frame this horror, to signal that 2666 instead works at the level of form, something that points to the possibility of seeing the novel as something other than a commodity.⁷

In 2666, then, what Adorno might have understood as an “appeal to subjects” is bad not only for art, but also for politics. That is, in marking this indifference to the reader’s or consumer’s experience, Bolaño’s portrayal of the murdered women not only aims to preserve the distinction between novel and commodity, but also reserves the possibility of seeing the structure that gives rise to the femicides in the first place, an economic structure that functions independently of our attitude toward its victims. What 2666 elicits, in this sense, is comprehension, not emotion, cognition, not affect; and while it cannot quite tell us how each of these women come to meet such horrific ends in the black holes of contemporary capitalism, it does suggest that the novel, and the work of art more generally, can tell us what our relationship to those victims cannot be. And it is by way of this politics of autonomous art that we might yet come to understand that the “secret of the world is hidden” in Santa Teresa. Which is not to say that the best Santa Teresa and its victims can hope for is “to turn into a kind of Detroit,” but that, under a global economic system steeped in crisis, the future of cities such as New York, London, Paris, and Beijing is Santa Teresa.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to Nicole Aschoff, Sarah Brouillette, Stephen Buttes, and Eugenio Di Stefano for their comments on the drafts of this article. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

2. As Mariano Siskind shows, this is particularly true in the case of the novel: "Because of the kind of experiences that the novel afforded to the readers of the colonial and semi-colonial peripheries, Latin American intellectuals immediately realized the important role that the consumption, production, and translation of novels could play in the process of socio-cultural modernization" (339).
3. For a discussion of Ludmer's conception of "postautonomous literature," see Di Stefano and Sauri.
4. Casanova's conception of world literary space draws on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the "field of restricted production," whose autonomy "can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products" (115). This is the sphere in which symbolic goods are manufactured for those producers who establish the criteria of aesthetic value, "internal demarcations [that] appear irreducible to any external factors of economic, political or social differentiation," including literary categories and criteria.
5. Jameson understood his essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" not only as a "theory of the cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature," but also as a "pendant to the essay on postmodernism which describes the logic of the cultural imperialism of the first world and above all of the United States" ("Third-World" 87-88, n. 26). This might begin to explain Alonso's skepticism toward any application of Jameson's model to the "non-Western novel in the age of globalization," and it may also begin to explain the distinction Volpi draws between an earlier generation of writers and his own. And this distinction becomes all the clearer if we recall Roberto Fernández Retamar's 1971 response to a similar question—"Does a Latin-American culture exist?" (3)—in "Caliban," an essay that belongs to the era of third-world nationalism described by Jameson's 1986 essay.
6. Considering the connections 2666 draws between the femicides in its fictional Ciudad Juárez and the Holocaust, it is perhaps not surprising that Adorno's claim that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" even as "literature must resist this verdict" (84) resonates with Bolaño's concerns here.
7. For an account that takes up the question of autonomy in Bolaño's *Distant Star*, see Di Stefano.

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