Social Imaginary and Narrative Form under Global Post-Socialism: Dubravka Ugrešić, Cormac McCarthy, Roberto Bolaño

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Hrvoje Tutek
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Referent: Prof. Dr. Robert Stockhammer (LMU)

Korreferent: Prof. Dr. Suman Gupta (The Open University, UK)

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SUMMARY

The dissertation consists of an introductory theoretical part followed by close readings of novels by authors Dubravka Ugrešić, Cormac McCarthy, and Roberto Bolaño. The theoretical part tries to develop a new conceptual framework for the analysis of recent narrative texts of world literature and provides a speculative "poetics of post-socialism."

Two main points are argued in the theoretical part: firstly, that the meaning of the term "post-socialism" should be expanded from its standard ethnographic use, in which the term denotes changes which occurred locally in the societies formerly belonging to the so-called "Eastern bloc." Instead, it should be used to denote a global condition. This is argued on the basis of criticism of "transitology" as developed by Boris Buden and Katherine Verdery, and more extensively, on the basis of world-systems theory as developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (and recently integrated into literary historiography by authors such as Franco Moretti or the Warwick Research Collective).

Secondly, the dissertation tries to develop a theory of narrative form, or more precisely, a prescriptive poetics of narration, for the age of post-socialism. This is done on the basis of Fredric Jameson's theorization of Utopia and Cornelius Castoriadis conceptions of the "imaginary" and "imaginary institution of society." The purpose of such a poetics is to produce a theoretical apparatus capable of distinguishing between narrative texts whose narrative form is wholly subsumed under the dominant social imaginaries of post-socialism and those texts that use narrative form as an instrument of testing the boundaries of those imaginaries, as a terrain of creative speculation about socio-historical possibility.

The analysis begins with a discussion of the history of the term "post-socialism" as deployed by discourse of "transitology." The discussion is based on a simple proposition: if, as world-systems theory argues, there is a global systemic framework regulating the logic of global production and exchange into which both Cold War blocs were integrated, then the dissolution of

really existing socialism constitutes a historical event the effects of which must have also culturally registered in core capitalist countries on a constitutive, structural level. Most of the studies focusing on post-socialist culture, however, retain an ethnographic, local focus. In opposition to that, we approach the problem of post-socialist culture, or more precisely, post-socialist narrative form, from a global perspective and try to read texts both from the formerly socialist and non-socialist (semi)periphery (Dubravka Ugrešić, Roberto Bolaño) and those from the core (Cormac McCarthy) as post-socialist texts.

The theoretical/poetical part that sets up the conceptual apparatus for the later textual analysis begins with a parallel reading of two very different theorists of post-socialism: Francis Fukuyama and Mark Fisher. We use their books, *End of History and the Last Man* (1989/1992) and *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), as orientation points or markers of periodization for the period in the history of world literature we are examining. The purpose of such a parallel reading is to establish analogies and points of convergence between the thinking of these two authors, whose theoretical and political positions are otherwise vastly different. The purpose of establishing these, in turn, is to demonstrate that often both revolutionary critiques and reformist defenses of late capitalism depend on signifiers drawn from the same social imaginary constituting the social world of late capitalism. Presuming that there are indeed such global frameworks of reference regulating the production of meaning in history, that there is indeed a social imaginary of capitalist universality, we discuss the logic of discursive procedures for its critical transformation.

The dissertation then moves on to the discussion of the history of the concept of the "imaginary." We rely on Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology and elaborate the opposition to and criticism of Jacques Lacan's conception of the imaginary as developed by Cornelius Castoriadis. We argue that Castoriadis' conception is useful for the theoretical-poetical purposes of this study

because it allows for the production of what we call "semantic excess", or new meaning in history, uncontained by what Lacan calls the symbolic. The discussion then moves on to the concept of the "social imaginary" and critically examines the uses of the concept by Manfred Steger (with Paul James) and Charles Taylor, while attempting to integrate some of their insights, most importantly those about the social imaginary functioning as a "collective representation" regulating social practices and the production of representations.

From there, the discussion turns back to Castoriadis, arguing that his concept of the imaginary and politics of "autonomy" can be productively related to Fredric Jameson's concept of Utopia as historically defamiliarizing "creative speculation." A comparison of Castoriadis and Jameson's concepts is developed through a parallel reading of their texts. We conclude that fundamental theoretical (and politically emancipatory) propositions of both authors are conceived in terms of the imaginary: as the problem of "invention" or "establishment" of new relations of the subject to the collective and of the subject to itself. The emergence of both Jameson's "Utopian subject" and Castoriadis' "autonomous subject" is predicated on a transformative, emancipatory resolution of the oppressive tension between the individual and the collective, characteristic of bourgeois societies. We point out that the reconstitution of the subject reliant on a proleptic speculative leap that is central for both Jameson's Utopian thinking and Castoriadis' project of autonomy, depends among other things on the activation of the productive capacities of the imaginary and the production of new social imaginary significations. These new social imaginary significations, when discursively formalized and integrated into cultural forms and forms of socio-political practice, have a chance of registering as concrete socio-historical effects.

Finally, on the basis of the above insights, we try to develop a sketch of a narrative poetics historically grounded in the socio-cultural context of the post-socialist period. We call it the "poetics of Utopian objects" and rely on Paul Ricoeur's proposition that poetics is "the conversion

of the imaginary." The main theoretical propositions of such a poetics are the following: as per Castoriadis, society is socially instituted in a state of "closure." The limits of that closure are delineated by the semantic fields of social imaginary significations (the effect of which is social institution, or in other words, they are materialized as institutions). Castoriadis calls these social imaginary significations "invisible objects." However, at the same time, the imaginary is capable of producing projective semantic excess, new social imaginary significations that reveal the limits of and point beyond the socially instituted closure. We call these "Utopian objects." This semantic excess can acquire representational form, i.e. be written into cultural forms (or more narrowly and more importantly for the purposes of this study – narrative forms). We connect these insights with Jameson's theorization of the discursive function of Utopia. That function is a defamiliarizing one, in the sense of Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization." The purpose of Utopian defamiliarization, however, is not simply to revitalize routinized, automated perception in the individual as in Shklovsky, but to defamiliarize the social imaginary, to make historical possibility appear for the collective. Therefore, the primary concern of "poetics of Utopian objects" should be the production of representational forms into which Utopian objects can be placed to become socially perceivable.

We move on to address how this technically occurs on the level of narrative form. We argue that the instituting social imaginary is by necessity inscribed into narrative texts on the level of narrative functions, or more precisely on the level of what Roland Barthes called *indices*. Indices are integrative narrative units relating dispersed semantic elements responsible for the "atmosphere", "setting", etc. of texts. In order to narratively build intelligible representations of social worlds, elements of existing social imaginaries have to be formalized into narrative indices and integrated into the narrative. It follows from the logic of our "poetics of Utopian objects", then, that the creative labor of the text, its poetic capacity, consists of inventing possibilities for

placement and contextualization of Utopian objects in relation to the established social imaginary, or their integration into what we call the narrative's "operative social totality" (the principle regulating the arrangement of social relations and dynamics of collective life represented in the narrative text).

Relying on the above theoretical basis, the dissertation continues onto chapters that consist of close readings and comparisons of a series of post-socialist novels. We start with Dubravka Ugrešić, the urbane Yugoslav/Croatian author most commonly read as exemplary of what David Williams calls "Trümmerliteratur Redux" or "literature of the post-1989 East European ruins." We analyze how the caesura in her writing career, which inaugurated her "post-socialist neo-dissidence" and consequent re-positioning in the globalized literary field, is reflected by the dynamics of form in her narrative fiction. We also try to relate this formal dynamics to the institutional and ideological pressures of the literary field she operates in and the broader capitalist world-system this field is integrated into. We try to show that examining her fiction from the late 1980s, from her celebrated late socialist metafictional novel *Forsiranje romana reke/Fording the Stream of Consciousness* to her novels/fictions of the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje*/*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *Ministarstvo boli*/*The Ministry of Pain*, reveals a trajectory of gradual abandonment or disavowal of historical possibility as a narrative problem, essentially a privatistic acceptance of social imaginary significations and narrative possibilities characteristic of the chronotopes aligned with the "End of History". This narrative-formal transformation mirrors, straightforwardly, the *Denkverbot* characteristic of the socio-cultural formation that Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism."

The discussion then moves on to Cormac McCarthy, a globally renowned writer with an explicit local focus on the US Southern and Southwestern hinterlands and border spaces. We trace the trajectory of the narrative-formal transformations in his novels in close comparison to that of

Dubravka Ugrešić. The detached, satirical, bookish, urbane post-socialist intellectualism of Ugrešić cannot be further apart from the prophetically exalted, allegorical, rural, anti-intellectual intellectualism of McCarthy. However, it is possible to detect upon closer inspection an equivalent post-socialist caesura dividing both their novelistic opuses. We consequently read the transition from the allegorical structure in McCarthy's revisionist Western *Blood Meridian, Or, The Evening Redness in the West*, to the Western romance structure of *The Border Trilogy* and nostalgic metacommentary of *No Country for Old Men* as exhibiting a comparable, if not identical, logic of abandonment of historical possibility as a narrative-representational problem. In Ugrešić, this literary post-socialist transition formally registers as a passage from political allegory and metafictionality to "middlebrow" exploration of ethnic identity politics. In McCarthy, the transition is from Gnostic allegory of capitalist modernity to the sentimental nostalgia of the Western romance. We also add to that trajectory of narrative-formal transformation his post-apocalyptic messianic narrative, *The Road*, which we read as a (failed) attempt to insert Utopian imaginary significations into the desolate spaces of the post-socialist imaginary. The homologous trajectories of these two literary "transitions", an Eastern and a Western one, we interpret as further proof for the thesis that the dynamics of the world-system needs to be observed as a literary-historical determinant, and that the "real existence" of the socialist bloc, despite its historical failures and fragility, also kept open, globally, the horizon of historical possibility that enabled narrative mediation of and creative speculation about alternative models of historical development which is suppressed under the contemporary world-systemic configuration and dominant social imaginaries.

In the end, we turn to the analysis of narrative texts by another globally-renowned novelist and a publishing phenomenon comparable to the former two, Roberto Bolaño. We read his novels/fictions, from *Los detectives salvajes/Savage Detectives*, to *Amuleto/Amulet and La literatura nazi en América/Nazi Literature in the Americas*, but also his essays and poetry, as

counter-examples to the tendencies of post-socialist mimetic passivity and historical pessimism we identified above. His texts appear, in our reading, as exemplary of a post-socialist Utopian poetics that strives to re-establish Utopia/historical possibility as a literary, narrative problem. We focus on the analysis of what we see as the dialectical movement of Bolaño's literary discourse and try to analyze the narrative devices and discursive techniques that make this movement possible. From what we call "trans-narrative integration", to "metafictional hyperbole" and dialectics of narrative form in Bolaño, we read these literary-formal arrangements not only as devices configured for testing the limitations of post-socialist social imaginaries and representing historical possibility in the age of "eternal present", but as attempts to articulate a materialist conception of literature that stands in an immanent relation to history. The thematic focus of Bolaño's texts is on the dynamics of the broader literary field, and is in that regard comparable to Ugrešić's work, most notably *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. The numerous characters of poets, writers, humanities professors, marginal intellectuals, Nazi enthusiasts and sinister presences milling about Bolaño's fiction could be read as an elaborate joke, a satirical take on the marginality of *word* in the era of *image*. This obsessive focus on the literary also seems to invite reading them as functions in the service of self-referential formalism, a kind of literary disavowal of historicity. But if we go beyond these superficial readings, emphasize that Bolaño's discursive devices are in the service of his literary dialectics, and notice how formally consistent their use is across his opus, that opus begins to appear less as a satire referring mimetically to some existing state of affairs, and more as an attempt to rearticulate a place for the Utopian in narrative form, a comical attempt at that, avoiding the pathos and delusions of earlier modernist attempts to articulate it. In this sense, the megalomaniac expectations and nervous, *picaresque* meanderings of Bolaño's characters through neoliberal/neofeudal hinterlands as they chase their literary windmills is necessarily read as a reference to Cervantes, which is simultaneously a reference to the beginnings of modernity itself.

The logic of this literary reference is one of double negation – ironization of the original modern irony. As such, it cancels out the ironic register in Bolaño and points to the possibility of a contemporary Utopianism beyond irony, or in other words, to an attempt to resurrect history at the End of History.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Dissertation besteht aus einem einführenden theoretischen Teil, dem eine ›Close Reading‹ Lektüre der Romane von Dubravka Ugrešić, Cormac McCarthy und Roberto Bolaño folgt. Im theoretischen Teil wird versucht, einen neuen konzeptionellen Rahmen für die Analyse neuerer narrativer Texte der Weltliteratur zu entwickeln und eine spekulative „Poetik des Post-Sozialismus“ zu entwerfen.

Im theoretischen Teil werden zwei Hauptargumente vorgebracht: Erstens, dass die Bedeutung des Begriffs „Postsozialismus“ von seinem ethnographischen Standardgebrauch, in dem der Begriff Veränderungen bezeichnet, die lokal in den Gesellschaften, die früher zum so genannten „Ostblock“ gehörten, stattgefunden haben, erweitert werden sollte. Stattdessen sollte er zur Bezeichnung eines globalen Zustands verwendet werden. Diese Argumentation stützt sich auf die Kritik an der „Transitologie“, wie sie von Boris Buden und Katherine Verdery entwickelt wurde, und darüber hinaus auf die Weltsystemtheorie, wie bei Immanuel Wallerstein (die in letzter Zeit von Autoren wie Franco Moretti oder dem Warwick Research Collective in die Literaturgeschichtsschreibung integriert wurde).

Zweitens versucht die Dissertation eine Theorie der Erzählform, genauer gesagt eine präskriptive Poetik des Erzählens, für das Zeitalter des Post-Sozialismus zu entwickeln. Dies geschieht auf der Grundlage von Fredric Jamesons Theoretisierung der Utopie und Cornelius Castoriadis Konzeptionen des „Imaginären“ und der „imaginären Institution der Gesellschaft“. Ziel einer solchen Poetik ist es, einen theoretischen Apparat zu schaffen, mithilfe dessen es möglich wäre, zwischen erzählenden Texten, deren narrative Form vollständig unter die dominanten sozialen Imaginarien des Post-Sozialismus subsumiert wird, und solchen Texten, die die narrative

Form als Instrument nutzen, zu unterscheiden, um die Grenzen dieser Imaginarien als Terrain für kreative Spekulationen über sozio-historische Möglichkeiten zu prüfen.

Die Analyse beginnt mit einer Historisierung des Begriffs „Post-Sozialismus", wie er im Diskurs der „Transitologie" verwendet wird. Die Diskussion basiert auf einer einfachen These: Wenn es, wie in der Weltsystemtheorie argumentiert wird, einen globalen systemischen Rahmen gibt, von dem die Logik der globalen Produktion und des Austauschs geregelt wird, und in den beide Blöcke des Kalten Krieges integriert waren, dann stellt die Auflösung des real existierenden Sozialismus ein historisches Ereignis dar, dessen Auswirkungen sich auch in den kapitalistischen Kernländern auf einer konstitutiven, strukturellen Ebene kulturell niedergeschlagen haben müssen. Die meisten Studien, die sich mit der postsozialistischen Kultur beschäftigen, behalten jedoch einen ethnographischen, lokalen Fokus bei. Im Gegensatz dazu nähert sich diese Dissertation dem Problem der postsozialistischen Kultur, genauer gesagt der postsozialistischen Erzählform, aus einer globalen Perspektive, wobei versucht wird, sowohl Texte aus der ehemals sozialistischen und nichtsozialistischen (Halb-)Peripherie (Dubravka Ugrešić, Roberto Bolaño) als auch solche aus dem Kern (Cormac McCarthy) als postsozialistische Texte zu lesen.

Der theoretisch-poetische Teil, der den begrifflichen Apparat für die spätere Textanalyse bildet, beginnt mit einer parallelen Lektüre von zwei sehr unterschiedlichen Theoretikern des Post-Sozialismus: Francis Fukuyama und Mark Fisher. Ihre Bücher, *End of History and the Last Man* (1989/1992) und *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009) wurden als Orientierungspunkte oder Periodisierungsmarkierungen für den untersuchten Zeitraum in der Geschichte der Weltliteratur ausgewählt. Der Zweck einer solchen parallelen Lektüre besteht darin, Analogien und Konvergenzpunkte zwischen dem Denken dieser in ihren theoretischen und politischen Positionen sehr unterschiedlichen Autoren zu finden. Damit soll wiederum gezeigt werden, dass sowohl die revolutionäre Kritik als auch die reformistische Verteidigung des

Spätkapitalismus häufig auf Signifikanten beruhen, die aus demselben sozialen Imaginären, das die soziale Welt des Spätkapitalismus konstituiert, stammen. Unter der Annahme, dass es tatsächlich solche globalen Bezugsrahmen gibt, welche die Bedeutungsproduktion in der Geschichte regeln, bzw. dass es tatsächlich ein soziales Imaginäres der kapitalistischen Universalität gibt, wird die Logik der diskursiven Verfahren für seine kritische Transformation erörtert.

Im Anschluss daran wird der Begriff des „Imaginären" historisiert. Dabei stützt sich die Dissertation auf die literarische Anthropologie von Wolfgang Iser und arbeitet die Opposition und Kritik an Jacques Lacans Konzeption des Imaginären heraus, wie sie von Cornelius Castoriadis entwickelt wurde. In der Dissertation wird argumentiert, dass Castoriadis' Konzept für die theoretisch-poetischen Zwecke dieser Studie nützlich ist, weil es die Produktion dessen ermöglicht, was als „semantischer Exzess" oder neue Bedeutung in der Geschichte bezeichnet wird; eine Bedeutung, die nicht durch das, was Lacan das Symbolische nennt, begrenzt ist. Die Diskussion geht dann zum Konzept des „sozialen Imaginären" über und untersucht kritisch die Verwendung des Konzepts durch Manfred Steger (mit Paul James) und Charles Taylor, wobei versucht wird, einige ihrer Einsichten zu integrieren, vor allem jene über die Funktion des sozialen Imaginären als „kollektiven Repräsentation", welche soziale Praktiken und die Produktion von Repräsentationen regelt.

Von dort aus wendet sich die Diskussion wieder Castoriadis zu und es wird argumentiert, dass sein Konzept des Imaginären und der Politik der „Autonomie" produktiv auf Fredric Jamesons Konzept der Utopie als historisch verfremdende „kreative Spekulation" bezogen werden kann. Ein Vergleich der Konzepte von Castoriadis und Jameson kommt durch eine parallele Lektüre ihrer Texte zustande. Daraus ergibt sich die Schlussfolgerung, dass die grundlegenden theoretischen (und politisch emanzipatorischen) Thesen beider Autoren in Begriffen des Imaginären konzipiert

sind: als Problem der „Erfindung“ oder „Herstellung“ neuer Beziehungen des Subjekts zum Kollektiv und des Subjekts zu sich selbst. Die Entstehung sowohl des „utopischen Subjekts“ von Jameson als auch des „autonomen Subjekts“ von Castoriadis beruht auf einer transformativen, emanzipatorischen Lösung der unterdrückerischen, für die bürgerlichen Gesellschaften charakteristischen Spannung zwischen dem Individuum und dem Kollektiv. Es wird darauf hingewiesen, dass die auf einem proleptischen spekulativen Sprung beruhende Rekonstitution des Subjekts, die sowohl für Jamesons utopisches Denken als auch für Castoriadis’ Projekt der Autonomie von zentraler Bedeutung ist, unter anderem von der Aktivierung der produktiven Kapazitäten des Imaginären und der Produktion neuer sozialer imaginärer Bedeutungen abhängt. Diese neuen sozialen imaginären Bedeutungen haben, wenn sie diskursiv formalisiert und in kulturelle Formen und Formen der sozio-politischen Praxis integriert werden, die Chance, sich als konkrete sozio-historische Effekte zu manifestieren.

Auf der Grundlage der obenerwähnten Erkenntnisse wird schließlich versucht, eine Skizze einer narrativen Poetik zu entwickeln, die historisch im soziokulturellen Kontext der postsozialistischen Periode verankert ist. Sie wird die „Poetik der utopischen Objekte“ genannt und stützt sich dabei auf Paul Ricoeurs These, dass Poetik „die Umwandlung des Imaginären“ ist. Die wichtigsten theoretischen Thesen einer solchen Poetik sind die folgenden: Nach Castoriadis ist die Gesellschaft sozial in einem Zustand der „Schließung“ eingerichtet. Die Grenzen dieser Geschlossenheit werden durch die semantischen Felder der sozialen imaginären Bedeutungen abgesteckt (deren Effekt die soziale Institution ist, oder anders gesagt, sie werden als Institutionen materialisiert). Castoriadis nennt diese sozialen imaginären Signifikate „unsichtbare Objekte“. Gleichzeitig ist das Imaginäre jedoch in der Lage, einen gewissen projektiven semantischen Überschuss zu produzieren, neue soziale imaginäre Bedeutungen, die die Grenzen der gesellschaftlich instituierten Schließung aufzeigen und darüber hinausweisen. Diese werden

„utopische Objekte“ genannt. Dieser semantische Exzess kann eine repräsentative Form annehmen, d.h. in kulturelle Formen (oder enger gefasst und für die Zwecke dieser Studie wichtiger – in narrative Formen) eingeschrieben werden. Diese Einsichten werden mit Jamesons Theorie der diskursiven Funktion der Utopie in Verbindung gebracht. Diese Funktion ist eine verfremdende, im Sinne von Viktor Schklowskis Konzept der „Verfremdung“. Der Zweck der utopischen Verfremdung besteht jedoch nicht einfach darin, die routinierte, automatisierte Wahrnehmung im Individuum wiederzubeleben, wie bei Schklowski, sondern das soziale Imaginäre zu verfremden, die historische Möglichkeit für das Kollektiv erscheinen zu lassen. Das Hauptanliegen der „Poetik der utopischen Objekte“ sollte daher die Herstellung von Darstellungsformen sein, in die utopische Objekte eingeordnet werden können, um gesellschaftlich wahrnehmbar zu werden.

Daraufhin wird erörtert, wie dies technisch auf der Ebene der Erzählform geschieht. Es wird das Argument vorgebracht, dass das instituierende soziale Imaginäre notwendigerweise in erzählende Texte auf der Ebene der narrativen Funktionen eingeschrieben ist, oder genauer gesagt auf der Ebene dessen, was Roland Barthes als Indizien bezeichnete. Indizien sind integrative narrative Einheiten, die verstreute semantische Elemente miteinander verbinden, die für die „Atmosphäre“, das „Setting“ usw. von Texten verantwortlich sind. Um erzählerisch verständliche Repräsentationen sozialer Welten aufzubauen, müssen Elemente bestehender sozialer Imaginarien zu narrativen Indizien formalisiert und in die Erzählung integriert werden. Aus der Logik der „Poetik der utopischen Objekte“ folgt also, dass die schöpferische Arbeit des Textes, seine poetische Kapazität, darin besteht, Möglichkeiten für die Platzierung und Kontextualisierung der utopischen Objekte in Bezug auf das etablierte soziale Imaginäre zu erfinden, oder ihre Integration in das, was die „operative soziale Totalität“ der Erzählung genannt wird (das Prinzip, das die Anordnung der sozialen Beziehungen und die Dynamik des kollektiven Lebens regelt, die im Erzähltext dargestellt werden).

Ausgehend von dieser theoretischen Grundlage werden in den weiteren Kapiteln der Dissertation eine Reihe von postsozialistischen Romanen genau gelesen und verglichen. Die Analyse beginnt mit Dubravka Ugrešić, der urbanen jugoslawischen/kroatischen Autorin, die am häufigsten als Beispiel für das gelesen wird, was David Williams „*Trümmerliteratur Redux*“ oder „Literatur der osteuropäischen Ruinen nach 1989“ nennt. Die Analyse zeigt, wie sich die Zäsur in Ugrešićs schriftstellerischer Laufbahn, die ihre „post-sozialistische Neo-Dissidenz“ und ihre konsequente Neupositionierung im globalisierten literarischen Feld einleitete, in der Formdynamik ihrer erzählenden Fiktion widerspiegelt. Es wird auch versucht, diese formale Dynamik mit den institutionellen und ideologischen Zwängen des literarischen Feldes, in dem sie sich bewegt, und dem breiteren kapitalistischen Weltsystem, in das dieses Feld integriert ist, in Beziehung zu setzen. Es wird der Versuch gewagt, zu zeigen, dass die Untersuchung ihrer Fiktion aus den späten 1980er Jahren, von ihrem gefeierten spätsozialistischen metafiktionalen Roman *Forsiranje romana reke*/*Fording the Stream of Consciousness* bis zu ihren Romanen/Fiktionen der 1990er und 2000er Jahre, wie *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje*/*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* und *Ministarstvo boli*/*The Ministry of Pain*/*Das Ministerium der Schmerzen*, zeigt eine Entwicklung der allmählichen Aufgabe oder Verleugnung der historischen Möglichkeit als narratives Problem, im Wesentlichen eine privatistische Akzeptanz der sozialen imaginären Bedeutungen und narrativen Möglichkeiten, die für die auf das „Ende der Geschichte“ ausgerichteten Chronotopen charakteristisch sind. Diese narrativ-formale Transformation spiegelt ziemlich genau das *Denkverbot* wider, das für die soziokulturelle Formation charakteristisch ist, die Mark Fisher als „kapitalistischen Realismus“ bezeichnet hat.

In einem nächsten Schritt widmet sich die Diskussion Cormac McCarthy, einem weltweit bekannten Schriftsteller mit einem expliziten lokalen Fokus auf das südliche und südwestliche Hinterland und die Grenzräume der USA. Es wird die Entwicklung der narrativ-formalen

Transformationen in seinen Romanen im engen Vergleich zu denen von Dubravka Ugrešić verfolgt. Der distanzierte, satirische, buchhafte, urbane postsozialistische Intellektualismus von Ugrešić könnte nicht weiter von dem prophetisch überhöhten, allegorischen, ländlichen, anti-intellektuellen Intellektualismus von McCarthy entfernt sein. Bei genauerem Hinsehen lässt sich jedoch eine gleichwertige postsozialistische Zäsur zwischen den beiden Romanwerken ausmachen. Der Übergang von der allegorischen Struktur in McCarthys revisionistischem Western *Blood Meridian*, *Or, The Evening Redness in the West* zur Struktur des Westernromans *The Border Trilogy* und dem nostalgischen Metakommentar von *No Country for Old Men* zeigt eine vergleichbare, wenn auch nicht identische Logik des Verzichts auf die historische Möglichkeit als erzählerisch-repräsentatives Problem. Bei Ugrešić wird dieser literarische postsozialistische Übergang formal als Übergang von der politischen Allegorie und Metafiktionalität zur „bürgerlichen" Erkundung ethnischer Identitätspolitik registriert. Bei McCarthy erfolgt der Übergang von der gnostischen Allegorie der kapitalistischen Moderne zur sentimentalen Nostalgie der westlichen Romantik. Diesem Weg der narrativ-formalen Transformation wird auch seine postapokalyptische messianische Erzählung *The Road* hinzugefügt, die als ein (gescheiterter) Versuch gelesen wird, utopische imaginäre Bedeutungen in die desolaten Räume des postsozialistischen Imaginären einzufügen. Die homologen Verläufe dieser beiden literarischen „Übergänge", eines östlichen und eines westlichen, werden als weiterer Beweis für die These interpretiert, dass die Dynamik des Weltsystems als literaturgeschichtliche Determinante beobachtet werden muss, und dass die „reale Existenz" des sozialistischen Blocks trotz seines historischen Scheiterns und seiner Fragilität auch global den Horizont historischer Möglichkeiten offen hielt, der die narrative Vermittlung und kreative Spekulation über alternative Modelle historischer Entwicklung ermöglichte, die unter der gegenwärtigen weltsystemischen Konfiguration und den vorherrschenden sozialen Imaginationen unterdrückt wird.

Schließlich widmet sich die Dissertation der Analyse von Erzähltexten eines weiteren weltweit bekannten Schriftstellers und mit den beiden erstgenannten Autoren vergleichbaren Verlagsphänomens zu, nämlich Roberto Bolaño. Seine Romane/Fiktionen, von *Los detectives salvajes*/*Savage Detectives*/*Die wilden Detektive* bis hin zu *Amuleto*/*Amulet* und *La literatura nazi en América*/*Nazi Literature in the Americas*, aber auch seine Essays und Gedichte werden als Gegenbeispiele zu den oben beschriebenen Tendenzen der mimetischen Passivität und des Geschichtspessimismus im Postsozialismus gelesen. Seine Texte erweisen sich als exemplarisch für eine postsozialistische utopische Poetik, die danach strebt, die Utopie/historische Möglichkeit als literarisches, narratives Problem wiederherzustellen. Die Analyse konzentriert sich auf die Analyse dessen, was als die dialektische Bewegung des literarischen Diskurses von Bolaño angesehen wird, und versucht, die narrativen Mittel und diskursiven Techniken, die diese Bewegung ermöglichen, zu durchleuchten. Von dem, was „transnarrative Integration" genannt wird, bis hin zur „metafiktionalen Hyperbel" und der Dialektik der Erzählform bei Bolaño, lesen wir diese literarisch-formalen Arrangements nicht nur als Mittel, die Grenzen postsozialistischer sozialer Imaginationen zu testen und historische Möglichkeiten im Zeitalter der „ewigen Gegenwart" darzustellen, sondern auch als Versuche, eine materialistische Konzeption von Literatur zu artikulieren, die in einer immanenten Beziehung zur Geschichte steht. Der thematische Schwerpunkt Bolaños narrativer Hyperbel liegt auf der Dynamik des breiteren literarischen Feldes und ist in dieser Hinsicht mit Ugrešićs Werk vergleichbar, vielleicht am ehesten mit *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. Die zahlreichen Figuren von Dichtern, Schriftstellern, Professoren der Geisteswissenschaften, Randintellektuellen, Nazi-Anhängern und finsteren Gestalten, die sich in Bolaños Fiktion tummeln, könnten als ein ausgeklügelter Witz gelesen werden, eine satirische Auseinandersetzung mit der Marginalität des *Wortes* im Zeitalter des *Bildes*. Diese obsessive Konzentration auf das Literarische scheint auch dazu einzuladen, sie als Funktionen im Dienste

eines selbstreferentiellen Formalismus zu lesen, als eine Art literarischer Verleugnung der Historizität. Wenn wir jedoch über diese oberflächlichen Lesarten hinausgehen, und betonen, dass Bolaños diskursive Mittel im Dienste seiner literarischen Dialektik stehen, sowie bemerken, wie konsequent ihre Verwendung in seinem gesamten Werk ist, beginnt dieses Werk weniger als eine Satire zu erscheinen, die sich mimetisch auf einen bestehenden Zustand bezieht, sondern vielmehr als ein Versuch, einen Platz für das Utopische in narrativer Form neu zu artikulieren, und zwar als ein komischer Versuch, der das Pathos und die Verblendung früherer modernistischer Versuche, es zu artikulieren, vermeidet. In diesem Sinne sind die größenwahnsinnigen Erwartungen und die nervösen, *pikaresken* Irrfahrten von Bolaños Figuren durch das neoliberale/neofeudale Hinterland, während sie ihren literarischen Windmühlen hinterherjagen, notwendigerweise als Verweis auf Cervantes zu lesen, der gleichzeitig selbst ein Verweis auf die Anfänge der Moderne ist. Die Logik dieser literarischen Referenz ist eine doppelte Negation – eine Ironisierung der ursprünglichen modernen Ironie. Als solche hebt sie das ironische Register bei Bolaño auf und verweist auf die Möglichkeit eines zeitgenössischen Utopismus jenseits der Ironie, oder, anders gesagt, auf den Versuch, am Ende der Geschichte die Geschichte wieder aufleben zu lassen.

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: POETICS OF UTOPIAN OBJECTS

CHAPTER TWO: DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

CHAPTER THREE: CORMAC MCCARTHY

CHAPTER FOUR: ROBERTO BOLAÑO

INTRODUCTION

Global Post-Socialism and Narrative Form

The 20th century world-system was characterized by a strong polarity between the socialist and the capitalist blocs, a polarity best recognizable in its (geo)political form, known historically as the Cold War. Due to its longevity, the complexity of geopolitical interests of states involved in it, and the ideologies and propaganda related to those interests, the cognitive maps of the world in the 20th century – as invoked in the public sphere and institutionalized in official histories on both sides of the divide – have usually emphasized the Manichean opposition between the blocs and the strict boundaries between them[1]. However, world-systems theory, perhaps most notably Immanuel Wallerstein, has for a long time insisted on the falsity of such a Manichean conception. From Wallerstein's world-systems theory perspective, the socialist bloc did not exist as an independent sphere, a separate and autonomous mode of production, but as a facet of the capitalist world-system. In an essay announced by the radically historicist title "The rise and future demise of the world capitalist system" from the 1979 book *The Capitalist World Economy*, Wallerstein is quite explicit about this: "There are today no socialist systems in the world-economy any more than there are feudal systems because there is only one world-system. It is a world-economy and it is by definition capitalist in form." (35) He reiterates and further elaborates this line of thought elsewhere. For instance, in *Geopolitics and Geoculture. Essays on the changing world-system*, a

[1] Even "the figure of the three worlds", as the cultural historian Michael Denning calls it (cf. *Culture in the Age of the Three Worlds*), is not opposed to that Manichean cognitive map as the "third world" has in many contexts always been defined in relation to the first and the second, either in terms of their "spheres of influence" or in the language of modernization theory, as the "least modernized" element on the same path of development. The Non-Aligned Movement, a coalition of states attempting to avoid the Manicheism and dangerous stakes of the Cold War polarity was an attempt to forge an alternative path to global cooperation that from the perspective of our contemporary singularity looks positively eccentric.

series of 1980s texts published in book form in 1991, Wallerstein demystifies the Manichean thinking about the Cold War geopolitical polarity and reasserts the functionalism of his approach. He explains the logic of the structural, world-systemic connection between the blocs by identifying it as a global mechanism for the stabilization of the capitalist world-system in that particular historical phase. He claims that the emergence of the USSR as a global power "could be thought of as playing the role of a 'subimperialist' power for the US" (90), providing stability and control in parts of the world outside of capital's immediate expansionary interest and moderating anti-systemic tendencies which threatened the interests of capitalist hegemony and endangered the world-system's operation. This leads him to claim that really existing socialisms were "historically comprehensible but transient phenomenon in the historical development of the modern world-system" (95-6), that they were a contingent semi-peripheral "development strategy", analogous to other two historically available such strategies: social democracy in the core, and national liberation movements in the periphery. Leaving aside the possible objections to such integrative, functionalist approach, among which the problem of socio-political autonomy of historical subjects (social movements, individuals, states etc.) within the world-system stands out theoretically, we would like to concentrate here on its central implication.

That implication is rather simple, and we will base an entire literary historiography on it: if there have indeed been such structural, systemic connections between the two "blocs", it is unavoidable that with the transformation and disappearance of one of them, the other had to be analogously transformed and destabilized. This logic was aptly expressed in the late 1980s by the historic words of Georgi Arbatov, an eminent Soviet political scientist and expert on the US. Addressing a US audience, Arbatov said: "We are going to do a terrible thing to you. We are going to deprive you of an enemy." (Arbatov 84) Wallerstein, in *Geopolitics and Geoculture*, reiterates Arbatov's warning by pointing out that "1989 represents the demise […] of both ends of the great

ideological antinomy of the twentieth century, the Wilsonian versus the Leninist eschatologies." (2) The Manichean conception of the post-socialist triumph of the capitalist bloc and the resultant End of History appears from this perspective as a myth. Or more precisely, an ideological rationalization forged in desperate confusion.

It further follows from this logic that the effects of the dissolution of the socialist bloc, often encapsulated by the term "post-socialism", could not have been locally or regionally contained to the societies of the former socialist states. Our hypothesis in this study is therefore that the condition of post-socialism can, in its different but homologous forms, be registered as much in the capitalist core, as in the former socialist (semi)periphery. We will thus use the term "post-socialism" as referring to a global state of affairs and will configure this term for literary-historiographic purposes. It is our wager that the term can be productively used as a vantage point for inquiry into the formal contortions of literary discourse and the transformations of the literary imagination under the conditions of the destabilized, "bifurcating" (*Geopolitics* 14) capitalist world-system in the late 20th and early 21st century.

This, however, is an uncommon usage of the term: initially, it was used in a naïve formal meaning, as a simple marker of periodization denoting the historical period immediately after the fall of really existing socialism and referring to the Eastern bloc. Later, it stood "either for the diversity of social formations emerging after socialism or for a particular style of doing ethnographic work." (Tulbure 4) In addition to that, the conceptual thrust of the term, deployed in a number of disciplines from anthropology, cultural studies, art history to sociology and others, stands in a tight relation to another term, that of "transition" and has been "used by many social scientists as an alternative to [that] teleological notion." (ibid.) The term "transition", denoting the reconstitution of property relations and attendant ideological forms characteristic of the final integration of the former socialist states into globalized flows of capital, should not be conceived

as a neutral one. Instead, it is an active element of that historical process itself, a foundational category of a discourse justifying the necessity and inevitability of that process. This particular discourse emerged in a peculiar sub-field of political science in the 1970s discussions about transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones, and then took a radical turn after the fall of really existing socialism. According to Dejan Jović, that turn was motivated by the failure of political scientists to predict the dissolution of the socialist bloc and the universal surprise by the rapid socio-political shifts that characterized it. Those political scientists tried to

> [preserve] the same method of analysis as the one that (by their own admission) failed to anticipate 1989. Thus, they simply re-interpreted the concept of transition, and tried to give it a new meaning. Transition was no longer a retrospective attempt at analysing transformations, but an anticipatory attempt to predict the future and to offer guidance on how to transform society towards the desirable objective. Transition was no longer primarily defined as "transition from authoritarianism" into something else that we can hardly define in advance, but as "transition to democracy" – thus a journey with a known destination, one that we can clearly define by using the models of democracy already developed in the case of West European societies. (50)

From such a perspective, post-socialism is synonymous with "transition" and refers to the transitory period of transformation in which political forms characteristic for Western liberal democracies were inaugurated, capitalist forms of private ownership legislated, attendant ideologies and social imaginaries instituted, and alternative historical possibilities forgotten. In a 1996 book *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* the anthropologist Katherine Verdery refers critically to such theories of historical inevitability, labels the discourse of "transitology" as

"naïve" and "fashionable" (16) and uses the term "transition" itself in quotation marks with an explicit mocking intention, unconvinced as she is by the fantasy of the inevitability of the transition from socialism to capitalism, authoritarianism to democracy, bondage to freedom, and the implicit teleology and progressivist temporality this implies. Boris Buden, in his own incisive critiques of "transitology", points out that its discourse has worked, quite cynically and violently, to repress the memory of alternative historical possibilities that opened up in the period of late socialist instability. (cf. *Zone des Übergangs*)

Both Buden and Verdery are very careful to avoid collapsing the historical contradictions and fractured temporalities of the "transition" into "flat Cold War binaries of capitalist West and communist East" (Chari and Verdery 9), as discourse of transitology does. Both, however, also observe post-socialism or "transition" as localized in the "Eastern bloc." As opposed to that, it follows from our above observation that post-socialism must register globally due to the integrated nature of the world-system. Therefore, it also follows that there must have been some form of "transition" detectable in the West, a "Western transition", if you will. Since the post-socialist condition has left detectable traces in cultural forms across the former socialist bloc, as a number of studies have shown (cf. Chitnis, Williams, Bailyn et al., Jelača et al., Tlostanova), the "Western transition" must have also left comparable traces. This study will therefore try to detect the symptomatic traces of "Western transition" in narrative literary texts from the core of the world-system and compare them to homologous symptoms of the "Eastern transition" in literary texts from the (semi)periphery, paying special attention to relate them to the common socio-historical logic of global post-socialism.

But if there is such a thing as a global post-socialist "transition", the question remains: a transition to what? Verdery herself, writing ethnographically in 1996 about the "transition" in former socialist states, postulated and convincingly and thoroughly argued for a provocative

conception: that "the transition" in the formerly socialist East is not from "socialism to capitalism" but from "socialism to feudalism", or more precisely, to the institution of social forms and relations under global capitalism the logic of which is functionally similar to analogous forms and relations that have historically been known in the feudal mode of production. (cf. 204-228) Strikingly, some twenty-four years later, in 2020, the political scientist Jodi Dean, who does not mention Verdery's study, put forth the same thesis about the historical development of global capitalism as a whole, proposing four "interlocking features" of neo-feudalism, or the neo-feudal phase of capitalist development[2], some of which overlap fully with those proposed in Verdery's ethnographic work on the "transition" in formerly socialist states. This proposition confirms our hypothesis: that the post-socialist condition or "transition" registers in homologous socially instituted forms across the world-system. This particular example also captures the fractured temporality of the "transition" in two ways: firstly, by pointing out the return of socio-political forms and social relations that were thought long buried by capitalist modernity, and secondly, by demonstrating that the "Eastern transition" served as a form of historical avant-garde that the "Western transition" is only now catching up with – thereby proving false once again the Manichean myths and teleology of "transitology."

We will try to map out this state of affairs – these systemic complexities, convergences between the core, semi-periphery, and periphery, fractured temporalities of the "transition", etc. – as they are mediated by narrative forms under global post-socialism. As an aspect of what Cornelius Castoriadis calls "social imaginary institution" (cf. *Imaginary Institution*) within the framework of the world-system, the post-socialist condition also exhibits features of combined and uneven

[2] "Neo-feudalism is characterized by four interlocking features: 1) the parcelization of sovereignty; 2) hierarchy and expropriation with new lords and peasants; 3) desolate hinterlands and privileged municipalities; and, 4) insecurity and catastrophism." ("Communism or Neo-Feudalism 2)

development characteristic of that world-system. An important literary sociology, materialist historiography, or simply theory of literature taking this into consideration was recently developed by the Warwick Research Collective in their 2015 book *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Although we owe quite a lot to that study, we will here take a more modest (or a more reductive) approach and disregard many of the complexities and contradictions arising out of the state of combined and uneven development of the capitalist world-system. Instead of focusing on these complexities and contradictions, we will try to construct a singular literary-historical narrative by using the term "global post-socialism" in the belief it can provide us with a convenient optics to observe recent cultural and literary history from the perspective of its vanquished (repressed) other. We will try to use the term both as a periodizing term in a materialist history of contemporary world-literature, and a critical vantage point from which it is possible to produce politicized readings of contemporary texts that are capable of revealing the cultural logic of the post-socialist condition as it is inscribed in narrative forms across various contexts in the world-system. It is our contention that narrative literary forms – both passively as mechanisms of politically unconscious socio-historical mediation, and more actively in their tendency to problematize the historical conditions of their own production and thus register the institutional arrangements of the broader social world – are a good place to search for traces of that cultural logic.

In addition to that, we will try to develop a formalist literary analytic, or more precisely: a poetics, of post-socialism capable of distinguishing between narrative texts whose narrative form is wholly subsumed under the dominant social imaginaries of post-socialism, i.e. texts which integrate existing social imaginaries/"collective representations" as the limits of their narrative representations, and those texts that use narrative form as an instrument of testing the boundaries

of those imaginaries, as a terrain of creative speculation about the socio-historical possibilities that lie beyond.

We will make ample use of the relatively nebulous concept of "historical possibility", as our analysis of post-socialist narrative forms will demonstrate that the probing of the "possibility of historical possibility" is a common narrative problem in the post-socialist novels we analyze. That concept can and will sometimes be used interchangeably with the concept of Utopia, the discursive function of which it often shares: Utopia/historical possibility points to speculation about modes of historical development and temporalities diverging from the Fukuyaman "End of History" and opposed to the repressive closure of Mark Fisher's "capitalist realism." It points to the short-lived alternative conceptions of "transition", written out of history by discourse of transitology, and to periods (or simply hopes) of historical foment capable of birthing alternative models of historical development and autonomous social institution. As such, the concept is as much a literary, narrative-representational problem, as it is a political-historiographic one.

Relying on the categories and concepts we started developing in this introduction – which will be further developed in the long theoretical/poetical excursus that follows immediately below – we will attempt to comparatively read three authors whose narrative poetics and positions in their respective literary fields at first glance appear to be vastly different. The theoretical/poetical framework we devise in the study will, however, justify the comparison and demonstrate that it is not only possible, but quite revealing and productive to read them through the optics of post-socialist "transition" and historical possibility as a narrative problem.

We will start with Dubravka Ugrešić, the urbane Yugoslav/Croatian author most commonly read as exemplary of what David Williams calls "Trümmerliteratur Redux" or "literature of the post-1989 East European ruins." (*Writing Postcommunism* 127, 6) We will analyze how the caesura

in her writing career, which inaugurated her "post-socialist neo-dissidence" and consequent re-positioning in the globalized literary field, is reflected by the dynamics of form in her narrative fiction. We will also try to relate this formal dynamics to the institutional and ideological pressures of the literary field she operates in and the broader capitalist world-system this field is integrated into. We will show that tracing her fiction from the late 1980s, from her celebrated late socialist metafictional novel *Forsiranje romana reke* (translated into English as *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*) to her novels/fictions of the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje*/*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *Ministarstvo boli*/*The Ministry of Pain*, reveals a trajectory of gradual abandonment or disavowal of historical possibility as a narrative problem, essentially a privatistic acceptance of social imaginary significations and narrative possibilities characteristic of the chronotopes aligned with the End of History. This narrative-formal transformation mirrors, quite straightforwardly, the *Denkverbot* characteristic of the socio-cultural formation that Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism." The consequences of this abandonment are, we argue from the perspective of our post-socialist poetics/poetics of historical possibility, quite negative.

Next is Cormac McCarthy, a globally renowned writer with an explicit local focus on the US Southern and Southwestern hinterlands[3] and border spaces. We will trace the trajectory of the narrative-formal transformations in his novels in close comparison to that of Dubravka Ugrešić. The detached, satirical, bookish, urbane post-socialist intellectualism of Ugrešić cannot be further apart from the prophetically exalted, allegorical, rural, anti-intellectual intellectualism of McCarthy. However, it is possible to detect upon closer inspection an equivalent post-socialist caesura dividing both their novelistic opuses. We will consequently read the transition from the

[3] See Jodi Dean "Communism or Neo-feudalism" for a discussion of her concept of "hinterlands" as one of the four interlocking features of neo-feudalism.

allegorical structure in McCarthy's revisionist Western *Blood Meridian, Or, The Evening Redness in the West*, to the Western romance structure of *The Border Trilogy* and nostalgic metacommentary of *No Country for Old Men* as exhibiting a comparable, if not identical, logic of abandonment of historical possibility as a narrative-representational problem. In Ugrešić, this literary post-socialist transition formally registers as a passage from political allegory and metafictionality to "middlebrow" exploration of ethnic identity politics. In McCarthy, the transition is from ruthless Gnostic allegory of capitalist modernity to the sentimental nostalgia of the romance. We will also add to that trajectory of narrative-formal transformation his post-apocalyptic messianic narrative, *The Road*, which we read as a (failed) attempt to insert Utopian imaginary significations into the desolate spaces of the post-socialist imaginary. The homologous trajectories of these two literary "transitions", an Eastern and a Western one, we interpret as further proof for the thesis that the dynamics of the world-system needs to be observed as a literary-historical determinant, and that the "real existence" of the socialist bloc, despite its historical failures and fragility, also kept open, globally, the horizon of historical possibility that enabled narrative mediation of and creative speculation about alternative models of historical development which is suppressed under the contemporary world-systemic configuration and dominant social imaginaries.

In the end, we turn to the analysis of narrative texts by another globally-renowned novelist and a publishing phenomenon comparable to the former two, Roberto Bolaño. We read his novels/fictions, from *Los detectives salvajes/Savage Detectives*, to *Amuleto/Amulet and La literatura nazi en América/Nazi Literature in the Americas*, with the help of his essays and poetry, and we read them as counter-examples to the tendencies of post-socialist mimetic passivity and historical pessimism we identified above. His texts appear, in our reading, as exemplary of a post-socialist Utopian poetics that strives to re-establish Utopia/historical possibility as a literary, narrative problem. We focus on the analysis of what we see as the dialectical movement of Bolaño's

literary discourse and try to analyze the narrative devices and discursive techniques that make this movement possible. From what we call "trans-narrative integration", to "metafictional hyperbole" and dialectics of narrative form in Bolaño, we read these literary-formal arrangements not only as devices configured for testing the limitations of post-socialist social imaginaries and representing historical possibility in the age of "eternal present", but as attempts to articulate a materialist conception of literature that stands in an immanent relation to history. The thematic focus of Bolaño's texts is on the dynamics of the broader literary field, and is in that regard comparable to Ugrešić's work, most notably *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. The numerous characters of poets, writers, humanities professors, marginal intellectuals, Nazi enthusiasts and sinister presences milling about Bolaño's fiction could be read as an elaborate joke, a satirical take on the marginality of *word* in the era of *image*. This obsessive focus on the literary also seems to invite reading them as functions in the service of a self-referential formalism, a kind of literary disavowal of historicity. But if we go beyond these superficial readings, emphasize that Bolaño's narrative devices are in the service of what we call his literary dialectics, and notice how formally consistent their use is across his opus and how insistently it sutures literature to history, that opus begins to appear less as a self-referential satire and more as an attempt to rearticulate a place for the Utopian in narrative form, a historically comical attempt at that, avoiding the pathos and delusions of earlier modernist attempts to articulate it. In this sense, from the dynamic arrangements of Bolaño's narrative form, from the iterations of dialectical movement across his texts and, more directly, from the *picaresque* meanderings of Bolaño's characters through neoliberal/neofeudal hinterlands as they chase their literary windmills, a peculiar reference to Cervantes emerges in the form of an inversion of the original modern irony. The reference does not function simply as a North Star always pointing to *Quixote* and the historical beginnings of the novel form, the beginnings of modernity itself, but as a re-historicization of Cervantes (i.e. the novel) in the 21st century and an attempt to point out that

the contemporary irony should not target the reader who privileges fantasy over reality, as it was the case with Cervantes, but the one who privileges reality over fantasy. This double negation – ironization of the original modern irony – seems to cancel out the ironic register in Bolaño and points to the possibility of a contemporary Utopianism beyond irony, or in other words, to an attempt to go back to *history* at the End of History, to re-examine the dusty old modern idea of history as gradual human emancipation from superstition and bondage, an idea betrayed and repressed by capitalist modernity itself, as it coagulates around us into post-socialist neo-feudalism.

CHAPTER ONE: THE POETICS OF UTOPIAN OBJECTS

1.1 Method and the Global Marketplace

We begin with an invocation of Margaret Thatcher. "There is no alternative." The slogan that she trumpeted so often, or the credo that she famously subscribed to, has persisted throughout the past few decades as a guiding principle of the ruling classes[4] across the core and the periphery, but also continued to provoke a flood of negative reactions and is often quoted as an example of authoritarian political arrogance of a ruling class ascending to the height of its power. The unceasing negative reactions to Thatcher's proclamation, the establishment of that particular slogan and her image itself as metonymies of an age, as well as the recorded glee at Thatcher's death in 2013 registering on the level of everyday political affect and exhibited publicly across the world[5] demonstrate a libidinal investment on the part of Thatcher's critics that cannot be explained simply as a knee jerk reaction to a particularly vivid instance of authoritarian arrogance. Indeed, the intensity and the longevity of the odium exhibited towards Thatcher points to a more disturbing possibility: that she was right. Right in the same sense in which, as per Slavoj Žižek's quip, "we are all Fukuyamans"[6] now, since the past thirty or forty years have been marked by an incapability of developing, or even making culturally visible, a plausible systemic alternative to the established world order. The experience of recent history across the globe – decades of "deregulation", liberalization of global trade, financialization of capital, regimes of economic austerity,

[4] The slogan was used both by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel justifying the political responses to the European sovereign debt crisis in 2010 and by the British Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 announcing new sets of austerity measures.
[5] A good, and darkly comedic, example of this is the alternative running commentary of Thatcher's funeral launched by the Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle and broadcast on Twitter to his several million followers.
[6] And have been since long before 1989, as this study hopes to demonstrate.

technocratic conceptions of governance, growing economic inequality and the abiding consensus of the ruling classes across the globe holding all this together – forces us to come to terms with the fact that Thatcher's words leave a burning sensation not because of their particularity, because they are privately hubristic, but because of their universality, because they symbolize the establishment of logos, the institution of a stable order. As all such moments of social institution, Thatcher's moment is defined by its apparent irreversibility. Her words cannot be proven wrong by way of rational argument, and history redone as a consequence of such proof. And the social order they serve to establish and consecrate, as an instituted and irreversible order, holds the power to designate hubristic instead all of those who want to challenge it, or in other words: it holds the power to discipline them. It is only from the acceptance of this basic fact, the fact that "Margaret Thatcher" – one of the signifiers we use here to designate the logic of the dominant socio-historical order – was right, that we can proceed with thinking the possibility of an alternative. For she is right only insofar as she states the obvious, as she speaks the specular, monosemic language of power: there is an order, it will not be challenged. If we simply disavow this banal fact (either by denying it, minimizing it, or by projecting blame), we risk finding ourselves engulfed by *ressentiment*, in the manner of Friedrich Nietzsche's weakling lambs, who bear a useless grudge against the birds of prey who feast upon them (cf. *Genealogy* 44-45), and who are, we might add, passivized in their hostile projection of blame by impotent enjoyment of their own righteousness. Or in other words, by indulging in such *ressentiment*, we will find ourselves trapped in a specific form of "imaginary relationship [to our] real conditions of existence" (Althusser 109) – we will, precisely by virtue of this *ressentiment*, the more aggressive the better, find ourselves reasserting the enduring power of the instituted order, i.e. we will find ourselves ideologically interpellated. Instead, let us try to accept it matter-of-factly and observe with sober eyes and in all its cultural implications our lack of alternative and acknowledge the situation which Theodor Adorno, already

in 1951, described ominously as the "absolute rule of that which is." ("Cultural Criticism" 33) Let us hope that doing this might, among other things, help us recover energies dispersed in disavowal and redirect them into the praxis of reinvigorating our imaginary – one of the necessary steps towards rediscovering the possibility of instituting historical alternatives.

The (re)discovery of that possibility under a historical situation such as ours is, we will argue here, not only a task of a particular politics, but a condition of possibility of poetics as such. Our age is marked by the demise of the sharply bipolar system that characterized the 20th century and guaranteed at least some degree of dialectical tension at the level of the world-system, and thus at least indexed if not truly embodied, for both the capitalist and the socialist pole, the possibility of historical alternative hinted at above, ensuring in this way also a level of motivation (and institutional conditions) for what might be called practices of socio-cultural speculation and historical creativity. This tension is long gone, superseded by the undisturbed flat surface of the capitalist market, and with it also shrunk the repertoires of those practices of creative historical speculation in their various forms, from internationalist labor movements, to radical social theories and even literature proper. The triumph of capital at the End of History inaugurated an age of retreat and negotiation precisely for those practices (or discourses) historically tasked with such speculation, tasked with, let us invoke this term, producing historically plausible signifiers of Utopia.

Symptoms of this retreat and negotiation can be observed quite easily in the epistemological – indeed, survival – strategies observable in the contemporary humanities beset by the process of real subsumption of the university under capital[7] across the world-system. One needs to go no

[7] See: Gigi Roggero: *The Production of Living Knowledge: The Crisis of the University and the Transformation of Labor in Europe and North America*, Gupta et al.: *Academic Labour, Unemployment and Global Higher Education. Neoliberal Policies of Funding and Management*, Primož Krašovec: "Realna supsumcija u hramu duha: klasna borba

further to demonstrate this than look at the recent appearance of what Carolyn Lesjak in her 2013 article "Reading Dialectically" called the "new disciplinary conservatism" (233) across literary departments in the US academic field. This new conservatism has, under the rallying cry of a "return to literature", tried to counter the disciplinary instability felt in the humanities in the form of the dominance of the post-structuralist epistemological paradigm. Under the label of neo-formalism, it encompasses both properly conservative "returns to the aesthetic" that range from Schillerian idealism to social Darwinist cognitive approaches, as well as historicist neo-formalisms still grounded in the post-structuralist paradigm. This disciplinary instability, however, should not be understood as purely endogenous, i.e. as resulting simply from the transformation of epistemological paradigms within disciplines, but should be observed from a broader materialist perspective that also includes the changing historical function of the institution of the university and its changing relation to the social order it is an institution of. From that perspective, one finds it relatively easy to discover that there are much more prosaic factors at play in the said disciplinary instability than the loosening of traditional epistemological paradigms. In order to exemplify this, we can use one of Lesjak's own examples, which she characterizes as the "extreme version" of the conservatively-bent status quo. Commenting on a symptomatic proposal for the future of humanities research flouted in the 2006 MLA Presidential Address given by Marjorie Perloff, Lesjak writes:

> the demand outside the academy, as witnessed by the enthusiasm surrounding Samuel Beckett's centennial, is for reading literature, not theory, so by returning to our roots,

u univerzitetskom polju", Slaughter and Rhoades: *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education*, and a range of other studies in various languages analyzing this process.

> we will not only satisfy ourselves but the market, as well. And in the process, this line of reasoning implies, we can perhaps save our jobs as humanities professors by (cynically) complying with the instrumentalization of knowledge and thought driving the very educational and university policies that see the humanities as obsolete. (237)

The phenomenon of the obsolescence of the humanities, together with the defensive negotiation strategies of institutions and individuals that try to uphold their disciplinary traditions and desperately continue to enact their waning social roles, is decidedly global in the same way that the socio-historical logic that motivates these phenomena is decidedly global. They appear, with local specificities, across the world-system and should be observed in relation to the same logos that, as we claimed above, announces itself through figures such as Margaret Thatcher. It is understandable that many should resort to such strategies and there is, certainly, for some, a material award to be gained through attempts at renegotiation of the position of the humanities within the broader network of social relations. But again, if we observe those attempts from a broader materialist perspective and if we observe them critically, as attempts to turn the scholarly, cultural, and yes, enlightenment agendas built into the disciplinary traditions of the humanities over to the capitalist market, or in other words if we observe them as symptoms of a retreat into heteronomy, these attempts appear as not only opportunistic, but entirely unscientific. We can justify this claim by turning to the observation made by Stipe Grgas, who elaborates on the problem of knowledge production within the framework of the humanities in a different – post-socialist, (semi)peripheral Yugoslav – context, and concludes how in the contemporary conjuncture "determined by the all-encompassing power of the economy [the knowledge produced by the humanities] is simply not considered a usable resource." (99) This severe diagnosis, with which we are more or less in agreement, should not be observed as a commonly heard sentimental

lamentation of disgruntled academics, but as a clinical sketch of the political economic conditions of contemporary knowledge production. As such, it constitutes an implicit but necessary comment on epistemology. Attempts to make the knowledge produced within the disciplinary frameworks of the humanities "usable" from the perspective of what Grgas calls the "conjuncture" do not simply imply popularization strategies or better marketing, but structural adaptations that transform the very form of that knowledge. In the interests of clearly marking a point of disagreement with such strategies, let us emphasize again the point that we made in an article that tried to establish structural equivalences between theoretical developments in the humanities in the core and the (semi)periphery of the world-system:

> The nostalgic return to a more peaceful age, of course, does not constitute a satisfactory answer to the described destabilization of the framework that regulates knowledge production in the humanities. It is unsatisfactory, as Matthias Nilges reminds us, because a return to prior historical positions from a new context is, from a consistently dialectical and materialist perspective, simply impossible. But it is also unsatisfactory because it is *a priori* based on a certain readiness to capitulate. In the era, let us use this concept, of real subsumption of the academic field under capital, the production of knowledge is regulated as the production of "research results", or in other words, it is regulated according to the quantitative criteria objectivized in a competitive system of evaluation of efficiency and instrumental usability of those results. Such a system demands from any investigative paradigm also a certain empiricism, or in other words a more or less tangible object of study, as well as a speculative restraint limited, wherever it is possible, by a consistent method of review. From that perspective, the return to form in the humanities, whether form is conceived simply as "that which is

> tangible" or "that which is instinctively beautiful", contains the implicit attempt to respond to the institutional demands of the system that is set up in such a way. It is impossible to avoid the observation that a demand for self-control is in itself highly welcome in the humanities. But within the commercialized system of knowledge production, such a demand often does not only guarantee the sole minimum of scholarly accountability, but also requests "production on demand." (Tutek 67) [8]

But let us not confine this problem solely to the academic humanities. The "absolute rule of that which is", after all, is absolute. Similar demands are made of literary production proper, and the same structural constraints direct the dynamics of literary fields and their characteristic networks of institutions. The literary sociologist Giselle Sapiro makes this point quite explicitly: "Literary activity has evolved from having ideological constraints to having mercantile constraints. […] In ultra-liberal configurations, it is the competition between publishers for the largest public that conditions the supply." (460) Although we cannot quite accept the clear distinction and opposition between the categories of "ideological" and "mercantile" she proposes, and would aim for a more historically precise and dialectical conception in which one category does not exclude the other, the point she is making is very similar to the one we were making above. The phrase "competition conditioning the supply", in other words, draws attention to the fact that the set of social relations that characterize capitalism, the institutional framework of the capitalist market, and the criteria of selection characteristic of those relations and institutions directly affect "outcomes" in cultural production: what is allowed to appear as literature and under what conditions, what is deemed desirable for publication and dissemination (i.e. what can be justified

[8] The quote is from an article that appeared in a volume edited by philosophers Borislav Mikulić and Mislav Žitko entitled *Inačice materijalizma*/*Varieties of Materialism* and published in 2017 in Croatian. The translation is ours.

as profitable). This is certainly not a new insight, but Sapiro's sociological research quantifies it, and thus helps us reiterate the perennially underemphasized point that this arrangement of conditions of production also has consequences on the level of literary form. Not necessarily in a banal way, as these "mercantile constraints" and demands are mediated by forms of writing and self-reflection that do not simply mirror the logic of capital and need not be conceived as instances of cynical obedience to the demands of the market. However, the very necessity of self-reflection under such a regime is already a reaction conditioned by the realities of the "mercantilized" literary field. These realities are neither marginal to the logic of the field nor optional from the perspective of literary form production. They are formally constitutive insofar as literary forms cannot escape registering the historical conditions under which they are developed. As Sarah Brouillette puts it on the very first page of her book *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, discussing the case of postcolonial writing: "authors use their texts to register anxiety about the political parameters of the literary marketplace" and "expressions of self-consciousness […] are a constitutive feature of the postcolonial field." (Brouillette 1) Her insights about postcolonial writing can also be generalized to encompass other literary formations across the world-system as the anxiety she speaks of is a reaction to the changing ethos – rules of the game – of literary fields subsumed under and globalized by capital and the political consequences of this. Wherever the ethos of the field includes a conception of autonomy or autonomous production, it will clash with the logic of capital[9].

It is important to note also that what follows from these observations is not simply a conclusion about the characteristics of literary forms in the contemporary world-system but a

[9] That particular form of anxiety is also often supplemented by the more general anxiety borne out of the generalized precarity characteristic of labor conditions under capitalism.

method. A method of reading for the humanities that operate under the same historical conditions and within homologous institutional frameworks as the texts they study: any, as Brouillette calls it, "meaningful interpretative practice" in the humanities is impossible without acknowledging the constitutive role of that material framework in the production of literary forms, and without acknowledging its own embeddedness in the same. Having this in mind, it is possible to claim that if there is a logic to literary production at the End of History, it is not the formalist, autonomous logic of what Harold Bloom called "the anxiety of influence" but the socio-historical, heteronomous logic of "the anxiety of the capitalist market." The literary texts we will be analyzing in this study all demonstrate this in various ways and quite explicitly.

1.2 Capitalist Realism at the End of History: The Ethics of Reduction in Fisher and Fukuyama

The analysis we are developing can in essence be considered an insight into the cultural and political consequences of the generalization of the very anxiety we described above. We understand it as one of the social consequences that followed the late 20th century transformation of the capitalist world-system the culmination of which was the fall of the socialist bloc. We will try to observe those consequences on the level of literary form in several post-socialist contexts across the world-system. Our focus will be different than the one characteristic of the world-systems theory-inflected sociologies and historiographies of literature such as WReC's *Combined and Uneven Development* and will not primarily observe the institutional, systemic, impersonal logic of the world system as it acts upon (or "registers in") literary form. We will instead discuss the more varied and intangible "collective representations", socio-cultural models, social imaginaries that develop under that logic and are written into literary form as social groups produce conceptions of sociality and historical possibility that regulate their collective life in the context of the post-

socialist world-system. We will try to do this by relying on a materialist conception of the causes and motivations of these processes. What we provisionally called above "the anxiety of the market" is, in other words, only one element of a complex socio-historical dynamics "the market" is the most blatant expression of, a dynamics produced as an effect of social relations mediated by capital, universalized as they have become in the post-socialist world-system.

During the past decade or so perhaps the most successful attempt at describing this socio-historical dynamics as it appears on the level of culture was provided by Mark Fisher with his term "capitalist realism". His widely-resonant book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, written in the immediate aftermath of the global market crash of 2008, provides an analysis which attempts to capture the cultural specificity of the most recent phase of capitalist development and focuses precisely on the logic and effects of the historically distinct social totality that is brought into being by the universalization of the capital-relation. In that book, Fisher examines the way in which this totality fully colonizes the realm of the subjective: subject identifications, processes of signification, cultural forms, and horizons of the politically possible. The concept capitalist realism, he writes, is meant to capture "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." (2) Capitalist realism, according to him, is not "confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action." (16) Justifying the use of a new concept instead of the concept of "postmodernism" as it was developed by Fredric Jameson, Fisher goes on to emphasize that both concepts target the same underlying phenomena, but that the processes the earlier one aimed to describe "have now become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind. […] What we are dealing with now […] is a deeper, far more

pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" than even Jameson's somber diagnosis pointed out. (7) Here, as in other places throughout the book, Fisher relies on the somewhat vague terms "sense" or "atmosphere" to describe the affective load characteristic of the *Zeitgeist* of capitalist universality and points out how the effect of this affective load is a paralysis of the subjective dimension of historical praxis, and in turn, of course, the arrest of collective socio-historical development. The concept of capitalist realism, therefore, encompasses a wider field than the concept of ideology and cannot be entirely equated with it. Perhaps not even in the all-pervasive Althusserian sense, if in that case the concept of ideology is meant to formally isolate the logic of the structuring structure which is internalized in the process of interpellation, and which imposes demands on and directs the imaginary identifications of the subject. The concept of capitalist realism is looser and describes also the contours of political affect and the consequences of instrumentalization of culture in late capitalism, or in other words, it encompasses what Raymond Williams called "the structure of feeling[10]" emerging in response to the closure of the field of socio-historical possibility and the attendant crisis of historical imagination characteristic of the post-socialist world-system. More precisely, capitalist realism describes a system of social reproduction at the End of History supported by a cultural feedback loop that eliminates potentially subversive imaginary significations that could appear either by chance or by intention. Subversive impulses, forms of culture, and other phenomena are not under such a regime "incorporated" into the system in order to be neutralized, i.e. digested into commodified, non-threatening forms and integrated into the ruling order, as it used to be the case throughout most of the 20th century. Instead, capitalist realism serves as a systemic insurance that such phenomena cannot even appear as external to that

[10] For a recent and detailed overview of the history of that concept as developed by Williams, see Stuart Middleton's 2020 article "Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling' and the Problem of Democratic Values in Britain, 1938–1961".

order, they are anticipated and neutralized *a priori* through what Fisher calls "*precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture." (9) Such domestication of desire has by the end of the 20th century been made easier precisely by the apparent lack of even a symbolic outside to capital, the remnants of which finally collapsed in 1989. Fisher, however, warns about conceiving of the 20th century incarnation of the world-system as "some prelapsarian state rife with political potentials […] it's as well to remember the role that commodification played in the production of culture throughout the twentieth century." (ibid.) Along the same lines, it is also as well to remember Adorno's aforementioned mid-twentieth century formula as it makes apparent that even the logic of precorporation, which Fisher identifies as a fundamental characteristic of capitalist realism, can be observed much earlier:

> In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one. All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is. There are no more ideologies in the authentic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence. ("Cultural Criticism" 33)

However, Adorno does not speak of a finished state of affairs but of the process of "society *becoming* more total." (ibid., emphasis ours) At that point, there still exists the dimension of the *outside* and the established social imaginaries still distinguish and acknowledge it as an operative category. This can be demonstrated, for instance, by observing the logic of US geopolitical strategy in the Cold War, a logic visible from its very name, the politics or strategy of "containment", and by remembering the ubiquitous metaphors of communism as an outside "virus" appearing

throughout Cold War culture. As Susan Buck-Morss reminds us in her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, "the structuring logic of [Cold War political imaginary] was already in place by the end of World War I", only to intensify with the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947:

> the imaginary effects of Bolshevism within U.S. political discourse were hallucinatory in ways that became the hallmark of the Cold War. As the absolute enemy (because it did not behave as enemies should!), Bolshevism took on the fantastic image of a "fire," a "virus," a "flood" of barbarism, "spreading," "raging," "out of control," a "monster which seeks to devour civilized society" and destroy the "free world." (2)

In addition to that, it is also important to mention a crucial point made by one of the keenest critics of the post-socialist transition in Eastern Europe, Boris Buden. In his analysis of the democratic movements in Yugoslavia in the 1980s published in German in a 2009 book entitled *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (*Zone of Transition: On the End of Post-Communism)*, he emphasizes the orientation of those movements towards historical potentials that are left out of the standard liberal narratives of the unavoidable transition to capitalism and liberal democracy, potentials appearing as realizable in the social imaginaries of those movements and driving much of their motivation. It becomes clear from his analysis that even as the socialist bloc was counting its last days, it was possible to imagine a reinvigorated alternative to the universalization of capitalism, an alternative which theories of modernization and the discourses of "transitology" characterized by liberal democratic triumphalism did not simply overlook but actively repressed and wrote out of history. Put differently, even as ideologies propping up the system of really existing socialism were delegitimized and the instituted social imaginaries

characteristic of that world were crumbling, the very existence of that system played a symbolic but crucial role in holding open the door of historical possibility.

Since then, however, new human beings have been arriving directly into the singularity of capital to be subjectivized under the regime of capitalist realism. A consequence of this regime of subjectivation, to go back to Fisher, are subjects who internalize the conception of a total world with no outside and a conception of temporality of perpetual present. He recognizes as one of the symptoms of this situation a characteristic psychological mechanism which he terms "depressive hedonia", and which is a reaction to the world-consuming logic of capital and the despairing monotony of history robbed of the dimension of the future. Depressive hedonia is "not […] an ability to get pleasure, so much as […] an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure. There is a sense 'that something is missing' – but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle." (22) The reference to "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", perhaps Freud's most controversial text, points to a very important realization. Leaving aside the discussion about that text's theoretical merits, the reference should be read as not serving so much to invoke the necessity of breaking out of the loop of repetition compulsion established by adhering to the now-generalized imperative to consume/pursue pleasure, but to index the intuition that this breaking out is a risky undertaking, involving danger, even – if only symbolic – the risk of death.

When read this way, Fisher's observation opens up to a comparison with the arguments made by Francis Fukuyama in his era-defining 1992 book *End of History and the Last Man*, where the "last man" of liberal democracy is understood as suffering, broadly speaking, from the same condition as Fisher's subject of capitalist realism. Fukuyama is usually labelled as a "right neo-Hegelian", but *End of History* owes as much to Hegel as it does to Nietzsche, whom Fukuyama

reads as a kind of radicalization of Hegel[11]. The "last man" from the book's title is of course the Nietzschean *Letzter Mensch*, who fully matures at the moment of the establishment of liberal democracy as the endpoint of historical development, and "has been jaded by the experience of history, and disabused of the possibility of direct experience of values." (306) However, in Fukuyama's view, such historical experience does not elide the – metaphysically conceived – human tendency towards what Fukuyama terms *megalothymia* ("man's desire to be recognized as better than his fellows.") (320) Although the tendency cannot be equated with the controversial Freudian *Thanatos*, a concept deployed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, there are certain overlaps as Fukuyama tries to explain and situate on the level of instinct the phenomenon of the ungovernable excess of motivation towards risk, danger, change, or conflict characteristic of human behavior – the tendency to reject the logic of "rational choice", the low hanging fruit of the pleasure principle, and to aim for the uncharted territory of the *beyond*. Human beings, writes Fukuyama

> will want to be citizens rather than *bourgeois,* finding the life of masterless slavery—the life of rational consumption—in the end, *boring.* They will want to have ideals by which to live and die, even if the largest ideals have been substantively realized here on earth, and they will want to risk their lives even if the international state system has succeeded in abolishing the possibility of war. *This* is the "contradiction" that liberal democracy has not yet solved. (314)

[11] "Just as Nietzsche's philosophy may be seen broadly as a radicalization of Hegelian historicism, so his psychology may be seen as a radicalization of Hegel's emphasis on recognition." (Fukuyama 314)

Even if we disagree with the implications of Fukuyama's analysis, reject his idealist, metaphysical terminology, and find problematic the specific diagnosis of "boredom", we can expand on some of his observations and point out that the contradiction he notices here is one that will not, for structural reasons, be resolved by what he calls liberal democracy – intertwined as that political system is with the self-reproducing algorithm of capital. The reasons for this are twofold: on the one hand, there is the class and world-systemic inequality integral to the functioning of our historical order, both of which structurally inhibit the possibility of universal *embourgeoisment* of the last men. Or in more straightforward terms: under the current world-system and class stratification characteristic of capitalism, most humans will simply never be in a position to experience the boring life of rational consumption. When this is taken into account, what Fukuyama terms "boredom" appears less a metaphysical human condition at the End of History, and more an affect born out of class privilege. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, it is precisely in the interest of this system to continue reinforcing that very "boredom" – to continue producing the jaded, exhausted consumer mired in capitalist realism – and find ways to sublimate it into something else should it become politically threatening. Even if the "boredom" appears as an unconscious, possibly threatening symptom, if its affective valence is negative, the mechanism of Fisher's capitalist realism ensures that the symptom is ideologically instrumentalized in order to guarantee systemic reproduction. Something very close to this process has famously been pointed out by Slavoj Žižek in his analysis of the way ideology functions in late capitalism:

> The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring

> power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them. (*Sublime* 30)

This ironical distance, the blasé indifference raised to the level of prevailing cultural attitude – or in Fukuyama's terminology: boredom – ensures no less than the psychosocial conditions for the reproduction of the capital-relation and continued valorization of capital. Such decadent detachment and "ironic enjoyment", as Žižek points out with surgical precision, are defense mechanisms, coping strategies that allow the subject to live without the weight of awareness of one's conformism, and help it remain in the loop of "rational consumption" without the burden of alienation or unpleasant consequences of radical dissent.

Such an attitude, as we have already said, is generalized in the culture of capitalist realism, and is a fundamental ideological effect required for social reproduction. Again, Fukuyama more or less points out the former himself, although he observes this generalized attitude as an effect of dubiously enlightened, self-congratulatory historical experience, an almost accidentally appearing "contradiction":

> The last man at the end of history *knows* better than to risk his life for a cause, because he recognizes that history was full of pointless battles […] The loyalties that drove men to desperate acts of courage and sacrifice were proven by subsequent history to be silly prejudices. Men with modern educations are content to sit at home, congratulating themselves on their broadmindedness and lack of fanaticism. (307)

Be that as it may, however, a little further in the book Fukuyama makes the same claim we made above – the problems resulting from this generalized cultural attitude cannot be fixed within

the system itself, the tools available from the toolbox of liberal democracy are insufficient to stabilize it: “Liberal democracies, in other words, are not self-sufficient: the community life on which they depend must ultimately come from a source different from liberalism itself.” (326)

At this point, the similarities between Fukuyama and Fisher’s arguments produce an interesting convergence, despite the irreconcilable differences between the left revolutionary attitudes of the latter and the conservative liberalism of the former. We claimed that these similarities result from the observation they both make about the problematic consequences of the adherence to the pleasure principle at the End of History (adherence that would better be described as the contradictory project of instrumentalization of the pleasure principle in order to ensure stable social reproduction; or: valorization of capital). If we also leave aside the fact that the aim of Fukuyama’s project is an honestly critical conservative appraisal of “liberal democracy”, discovering its weaknesses in order to make it indefinitely sustainable, whereas Fisher is concerned with finding ways to escape its enclosure and ultimately destroy it, the thinking of both leads to a postulation of the necessity of an “outside to capital” for future historical development. For Fukuyama, the principles binding communities together under the regime of liberal democracy have eroded and if this erosion continues, “community life” on which this regime depends will become impossible: “in the long run those liberal principles had a corrosive effect on the values predating liberalism necessary to sustain strong communities, and thereby on a liberal society's ability to be self-sustaining.” (327) Therefore, the instruments for the revitalization of communal life in the future, what has been pushed outside of the regime established at the End of History, must somehow be brought in to help revitalize and sustain it. Whether it is God once again, or “new values”, or some other, more innovative conception, Fukuyama does not really say; what seems unavoidable from the position he develops, however, is that the process includes a reintroduction of the transcendental signified and the consequent establishment of an exclusionary moral order

with clearly defined "outsides": "This decline has occurred not despite liberal principles, but because of them. This suggests that no fundamental strengthening of community life will be possible unless individuals give back certain of their rights to communities, and accept the return of certain historical forms of intolerance." (326)

For Fisher, who is generally of more importance to us in this study and to whose conception we will be returning to repeatedly, the category of the outside is necessary for making the established order appear as historically contingent, and to motivate and facilitate the project of moving beyond it. In conceptualizing this, he relies on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lacan's concept of the Real:

> For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us. (18)

Based on the above, one could perhaps argue it is Fukuyama's understanding of the ruling historical order that, unexpectedly, leaves more opportunities for the kind of socially transformative project that Fisher is committed to because Fukuyama characterizes that order as containing both the apparent and seriously destabilizing contradictions and as involving some form of politics of rational, or at least guided, internal agency that can be sufficiently powerful to transform it. For Fisher, on the other hand, the system is so overwhelmingly powerful that not much except a radical encounter with the Lacanian Real can bring us to even consider its weaknesses. But that aside, what is crucial to observe here is another convergence: both of them conceive of the necessary external

corrective to capital/liberal democracy as involving forms of regulative universality in order to proceed with the revitalization or discovery of forms of communal life that have either been suppressed or made impossible under capital.

Fisher, for instance, pleads both for a subordination of the state to the general will which "involves, naturally, resuscitating the very concept of a general will, reviving – and modernizing – the idea of a public space that is not reducible to an aggregation of individuals and their interests" (77) and a refocusing/reconfiguring of desire at the level of the subject, involving nothing short of a new ethics of desire he calls "new ascesis": "If […] unlimited license leads to misery and disaffection, then limitations placed on desire are likely to quicken, rather than deaden it. In any case, rationing of some sort is inevitable." (80) Fukuyama, analogously, speaks of the long-term unsustainability of communities founded on the principles of "rational consumption" and, as we have seen from one of the above quotes, concludes that correcting this will also require a transformation founded on new forms of limitation and rationing. This limitation, as in Fisher, proceeds simultaneously on the communal level (a reduction of what is now conceived as "rights[12]"), and on the level of the invididual (a reduction in what he terms "private comforts" in order to revitalize "thymotic striving" necessary for social development): "The decline of community life suggests that in the future, we risk becoming secure and self-absorbed last men, devoid of thymotic striving for higher goals in our pursuit of private comforts." (328) In other words, both thinkers can be understood, if observed at a sufficient level of abstraction, as advocating an analogous ethics and politics – an ethics and politics of reduction.

Such ethics and politics appear as the necessary answer to the (self)destructive tendencies of liberal democracy and capital but our consumerist, liberal-democratic imaginary is of course

[12] "[…] no fundamental strengthening of community life will be possible unless individuals give back certain of their rights to communities, and accept the return of certain historical forms of intolerance." (326)

predisposed to conceiving any politics of reduction as evil, puritan, and most likely also tied to "outdated" authoritarian state institutions. But this is an ideological chimera and, as both Fukuyama's right-wing and Fisher's left-wing perspective help to make clear, the reduction should be understood as a necessary precondition for the liberation of those human capacities which remain submerged and repressed under the ideological imperative to enjoyment through consumption. Fukuyama, as we have repeatedly pointed out, emphasizes the liberation and successful sublimation of those capacities which can be brought into the service of stabilization of the liberal democratic system established under capitalism and can serve to strengthen liberally conceived forms of communal life: by providing outlets for patrician thymotic striving, worthy individuals[13] could achieve self-actualization and avoid the destabilizing excess of negative affect that registers as "boredom". Fisher's egalitarian project, on the other hand, postulates the liberation of the human capacities stunted under such a regime as an aim in itself and points out that this liberation can occur only through a radical dismantling and reconstitution of the very social relations and forms of communal life developed under the historical order Fukuyama desires to save.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that both of these contrasting and to a large degree mutually exclusive analyses focus on those consequences brought about by the post-socialist re-alignment of the world-system that appear on the level of the subject. Both the term "capitalist realism" and "End of History" index a state of crisis that registers as negative affective loads of subjects entrapped by social imaginaries that constrict the realm of socio-historical possibility in what appears as a "total society". In other words, what both these analyses attempt to address is a crisis

[13] Fukuyama is a conservative moralist and speaks quite openly about a hierarchy of "serious" and "just" causes thymothic striving can be poured into. See the final chapter of *End of History* entitled "Immense Wars of the Spirit". (328-339)

of historical imagination. If one of the defining characteristics of postmodern culture as theorized by Fredric Jameson was what he called the loss, or waning, of historicity, perhaps it can be claimed – in the same way Fisher claims that capitalist realism in relation to postmodernism represents a change in degree that reached the point of qualitative difference – that the ultimate consequence of the waning of historicity is a full-fledged crisis of historical imagination.

Again, both Fisher and Fukuyama, despite their vast ideological differences, recognize the existence of this crisis. Indeed, it is the central problem of Fisher's book, announced as early as the rhetorical question that serves as the subtitle: *Is There No Alternative?* In Fukuyama, the recognition is implicit and the crisis acknowledged indirectly, by way of diagnosing the erosion of communal bonds and the self-indulgent docility of the last men, a situation characterized by the lack of opportunities to productively channel "thymotic striving", the attendant universalization of static "boredom", and eventual atrophy of thymos. As we pointed out above, neither of them considers these problems solvable strictly within the framework of the historical order under which they appear. This necessitates, in Fisher, radical rupture with that order, or, in Fukuyama, importation of exogenous elements that can help transform it sustainably. But in any case, both strategies require a postulation of an "outside". The specific forms of politics and ethics of reduction that both rely on are the foreign elements, "objects" imported from this imagined outside to help bring about the goals set by each strategy. In Fisher's case this means legitimizing the ascesis intended to refocus desire and revitalize anti-systemic politics capable of inaugurating a new historical order, and in Fukuyama's a reformist reduction in what is conceived as individual "rights" and "freedoms" that would serve to revitalize communal life and save the system from itself.

Both of them, as we have tried to demonstrate, attempt to make visible in theoretical form the constitutive logic of the historical order emerging with the post-socialist transformation of the

world-system and which registers on the level of the subject in uncomfortable ways. We will observe this logic as formalized in a set of categories that organize the instituting social imaginaries established under that world-system. But we will also use these two opposing theoretical interventions as historical coordinates. Fukuyama's essay on the basis of which the later book was written was first published in 1989 as the socialist bloc entered the final phase of its collapse. Fisher's book was published in 2009, soon after the global economic meltdown that marked the end of the age of innocence of the neoliberal consensus. This also makes them useful as endpoints for a periodization of the literary corpus which we will be analyzing in this study. Beyond determining how the social imaginaries characteristic of the post-socialist world-system "register" in narrative literary form, our first and foremost task will be to determine whether narrative form, despite depending on the reproduction of those same social imaginaries to construct intelligible narrative representations, is also conducive to the introduction of imaginary significations foreign to their logic. We will try to ascertain in what ways literary texts warp and reconstitute those imaginaries, if indeed they do so. The foreign categories of "outside" and "reduction" that we extracted from the above juxtaposition of Fukuyama and Fisher will represent important analytical tools.

Before we turn to a necessary theorization of the concept of the social imaginary and the process of its inscription into literary narrative form we can turn to an older insight by Fredric Jameson in order to demonstrate that this process has been noticed in cultural analysis even prior to 1989. The insight, which pre-dates by nine years Jameson's original theorization of postmodernism, can be found in his 1975 essay "World Reduction in Le Guin." In that essay, Jameson identifies in the genre of science fiction a specific narrative device that he correlates to the fear of ineluctable encroachment by capital and the anxiety of total subsumption. He ends up criticizing it as a symptom of what might be called the poverty of Utopian imagination, prefiguring

in this way the later ubiquitous diagnoses of the crisis of historical imagination at the End of History. Analyzing two novels by Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, he detects in them a narrative device based on

> the principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification which [we] will henceforth term *world reduction*. (271)

Jameson does not suggest that the narrative device he identifies is characteristic of the Utopian genre as such. Instead, he speculates "that it is the massive commodity environment of late capitalism that has called up this particular literary and imaginative strategy, which would then amount to a political stance as well." (278) We can read the thesis from the final part of Jameson's quote, namely that the imaginative strategy called up by the massive commodity environment of late capitalism translates into specific political stance, in different ways. Firstly, we can claim that Le Guin uses the device of world reduction as a narrative homology of the same type of politics of reduction we identified in the later analyses by Fisher and Fukuyama. In other words, we can read it as a narrative response to the same underlying understanding of the unsustainability of infinite expansion of the world of capital and as an attempt to narratively develop alternative social imaginary significations and insert them in the narrative worlds of her novels. Thus, what is essentially a political proposition – that limits to the dynamics of the existing system must be set if self-destruction is to be avoided – is operationalized at the level of social imaginaries regulating the structure of those narrative worlds. Or we can understand it even more radically: in *The*

Dispossessed, where the represented Utopian world is scarce and somber and contrasted to the decadent abundance of the more "realistic" neighboring world, a proposition is put forth that the establishment of a society guaranteeing the conditions for a high degree of autonomous development and emancipation to each of its individual members requires a degree of material scarcity compared to the productivist logic of social reproduction governing capitalist modernity. Put more succinctly, Le Guin's novel is a narrative exploration of the proposition that scarcity and reduction – not abundance and expansion – are the conditions of possibility of Utopia.

But Jameson himself does not seem to read it quite in the same way. Instead he offers an early iteration of the oft-quoted dictum ascribed to him, that it is "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." If we read the final paragraph of his essay correctly, as reflecting both on Le Guin's proposition "not to ask questions" found in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and the narrative device of world reduction she employs, then world reduction, with its systematic exclusion of the "multiplicity of what exists", implies precisely the avoidance of asking unpleasant questions, a symptom of "the way in which the utopian imagination protects itself against a fatal return of just those historical contradictions from which it was supposed to provide relief. In that case, the deepest subject of Le Guin's *LHD* would not be utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place." (280)

Although Jameson is indeed rightly suspicious of the latent quietism he identifies in utopian narratives that deploy the device of world reduction, it might be more productive to take them, as we first suggested, at face value. If we understand the "reduced worlds" in those narratives not as simplifications that legitimize the avoidance of questions about unpleasant historical contradictions occurring in reality, but as targeted speculations on the potential contradictions that utopian social

orders themselves might bring about or even require in order to emerge[14], then the device of world reduction appears homologous to the politics and ethics of reduction we analyzed above on the examples of Fisher and Fukuyama. In other words, it seems that various "political stances", even opposing ones, responding to the problem of the "massive commodity environment of late capitalism" do not necessarily exhibit a poverty of utopian imagination, as Jameson claims. It might be, instead, that in such a historical context utopia itself is imagined as a form of poverty (in contrast to the excessive, corrupt, and dangerous abundance of late capitalism). This is perhaps not so perverse or counter-intuitive a thesis when observed in the light of Fisher's capitalist realism and the ascetic desire he advocates for, or even in the light of Fukuyama's reduction of individual rights as a precondition for renewal of communal life, which both appear, one could argue, as symptoms of disillusionment with, and awareness of the destructive nature of the said abundance.

The existence of such homologies between narrative representations of an anarchist science fiction writer, critical interventions of a communist theorist and critic of culture, and reformist warnings of a conservative political philosopher[15], leads us to the conclusion that these differing responses to what is essentially the same problem rely on figures of thought emerging from the same field of theoretical possibilities and cultural tropes. Or in other words, that both revolutionary critiques and reformist defenses of late capitalism draw from and depend on a shared social imaginary constituting the social world of late capitalism.

It is here finally where we turn to discuss and develop more precisely the concept of the (social) imaginary itself. To do this we will be relying significantly on the work of Cornelius

[14] For instance, the Western utopian imagination is rife with figures of abundance. The proposition that a utopian order can be established only under conditions of scarcity – that scarcity is the condition of possibility of Utopia – is not only quite radical politically, but also poetically.
[15] Especially having in mind the fact that Le Guin's novels precede Fukuyama by fifteen to twenty years and Fisher by twenty more.

Castoriadis and will attempt to adapt his concepts for the purposes of literary and cultural theory in order to theorize the relation between social imaginary institution and literary form in the post-socialist period. Our orientation in history, the periodization we established, relies on the terms "end of history" and "capitalist realism" which serve as our beginning and end points. Both of these terms, and the concepts they denote, attempt to map out the contours of the thinkable within the socio-historical framework instituted in the post-socialist period, as well as discuss the symptomatic limitations of the culture developed in that historical context. Despite the usual postmodern objections to such attempts at *Zeitgeist* diagnosis and other related attempts to conceptualize social totality, and despite the difficulties in empirically grounding these, if we assume they do indeed refer to something real – i.e. if they make the logic of history and the dynamics of collective life perceivable by recognizing them in traces they leave in tangible cultural forms – in what forms and how exactly do these traces appear? This will be one of the guiding questions in this study as we examine literary discourse, or more precisely what we call the post-socialist novel. Also, if there are global frameworks of reference regulating the production of meaning in history, and thus also our conceptions of social life, if there indeed is a social imaginary of capitalist universality, what are the discursive procedures for its criticism and transformation?

1.3 What is the Imaginary?

To begin with, it is necessary to point out that it is common, perhaps especially in contexts where literature is discussed, to identify the imaginary with individual imagination. This presupposes a conception of "imagination" as a (cognitive) *faculty*[16] activated at will by the

[16] Our analysis will depend here on what Wolfgang Iser identified as a "historical sequence" of conceptions of the imaginary from "faculty", to "act", to the "radical imaginary". Iser writes his excellent, insightful, and idiosyncratic

individual subject, a conception that – once again, especially in contexts where literature is discussed – owes a great deal to the legacy of Romanticism, its characteristic conceptions of the subject, and ideology of the aesthetic. However, this conception, in the more than two centuries since the Romantics, proved not only to be theoretically inadequate, presupposing as it does a relatively solid, coherent, and autonomous subject as the activator of faculties (imagination among them), but also self-defeating: "The nature of a 'faculty' is bound to change when the agent that activates it changes. Coupling the imagination with the self-constituting subject considerably altered the traditional concept of the faculties; but, finally, the classification of the imagination as a faculty became virtually obsolete […]" (Iser 194)

But even when the conception of imagination as a faculty is left behind, and the subject is abstracted to "consciousness" so that imagination turns from a faculty activated by the individual subject into an *act* of *consciousness* relating to the world – an act, it follows from such a conception, that necessarily results in the annihilation of the world consciousness relates to, as it occurs in the phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre[17] – the concept still remains tied to a form of idealistic individualism that leaves no place for either the dimension of history nor for socio-historical creation. Cornelius Castoriadis, in an essay crediting Aristotle with the "discovery of the imagination" and tracing the "cover ups" and conceptual contortions that relegated imagination to a marginal place within the dominant Western philosophical paradigms, terms such approaches "psycho-logical" or "ego-logical" and demonstrates, on the examples of Aristotle's *De Anima* and

history of the concept, or better, history of the discourses to which the concept is central, within the framework of his literary anthropology. See Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, especially 171-246.

[17] As a humorous aside but also relevant to the point we are making here, let us mention a footnote in another work by Castoriadis where he sarcastically refers to Sartre's idealism, i.e. his refusal to admit historical determinants in his conception of the subject (or more precisely consciousness): "The author of this statement [J.-P. Sartre] was no doubt certain that he carried no trace at all of another within himself (otherwise, he might just as well have said that Hell was himself). He has, moreover, recently confirmed this interpretation by stating that he had no super-ego. How could we object to this, as we have always thought that he spoke of matters on this earth as if he were a being arriving here from another planet." (*Imaginary Institution* 384-5)

Kant's concept of transcendental imagination, how remaining within the ego-logical horizon makes it impossible to recognize the creative dimension of the imaginary, or "imagination as a source of *creation*." ("The Discovery" 245) Criticizing simultaneously both Aristotle and Kant, he makes the point that in order "to furnish an access […] to *what* intemporally *is*" both Aristotle's "first imagination" and Kant's "transcendental imagination" have to be posited "as always producing the Stable and the Same", or in other words, that thinking imagination always and invariably in relation to the subject, as it is done within the ego-logical framework, deprives it of its creative potential. Furthermore, if "the transcendental imagination set itself the task of imagining anything whatsoever, the world would collapse immediately" – which is exactly the consequence of Sartre's later conception, bound as it is to his ahistorical "consciousness". (ibid.)

Castoriadis does not rest with this criticism, however, and develops a major conceptual departure from the ego-logical paradigms of imagination that conceive it in an instrumentalist manner, as a supplementary mechanism within the arrangement of the human psyche. As we shall see, this departure and the resultant questioning of the deterministic relation between the imaginary and the world, or between the imaginary and other, superordinate, constitutive factors of subjectivity, is also what makes Castoriadis' theory an important reference point in attempts to think the relation between the poetic (imagination) and the historical (world) beyond the concept of ideology as the key mediating factor. Or more precisely, Castoriadis' theory is useful in conceptualizing that dimension of the poetic irreducible to socio-historical *reproduction* of (ideological) forms[18] – its creative, irreducibly *productive* dimension.

[18] Castoriadis' sustained engagement with Aristotle, crucial for his innovative theory of the imaginary, leads us also to invoke the Aristotelian departure from Plato's theory of mimesis as imitation. Aristotle envisions a more creative role for mimesis, and conceives it as reconstruction, not reproduction. Interestingly, as a (former) adherent of Marxist theory, Castoriadis does not utilize the concept of Utopia in his theory of creative imagination, no matter how productive it was for the strand of Western Marxism that, very roughly, can be seen as developing along the main line of Bloch-Adorno-Jameson and that deployed this concept in order to move away from vulgar materialism of reflection theory and the base-superstructure model.

Conceptualizing the imaginary outside the standard ego-logical model, outside all deterministic relations and hierarchies of causation, as Castoriadis does, represents an attempt to avoid reproducing a version of reflection theory, either a materialist or an idealist one – both of which rely on a definition of the imaginary as an "image of something." To insist on such a concept of the imaginary, it is our claim, is especially important in the historical context established under capitalist realism, in which any possibility of radical *poiesis*, any attempt to bring into being a radically new social form, or more narrowly a poetic one, is precluded by the imperative to adhere to the ideological "principle of realism" universalized in contemporary global culture. In such a context, the activity of the imaginary is corralled into the narrow framework of narcissistic identification with whatever instance of the commodity form (i.e. lifestyle, brand, product, etc.) is currently on offer. The consequence of this particular ideological hold on the imaginary is a reduction of its radical potential until it behaves precisely as it is supposed to behave under the Lacanian conception of the imaginary in its mirror phase, i.e. before the symbolic register (language, etc.) is introduced. Under that conception, the imaginary operates by establishing a dynamic network of relations between the "foremost imaginary object" – the ego – and other objects. Relations "wherein everything is played out in terms of but one opposition: same or different", and where "same" is affectively correlated to love and "different" to hate. (Fink 84) In this process of identification and disidentification, the imaginary is a type of recognition algorithm scanning the environment for images (of itself) to establish a desired form of relation to a perceived object.

In what is often described as his most important work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis objects very strongly to that particular conception right at the outset. It is useful to quote the objection fully here in order to demonstrate the main point of difference between his conception and the better known Lacanian one, disseminated and established as it is across a variety

of humanities and social sciences disciplines. Castoriadis writes, avoiding to refer to Lacan by name:

> that which I call the imaginary has nothing to do with the representations currently circulating under this heading. In particular, it has nothing to do with that which is presented as "imaginary" by certain currents in psychoanalysis: namely, the "specular" which is obviously only an image of and a reflected image, in other words a reflection, and in yet other words a byproduct of Platonic ontology (eidolon) even if those who speak of it are unaware of its origin. The imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the "mirror" itself and its possibility, and the other as mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is creation ex nihilo. Those who speak of "imaginary", understanding by this the "specular", the reflection of the "fictive", do no more than repeat, usually without realizing it, the affirmation which has for all time chained them to the underground of the famous cave: it is necessary that this world be an image of something. The imaginary of which I am speaking is not an image of. It is the unceasing and essentially undetermined (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of 'something'. What we call "reality" and "rationality" are its works. (3)

As opposed to the specular conception of the imaginary, the one put forth by Castoriadis' is a radical one in the original etymologically sense of the Latin noun *radix*, or "root". Its aim is to release the imaginary from the ontological hold of either materialist or idealist normativity and establish it as an undetermined ontological fundament, as ontology itself:

> representation, imagination and imaginary have never been seen for themselves but always in relation to something else - to sensation, intellection, perception or reality - submitted to the normativity incorporated in the inherited ontology, brought within the viewpoint of true and false, instrumentalized within a function, means judged according to their possible contribution to the accomplishment of the end that is truth or access to true being, the being of being (ontos on). (168)

Under such an ontology, quite unlike in Lacan who explains the emergence of meaning in the unconscious with reference to the symbolic register ("the unconscious is structured like a language", i.e. the unconscious is the discourse of the Other), the imaginary for Castroiadis underlies not only the process of semantic creation, but is a condition of possibility of psychic functioning as such. As the psychoanalyst Fernando Urribarri elaborates, in Castoriadis "the basic operation of the psyche is imagining" and "the creation of imaginary meaning." Imagination holds primacy as "the source of psychical meaning: open to elucidation and understanding (as psychoanalytical interpretation illustrates) but irreducible to logical functioning (and formalization) as well as to social significations." (43) Of course, such an autonomist conception of the imaginary – in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* Wolfgang Iser even characterizes Castoriadis' imaginary as an instance of the alchemical and philosophical "materia prima" – is open to the criticism that the ontology resulting from it is radically relativist, a voluntarist or a solipsistic one, and to the suggestion that the imaginary thus conceived betrays an idealist conception that negates or diminishes "reality" and conceives of history as entirely arbitrary. And indeed, it is a conception that has "far-reaching consequences, not least for the conception of the subject and its relation with the social: […] the metaphysics and the ideology of the ontological alienation of the psyche to

language and the symbolic order, as well as the idea of an inner and intrinsic passivity of the subject in relation to meaning and signification." (Urribarri 43) However, the psyche is not a static object, nor a readymade entity that is drawn already operational and fully-formed into the historical order. It emerges through socialization and is embedded in a network of pre-existing social imaginary significations and forms upon which its development hinges, or which in Urribarri's words the psyche "demands." This demand for imaginary meaning, the capacity of the psyche to produce, attach itself to, and engage with social imaginary significations that pre-exist it, is in fact a precondition of socialization: "defined as the change from originary psychical meaning to the predominance of social imaginary significations, organized in/by the social institution of language." (43) But this does not mean that the structure of the psyche can be reduced to social imaginary significations. The imaginary of the individual psyche is not conceived by Castoriadis as a Xerox machine for external social imaginary significations, it is neither a vessel to pour pre-existing meaning into, nor a blind identification algorithm. Successful socialization of the individual requires integration of the *productive* capacities of the individual imaginary within the existing order of social imaginary significations. Or in other words, there has to be sufficient space within the social order, the order of social imaginary significations, for the individual imaginary to operate, i.e. create meaning and find pleasure. If this is impossible, the result is psychological dysfunction.

We can easily expand this observation and use it to explain the adaptive capacities and the long-term stability of capitalism despite serious challenges it has faced throughout its history in the form of numerous anti-systemic movements, revolutionary events, and other collective political responses to its systemic contradictions. Its "stability in instability" can be observed as a consequence of, among other things, the historically unprecedented freedom the system has allowed for the activity and actualization of the imaginary and of the capacity of the system to

successfully coopt and subsume even relatively hostile social imaginary significations – so long as the foundations of the system, the commodity form and the capital-relation, remain intact. The relatively wide boundaries it sets to the activity of the imaginary are sufficient to keep it functioning in a manner that is, from the point of view of capital, productive and resistant to sustained political challenges. So if capital has indeed colonized the imaginary to the extent to which Fisher observes, it has not done so by means of force but by means of negotiation and mimicry, by accommodating whatever new forms the imaginary can produce, as long as they do not question its systemic foundations.

However, one should be careful here and point out that it is very doubtful if we can call the contemporary variant of the system so functional and stable. One of the phenomena characteristic of that variant, as Mark Fisher observes, is the "mental health plague", i.e. the concerning prevalence of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, especially among young people, in contemporary Western society. Fisher notices that under capitalist realism, these problems are never addressed as social problems (or consequences of socialization into capitalist realism). Instead, during the past several decades there occurred what he calls "the vast *privatization of stress*", i.e. the relegation of the responsibility for mental health to the level of individual, the attendant medicalization of mental health problems, and the normalization of their widespread occurrence. He asks the following question: "[…] how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill?" and suggests that this is grounds for reconsidering capitalism as "inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high." (*Capitalist Realism* 19) If we integrate this insight with Urribarri's claims about the connection between the (socially instituted) space for the productive activity of the imaginary and successful socialization, we can draw the conclusion that at least parts of the generalized psychological distress Fisher points out can be ascribed to the deterioration of conditions, under

capitalist realism, for the socialization of the imaginary. Or put differently, we can relate this to what we called above "the crisis of historical imagination" and propose the thesis that one of the causes of this mental health plague might be the closure of avenues for the productive activity of the individual imaginary and the narrowing down of the field of historical possibility. From this perspective, contemporary capitalism appears not simply less than stable or dysfunctional, but positively anti-social.

It is useful here to go back to Fredric Jameson's essay on Le Guin in order to reinterpret some of the conclusions from that essay from the perspective we are developing here. As it was mentioned above, Jameson reads the injunction not to ask questions from Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as "the way in which the utopian imagination protects itself against a fatal return of just those historical contradictions from which it was supposed to provide relief. In that case, the deepest subject of Le Guin's *LHD* would not be utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place." (280) If it is indeed true that Utopia cannot be conceived in late capitalism[19] and that this is indeed the "deepest subject" of Le Guin's novel, then the later development of this insight, which draws attention to the limits of historical imagination in our time, Jameson's famous and famously overused observation that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism", has been misinterpreted as an observation about failure. Instead, one can claim, following Fisher again, that under conditions of capitalist realism – where the activity of the imaginary is not only successfully incorporated into the ever-flexible framework of the system, but where that activity is always already "precorporated" – radical imagination does not "fail", but cannot structurally ever move beyond the reproduction of preexisting, commodified forms. However, since radical imagination is *per definitionem* uncontainable, always strives

[19] Except perhaps in the form of "ambiguous utopia", which is the subtitle of Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*, in which Utopia only occurs under conditions of extreme scarcity – and not as historical Utopias of abundance.

towards the production of semantic excess characteristic of what we might simply call "new meaning", then perhaps the apparent poverty of contemporary Utopian imagination and the fixation on pervasive figure of the apocalypse represents an attempt to break the hold that capitalist realism has over the imaginary. In other words, under conditions of capitalist realism, where "realism" describes not only the world as it is from the perspective of ruling class ideology but also regulates the logic of all imaginable worlds, imagining the world's end should perhaps be understood less as a failure, as a symptom of passivity or self-indulgent despair, and more as an attempt to claim freedom for the imaginary, an attempt to produce the conditions of possibility of future Utopian thinking. From this perspective, the apocalypse under capitalist realism is revealed as an attempt to look for Utopia[20].

In any case, the above theorization of the relation between the imaginary and socialization leads us to the following point: under capitalist realism, the "predominance of social imaginary significations" over "originary psychical meaning" is so overwhelming that the space left for positive projections of the imaginary is, if not non-existent, then at least very narrow. This results in an impossibility to functionally socialize the imaginary which should, from the standpoint of long-term viability of the system and on top of the highly precarious conditions of labor and the anxiety-producing models of biopower that characterize that system, be understood not simply as one of the contributing factors to the deterioration of mental health across the West but as one of the dialectical contradictions of the system that over time significantly contributes to its instability. The contemporary apocalyptic imaginary and its social imaginary significations might thus be

[20] Elsewhere, we have pointed out a tendency in some characteristic recent apocalyptic narratives to transform their post-apocalyptic settings into Utopian experiments and to blur the boundaries between the apocalyptic and the Utopian. See: Tutek, H. "Dwelling in the Apocalypse: Capitalist Modernity, Antimodernism, Zombies." Besides Robert Kirkman's comic *The Walking Dead* discussed in that article, George Romero's 2005 film *Land of the Dead* can be read as exhibiting the same tendency.

understood as a form of prefigurative cultural politics or a conditioning response developed in preparation for the moment the instability reaches critical levels, conditioning motivated by an unconscious (and fundamentally Utopian) belief that things cannot go on as they are. In such a historical situation, the outcomes at the level of the individual psyche are similarly destructive both for the "unsocialized" imaginary (the imaginary that actively resists socialization), and for the imaginary fully socialized into capitalist realism: they are either socialization for which the price of psychic dysfunction must be paid, or self-destructive resistance which finds masochistic pleasure in imagining the apocalyptic, salvation-less destruction of the "socializing" world.

The contemporary erasure of boundaries between Utopian and apocalyptic narratives should from this perspective be read not as anti-Utopian (or dystopian) but as a symptom of the dawning cultural awareness that the positive social projections Utopian imagination produces are on their own not only insufficient to break the hold that capital has over the imaginary, but that they now more than ever emerge precorporated, as images of the world they are supposed to replace. What is necessary to break this hold then, on top of producing social imaginary significations that can mobilize social groups in creation of entirely new forms of social being, is to destroy the world (i.e. the social imaginary significations that constitute it). There are no immediate Utopian exits and imaginary significations can become truly social, or in other words can mobilize social groups on a large scale, only insofar as they offer the pleasure of creation outside of the accommodating prison of abundance that is offered by capital. If the imaginary is immanently creative, if it always, as per Castoriadis, "exceeds the possibilities of the material conditions of life" (Steger and James "Three Dimensions" 63), then it also must be destructive as the new can be born only insofar as the old is left behind dead and decomposing. Contemporary apocalyptic-Utopian narratives thus offer a paradigmatic cultural form in which the logic of "destructive pre-creation", formally speaking a revolutionary logic, can convincingly appear under capitalist realism: the sparse

apocalyptic chronotopes, radically "reduced worlds" produced by the contemporary apocalyptic imagination are representative spaces in which the contours of the Utopian are thought and negotiated in global post-socialist culture.

Such an interpretation depends on a concept of the imaginary that conceives it as capable of autonomous semantic production, or more precisely, capable of producing new meaning, new social imaginary significations that avoid being bogged down in the mirage of capitalist realism. An elaborate version of this can be found in the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis. However, most working conceptions of the imaginary that are encountered across contemporary humanities and social sciences, including Fisher's, rely on theoretical traditions dependent on the reflection, or specular, theory of the imaginary. This makes it difficult to conceptualize not only new meaning production but the possibility of any autonomous collective activity aimed at radical socio-cultural transformation, and has serious consequences both for cultural theory and for politics more broadly.

In cultural theory, such concepts have been used to explain social reproduction and the mediating role ideology plays in containing the potentially destabilizing semantic excess that appears as a consequence of unfettered activity of the imaginary in the process of production of cultural forms. In disciplines that study social relations and social reproduction *per se,* such as sociology or anthropology, reflection theory, or more precisely the specular concepts of the (social) imaginary, have also been used for a similar purpose, even if those sometimes claim Castoriadis as an influence. (cf. Strauss "The Imaginary") As the central unit of analysis in those disciplines is the social group (or the individual as defined through relations to given social groups), what they primarily observe is the activity of the imaginary as it manifests for the collective in social situations, or in other words, they interrogate the function of social imaginary significations in the (re)production of specific modes of sociality. In order to emphasize the activity of the imaginary materialized in cultural forms as they regulate the dynamics of collective life, the concept "social

imaginary" is used. Often, when that concept is deployed, it denotes something akin to "cultural model" (Strauss 329): a regulative social principle, a "structuring structure" broader and looser than ideology which exists across a culture, provides the framework of desirable models of behavior for a range of social practices, and limits the field of political possibility when communal life is envisioned. What such conceptions lack, relying as they do on the specular theory of the imaginary, is an understanding of its productive capacity, its socially transformative aspect and the Utopian traces it is capable of producing and incorporating into cultural forms.

1.4 What is the Social Imaginary?

The particular usage of the concept of the imaginary to explain the dynamics of collective life can be traced as it emerged and was refined and rearticulated over the past several centuries in attempts to explain the subjective dimension of the relation between persons and their social environment. Wolfgang Iser, in the above mentioned study, notices that in the historical periods succeeding Romanticism, the term "imaginary" appears as a substitute for previous terminology, more specifically for the term "imagination", and that this substitution "shows clearly that it began to be viewed as a basic act of relating us to the world." (185) In other words, the concept acquired a social component distinguished from the conception of imagination as "individual faculty." In this here study, we will utilize the concept of the imaginary in a similar vein, albeit with an emphasis on its productive, socially-transformative aspect, conceiving of cultural form as the terrain on which conceptions of political possibility and models of communal life are produced, interrogated, and reproduced or redeveloped as social imaginary significations. We will try to observe the social imaginary significations which we find characteristic of the regime of capitalist realism and examine how they are formalized in literary discourse, asking the question of what consequences does that have on the form and narrative possibilities of the novel. We will analyze

the logic of narrative "world-building" in what we term the post-socialist novel and reflect on the socio-cultural effects of narrative forms when conceived as social imaginary significations. In this, our fundamental assumption will be that observing how the social imaginary is formalized in literary discourse leads to an understanding of how literary discourse is used as an instrument of communal life – how it "relates us to the world."

Before we delve into this project in a more focused manner, it is necessary to examine in more detail the common uses of the concept of the social imaginary. While doing this, we will try to modify that concept in line with the literary-theoretical purpose of our study and differentiate it from those established uses. As Paul James explains in an essay tracing the history of the concept, which overlaps to a significant degree with Iser's, the debates over the concept of the social imaginary started off as cosmologies – attempts to isolate a universal regulating principle characteristic of an age – and have emerged on the background of Christian theological conceptions of the Spirit. With the secularization of those debates and their further epistemological refinement, there occurred a significant change: "Thus, across the mid-twentieth century to the present, this quest changed in epistemological form, shifting from an emphasis on the couplet of national spirit and world-spirit to a secular conception of the social imaginary. […] Cosmology slowly learnt to live under the dominance of a constructivist frame." (James 34) James goes on to delineate the history of those debates and the transformation of their central tenets and organizing categories, tracing how concepts such as "the spirit of the age" and "the spirit of humanity" gave way "to a new conception of the imaginary, including the social imaginary." (37) James traces this uneven trajectory (or more precisely: trajectories) from thinkers such as Voltaire and Hegel to Heidegger, and then more recently Sartre, Lacan, Castoriadis, to finally Charles Taylor and Manfred Steger.

Despite the emergence of the concept itself in such a broad philosophical context, James' history and usage is bound to the discipline of sociology and the particular set of concerns that arise

from its institutional and methodological frameworks. The empiricism of that discipline, however, stands in an uneasy relationship to the problem of the social imaginary, since the problem itself is of dubious "facticity," eschews easy methodological formalization and is laden with epistemological aporias seemingly more at home in what we call the humanities than what we call social sciences[21]. The problem the concept raises, to put it bluntly, is the problem of the status of meaning in history and the ontology and social function of representation. As mentioned above, the most common way to address this problem from disciplinary perspectives of sociology or anthropology, is to rely on the concept of the social imaginary that Strauss describes as "cultural model" or cognitive schema. (329-334) This perspective, however useful it may be in explaining the dynamics of social reproduction and identifying cultural mechanisms which societies and social groups develop in order to ensure historical continuity, is less useful when trying to account for the social production of new meaning and conceptions of political possibility. Going down this path cannot prove sufficiently productive for a critical analysis of cultural forms that takes seriously the capacity of the aesthetic to move across and beyond the ideological, and that is interested in the semantically creative potentials of *mimesis*, as it quickly leads back to the perennial problem of determination (i.e. the problem of the nature of the relation between representations/cultural forms and the material conditions under which they emerge) and does not help with the reconceptualization of the imaginary as a source of new meaning. If we examine more closely a contemporary sociological conception of the social imaginary, the one proposed by Manfred Steger (and elaborated further by Paul James) in his attempt to account for the "subjective dimension of globalization" or the constitution of global "imagined communities", we can both try to enrich the

[21] See Gilleard 2018 for a discussion of precisely these issues from the perspective of sociology of culture.

conceptual toolbox useful to our purpose here, and go beyond the limitations of that kind of approach.

In his 2008 book *The Rise of the Global Imaginary. Political Ideologies from the French Revolution to the Global War on Terror*, Manfred Steger writes about the theoretical background of the concept of social imaginary that he uses:

> Drawing on Benedict Anderson's account of the imagined community of the nation, Charles Taylor argues that the social imaginary is neither a theory nor an ideology, but an implicit "background" that makes possible communal practices and a widely shared sense of their legitimacy. It offers explanations of how "we"—the members of the community—fit together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations. These background understandings are both normative and factual in the sense of providing us both with the standards of how things usually go on and how they ought to go on. Much in the same vein, Pierre Bourdieu notes that the social imaginary sets the prereflexive framework for our daily routines and our commonsense social repertoires. (6)

In a 2013 co-authored article entitled "Levels of Subjective Globalization: Ideologies, Imaginaries, Ontologies", Steger and James further elaborate the reference to Bourdieu and provide an account of the social imaginary as both structured and structuring:

> Our use of the term is more akin to Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the pre-reflexive *habitus*, that is, 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures

> predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations' (Bourdieu 1990:53). And yet, the concept of the *habitus* is too normatively driven while the concept of the 'social imaginary' has a stronger sense of the social whole or the general 'given' social order. (30)

The Stegerian concept of the social imaginary, thus, refers to the ways in which social existence is conceived in the broadest sense: what kind of a social whole is pre-reflexively felt as real/operative, what kind of general, broader framework lived communal relations are imagined to unfold in at a given historical moment. This "sense of the social whole" unavoidably also organizes communal practices and guides and structures relations between people sharing the same social imaginary. But even more importantly, when understood in relation to Bourdieu's theorization of the habitus, the social imaginary is a determinant in the process of "generating and organizing" representations. In other words, since representations emerge from experiences unfolding within a certain social whole and are understood in relation to it, the social imaginary represents an unavoidable framework of reference for the production of representations. It regulates the coherence of a semantic universe (which finds its historical, material correlates in existing social relations and networks of institutions belonging to the same social whole) within which cultural forms appear as referring to "the world", in which they appear as "realistic", understandable, meaningful. Therefore, any narrative representation, any attempt at narrative "world-building", to use a term that recently gained popularity across different literary and media theories, is necessarily constituted in reference to the established social imaginary.

We will return to this point and elaborate it further, but before we do that let us emphasize that the social imaginary Steger and James speak of here should not be thought of as a strict set of principles, reducible to "official" ideological meanings and institutional recognition but should

instead be understood as a loose semantic framework emerging from a network of related imaginary significations appearing across various contexts comprising the social life of communities. Steger and James address this directly:

> The concept of the 'social whole' points to the way in which certain apparently simple terms such as 'our society', 'we,' and 'the market' carry taken-for-granted and interconnected meanings. A social whole, in other words, is not necessarily co-extensive with a projection of community relations or the way people imagine their social existence. Nor does it need to be named as such. It can encompass a time, for example, when there exists only an inchoate sense of global community, but there is today paradoxically an almost pre-reflexive sense that at one level 'we' as individuals, peoples, and nations have a common global fate. (31)

This "inchoate", loose, "taken-for-granted" social sensibility, of course, emerges as a response to specific historical conditions, specific forms of embeddedness in the material conditions of social life – geopolitical relations, institutional networks, markets, specificities of different regimes of capitalist accumulation that characterize the world-system. But there is a discrepancy here: the existence and effects of those conditions, or indeed, the awareness of their existence, does not automatically translate into a determinate type of collective identification with the social whole delineated by, and logically emerging from, those conditions. In other words, and in the context of contemporary globalized capitalism: "the practice of interrelation on a global scale and the content of messages of global interconnection and naturalized power" may be "bound up with each other" in various degrees of tightness. (Steger and James "Levels" 31) The structure of social relations in late capitalism, their asymmetries and hierarchies underscored by a logic of

global interconnection, do not determine in a straightforward manner the content of subjective perceptions, projections, and desires[22] related to communal life. This is also precisely what motivates Aijaz Ahmad's caution about the pronunciations of the age of world literature in his 2000 article "The Communist Manifesto and 'World Literature'", in which he writes about the various and multi-faceted appearances of the national and its persistence under conditions of capitalist globalization. For him, world literature is possible only "if material relations among the different language-literature complex can be organised in a structure of exchanges that are non-hierarchical, non-exploitative and non-dominative." (28) In the capitalist world-system, characterized as it is by imperialist domination and structural asymmetries of economic development, this is of course impossible and the national, as a specific social imaginary signification, remains present both in its oppressive (e.g. imperialist domination) and emancipatory (e.g. self-determination) forms. To paraphrase this in Manfred Steger's terms we are discussing here: despite the emergence of what Steger calls the global social imaginary, the national imaginary is still the main relevant framework regulating the production of representations of communal life and conceptions of social relations. But this does not mean, of course, that literature, no matter how tightly it might be bound to the history of the nation, is inextricably wedded to the national imaginary. Or to any other form of

[22] It is possible to put forth the claim that this phenomenon is, at least partially, another consequence of commodity fetishism as defined by Marx. Concrete connections between various "imagined communities" across the globe (i.e. commodity flows, globalized cultural commodities, structural economic and political dependence, etc.) do not determine and are invisible behind the imaginary identifications of members of those communities with established conceptions of the social whole. This is proof of a high level of arbitrariness, or relative subjective autonomy, in the process of "imagining communities" that is analogous to the distorted perception of commodities as things endowed with organic, "natural" economic value, and not as products of relations between people. Marx has the following to say about this: "[…] the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities." (*Capital* 165)

social imaginary for that matter: the discrepancy between the global logic of capitalist interconnection and local subjective identifications with conceptions of communal life that we described above should not simply be read as a consequence of distorted perception or misidentification. It points to the fact that the form of the operative social imaginary is not co-extensive with the structure of material conditions under which it operates. This also means that the activity of the social imaginary is relatively autonomous, that space exists for creative transformation of the social imaginary through various forms of cultural and socio-political activity. The social imaginary, in other words "is not totalizing, but rather a cultural dominant, layered across prior and emerging imaginaries." (James 41)

This cultural dominant cannot be subsumed under the concept of ideology, as Steger and James argue in their article, agreeing with the philosopher Charles Taylor. Despite the observable political effects that the social imaginary produces as a semantic framework organizing social practices and representations, it operates, they claim, more loosely than ideology, as a "background" upon which ideological struggles take place. Indeed, the Stegerian concept emphasizes, in an almost formalist way, the distinction between *ideas*, *ideology*, and *the social imaginary*, and describes their interactions and layering as an "integrated set of levels of social engagement with meaning." The social imaginaries are, as a level of this set, defined as "convocations of the social whole that frame different ideological contestations." (James 42) Such distinction of the concept of the social imaginary from the purely ideological allows Steger and James to observe the scope and forms in which sociality as such is imagined to be unfolding independent of ideology. Or in other words how the limits of what is felt to be a legitimate social whole are set at a given historical moment, and beyond direct intervention of contesting forms of ideology. This also allows them to observe how ideology, which is in their understanding a more comprehensive set of beliefs, interacts with the pre-reflexive social imaginary – territorializing

political projections and adapting conceptions of the politically possible to the forms of communal life set by operative social imaginaries. Steger himself, discussing in his book the emergence of the national imaginary, describes this interaction as a process of making the implicit politically explicit, of giving concrete political form to the floating "sense" of the social whole: "the explicit grand ideologies gave political expression to the implicit national imaginary." (Steger 9)

But it is already visible from this quote that Steger goes a step further. In the same book, he studies the historical passage from the national to the global imaginary as the cultural dominant and traces the histories of three "grand ideologies" (conservatism, liberalism, socialism) throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. All of them, Steger claims, should be understood as "articulations of the national imaginary" (83) and are in his view inconceivable without this background. In other words, Steger posits the development of the national imaginary as a condition of possibility for the development of the three grand ideologies and understands all of them as inextricably bound to it[23]. However, it is impossible to overlook that each of the different forms of social imaginary Steger writes about is wedded to a specific regime of accumulation that characterized the capitalist world-system at different points in its development. The dominant of the national imaginary encompasses the periods of the industrial revolution, the development of the Fordist regime of accumulation and the intensive competition between national capitals, while the emergence of the global imaginary coincides with the transition to the post-Fordist regime of accumulation, the global division of labor and globalization of capital. In other words: specific regimes of capitalist accumulation give rise to the social conditions under which homologous forms of social imaginary emerge, which are then

[23] An interesting post-socialist novel, Luther Blissett's *Q*, implicitly provides an opposing conception: one of the aims of that text, a historical novel about the radical Anabaptists in the German Peasants' War of 1524/5, is to establish a conception of historical continuity of communist ideology that is in no way tied to the national imaginary. Friedrich Engels' study of the same historical event, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* written in 1850, also makes a similar point, and treats Thomas Müntzer, the leader of the Anabaptist rebellion, as a proto-communist revolutionary.

articulated in different ideological forms. Even if Steger does not acknowledge this himself, it is impossible to deny the existence of an implicit chain of determinations in his account from which it also follows that his conception of the imaginary is another instance of the specular theory of the imaginary under which its various forms are explicitly or implicitly understood as mirroring existing historical conditions. We have already announced the intention to move away from such conceptions but we can, using Steger's own examples, directly demonstrate why they are insufficient.

In *The Rise of the Global Imaginary*, Steger devotes some space to address the internationalist aspirations of socialist ideology and to criticize, on the example of the 19th and early 20th century German socialism, its historical record on this issue. He does that in order to cement his claim that each of the three grand ideologies, even the explicitly internationalist one, operates within the national imaginary. According to him, the global horizon of socialist ideology never really represented more than a theoretical proposition and, he claims, the examples of historical practice of socialist parties and organizations he enumerates demonstrates a firm allegiance to the national[24]. Although there is no need to go into this in much detail here, it is necessary to mention that a number of historical examples could be given to oppose this argument (which, in addition, is based on the example of socialist organizations and parties in a single country[25]): from internationalist and trans-national organizations committed to socialist ideology and fundamentally important for the history of international socialism, such as the International, to the practices of countless socialist internationalists across the world who, for instance, joined the Spanish International Brigades in the 1930s or the Rojava Kurds in our own time. Or an entire universe of smaller-scale political

[24] Cf. Steger 44-84 and especially 74-84 for the part on "German socialism".
[25] It is also difficult to see why Germany should be considered a representative case in this respect. In addition, it would be more precise to call the organizations Steger discusses "social democratic" or reformist to distinguish them from the more radical communist and/or revolutionary ones.

events demonstrating internationalist solidarity and the global horizons and imaginaries of socialists, such as the 1961 Yugoslav protests on the occasion of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, which drew out tens of thousands of people across a number of cities and resulted in the ransacking of the Belgian embassy in the country's capital. Such events, along with a myriad other internationalist and trans-national practices and actions of solidarity before and since, demonstrate the potential of the social imaginary to "organize practices", and all of them demonstrate that the global imaginary has been an integral element of socialist ideology since its inception.

But even more importantly, instead of presenting a counter-argument to Steger based on enumerating exceptions, we can interrogate the theoretical validity of his claims by looking at how socialist ideology developed historically and solidified its own internal consistency. Steger's strong thesis about the relation between the national imaginary and grand ideologies establishes a connection between them that could be called genealogical: the development of the national imaginary is a prerequisite for the development of the "grand ideologies". The emergence of ideologies is thus situated in a chronological sequence, they appear *after* the national imaginary is established and are contained within its broader framework. This, however, fails to account for the complexity of the interaction between what Steger calls the social imaginary and what he calls ideology – the possible ways in which social imaginaries are transformed by ideologies, and vice versa. For instance, Marx and Engels' recurrent critiques of "utopian socialism"[26] and their proposition to replace it with their own methodologically more advanced conception of "scientific socialism" represent one of the milestones in the development of socialist ideology. This development has stood as one of the ideological foundations of the socialist movements and

[26] For a useful and informative overview and systematization of Marxist critiques of Utopian socialism, see Roger Paden's 2002 article "Marx's Critique of the Utopian Socialists."

organizations that followed, and that left the most important historical traces globally. But "scientific socialism", or in other words socialist ideology based on Marx's historical materialist critique of capital, was not developed as a consequence of an attempt to articulate national problems, problems that appear within the strict horizon of the national imaginary[27]. It was based on a critical, empirical analysis of the "*locus classicus*" of capitalist development, namely England, in order to arrive at an abstract theoretical model of the capitalist system as such and to offer a theorization of historical laws and tendencies that "[win] their way through and [work] themselves out with iron necessity" despite differences in their national contexts. (*Capital* 91) Such an understanding of the logic of capital and its inherently expansive, globalizing dynamics bound by national borders only in a provisory way, and the form of socialist ideology that resulted from it, demonstrate indebtedness to an imaginary that is trans-national, indeed, global in its scope. *"Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!"*, that most recognizable of socialist slogans appearing at the end of *The Communist Manifesto* as early as 1848, before most of the mentioned theoretical work had even been conducted, illustrates this understanding very precisely. If class is taken to mean the structural equivalence of subject-positions in relation to capital, or in other words if the concept is stripped of its cultural baggage and understood in the abstract Marxist sense, then the logic of the above call to unity becomes less an example of Utopian political voluntarism without any empirical basis, as it would be seen from a Stegerian perspective, and more an appeal to acknowledge a level of empirical reality hitherto unacknowledged (or simply obscured by ideology

[27] The empirical data central to Marx's analysis in *Capital* is drawn mostly from a single country, namely England. However, this is not a limitation of Marx's "national imaginary" but precisely the opposite: a consequence of England's example serving as "the image of the future" to less developed industrial countries. Marx's focus is always the trans-national logic of historical laws of capitalist production: "What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of production and forms of intercourse [*Verkehrsverhältnisse*] that correspond to it. Until now, their *locus classicus* has been England. This is the reason why England is used as the main illustration of the theoretical developments I make. If, however, the German reader pharisaically shrugs his shoulders at the condition of English industrial and agricultural workers, or optimistically comforts himself with the thought that in Germany things are not nearly so bad, I must plainly tell him: *De te fabula narratur!"* (*Capital* 90)

and/or commodity fetishism). An appeal, in other words, to politically develop an alternative referent for identity on the basis of proletarian (i.e. internationalist, and later global) class consciousness. From that perspective, the global imaginary should by definition be understood as an integral element of proletarian class consciousness[28]. Having these and other such examples in mind it becomes difficult to defend Steger's claim that all "grand ideologies" emerge within and remain firmly wedded to the framework of the national imaginary. But even more importantly, it becomes clear that the social scope of specific forms of the social imaginary should not be regarded as fatally wed to a concrete, existing arrangement of social relations and material conditions.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, whose use of the concept of the social imaginary is referenced often by James and Steger, provides a more dynamic, dialectical conception of the interaction between the social imaginary and ideology that leaves more room for speculative, projective meaning and for the transformation of the established social imaginary by the introduction of new social imaginary significations. From the perspective of moral philosophy, however, he avoids the concept of "ideology" and uses the term "theory of moral order":

> The modern theory of moral order gradually infiltrates and transforms our social imaginary. In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones but ones often transformed by the contact. This is crucial to what I called above the extension of the understanding of moral order. It couldn't have become the dominant view in our culture without this penetration/transformation of our

[28] The term "proletarians of all countries" can, indeed, be considered a pleonasm as "proletarians" as a whole are by definition "of all countries." However, the emphasis on the redundancy "of all countries" acknowledges the prevalence of the national imaginary and the nation as the primary referent of identification at the point of writing the text.

> imaginary. […] But this process isn't just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In coming to make sense of the action the theory is glossed, as it were, given a particular shape as the context of these practices. […] Nor need the process end here. The new practice, with the implicit understanding it generates, can be the basis for modifications of theory, which in turn can inflect practice, and so on. (*Modern Social Imaginaries* 28-30)

It is important to emphasize Taylor's conception for several reasons. On the one hand, Taylor exhibits an awareness of the need to introduce a degree of subjective autonomy to the functionalist conceptions of the social imaginary which understand it as a "cultural model" coordinating social practices and ensuring collective identification within communities. It is precisely what Steger calls the "looseness" of the social imaginary that both distinguishes it from ideology and ensures the necessary space for introducing new significations and meaning. On the other hand, the problem with Taylor's conception is that it offers a simplistic rationalist-idealist model in order to explain the transformation of the social imaginary, which appears to us as too neat and historically naïve. The part we quoted above offers only a sketch of a more complex dynamics, but the basic claim put forth in it is the following: a "theory", an initial "idealization", "gradually infiltrates" the social imaginary and spontaneously transforms it. In the process, the theory is "glossed" and deposited as an element of the social imaginary, in this form becoming more efficient in organizing social practices. This model suggests a type of dialogic, liberal communicative rationality in which new semantic material seamlessly and peacefully enters the terrain of existing social imaginaries and does so in the form of "theory", i.e. in the form of a more or less coherent, thought out, rational framework of ideas. No suggestion of particular historical motivations behind the emergence of new ideas is mentioned, nor is the possibility of ideological obstacles to certain ideas entering the

social imaginary discussed. Whose ideas get to the position from which they can enter into the dialogic relation with the established social imaginary, to what historical purpose are social imaginaries transformed? Taylor conceives of this exchange in a formalist manner, idealistically, and his conception of a dialogue of ideas is analogous to the abstract exchanges supposedly constituting the capitalist "free market." As a consequence of this, the transformation of the social imaginary, and historical development of social relations more broadly, is conceived as a peacefully dialogic social exchange within a dynamic but stable social order. A good many historical examples could be offered to counter this thesis. But more importantly, Taylor's idealism raises questions and invokes the old discussion about ontology and causation: what comes first, independent ideas or material conditions that give rise to them? Taylor is aware of this and addresses that question immediately in the following chapter entitled "The Specter of Idealism." (31-48) He acknowledges the historical materialist critique of the conception that "ideas drive history" but goes on to emphasize that human socio-historical dynamics is too complex, and historical phenomena too multi-faceted to be reduced to a single universally applicable model of causation. We do not need to enter this never-ending discussion here, but suffice it to say that, while we agree with Taylor's refusal to accept the simplistic dichotomy between ideas and material conditions, we do not agree with his claim that there are certain contexts in which the establishment of ideas as historical forces should be observed independently from their material conditions and contemporaneous class struggles or power structures, nor do we think the examples he offers unambiguously demonstrate this[29]. Furthermore, insisting that there are contexts in which "ideas"

[29] The main example Taylor offers for this is the main doctrine of the Reformation, "sola fide", which is, according to his claim, not possible to relate to specific class dynamics. However, even if an "idea" appears to have no structural connection with the historical context under which it emerges, its transformation into a "historical force", i.e. its operationalization as a widely recognizable social imaginary signification that is capable of organizing collective practices, is always dependent on how this idea can be functionally integrated with the intentions and historical interests of different social groups. Interestingly, Luther Blissett's *Q* is again not only a very useful literary

emerge independently of their material conditions reintroduces the same dichotomy at the very moment Taylor suggests it should be abandoned.

In any case, the main point to be raised here is that Taylor's conception of the social imaginary as the repository of "glossed theories" that develops into a complex structure of simplified concepts guiding social practice produces another iteration of the specular theory of the imaginary. Taylor's is an idealist version of it, from which the problem of political power of social groups as a factor in the production of history is elided, and in which the imaginary is cast into the role of a supplement to the idea-producing capacities of the psyche, operationalizing pre-formed "theories" into ideational forms more adequate for organizing social behavior. On the one hand, this is quite different from Steger, whose *materialist* specular conception of the imaginary is problematic because it ends up treating the social imaginary as a mirror of preceding social relations and development phases of the social order under which it operates, but on the other they both propose the cultural model theory of the social imaginary and treat it primarily as an instrument of social reproduction, a passive repository of conceptions and models of sanctioned social behavior, and not as a terrain of historical struggle.

1.5 The Social Imaginary as a Terrain of Struggle

As we have repeatedly pointed out, the treatment of the social imaginary characteristic of Steger and Taylor, the "cultural model theory" of the social imaginary, does not offer a satisfactory answer to the problem of the production of new meaning within existing ideological frameworks and does not satisfactorily address the possibility of transformation of social imaginaries. If the (social) imaginary is treated primarily as an instrument of social reproduction, establishing

dramatization of that particular problem, but also offers a narrative elaboration of the social struggles centered around the same historical example that Taylor uses.

common frames of reference, inducing homogeneity, and guiding and coordinating social practices to ensure stability of a social order, the result seems to be a functionalist conception of social relations and the social role of culture that can tolerate neither the possibility of uncontrolled meaning-production within the social fields established by such imaginaries, nor conceive of the logic and effects of social struggle over the form of the social imaginary. Where are new social imaginary significations produced and how exactly do they "infiltrate" established social imaginaries, if the social imaginary serves simply as a "cultural model" ensuring social reproduction? How can social imaginary significations ever be thought of as "new" or transformative if the imaginary is conceived as mirroring pre-existing conditions, concepts, forms of thought, and established social practices? Similar questions are also difficult to answer from the perspective of Lacanain theory, despite the fact it differs significantly from the sociological theories we discussed above in that it understands the imaginary strictly in relation to the subject. However, as we have noted above, it also relies on a conception which casts the imaginary in a dependent, reproductive role and treats it as a blind mechanism of identification in the process of subject-constitution.

The motivation to answer those unanswered questions is in the following: if we accept that the imaginary has a social and socializing dimension, and a social role as a "structuring structure" imparting meaning to social relations, organizing social practices and modelling communal life, then the forms in which it appears and in which it is materialized, including the novel, should be thought of as instruments of socio-historical development and transformation. Therefore, understanding those forms, how they are reproduced in culture, and how they can be infiltrated and rearranged by new meanings/significations is indispensable to understanding the production of history. This might be especially important in the historical context characterized by Fisher's capitalist realism and the crisis of historical imagination we discussed above, as in that context the

very possibility of history is suspended with the help of forms of thought mediated through a culture incapable of escaping "precorporation", i.e. being constituted by mirroring the logic of social relations and reproducing the social imaginary characteristic of the system under which they emerge, a culture from which "Utopian semantic excess" has been excluded.

Wolfgang Iser argues that each of the conceptions of the imaginary that appeared historically ties it to a different activating mechanism or logic, which results in the production of different (imaginary) events "the nature of [which] will vary according to the source that sets it in motion." (185) We will argue here that Fisher's reliance on the specular conception of the imaginary characteristic of Lacanian theory reinforces the very historical impasse that his concept of capitalist realism is meant to criticize and that it results in a peculiarly enigmatic conception of politics that elides the possibility of autonomous efforts to break through that historical impasse. We work with the hypothesis that the (social) imaginary has a role to play in the production of history and is amenable to transformation and reordering by the inclusion of new significations. Capitalist realism, as an ideological effect produced by a network of specific social imaginary significations, can therefore be engaged and destabilized on the level of the social imaginary. In order to achieve that, or in other words in order to begin looking for a way out of the crisis of historical imagination characteristic of capitalist realism, a concept of the imaginary that frees it from a dependence on "image" and emphasizes its productive/poetic and not its reproductive/specular aspect is necessary. As it was already emphasized above, Cornelius Castoriadis' work offers such a concept and will help us understand the role of the imaginary in producing, to use Iser's terms, "the event" of new meaning.

The deeper issue that lies behind the problem with the specular conception of the imaginary and the difficulty to explain new meaning production under such a conceptual regime is not simply the issue of the autonomy of the subject constituted by the activity of the imaginary but also, by

extension, the issues of social reproduction, the role of ideology and, more broadly, class consciousness. From a Lacanian perspective, if the subject is constituted through the specular/mimetic activity of the imaginary and then socialized and locked in place by an entry into the symbolic, the only way for what we call here "new meaning" – but what can even be called "freedom" or "revolution" – to appear is through a sudden and unpredictable irruption of what Lacan terms the Real and the consequent reconstitution of the Symbolic. The problem with this, however, is that the Real, by virtue of it being outside symbolization and thus utterly foreign and uncontrollable, appears in the social dimension only as an unexpected rip in the fabric of the Symbolic, often under the guise of the miraculous, the disastrous, the revelatory, the apocalyptic. Its appearance is thus beyond the reach of any thinkable autonomous practice of the subject, it is difficult to imagine that it can under any conditions be called forth or willingly made to appear. It is, therefore, not an accident that the thinkers who directly rely on or engage with the implications of the Lacanian paradigm conceptualize this problem using a language that has to account for the unpredictable, annunciatory nature of the irruption. Thus, for instance, both Alain Badiou's revelatory, ontologically disruptive "Event", which only retroactively constitutes the conditions of its own possibility[30], and Slavoj Žižek's "Act", which entails "transcendental risk" and radically transforms the subject[31], can both be conceived as portals thorough which the substance-less

[30] Daniel Bensaïd has the following to say about Alain Badiou's Event: "Aleatory by nature, the event cannot be predicted outside a singular situation, nor even deduced from that situation without some unpredictable chance operation." ("Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event" 97) Similarly, Andy McLaverty-Robinson outlines several ways in which the Event can appear: "Sometimes Badiou portrays the Event as purely random – an effect of chance. The word he usually uses is *hasardeux* (haphazard). It is chance in the sense of a possible encounter or dysfunction. Sometimes he portrays it as an act of creation out of nothingness (*creatio ex nihilo*). At other times, he treats it as a kind of structural necessity, which will happen sooner or later. Yet it is outside the normal structures of social control." ("Alain Badiou: The Event")

[31] In this paragraph from *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek unites his own interpretations of Lacan with Badiou's notion of "fidelity" to the Event in the criticism of Judith Butler and what he calls "deconstructionist ethics" in its voluntarist idealism: "Lacan's answer to this is that absolute/unconditional acts do occur, but not in the idealist guise of a self-transparent gesture performed by a subject with a pure will who fully intends them. They occur, on the contrary, as a totally unpredictable *tuche*, a miraculous event which shatters our lives. To put it in somewhat pathetic terms, this is how the 'divine' dimension is present in our lives, and the different modalities of ethical betrayal relate precisely to

irruptions of the Real can pass into the order of the Symbolic. As such, they resemble miracles and it is no wonder that both philosophers' work has engaged with, or motivated engagements with, theology.

Mark Fisher himself, discussing culture as the field in which potential irruptions of the Real can become visible, has the following to say about its appearance: "The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So, one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us." (18) The term Fisher uses to conceive of a critical strategy against capitalist realism is the rather mystical "invocation", which leaves us with no clear answers as to how the mysterious formula of "invoking the Real" could be theoretically or culturally, not to mention politically or organizationally, operationalized. However, the book itself might be taken as an example of one such strategy in its attempt to make the possibility of irruptions of the Real graspable in theoretical form, its diagnostic savviness in identifying fields in which those irruptions will most likely appear[32], and its prescient analysis of cultural forms which draw attention to the possible fracture points in the order of instituted reality. But even after all this, the answer to the question implicit in Fisher's "politics of invocation" – how to make the Real appear? – remains vague. Having in mind the elusive nature of what the concept refers to and the haphazard ways in which it appears in reality, it is fair to conclude that the difficulty in providing that answer is an effect of that immanent elusiveness, and not of any theoretical negligence on Fisher's part or the theoretical insufficiency of Lacanian-inflected paradigms, the usefulness of

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the different ways of betraying the act-event. The true source of evil is not a finite mortal man who acts like God, but a man who disavows that divine miracles occur and reduces himself to just another finite mortal being." (376)

[32] He goes on to delineate the three central "aporias of capitalist realism", or the three unacknowledged "sites" of reality under capitalist universality where "politicization is being fought for." (19) These are, for him, the environment, mental health, and bureaucracy, each in their own way representing what is excluded (repressed) by the symbolic order of capitalist realism despite, or precisely because, these are the sites where the contradictions of capitalist universality can currently be made most visible.

which lies precisely in the fact that they draw attention to the constitutive incompleteness of reality and do not shirk from theorizing the aleatory, or the miraculous, as one of the effects of that incompleteness. But there is another implicit question here: if it is true, as Fisher claims, that capitalist realism has colonized everything, that there are no visible and plausible alternatives, that the historical conditions are such that any emancipatory attempt must first contend with the peculiar state of precorporated contemporary culture, and the subject is trapped by the miserable *Wiederholungszwang* of "depressive hedonia", then how is it even possible to hope that any conscious, targeted invocation of the Real can ever even be made? On the other hand, if it can indeed be made and if attention can indeed be called to the contingency of capitalism's "realism", if invoking the (miraculous or disastrous) Real in the hope that its appearance will cause a disturbance sufficiently strong to loosen the subject from the iron grip of "reality" [33] can succeed, then why stop at a proposal as modest as the politics of invocation surely is? Why not indulge in a more comprehensive creative effort and speculate about and discuss the methods of that politics, or even speculate about the form of possible alternatives to the order established by what is recognized as reality/realistic and symbolize it in cultural forms?

If we follow this argument through, it is impossible to avoid the thesis that such reluctance and modesty might also be a symptom of capitalist realism. This thesis becomes quite convincing if we contrast Fisher's approach to a different one taken in an older text similarly appropriating Lacanian concepts for cultural/literary theory. The older text in question is Fredric Jameson's "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Problem of the

[33] We can observe this in light of the point that Marx's famously raises in *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." (15) To paraphrase: under the conditions of capitalist realism, men can start to make their own history again only after dispensing with the ideological delusion that history has already been completed.

Subject", his thorough 1977 examination of central Lacanian concepts in which he reconfigures and primes them for uses in cultural- and literary-theoretical contexts. In this text, Jameson tries to propose a theoretical solution for what he sees as problems arising out of unsatisfactory conceptions of the subject as they exist in the work of the Frankfurt School and certain strands of post-structuralist French theory. In the case of the Frankfurt school, he claims, the diagnosis of the ills that capitalist society bequeaths to the subject is made in the name of the "ideal of psychological autonomy and individualism" (392), and in the case of the *Tel Quel* poststructuralists the very same ideal is "denounced as an ideological and a bourgeois phenomenon" and the disintegration of the subject and the illusion of its autonomy in late capitalism welcomed as "the harbingers of some new post-individualistic state of things." (393) Jameson offers a third way out:

> The solution can only lie, it seems to me, in the renewal of Utopian thinking, of creative speculation as to the place of the subject at the other end of historical time, in a social order which has put behind its class organization, commodity production and the market, alienated labor, and the implacable determinism of an historical logic beyond the control of humanity. Only thus can a third term be imagined beyond either the "autonomous individualism" of the bourgeoisie in its heyday or the schizoid part-objects in which the fetishization of the subject under late capitalism has left its trace; a term in the light of which both of these forms of consciousness can be placed in their proper historical perspective. (393)

Jameson's "solution" appears at the end of a 60-page exegesis of Lacanian theory and contains not only criticism of those conceptions of the subject which can be demonstrated to *mirror* the specific alignment and ideological needs of capital at particular points in history, but also a call

for “creative speculation”, a re-assertion of autonomous, imaginative capacities of the subject. In what almost seems an old-fashioned humanist manner, these capacities are taken to be immanent to the psychodynamics of the subject and crucial for socio-cultural activity and historical development proceeding by way of production of new forms of consciousness. The self-reflective creative speculation that Jameson calls for is, in other words, a mechanism that suggests a subject capable of “making its own history”, a subject for which the creative role of the imaginary is central. In comparison to Fisher’s formula of “invoking the Real” in order to, hopefully, shock the passivized subject into the production of new historical meaning, new imaginary significations, Jameson’s solution implies a subject that is much more active. A historical lesson can be drawn from this. As we have mentioned above, Fisher’s “modest proposal” appears in this comparison as itself hobbled by the very capitalist realism it denounces: for late-1970s Jameson it was still possible to creatively speculate about or actively imagine the “place of the subject at the end of historical time.” For Fisher, no creative speculation of this kind is possible, only a last-ditch attempt, an almost desperate politics of invocation (of the unsymbolizable, randomly appearing Real). For Jameson, the possibility of creative speculation still exists for the simple reason that the medium in which this creative speculation proceeds, its condition of possibility – historical time – still exists. For Fisher, living at the End of History, there is no such thing as a developing historical time, that particular social imaginary signification which served to direct and regulate the cultural production of signifiers is inactive, so the possibility of creative speculation about the place of the subject at the end of historical time does not exist either.

In other words, a dynamic conception of historical time is the condition of possibility for the production of new historical meaning. It is a medium in which the labor of the imaginary unfolds. Without such a conception, we are left only with the option of endless repetition of signifiers inherited from previous periods in order to sustain cultural and political life, periods which

possessed such a conception of historical time and were as a consequence marked by culturally and historically specific signifiers. This insight is indeed corroborated by Fisher himself in his work after *Capitalist Realism* in which he theorizes, to quote from a 2014 lecture entitled "Slow Cancellation of the Future", the "disappearance of the sense of specificity of cultural time" in 21st century culture.

Herein lies the true meaning of what we called above the "crisis of historical imagination." Jameson's waning of affect, weakening of historicity, and replacement of depth by surface (cf. *Postmodernism* 1-54) – diagnosed as fundamental characteristics of postmodernity and extended from tendencies to default conditions under the regime of Fisher's capitalist realism – result in the paralysis of creative speculation, the hobbling of the imaginary, the inability to culturally produce imaginary significations that re-align the symbolic arrangement of reality by offering alternative and novel conceptions of historical development, thus pointing to the contingent nature of said social reality. The ultimate result of this is a radical depoliticization of culture.

In order to counter such paralytic tendencies, we would like to argue here, it could potentially be very useful to return, with Fisher's analyses in mind, to the positions staked out by Jameson. To return, but not in order to repeat them as empty gestures, immobilized by the sentimental patina that all retro-styles in contemporary culture boast. But to return in order to interrogate their speculative confidence and possibly integrate it into an attempt to move past the desperation implicit in Fisher's account of the contemporary cultural situation, and the attendant passivity inherent in the formula of politics of invocation.

As we commit to that task, it is necessary to observe an important homology between such politics and certain offshoots of "French theory"[34], i.e. the characteristic political and theoretical

[34] Interestingly, as a harsh critic of this particular discursive formation, Cornelius Castoriadis explicitly calls it "French ideology": "The effacement of the subject, the death of man, and the other asinine conceptions contained in

reasoning that emerged in the historical context of the failure of the May 1968 student and workers' revolt. Peter Starr, in his book *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May '68*, meticulously analyzed that reasoning by relating it simultaneously to the experiences of its immediate context, and to the broader historical tradition of modern revolutionary thought. In Starr's analysis, it was necessary for *l'apres-Mai* theorizing, reacting to the historical context of a "failed revolution", to come to terms not only with the events that unfolded in 1968 but also with the structures of thought inherited from earlier attempts to theorize revolutionary rupture, especially the ones that claimed the legacy of the French Revolution. These earlier attempts were heavily reliant on an all-or-nothing logic of historical success or failure and dependent on opposing figures of hope and despair. Such Manichean logic and figures of thought depended on a repression of the older meaning of the term "revolution", namely "cyclical return", which was fully replaced by a post-1789 insistence on revolution as a radical rupture, a historical *novum*. In other words, an earlier "relative emphasis on particularly cyclical or recurrent forms of political mutation, forms that effected a return to the past fully as much as a break from that past" was replaced by the radical project of revolution as invention of new forms (political, aesthetic, etc.). According to Starr, "it is the very suppression of this older sense of revolution as cyclical repetition that would seem to have condemned modern theorists and practitioners of revolution to an obsessively repetitive fascination with revolution *as* repetition." (1-2) In his genealogy, it is this fascination, fraught with a sense of apprehension, if not even dread, that becomes a motivation for French theory *l'apres-Mai*. The desire to come to terms with the repressed cyclical aspect of revolution, to rediscover the tendency of displaced forms to cyclically return, is what characterizes and drives much of the conceptual

what I have called the French Ideology had already been in circulation for some years. Their inescapable corollary, the death of politics, could be made explicit without much effort. […] it is clearly incompatible with the very activities in which the participants in the movements of the sixties, including May '68, were engaged." ("Movements of the Sixties" 51)

apparatus developed in that particular form of textuality, concerned as it is with the problems of repetition, power, desire, liberation, establishment of the symbolic order, etc. From the perspective that Starr sets up, the central figure of this discursive and historical context is Jacques Lacan, whose work proved especially attractive in the historical situation in which the symbolic, seemingly penetrated and exploded by the revolutionary energies of May '68, managed to quickly re-assert itself in spite of either of the two strategies various actors of the revolt had at their disposal: on the one hand organized, collectivist political action, and on the other anarchic collective refusal in the name of individual *jouissance*. Lacan's work appears in this context as the most faithful theoretical expression of this "revolutionary double bind", or in more straightforward terms, of the apprehension that against the overwhelming power of the Symbolic nothing works – that even the most radical historical rupture is likely to be rapidly bridged by the return of the very same forms that were originally repressed, that yielding to desire should be thought in the mode of the tragic, as much liberation as entrapment. This logic of theoretical and political impasse which emerged in the aftermath of 1968's "failure" is, according to Starr's genealogy, built into the very categories used to explain the failure, and has found itself, considering the significant influence of *l'apres-Mai* theory in general and Lacan's work specifically, repeated in various ways many times since, among others also by Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism.

From the perspective from which we are trying to observe it here, the problem with that particular theoretical influence is not in an overemphasis on the oppressive nature of the Symbolic and its unyielding nature. As Peter Dews reminds us, "despite all the philosophical and political reservations one might have about his thought, Lacan always understood symbolization as a kind of emancipatory process, releasing the subject from tutelage and stasis, from dependency on an alienating image." (520) Nor is the problem in the conceited totalization or supposed hermeticism of Lacan's system, the narrow space left within it for the irruption of the new and as-yet-

unsymbolized. The consequence of the later stages of his work, where the focus is on the elaboration of the Real and in which the problem of the Real is positioned as the central one, is precisely the theoretical integration of the possibility for such irruptions (this part of Lacan's work is to a large extent also what Fisher himself draws from and bases his revolutionary hopes on). In other words, the problem is neither with the one-sidedness of Lacan's argument, nor with its consistency with historical experience, nor with the excessive reductionism of his ontology. The problem we are trying to elucidate and that is central for us here appears most visibly at a different level. In essence, it is a political problem, or to put it in a straightforward manner, a problem of usefulness of that particular theoretical tool for the historical task of creative speculation beyond the impasse of capitalist realism. If Lacan's thought, as Starr argues, institutes "a series of impasse structures within analytic theory itself" (8), if its notorious duplicity, ambiguousness, slipperiness, even deceitfulness, are not simply taken at face value as signifiers meant to inscribe the problematic logic of desire into the form of textuality meant to theorize it, an essentially aesthetic performance of a kind of "theoretical realism", but if they are, with a healthy dose of materialist skepticism, understood in their historical particularity, as theoretical formalization of a local historical experience, we can question the theory on precise, politically demarcated, grounds. If what motivates the logic of this theory is an experience of a massive social revolt judged and conceptualized unequivocally as a failure, would not the inscription of such a conceptualization freeze, interminably, a particular, contingent political judgment into the very mechanism of the theory claiming to elucidate the universal movement of desire? If we, temporarily and heuristically, conceive of politics here as a kind of applied, world-making ethics, we might grasp the import of Lacan's project from the following paragraph by Peter Starr:

> For Lacan, the ethics of psychoanalysis point first and foremost toward a suspension of desire in the tragic, purificatory experience of being-for-death.
>
> But since it is in the very nature of human experience for such a suspension of desire to prove untenable, tragic purification triggers the reemergence of an endless, specifically comic flight of desire. Analysis of Lacan's elliptical pronouncements on the subject of revolutionary politics in general, and on May '68 in particular, shows them to be inscribed in a textuality that likewise fosters an oscillation between tragic insight into the impasse that is human desire and desire's comic reprise. (8)

What kind of a political position, and what kind of a conception of history are implied by such a judgement of tragic historical failure and compulsion to farcical reprise? If we accept the theory that is based on it, based on a Manichean tension of success/failure, what kind of import does it have on specific forms of politics we are likely to develop on its basis? What kind of politics is even allowed by that system, what are its consequences, is it a desirable kind of politics? What is the fate of history if we espouse such politics? These are the questions that, when posed, should, if not lead us out of the impasse, then at least lead us to an awareness that we are indeed stuck in one and that the very categories we use to point it out, categories such as capitalist realism or politics of invocation, might be partially responsible for keeping us in its hold. The ambiguity characteristic of the position reliant on these categories is certainly helpful in heeding the dangers of an all-or-nothing politics and fragility of thought overly reliant on idealistic binaries. But it is dubious whether it is helpful in attempts to escape a dominant ideology that itself relies on acknowledging ambiguity ("global capitalism might not be perfect but consider the horror of alternatives"), and whether it is, consequently, a useful tool of historical creation in the context dependent on that ideology.

Having all this in mind, it is time to return to the concluding paragraph of Fredric Jameson's 1977 text and point out the misleading way in which he points to Lacan as a theorist of liberated desire[35] (if this is indeed what is implied by the term "realized desire" that he uses):

> To such a vision, to the theoretical elaboration of such an ideology of the collective, it would seem that the Lacanian doctrine of the decentered subject – particularly insofar as that structural 'subversion' of the subject aims, not at renunciation or repression, but rather precisely at the realization of desire – offers a model more than merely suggestive. (395)

But what complicates Jameson's inaccuracy, or indeed, reveals it to be more of an attempt at dialectical gymnastics than an inaccuracy, an attempt motivated by a fidelity to a different kind of theoretical and political project, is his earlier introduction of a foreign concept into the hall of mirrors that is Lacan's theory. That concept is Jameson's "creative speculation", in essence a more technical iteration of his stubborn central concept of Utopia. This is key to notice here because the unexpected appearance of that concept at the very end of the text represents nothing less than an enticement to move out of the impasse, a dare to imagine historical difference without simultaneous disavowal.

For indeed one has to wonder what place can there be for the concept of Utopia and for "Utopian thinking" within a theoretical paradigm reliant on Lacanian theory. It strikes one as an odd addition to the Lacanian triad of the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real since a consistently Lacanian

[35] Lacan appears by the end of Jameson's text almost as an avatar of Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus, a text he was one of the main targets of. But Jameson is neither alone in reading Lacan in such a way, neither is this the only way in which Lacan's theory has been understood, as numerous criticisms of his "fatalism" and "radical pessimism" attest. For more, see Starr's valuable study, especially 35-74.

perspective can lead us nowhere else but to an interrogation of the concept's complicity with the movement of the imaginary and consequent suspicion toward the project of "renewal of Utopian thinking." Because what else is there to say about Utopia from such a perspective than that it is an iteration of the imaginary drive toward unification, a desire for the One, a narcissistic projection of the split subject, deluded and intent on finding the lost object-cause of desire, or at least on masking its own constitutive void? Traditionally, Utopia has been a figure of closeness, a projection of desire intent on erasing difference, a conception of identity of the subject with itself and the world. And as Catherine Clément points out, in her elaboration of Levi-Straussian insights into what might be called the pedagogy of myths,

> [The tragic hero] has forgotten the lesson of myths, which are, as Levi-Strauss tells us, lessons of "appropriate distance." Keeping the right distance between yourself and the madness of impossible desire, between yourself and the real: but this distance actually exists—it is regulated on all sides by the multiple codes of so-called everyday life. As described by Lacan, psychoanalytic practice consists, on the contrary, in *exacerbating distance.* Let there be no misunderstanding, you wretched souls: your desire is forever cut off from its object, which is lost, and will always be undermined in the most agonizing separations. (qtd. in: Starr 41)

So it seems that the distance-exacerbating project of psychoanalytic theory/practice would stand in direct opposition to the distance-erasing project of Utopia. However, Jameson is a much more thoughtful theorist of Utopia than what the heuristic we put forward above might suggest. In the introduction to a collection of mostly older essays published in 2005 under the title *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, he specifies two

purposes for Utopia, or more precisely Utopian narratives, as they exist across history (of literature) – one a cognitive-formalist, the other psychological:

> […] at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment […] therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively. […] Here as elsewhere in narrative analysis what is most revealing is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus.
>
> It is important to complete this Utopian formalism with what I hesitate to call a psychology of Utopian production: a study of Utopian fantasy mechanisms, rather, and one which eschews individual biography in favor of historical and collective wish-fulfillment. (xiii)

In another place in the same book, Jameson makes a related point in relation to the genre of science fiction as a whole:

> I would argue, however, that the most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. […] all these things [that characterize the present of capitalism] are not seized, immobile forever, in some 'end of history', but move steadily in time towards some unimaginable yet inevitable "real" future. SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history,

and this is so irrespective of the "pessimism" or "optimism" of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization. (288)

It is quite obvious from these quotes, then, that the role Jameson conceives for Utopia as it appears in literary discourse is precisely the opposite from the suggestion we heuristically elaborated above – it produces the effect of exacerbating, not erasing, distance (from the established order of the present). Or indeed, we can expand this beyond Utopia as it is formalized in literary discourse, and claim with Jameson that this is the role of "creative speculations as to the place of the subject at the other side of historical time" that can be realized in other discursive forms as well.

Furthermore, instead of projecting a vision of the future in which all difference collapses and disappears in an attempt to satisfy the cravings of the imaginary, the ultimate effect of Utopia is to make history appear in the present, or to make the present appear as history, thus formally opening the space for the very possibility of historical difference to appear. This is an effect that registers at the point of reception and is not thwarted if what is offered on the level of content is a vision of a suspended future of difference collapsed in imaginary bliss (or, in the case of dystopia, imaginary disaster). Even though Jameson calls this particular insight a formalist one, referring quite directly to Viktor Shklovsky and his concept of "defamiliarization"[36], it is important to emphasize the point

[36] As an aside, let us mention that the problem of stunted perception which the role of literature is to shake up and awaken also appears in the US New Critic John Crowe Ransom, another well-known modernist literary theorist, albeit one of a more conservative ideological bent than Shklovsky. However, in Ransom this problem is conceptualized as the problem of over-reliance on abstraction, not cognitive automatization, and as such evokes the criticism of Enlightenment reason by Horkheimer and Adorno. Although, once again, it is in the service of an entirely different project, one that might be called "object-oriented poetics". Here is John Crowe Ransom from a 1937 essay entitled "Criticism, Inc.": "The critic should regard the poem as nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre. The poet himself, in the agony of composition, has something like this sense of his labors. The poet perpetuates in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch. His poem celebrates the object which is real, individual, and qualitatively infinite. He knows that his practical interests will reduce this living object to a mere utility, and that his sciences will disintegrate it for their convenience into their respective abstracts. The poet wishes to defend his object's existence against its enemies, and the critic wishes to know what he is doing, and how."

that the purpose of Utopian defamiliarization is not simply to revitalize routine/automated perception in the individual, but to make history appear for the collective. If for Shklovsky automatization (or "algebraization") of perception appeared as a natural phenomenon characteristic of the human cognitive apparatus[37], for Jameson it is a historical, ideological effect of late capitalist culture, a consequence of the loss of historicity that he identified as one of the central characteristics of postmodernity. Having this in mind, we can now finally extend this insight and re-configure it *via* Shklovsky and Castoriadis to arrive at the following formula – the effect of the loss of historicity is the automatization of the social imaginary.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this particular insight for a theory of literature under capitalist realism. If one of the fundamental characteristics of the ideological impasse characteristic of this period is the disappearance of the conception of historical alternative, of the conception of developing historical time, or indeed the disappearance of a conception of history as such, then making history appear – de-automating the social imaginary – should be regarded not simply as a demand of a specific poetics, but as a condition of possibility of the aesthetic as such. We can even ground this thesis in Shklovsky's original formalist reasoning. A few paragraphs after he invokes automatization as a natural phenomenon, Shklovsky jumps rather abruptly to a kind of ethical-aesthetic judgement which makes one wonder whether there is, indeed, a kernel of a historicist argument in his formalism:

> This is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war.

[37] In the seminal essay "Art, as Device", published in 1917, Shklovsky writes: "Considering the laws of perception, we see that routine actions become automatic. All our skills retreat into the unconscious-automatic domain; […]" (161)

> "If the whole complex life of many people is lived unconsciously, it is as if this life had never been."
>
> And so this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. (162)

This insight, however, needs to be supplemented and historicized. What Shklovsky the modernist confidently calls "art" is under capitalist realism reconfigured primarily as "entertainment." Under such a regime of commodified culture, it is very doubtful whether "art" even exists, let alone whether it is capable of helping one to "recover the sensation of life." In fact, art-as-entertainment is fully integrated into the matrix of overstimulation characteristic of late capitalist consumption models, either in the form of 24/7 headphones soundtracks to everyday life or in the form of bingeing of serial narratives for short-term alleviation of anxiety, or any other equivalent "consumer behavior." Such behavior is characteristic of Fisher's depressive hedonia we discussed above. The element felt to be missing for the subject in that state is precisely the "sensation of life", and this registers among other things as the "incapacity to connect current lack of focus with future failure, […] inability to synthesize time into any coherent narrative." (*Capitalist Realism* 24) The "sensation of life" is thus obviously not recovered through the consumption of cultural commodities. Instead, it is precisely such consumption that serves simultaneously as the domain into which one escapes from the felt sense of lack and the mechanism that reproduces and reinforces it. So it is not "art", or cultural forms as such that help one recover the "sensation of life." The recovery can occur only under historical conditions where "art" is possible in the first place, where a sense of historical possibility exists and can be "synthesized into a coherent narrative." Since the anxiety-ridden, repetitive pursuit of pleasure characteristic both of depressive hedonia and of consumerist behavior in general traps the subject in a temporality of

perpetual present[38], in order for the narrative synthetization necessary for a "coherent" sensation of time to even occur, a rediscovery of the dimension of the future, the institution of a conception of developing historical time is necessary.

In other words, what is at stake for defamiliarization under capitalist realism, is not Shklovsky's stoniness of the stone, but the historicalness of history. The problem of automatized perception at the End of History registers not simply as the stone that ceases to be stony, but as history that ceases to be historical. So to make history appear historical again for the automatized social imaginaries of the subjects of capitalist realism, an exacerbation of distance effected by "Utopian thinking" is required.

We are thus arguing here for a poetics the central demand of which is an engagement in creative speculation about "the other end of historical time" and the re-discovery of the dimension of the future as a social imaginary signification. As we have pointed out above, such creative speculation should not be identified solely with literary genres the historical purpose of which has been to develop narrative forms in which creative speculation about socio-historical development is of the foremost concern at the level of content, such as science fiction, or narrative Utopias proper. What we will try to examine here are narrative texts that align themselves with and are inscribed into the literary tradition that includes the triad of realism-modernism-postmodernism and observe how they process the social imaginary significations characteristic of capitalist realism and integrate them into characteristic narrative forms, thereby establishing a particular relation to

[38] In his seminal re-interpretation of Marx's basic analytical categories from the perspective of value-form theory, Moishe Postone explains this peculiar temporality as a consequence of capitalist commodity production: "In other words, the dialectic of the two dimensions of labor and of time in capitalism is such that value is reconstituted as a perpetual present, although it is moved historically in time. This reconstitution, as I suggested, is the most fundamental determination of the structural reproduction of the relations of production, that is, of the basic social forms that remain constitutive of capitalism, despite the tremendous transformations characteristic of this social formation." (*Time, Labor, and Social Domination* 346)

that ideological formation and projecting a specific conception of history without necessarily invoking Utopia as such.

Before we focus on those texts explicitly, a final synthesis of everything we discussed so far will lead us to our final analytical categories and a working definition of poetics central to our analysis. Above, we discussed Utopia as a form of creative speculation that results in the appearance of (the present as) history. We should point out once again that we conceive of this discursive process of Utopian thinking (or creative speculation) as resulting in the production of new imaginary significations capable of re-constituting the social imaginary. The activation and engagement of the imaginary that this requires should be conceived in contrast to the politics of invocation suggested by Fisher, as a (relatively) autonomous process of self-reflective, creative speculation, a poietic process with concrete, collective socio-historical goals, inextricably tied to related forms of historical praxis.

1.6 Castoriadis and Jameson, Autonomy and Utopia

Going back to the above discussion of Jameson's misreading of Lacan, it should be noted that it is neither accidental, nor contradictory that Jameson relies on introducing the foreign concept of "Utopian thinking" into the Lacanian matrix. He does that in an article that reaches its ultimate conclusion by arguing for the need to develop a new imaginary signification, "a properly Marxist 'ideology'" (393), in the service of producing a different conception of the subject, a conception capable of replacing those historically established "forms of consciousness" already firmly locked into the register of the symbolic. However, even though his proposition can be understood as relying on a misreading of Lacan, the misreading (or better: a re-configuration) of the initial theory might be necessary in order to avoid entrapment in the (ideo)logical impasse that post-May theory

– as Starr's convincing and historically careful reading points out – simultaneously makes visible and problematically reproduces by integrating it into its concepts and categories.

Finding a way out of this impasse is an urgent task for any project that sets its course towards an exit out of the socio-historical stasis effected by the universalization of capital and the attendant closure of historical possibility formalized as the culture and structure of feeling of capitalist realism. The exit suggested by Jameson depends on the production of novel social imaginary significations, i.e. it relies on a re-conceptualization of the social role of the imaginary, and one that is at odds with the Lacanian theorization. This re-conceptualization is motivated by an explicit anti-capitalist, Marxist politics and calls for a homologous poetics and discursive strategies that merge in a historical praxis reliant on the productive capacities of the imaginary. The minimal project implied by Fisher's politics of invocation, i.e. learning to facilitate irruptions of the Real in order to reveal the contingent nature of reality, is quite modest in comparison. The politics of the imaginary we can extract from Jameson's conception is a politics of, however limited, historical agency, a politics of autonomous practice in which the imaginary is conceived as a capacity of consciousness that can interact with the symbolic in order to reconstitute it. The production of social imaginary significations and the labor of the imaginary as it is materialized in cultural forms, even if it is motivated by a dangerous desire for identification and unification on the level of production, has a different effect at the point of reception, where it appears as a proper historical effect, as a defamiliarization of the automatized social imaginary.

We would not be amiss in calling this type of politics a positive politics, and its homologous poetics a prescriptive one. If we observe it in its critical relation to historical precedents (i.e. really existing anti-systemic movements and the institutional forms these took when they were successful) and in the dialectical skepticism it exhibits towards contemporaneous discursive formations emerging from the "logic of the impasse", we can even, ironically, call it a "third way

politics." Jameson should from this perspective be positioned not so much alongside post-May French theory as alongside an older generation of theorists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, on whom Jameson focused in his early scholarly work, and, more interestingly for us here, Cornelius Castoriadis. This link between Jameson and Castoriadis, which we already established implicitly, needs further elaboration here as it serves as the basis on which the theoretical apparatus we will use in our narrative analysis is built.

The link can be made explicit with reference to the opposing theoretical logics that Peter Starr identifies in the context of pre- and post-May French theory, logics that also delineate different political conceptions and motivate different modes of historical practice. As we have already pointed out, according to Starr, post-May French theory is characterized by a logic of impasse which emerges as a consequence of a consistently apprehensive attitude to all forms of power. What these theories start from is an unrecognized value judgement which unequivocally conceives of the inability of May '68 events to spontaneously generate a revolutionary transformation as a "defeat." This is motivated by a form of historical skepticism toward the legacies of 20th century communism and a form of all-or-nothing thinking based on a tautology. This "neither/nor" logic of the impasse ("neither the power of the state nor the power generated by anti-systemic movements which is simply the spectral double of the power of the state") diverges from the "neither/nor/but" logic of pre-May critics of really existing socialisms and established traditions of modern revolutionary theory, such as Castoriadis or Sartre. A longer quote from Starr which points that out quite explicitly is in order:

> Where the logics of specular doubling and recuperation most obviously part company with analyses such as these, I would suggest, is in their essential resistance to contextualization within a complex, historical account of the difficulties inherent in the

> process of institutionalizing a revolution (the difficulty, for instance, of reconciling the often contrary demands of individual autonomy and collective solidarity). In their most univocal formulations, the logics of failed revolt meticulously occult the incremental advance, that specifically historical remainder that makes a difference. That is to say, they are grounded in an essentialist tautology whereby failure is presumed to equal failure (and nothing else), whereby the social system that returns on the far side of a revolutionary episode is deemed the same as that against which revolution was brought ("revolution is always impossible because the same always returns in the opposite"); whereby Power or the Master are always at one with themselves (and hence absolutely noxious). An account of revolution as repetition becomes a "logic," in short, when it is founded on an identitarian or tautological circularity (e.g., the conception of power as one and self-identical) and when it is subject to an "all-or-nothing" standard. Considered in light of earlier accounts (by Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others) of the inevitable betrayal of a revolution's aims through the process of its institutionalization, the so-called logics of failed revolt appear strikingly impoverished. (29)

What aligns Jameson with Castoriadis, beyond his insistence on the historical power of social imaginary significations suggested by the concept of Utopia, is also a dialectical conception of Utopia's inevitable failure, i.e. Jameson's insistence that the aim of Utopian significations is not the future establishment of a historical order characterized by imaginary bliss but outlining the contours of the otherwise invisible order governing the present. This conception of Utopia as heuristic is analogous to the heuristic conception of revolution pointed out by Starr as characteristic for pre-May accounts, including Castoriadis': "betrayal through institutionalization" is understood

not as an index of failure, but as the inevitable movement of historical development beyond the point of revolutionary rupture. On top of that, the neither/nor/but logic that aligns Jameson's theoretical project of creative speculation about the place of the subject on the other end of historical time with Castoriadis' project of autonomy can also be explicitly observed in the way he envisions the fate of desire at the very end of his reading of Lacan in the text that we have drawn from in this analysis – "neither renunciation, nor repression, but a realization of desire." If we remember here that for Jameson Utopia is in fact a form of desire[39], we can make the argument that what he is proposing here is not a realization of desire on an individual level. More specifically, the realization of desire ("a desire called Utopia") does not occur in the consumerist identification of desire with the pleasure in "getting what you want", but in the reconstitution of the subject through active production of history. This lays out a logic homologous to the neither-nor-but movement characteristic of Castoriadis' earlier criticisms of really existing socialisms[40] – "neither really existing socialism, nor capitalism, but radical democracy/'the project of autonomy'[41]", a project that has similarly transformative consequences on the level of the subject and implies "that history be thought in its openness to the emergence of radically novel innovations." (Breckman 133)

In any case, the important thing to observe here is the alignment between these two historical projects: both Jameson's Utopian creative speculation and Castoriadis' autonomy mandate an active search for positive political content, the production of history through the creation of novel

[39] The subtitle of *Archeologies of the Future* is *Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions*. This formula brilliantly summarizes three important points that can be extracted from Jameson's theory as we read it here: Utopia is a form of desire, Utopia is an imaginary signification (i.e. "fiction"), Utopia is a specifically modern social imaginary signification (therefore it is a "science fiction", and cannot in its social role be equated with myth).
[40] Jameson, however, never renounces Marxism, which was, at least on a rhetorical level, felt to be necessary by Castoriadis.
[41] For Castoriadis, autonomy on the level of the subject means the "establishment of a certain relation of the individual to himself, the opening up to reason of the imaginary, or the transformation of the relations between unconscious intention and conscious intention." ("Epilegomena to the Theory of the Soul" 36)

forms of social life and conceptions of the subject that take seriously the possibility of emancipation. The production of new social imaginary significations in this process constitutes a form of historical praxis that, even if it is critical of the historical traditions of institutionalized revolutions, is not apprehensive towards the possibility of collective emancipation and radical socio-historical alternatives.

And indeed, it is no wonder that in the case of Jameson an introduction of incompatible elements into Lacan's theory is a consequence of such an alignment. Castoriadis himself, precisely because of the lack of room left within Lacan's grid of concepts and categories for autonomous activity on the part of the subject[42], polemically called his work "a monstrosity." (cf. "Psychoanalysis, project and elucidation" 46-115) The political stakes of this disagreement are precisely pointed out by Warren Breckman in a 2013 book entitled *Adventures of the Symbolic: Postmarxism and Radical Democracy*: "Castoriadis articulated the crucial difference between his and Lacan's conceptions of the imaginary, and the difference bore directly on questions of the human subject, creativity, agency, and self-transformation." (123) Additionally, for Castoriadis, "the premise of an originary capacity that links drives to psychical representations is inherently necessary in the Freudian problematic, but Freud's failure to make it explicit reflects a deeper reluctance to thematize the imagination as such." (127) It is relatively easy – based on this insistence on terms such as "originary capacity", agency, creativity, autonomy, and on the central importance given by Castoriadis to "thematization of imagination" as generative, non-mirroring, non-representational – to make the mistake of assuming that the imaginary is central for Castoriadis on liberal humanist or Romanticist grounds, that his theory aims at recuperating the irreducible

[42] Castoriadis, from the point of view of his characteristic insistence on the constitutively creative role of the imaginary for the psyche, observes this lack of room as a consequence of Lacan's specular conception of the imaginary.

substance of the human "soul", or the unbounded nature of human creativity. As we have already pointed out in passing, a similar mistake is easy to make with regard to Jameson's Utopian creative speculation, unexpectedly introduced as it is into the Lacanian matrix. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, as both remain firmly committed to the psychoanalytic, materialist conception of the subject decentered by the unconscious[43]. However, it is necessary to draw attention to this illusion as it can help us further elucidate the alignment between those two thinkers' understanding of the subject and its relation to the process of production of history.

The alignment is politically motivated – as is the emphasis on the generative role of the imaginary which makes both diverge from Lacan. It is a result of an explicit commitment to a particular form of historical praxis, namely socially-transformative, anti-systemic politics which does not conceive of historical development[44] without the element of the subjective[45] (as it is the case, for instance, in the Marxism of Althusser, whom both have engaged with critically[46], and who in his conception of history as a process without a subject weds Lacanian concepts to an anti-Hegelian, structuralist Marxism). For Jameson, what is ultimately at stake is the dialectical role social imaginary significations have to play as factors of socio-historical transformation. The labor

[43] And discovered as such by Freud, even though Jameson credits the "decentering" to Lacan: "the Lacanian doctrine of the decentered subject […] offers a model more than merely suggestive." (*Imaginary and Symbolic* 395)
[44] We are using the term "development" here and elsewhere in a more neutral, non-technological sense than the one it has acquired through its deployment in sociological or economic theories of modernization, or in a range of other Western discourses often characterized by teleological and moralistic conceptions of history.
[45] It is impossible to avoid mentioning here that Jameson in particular is commonly (and insufferably, one might add) accused of exactly the opposite by critics hostile to his insistence on the concept of totality, or to historical materialism more generally. Hence stereotypical charges of vulgar materialist reductionism, intolerance of difference, etc. We designate such attacks as "insufferable" here primarily on a theoretical basis, as they mischaracterize, misunderstand, or ignore the dialectical method of Jameson's engagement with a wide spectrum of "antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations" (*Political Unconscious* x), which has always strived for mediation and not nullification. The aim of this engagement, in which Marxism is conceived as a "translation mechanism" between incommensurable positions, is a dynamic one and results in their ultimate *Aufhebung*, "at once canceling and preserving them." (ibid.) Ulf Schulenberg, in a relevant 2001 article critically sympathetic to Jameson and discussing precisely these problems, rightly recognizes the fundamental importance of Jameson's work for "The emergence of an open and largely undogmatic Marxist discourse […]" (282)
[46] Jameson more systematically and productively than Castoriadis, prone as he was to polemical reductionism. See the introductory chapter of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.

of the imaginary, as he envisions it, is directed towards forging a "new form of consciousness" or a conception of the subject which will appear "at the other end of historical time" as an emancipatory "third term […] imagined beyond either the 'autonomous individualism' of the bourgeoisie in its heyday or the schizoid part-objects in which the fetishization of the subject under late capitalism has left its trace." ("Imaginary and Symbolic" 393) For Castoriadis, the imaginary is also a fundamental instrument for the emancipatory reconstitution of the subject pursued in the project of autonomy, the subjective effects of which are defined quite precisely as the "establishment of a certain relation of the individual to himself, the opening up to reason of the imaginary, or the transformation of the relations between unconscious intention and conscious intention." ("Epilegomena" 36) This transformation into autonomous subjects and autonomous collectives can begin, as in Jameson, only under historical conditions where the alienating and reifying influences of capitalist social relations and their attendant ideologies and institutional forms are perceived in their historical contingency and can fully come about only as they are dismantled. This is a vast historical task involving among other things theoretically informed praxis, innovative organizational forms, and the production of alternative social imaginary significations, i.e. a positive politics. In his own account of the failure of May '68, Castoriadis sums this up and points out the experience of "enormous difficulty involved in extending critique of the existing order in practical and positive ways, the impossibility of assuming the goal of an autonomy that is at once individual and social by establishing collective self-governance." (qtd. in Starr 21)

For Jameson, who uses the vaguer but still positively charged concept of Utopia instead of autonomy, the labor of the imaginary producing new forms of consciousness is similarly understood as grounded in critique and engaged in the dual task of re-inventing both the subject itself and the political relationship of the subject to the collective: the development of "a theoretical elaboration of […] an ideology of the collective" proceeds in step with the development of an

emancipatory conception of the subject, where ideology is understood in the Althusserian sense, as an "imaginary relation": "the ideological representation must rather be seen as that indispensable mapping fantasy or narrative by which the individual subject invents a 'lived' relationship with collective systems which otherwise by definition exclude him insofar as he or she is born into a pre-existent social form and its pre-existent language." ("Imaginary and Symbolic" 394)

For both, then, the fundamental emancipatory propositions are conceived in terms of the imaginary: as the problem of "invention" or "establishment" of new relations of the subject to the collective and of the subject to itself. In other words, the emergence of both the "Utopian subject" and the "autonomous subject" is predicated on a transformative, emancipatory resolution of the oppressive tension between the individual and the collective characteristic of bourgeois societies. Both theoretical projects could be said to represent attempts to re-draw the lines between these two instances according to radically transformative political visions. These new conceptions of the subject are conceived as goals to strive towards, as futuristic projections. Warren Breckman's insight about Castoriadis' understanding of psychoanalysis is helpful in pointing out the importance of this: "Aimed at autonomy, psychoanalysis should take the 'subject' not as its point of departure but as its end goal, as its project." (133) Insofar as we are speaking about the subject of Utopian creative speculation, the same could be applied to Jameson as well, since his subject too is conceptualized through a proleptic imaginary leap, by recourse to a vision of the world beyond capital, in relation to an imagined social arrangement "at the other end of historical time." The prolepsis involved in both these conceptions is another point of divergence from Lacan as he, according to Breckman "in common with all structuralists, excluded the essential dimension: temporality." (ibid.)

If there is one fundamental justification for our attempt to develop a theory of literary forms on the basis of Castoriadis and Jameson, then it is this: the capitalist realist impasse at the End of

History is also based on an exclusion, or more precisely reconfiguration, of temporality dependent on a repression of the dimension of the future. Any theory looking to break the suffocating hold of the temporality of perpetual present characteristic of capitalist realism must look for ways of reinstating that dimension.

1.7 The Poetics of Utopian Objects

The reconstitution of the subject reliant on a proleptic speculative leap, central for both Utopian thinking and the project of autonomy, depends among other things on the activation of the productive capacities of the imaginary and the production of new social imaginary significations. These, when discursively formalized and integrated into cultural forms and forms of socio-political practice, have a chance of registering as concrete socio-historical effects. We already emphasized the importance of conceiving of such labor of the imaginary as productive and not merely reproductive, as well as how both the unexpected introduction of the term Utopia in Jameson's text and the harshly critical attitude of Castoriadis towards Lacan point to politically motivated disagreements with the constricted way the Lacanian matrix treats the historical emergence of new meaning. This is not to say, however, that we should conceive of any activity of the imaginary as fully free from the regulative framework of the symbolic. As Jameson reminds us at the end of his 1984 book *The Political Unconscious*, "[…] the undiminished power of ideological distortion […] persists even within the restored Utopian meaning of cultural artifacts." (290) Such a dialectical conception of the relation between ideology and Utopian semantic excess is not foreign to Castoriadis either, despite the fact that much of his work proceeds from a re-conceptualization of the imaginary as endlessly creative, irreducible to a mirroring function, and despite the fact that he understands imagination as "an unbridled imagination, a de-functionalized imagination." (Castoriadis "Logic" 15) To quote once again Manfred Steger and Paul James, who summarize

Castoriadis succinctly: “the imaginary is that which expresses the creative excess of our human condition. It always exceeds the possibilities of the material conditions of life.” (“Levels” 63) However, Castoriadis never disregards the socio-historical pressure that the imaginary is subjected to:

> Society, in its turn, is instituted (*s’institue*) each time in (a state of) closure. Closure of its logic, closure of its imaginary significations. Society fabricates individuals by imposing both of these forms of closure on them; it therefore fabricates, first and foremost—and exclusively, in the overwhelming majority of societies—closed individuals, individuals who think as they have been taught to think, who evaluate likewise, who give meaning to that which society has taught them has meaning […] All this means, too, that, through this social fabrication of the individual, the institution subjugates the singular imagination of the subject and, as a general rule, lets it manifest itself only in and through dreaming, phantasying, transgression, illness. (“Logic” 29)

The imperative of social reproduction, in other words, necessitates the regulation of imaginary activity of individuals. The social imaginary then, far from being an ever-shifting repository of imaginary excess of individuals, has a life of its own as a framework of instituting significations which demarcate and regulate the domain of collective life. By definition, it is limited and the reproduction of every instituted social formation depends on setting and maintaining these limits.

However, as we mentioned above, it is important to take seriously the possibility of a certain projective semantic excess the imaginary is capable of producing and to dedicate critical attention to the cultural forms and discursive strategies in which this excess can be materialized. Because

for Castoriadis, as by implication also for Jameson, one of the central aspects of the imaginary is the potential to produce significations capable of destabilizing the "closure": whether by defamiliarizing it and thus making it appear in its contingency, whether by reconstituting (or even destroying) the closed order of instituted social imaginary significations through the introduction of new significations, meanings and semantic relations. What else is Utopia, as Jameson conceives it, but one instance of this uncontainable excess of imaginary activity re-asserting itself against the suppression imposed by social institution, its established social imaginary significations and the symbolic?

Our analysis of narrative forms in the post-socialist novel will proceed from this theoretical framework. These narrative forms are unavoidably constructed with reference to the global capitalist realist social imaginary, which represents – as their socio-historical and cultural context – nothing less than their historical conditions of intelligibility. This makes the logic of these forms, again unavoidably, socially instituting as they would be unintelligible without reproducing that framework of reference to a degree minimally necessary for intelligibility. Since social institution, as we noted above, can only exist in a state of closure, our task here will be to map out the historical limits of that closure and interrogate whether there are, within the confines of the literary corpus we are concerned with here, discursive means to bring it into question. If the meaning of such closure is that, as Castoriadis claims above, "that what is thought cannot be put into question in its essential features", then the imaginary excess or Utopian creative speculation that we postulate as a product of the labor of the imaginary should register on the level of form precisely as the forbidden question addressed to the essential features of the closure. This is the true historical import of Shklovsky's defamiliarization: if it were simply a way to re-invigorate our fatigued perception in order to make our experience as perceiving subjects interesting or pleasurable again, if the purpose of it were simply to register anew what had already been established as objects, this

would be a purely formal process and its potential and effects would amount to no more than repetition, a reconstruction of the world we already know is there. As such, as a condition of possibility of repetition, as simply an individual cognitive effect that ensures pleasurable re-perception of what had already been perceived (in other words, established as "being there"), defamiliarization could not register as a poetic effect, if by *poiesis* we mean production of new meanings. Therefore, defamiliarization should be understood not as (re)cognition of objects already constituted as objects, but as a part of the process of making appear/creating new objects (with reference to the cognitive framework within which old ones are visible). This, in fact, is very close to how Aristotle – whom Castoriadis engages with extensively and whom he credits with the "discovery of the imaginary" – conceives of mimesis, or representation as such. As Paul Ricoeur succinctly elaborates, unlike for Plato and the long tradition of hostility towards mimesis resulting from the Platonic conception, for Aristotle "mimesis is not a copy but rather a reconstruction through creative imagination." ("Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics" 142)

This can be tied in with what we have said about the imaginary so far: the imaginary, according to Castoriadis, is implicated in any act of perception as the domain in which the basic materiality of the reality about to be perceived is registered. Simultaneously, it is the origin of representational forms that provide access to that reality and produce a conception of its coherence by constituting it in specific ways. From that perspective, poetic defamiliarization can be observed as a process of reconstituting reality beyond repetition, a process of *poiesis* for which the productive, creative capacity of the imaginary is crucial.

What is the nature of these "new objects" created by the imaginary in its poetic capacity? We can turn here to a helpful insight by Castoriadis and use it to connect everything we have said so far about the productive capacity of the imaginary to the logic of narrative representation. Castoriadis puts forward the thesis that what characterizes "the emergence of humanity" is the

substitution of representational pleasure for animalistic organ pleasure and the domination of the former over the latter. This substitution and domination, it follows from his argument, is a prerequisite for Freudian sublimation (without the pleasure of language, humans would simply turn back to the animalistic state of "organ pleasure"). As such, it is revealed to be the prerequisite for human culture and social life. This social life is characterized by

> the appearance, through the works of the social imagination, of the institution, therefore the creation of what are, properly speaking, *invisible objects*. (In their social capacity, objects are invisible. One may see vegetables and cars, one never sees the commodity 'vegetable' or 'car'; the commodity is a social imaginary signification.) And we encounter a primordial fact: disconnected from the drive, the singular imagination becomes capable of offering the psyche public objects as objects of cathexis. ("Logic" 29)

We can finally return here to Steger and James and their elaboration of the social imaginary in relation to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. Above we pointed out how their view usefully explains the role that the social imaginary plays in the process of generating and organizing representations. These representations, or "invisible objects", "objects in their social capacity", are then, as Castoriadis points out, taken up as "objects of cathexis", or objects that are endowed with a certain amount of libidinal investment, objects onto which libidinal energy, e.g. in the form of emotional attachment, is projected. These invisible objects are products of the activity and labor of the imaginary and in their social capacity they have a socially instituting effect. As a simple example, we can take the national flag. Similarly to the example Castoriadis provides above, one sees the flag – a piece of painted cloth – but one does not see the network of meanings, practices,

beliefs, and institutions that the flag as an invisible object has a role in instituting even though these represent the real meaning and purpose of hoisting the flag to be seen. Of course, the semantically generative potential of invisible objects as signifiers is not exhausted in their primary instituting and ideological role, even though they do appear in that "social capacity" as finished or complete, or in other words even though they appear as signifiers whose relation to their signifieds is fixed. This appearance of completeness, or an illusion of semantic exhaustion, can be considered an effect of what Castoriadis calls closure (which is a characteristic and, at least for social orders where "autonomy" does not exist, a necessary condition of social institution).

It follows then – if one of the social functions of invisible objects as social imaginary significations is to institute closure – that accepting them as exhaustive of the semantic potential of their referents means committing a type of interpretive fallacy (with serious ideological effects). Since these social imaginary significations also serve as objects of cathexis, it is easy to put forth the claim that the fallacy can from a literary theoretical perspective be considered analogous to an extreme version of what the New Critics Wimsatt and Beardsley called "the affective fallacy." The affective fallacy consists of identifying the semantic/aesthetic potential of the text fully with the experience of the reader, or of assuming that the experience of the reader is, indeed, the experience of the text as such[47]. Thus, if social imaginary significations, invisible objects in their social capacity, are received as they are intended to be received, or in other words if they are received through the prism of affective fallacy, they become instruments of closure of the social institution.

[47] In the words of Wimsatt and Beardsley: "The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological skepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the overall forms of skepticism. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism." ("The Affective Fallacy" 31) Reader-response criticism later mounted a criticism of that concept arguing that the text cannot be considered an iconic sign and that it exists only at the point of reception.

This also brings us to our final conclusion. Firstly, for any critical, socially transformative project – theoretical, poetic, and/or *stricto sensu* political – it is imperative to maintain an attitude of distance towards socially instituting invisible objects. Secondly, as the above example of the commodity as a social imaginary signification demonstrates, it is possible to produce invisible objects charged with critical, anti-systemic potential. In other words, there can be social imaginary significations that "exacerbate distance" from the closed, socially instituted networks of meaning characteristic of the ruling social order. One could argue from this perspective, for instance, that the ultimate aim of Marx's theoretical work is precisely to produce such distance-exacerbating invisible objects. The concept of commodity which we used as an example above demonstrates this quite clearly, especially if observed in relation to the closely connected Marxist concept of commodity fetishism. The latter points precisely to the logic of the socially instituted closure characteristic of capitalist societies: commodity fetishism, as an ideological effect of capital, makes it difficult to perceive social relations (in the domains of production and exchange, for instance) as anything but relations between things, or in other words commodities are perceived not as signifiers of specific social relations, but as economic objects in themselves, organically endowed with intrinsic economic value. In such a context, the Marxist concept of commodity, revealing precisely the social relations hidden behind the capitalist world of things as exchange values, has a defamiliarizing effect and acts upon this state of affairs by making appear what is excluded and repressed beyond the limits of the closure.

Consequently, we can re-define the Jamesonian Utopian thinking or creative speculation in these new terms – as the type of labor of the imaginary that results in the production of social imaginary significations, invisible objects, crafted either from the repressed semantic excess that

is available beyond the socially instituted closure, or crafted *ex nihilo*[48]. The defamiliarizing socio-historical effects of such objects register as acts upon the closure which test, dismantle, bring into question its socially instituted limits and offer up alternative conceptions of socially instituted order. For our purposes here, we propose to call this type of objects "Utopian objects." Communism, for instance, is one such object. Under the regime of capitalist realism, the future, or indeed history itself, should also be considered one.

It might not be visible at first glance, but what is at stake here is a poetics. We can turn to a useful working definition of poetics given in passing by Paul Ricoeur, who points out that the "central element of poetics" is the "conversion of the imaginary." ("Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics" 143) If we take this to mean a conversion of the *social imaginary* – and we should, since any poetics is a program regulating the production of representations which are then immersed in and respond to specific historical conditions for specific purposes that cannot be called otherwise but ideological – we might add to it the insight that the function of any poetics that takes seriously the aim of converting the social imaginary should be the production and discursive formalization of Utopian objects. Or more precisely, its aim should be the production of representational forms in which Utopian objects can become socially perceivable in spite of the limitations to their intelligibility produced by the closure of the social institution.

There can, however, be no purely Utopian representations radically exterior to the historical conditions and the established social imaginary under which they emerge. The established social imaginary is an unavoidable framework of reference, even a determinant, in generating and

[48] Creation *ex nihilo* is not only a logical possibility that proceeds from Castoriadis' understanding of the imaginary, or what he calls the radical imaginary, but indeed, history as such is, for him, produced *ex nihilo*. To elaborate this further, it is important to remember that for Castoriadis "institution is inconceivable without signification" (*Imaginary Institution* 360) and that "primary imaginary significations" that a society posits are "[poles] in relation to which all social doing is oriented." (362) The (semantic) structure of those primary imaginary significations, such as "God", is self-referential, they do not have referents outside themselves, but originate as self-referential loops. In other words, they are derived out of nothing (else but themselves). (cf. *Imaginary Institution* 361-362)

organizing representations. This is the source from which, as we pointed out above with Jameson's help, the power of ideological distortion, persisting alongside the Utopian meaning generated by cultural artifacts, is generated. Therefore, it follows that the existing instituted/instituting social imaginary, as a semantically generative principle and as a loose, pre-reflexive framework of significations binding collectives together, organizing practices, and ensuring social reproduction, has to be written into narrative texts in some form.

In order to elaborate this problem further, we can turn to Alexander Beecroft's recent study of the "ecology of world literature" in which Beecroft constructs a new periodization of world literature from antiquity to the present day in which periods are distinguished according to the prevailing ecological system in which texts emerge. Starting from the insights from his 2008 article "World Literature Without a Hyphen", which were developed into a 2016 book entitled *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Beecroft sets up a periodization of what he calls literary ecologies, or complex but specific ways in which literary systems throughout history adapt to and relate to their social conditions while developing relatively autonomous frameworks of production and reproduction. For Beecroft, the concept of ecology is meant to be used as a "controlling metaphor" that is more useful than the controlling metaphor of "economy" which has more often been deployed to understand the dynamic mutual relations of literary fields and the relations of literary fields to the world at large[49]. He seeks to develop a complex model of world literature that can encompass "the multiplicity of strategies used by literatures to relate to their political and economic environments. As such, it should neither innocently claim that literature is exempt from this larger economic and political order, nor engage in *a priori*

[49] For instance, in Pascale Casanova's important 1999 book *The World Republic of Letters*.

assumptions about what that order, and literature's relationship with it, look like." ("World Literature" 91) The term ecology, he claims elsewhere, is more useful because

> we are dealing with a system in which the various inputs are not in fact equivalent to each other, or if we wish to keep the significance of those inputs distinct […] ecology understands, accepts, and insists on, the distinct and mutually interactive nature of these various inputs, so the changes in the external environment (more or less rain than usual, habitat destruction) can have complex and shifting impacts on the various species found in a given context." (*An Ecology* 18)

Elsewhere, Beecroft explains literary ecology as denoting "a relationship between literatures and their environments, understood as including economic, political, social, religious and technological factors, as well as relations with other languages and literatures." ("Tropes" 195) Referring to Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities", he goes on to add that each of the ecologies is a "species of 'imagined community' prone to specific blind spots and gaps." The concept of ecology, it follows, is meant to reveal the logic of "external forces operating on texts, authors, and readers within them." (ibid.) But, Beecroft goes on, "At the same time, however, a literary ecology is at heart a group of texts linked to each other in the minds of authors and readers […]" (198)

It is, we would like to point out, important to notice here the way in which Beecroft puts forth two opposing definitions of ecology, or at least isolates two of its aspects and conceptualizes them as separate and disconnected: on the one hand the ecology as "external forces" (or in other words, literature as a historical institution), on the other as "texts linked in the minds of authors and readers" (literature as a relatively autonomous network of social imaginary significations). He

attempts this separation despite previously establishing a sophisticated and plausible materialist model of literary ecologies as complex historical systems, a model which certainly leaves room for relative literary "autonomy" and is not overly reductive at its expense. It is easy to assume that Beecroft does this precisely in order to avoid charges of materialist reductionism, but such a separation of the two aspects of literary ecology weakens his theoretical model. For texts belonging to the same ecology are "linked in the minds of authors and readers" *precisely because* they belong to the same ecological system, and not in spite of it, or alongside with it. (Different texts can be "linked in the mind" in various associative ways and according to various criteria, from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, but the existence of such links means neither that they must belong to the same ecology, nor that their connection is of broader, systemic significance.) Consequently, treating this second linkage as separate from the ecological, systemic one helps perpetuate the aestheticist illusion of literary texts (and their audiences) as worlds unto themselves, disconnected from history. It also creates an obstacle to perceiving the principle on the basis of which this linkage, in both aspects pointed out by Beecroft, is even possible.

From the perspective we have espoused in this study, we should emphasize the role that literary systems (ecologies) and individual texts have to play in social institution, or more precisely we should consider them to be mechanisms of that institution. Instead of conceptualizing (groups of) texts that exist as separate communities, with the concept of community implying a certain communal autonomy, these groups of texts, together with institutional relations that comprise a literary system/ecology, are bound together precisely by the fact they are in the last instance *not* autonomous from the wider historical frameworks within which they exist, and from the general

process of social institution[50]. A narrative text as a formally limited, social organization of meaning should not be seen as an element of a set – literary ecology – that stands in a type of necessary but external relationship to its historical environment, but as an integral part of this environment, existing in a type of *pars pro toto*, synegdochal dependency. In other words, it is not a world unto itself, but an instrument of the world's social institution. It is in the historical environment of that broader social world that a new text is institutionally situated, it is from that environment that it inherits language and form (i.e. pre-existing notions of semantic-organizational possibility), which it then reproduces and/or reorganizes, and then in turn projects back into its historical environment, comprising one aspect of the reproduction of social life.

In other words, what binds texts together on the most abstract level is a social imaginary that both their authors and readers share and that is also constitutive of the ecology these texts belong to. Furthermore, that social imaginary is not only built into the operating logic of the literary system/ecology, but is also present on the level of individual texts themselves, as a principle of narrative structure. Beecroft makes the same claim and one of the central aims of his study is identifying formal elements symptomatic of this:

> But how do these large-scale comparisons play out on the level of the text? Are the traces of literary ecologies visible on the scale of close reading? It is my belief that they are—that literatures operating in certain cultural environments are prone to employ specific formal features adapted to the specific contexts in which they find themselves. ("Tropes" 195)

[50] Once again, Beecroft's theory does not oppose this, but its emphasis on delimiting the frameworks of literary systems results in a shift of emphasis from the social(ly instituting) role that both literary ecologies and literary texts themselves play, which is of central interest to us here.

Each of Beecroft's ecologies is structured as a literary-systemic equivalent of a type of social structure characteristic for (or possible in) a particular historical conjuncture (the ecologies are, namely: panchoric, epichoric, vernacular, national, and global[51]). A literary ecology reproduces, to an extent, the form and limits of the social imaginary established in the socio-historical context it belongs to. Individual texts, as elements of that ecology, exhibit traces of that same imaginary on the level of form. They could not otherwise be linked together. Or in other words, in order to be functionally related as elements of a particular ecology, individual texts must share formal characteristics whereby the established social imaginary can be written into them. From that perspective, these formal characteristics and devices do not simply represent a specific poetics or arbitrarily designate the structural possibilities of narration, but are revealed as instruments of (re)production of particular social imaginaries, instruments of social institution.

Beecroft dedicates a lot of effort to identifying a range of those across various literary genres, from genealogy in the epics and myths of the panchoric ecology, to the narrative *entrelecemant*, i.e. multi-strand narration in the novels of the global ecology. His insights will be extremely useful to us here, but our focus is solely on the global ecology and the novel, i.e. what we designated as post-socialist novel. Furthermore, instead of focusing on formal elements that can be said to appear across specific ecologies and trying to understand how they help bring those ecologies into being, we will focus on how these devices operate as instruments of (re)production of the social imaginary. Since the texts we are working with here are novels, our analysis requires a conceptual apparatus adapted to the analysis of narrative forms in order to make it possible to recognize the ways in which the social imaginary can be written into them.

[51] It is important to note, and Beecroft emphasizes this, that these do not represent a teleological succession of historical phases.

This inscription occurs, we claim, on the level of narrative functions, or more precisely on the level of what Roland Barthes in his seminal text "An Introduction into the Structuralist Analysis of Narrative" defined as *indices*[52]. Indices, as a class of functional units structurally organizing semantic elements (content) into the intelligible form of a narrative text, are "integrative", "truly semantic units" that operate by "sanctioning" content in paradigmatic relations. They are "metaphoric relata" the purpose of which is not to, put straightforwardly, drive forward the unfolding of the story but to relate its dispersed semantic elements and integrate them as equivalents by way of metaphoric transfer into what we perceive as, for instance, "atmosphere", "character", "setting", etc. They "refer to a signified, not to an 'operation'". (Barthes 247-8) Therefore, in order to narratively build a (representation of a) "world", or more precisely in order to narratively construct a social world that is intelligible to us, that is mimetically successful, relevant elements of an established social imaginary have to be formalized into narrative indices and integrated into that world.

[52] A comprehensive definition is in order here. Barthes puts forth the following, taking as an example Ian Fleming's James Bond narratives and claiming it is possible to categorize narrative texts as predominantly "functional" or "indicial": "The second broad class of units, integrative units, comprises all the 'indices' or 'indicators' (in the broader sense of the word). In that case, the unit, instead of referring to a complementary and consequential act, refers to a more or less diffuse concept which is nonetheless necessary to the story: personality traits concerning characters, information with regard to their identity, notations of 'atmosphere,' and so on. The relation between the unit and its correlate is no longer distributional (often several indices point to the same signified and the order of occurrence in discourse is not necessarily relevant) but integrative; in order to understand what purpose an index [indice] or indicator serves, one must pass on to a higher level (actions of the character or narration), for only there can the 'index' be clarified. The administrative power that lies behind Bond, suggested by the number of lines on his phone, does not have any bearing on the sequence of actions triggered by the act of answering the phone; it only takes on value on the level of a general typology of character (Bond is on the side of Order). Indices, because their relations are, as it were, vertically oriented, are truly semantic units, for unlike properly defined 'functions' that refer to 'operations,' indices refer to a signified, not to an 'operation.' The sanction of indices is 'higher-up,' sometimes it is even virtual, outside the explicit syntagm (the personality traits of a character may never be verbalized and yet repeatedly indexed), it is a paradigmatic sanction. By contrast, the sanction of 'functions' is always 'further on,' it is a syntagmatic sanction. Indeed, the distinction between functions and indices bears out another classical distinction: functions imply metonymic relata, indices metaphoric relata; the former are functional in terms of action, the latter in terms of being." (246-7)

Once again, this process by which the social imaginary seeps into texts is – because of the text's fundamental historicity, or because of the fundamental historicity of language itself[53] – unavoidable. When it comes to the representation of socio-historical relations and the dynamics of collective life, or what has in recent years across theories of different media often been called "world-building", elements of the social imaginary formalized in indices and providing a framework of reference for the understanding of social relations and collective life in narratives merge into a higher order function to represent an organizational logic akin to the Bakhtinian chronotope[54]. As opposed to chronotope, which denotes the form of spatiotemporal arrangement in narrative texts, the principle we are referring to denotes and regulates the arrangement of social relations and dynamics of collective life represented in the narrative text. We propose to call this principle "operative social totality."

Based on the above elaboration, we can observe operative social totality as a type of a complex, cumulative function of a narrative text. As such it does not necessarily correspond to a single formal device but emerges from narrative indices, as a projective function, a type of permeating principle. If we accept Roland Barthes' definition of narrative function as the smallest identifiable unit of a narrative, or in other words the smallest identifiable formal element that drives narration forward, operative social totality could be understood as a higher order function providing the basic narrative functions with a specific, socio-historical referential framework. Or put more succinctly and expanding on the language of narratology, it could be called narrative's implied social referent. Such an organizing principle is integral to the structure of narrative as a *socially*

[53] One should not consider this "fundamental historicity" a limitation, but simply a necessary condition of intelligibility of language to its users.
[54] In fact, a specific chronotope – or the narrative representation of the logic of a specific "spacetime" – can also be considered a social imaginary signification, a product of the historically conditioned, socially instituting imaginary.

symbolic act since it brings into being, enacts, a logic of social relations imagined to obtain in a narrative, and regulates the formal possibilities of its narrative arrangement.

Finally, we can return to the re-worked definition of poetics that we took from Ricoeur and integrate it with our discussion of Utopian objects. We claimed above that poetics can be understood as a program that regulates the production of representations the aim of which is a conversion of the established social imaginary. Consequently, the primary concern of any poetics should be the production of representational forms into which Utopian objects can be placed to become socially perceivable. But representational forms, inherited from pre-existing literary ecologies, also formally resist this placement and reproduce the logic of established social imaginaries. Or in other words, they reproduce the ideological closure of the existing social institution without which they would be unintelligible. Therefore, the creative labor of the text, its poetic capacity, consists of inventing possibilities, formal devices, of placement and contextualization of Utopian objects in relation to the established social imaginary, or their integration into the narrative's operative social totality.

Such a definition of poetics seems especially important in the context of the global literary ecology heavily permeated, as it cannot escape to be, by the social imaginary significations characteristic of capitalist realism. In that context, the central socio-cultural effects of forms capable of integrating Utopian objects – and the necessary condition of literary, and by extension historical, creativity – is the defamiliarizing appearance of the present as history, and the insertion of a speculative, future-oriented temporality into the network of social imaginary significations characteristic of the existing socially instituted order.

CHAPTER TWO: DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

2.1 Sanctioned Fiction and its Other under Really Existing Socialism

At the close of his 2013 book *Writing Postcommunism: Towards a Literature of the East European Ruins* David Williams makes an important observation about Dubravka Ugrešić's position as a writer in the globalized literary field: "Ugrešić unwittingly revived both the dissident and exilic models of writing that were buried shortly beforehand in an obviously shallow grave alongside the ruins of the Wall." (173) What Williams is referring to here, more concretely, is the newfound global reception of Ugrešić's work that followed her decision to leave Croatia after a scandalous onslaught of criticism, defamation, and threats launched against her by Croatian nationalists[55]. Finding it impossible to work in such a context and most likely considering her security threatened, Ugrešić left the country in 1993 in an ideologically highly charged atmosphere, and found herself, as a critic of nationalist and (proto-)fascistic ideologies and political tendencies integrated into the institutions of the state and suffocating the space for criticism in the public sphere, an author in exile. The centrality of this particular development for her position as a writer and public intellectual, along with the key term "exile" that describes it, is also codified by the biography that can be found on her official website:

> […] Ugresic [sic] worked for many years at the University of Zagreb's Institute for Theory of Literature, successfully pursuing parallel careers as both a writer and as a scholar. In 1991, when war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, Ugresic [sic] took

[55] Those were often allied to HDZ, the right-wing party that governed the country during and after the period of violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and restoration of capitalism (i.e. the "transition") – but not exclusively. The attack on Ugrešić is in this sense even more significant as a symptom of near-universal interpellation of intellectuals in the public sphere by nationalist ideology, which has been the primary ideological form normalizing the shift in social and property relations in the "transition" and after.

> a firm anti-war stance, critically dissecting retrograde Croatian and Serbian nationalism, the stupidity and criminality of war, and in the process became a target for nationalist journalists, politicians and fellow writers. Subjected to prolonged public ostracism and persistent media harassment, she left Croatia in 1993. She therefore positions herself as a "transnational" or rather a "post-national" writer and champions the right of authors not to recognize or respect ethnic and national borders, especially in cases where these are being imposed by force, as they are in her case. In an exile that has in time become emigration, her books have been translated into thirty languages. ("about")

The complexity and peculiarity of Ugrešić's position in the globalized literary field as a *post*-socialist dissident and exile forces us to confront a number of significant issues. Firstly, the seeming anachronism in the usage of Cold War categories of "dissident" and "exile" post-1989 is on the one hand indicative of the early incapability of Western reception to process and absorb Eastern bloc literature beyond ideological Cold War categories and codes[56]. On the other hand, if we observe this phenomenon from a broader perspective and take seriously the dangerous, life and death implications of the political situation Ugrešić found herself in the 1990s, we have to point out that her particular example contradicts the triumphalist End of History narrative of liberation from censorship and state control that the supposedly democratic regime changes across Eastern

[56] Williams cites Andrew Wachtel's study *Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* in an attempt to answer the question "why no new Milan Kundera has emerged since the fall of the Berlin Wall." (173) In this study, Wachtel examines the sociocultural and institutional conditions under which Eastern bloc literature was received in the West, or more precisely, that made this reception possible by establishing (politicized) interpretive codes through which it was read and understood. He then analyzes the new political conditions of the literary fields in the Eastern bloc and Eastern writers' strategies of adaptation to these new realities. Williams' answer to the question of why has there been no new Kundera incorporates the changing geopolitics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries: "actually there has: his name is Orhan Pamuk." (ibid.)

Europe were imagined to have brought about[57]. And finally, Ugrešić's anachronistic "dissidence" and "exile", occurring only after the fall of socialism, is further complicated and made peculiar by the fact that she is not only a post-socialist, but also a *Yugoslav* post-socialist "dissident" and "exile".

We are emphasizing this fact because the history of Yugoslav socialism has famously been marked by a certain exceptionalism: from the organic emergence of its socialist revolution in the process of WWII anti-fascist liberation (which did not require significant military assistance either by the Red Army or Western powers), to the 1948 Tito-Stalin split, and the consequent forging of an autonomous, homegrown model of socialist development, the geopolitical characteristic of which was a "third way geopolitics" and strong investment into the anti-imperialist alternative of the Non-Aligned Movement. Without going into much detail[58], one of the consequences of such "eccentric" model of socialist development – dependent on a combination of decentralization of state power and democratic workers' self-management, but also on the increasing reliance on market mechanisms, liberal reforms, and deeper integration into global capital flows – was also a public sphere that was freer from direct state censorship characteristic of Stalinist regimes. Simultaneously, that public sphere was also freer from the pressures of the market characteristic of Western capitalist regimes[59]. In his discussion of Dubravka Ugrešić, David Williams also invokes

[57] If we understand that ethno-nationalism is the dominant form of ideology necessary for the "transition" to capitalism in the Yugoslav socialist periphery, and that Ugrešić was attacked primarily on ideological grounds as an anti-nationalist (as well as a feminist), an interesting and ideologically incongruent image appears of her as essentially a dissident to the "transition", i.e. capitalist social relations and its political form of liberal democracy as they appear in the European (semi)periphery.

[58] For some of the most significant recent research on the contradictions of the Yugoslav system, see Unkovski Korica 2016, Cvek et al. 2019, Musić 2021. For a quick overview of the peculiarities of that system and its weaknesses from a perspective informed by some of the above research and one we are in agreement with, see Robertson 2017.

[59] Ugrešić herself addresses this in her book of essays *Kultura laži*/*The Culture of Lies*: "The contemporary Yugoslav writer used to create in the freedom of an outsider. He wrote, aware of his irrelevance within his own culture, without pretensions to relevance abroad. […] The Yugoslav writer lived a socially non-privileged, but a literary privileged life. Because uncanny non-provincial gestures such as copious translations of foreign books, which were impossible in market-oriented cultures, were possible only in the wild, non-market-oriented, disorganized and inarticulate

this Yugoslav exceptionalism: "[…] the events of 1989 effectively disestablished the three dominant modes of writing in communist-era eastern Europe – dissident (*samizdat*), exilic (*tamizdat*) and officially sanctioned literature (the former Yugoslavia being, in all three respects, the inevitable exception)." (143) What he is referring to here is that the "modes of writing" characteristic of most socialist regimes in Eastern Europe did not exist in the same form since the socio-historical conditions under which the Yugoslav literary field developed were also different. Therefore, the following conclusion can be drawn: in the peculiar but significant example of Dubravka Ugrešić, it was not the conditions of the literary field under socialism, but precisely its transformation during the restoration of capitalism, that turned her into a dissident or exiled author, enabling simultaneously the revival of "models of writing" characteristic of the socialist Eastern bloc. This fact of the afterlife of "socialist" positions in the literary field under capitalism complicates not only the history of post-socialist literature but the history of post-socialism as such (to the same degree that the positions of Ugrešić and other Yugoslav authors' in the socialist field complicates the history of socialist literature and socialism).

The standard narrative of that history is familiar: the trajectory of Eastern bloc literature is understood exclusively with reference to the censorious and repressive relation of the state towards the public sphere. The *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, i.e. dissident and exilic, modes of writing appear in an attempt to override the censorious efforts of the state and – despite more liberal periods like the Khrushchev Thaw, or the years leading up to the Prague Spring in 1968 – it is not until 1986 and Gorbachev's *glasnost* that "new literature", i.e. literature free of the moralistic dictates of official state ideology begins to publicly appear.

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culture. Only in the disoriented, half-literate and simultaneously highly literate culture rich editions of local books could be printed. Only in a spendthrift, crazy country between *communism* and *capitalism* (to use words from the dictionary of East European stereotypes) books could be printed without covering their expenditures by sales […] From a purely literary point of view, the Yugoslav writer lived as a rich poor man." (51)

Rajendra Chitnis, in his book *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech, and Slovak Fiction of the Changes 1988-1998* writes the literary history of the emergence and development of this new literature, or "other fiction" as it was called in the 1980s Russia. He dates its appearance and public and critical acknowledgement to the *glasnost* period of the latter part of the 1980s: "The first serious attempts to explore the nature of the 'new' writing of the *glasnost'* period appeared in Russian literary journals in 1989." (5) In an attempt to define "other fiction", he cites the following definition as more useful than those which tried to define it according to specific formal criteria (like the typology of characters, etc.): "A more effective means of differentiation was proposed by Vladimir Potapov, who defines 'other fiction' as 'literature which feels and acknowledges itself as only and nothing more than a phenomenon of language' […] or, in other words, breaks the convention that literature is the source of truth about how to live." (7)

This definition provides a good example of the perspective from which the poetics of Ugrešić's fiction from the 1980s is usually understood. In other words, her novels are read as paradigmatic examples of postmodern literary discourse, with irony, metafictionality, intertextuality, juxtaposition of different narrative styles identified as central narrative devices. (cf. Dakić 2018, Korljan and Škvorc 2009, Mandić) Perhaps her most important text of the period, to which we will turn shortly, is the 1988 novel *Forsiranje romana-reke* (translated as *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*) for which she won most of the major Yugoslav literary awards[60] and which was one of the codifying texts of socialist postmodernism in Yugoslavia. But Ugrešić is certainly not the sole representative of such poetics. To illustrate this, we can turn to a quote from a 1983 essay on "the avant-garde and post-avant-garde developments", written by Branko Čegec,

[60] The NIN Award, the "Ksaver Šandor Gjalski" and "Meša Selimović" awards, together with the award of the City of Zagreb in 1989.

an important Yugoslav/Croatian poet, critic, publisher, and editor belonging to the so-called "Quorum generation" of writers. Čegec writes about the poetical and ideological horizons of literature in late socialism and makes the following point, overlapping almost to the letter with what Potapov will write some six years later in the Soviet Union, and echoing what are considered to be the central tenets of late socialist postmodern writing: "the ideologically self-aware authorial instance abandons the literary orientation burdened by the notion of the text as a battlefield of ideas and, by reevaluating fundamental literary aims, turns its interests instead towards the analysis of external and internal laws [...] of the literary text." (Čegec 6-7)

It is crucial to point out that these proclamations come from a cultural figure who was on the editorial board of the journal published by the Association of Croatian Socialist Youth. To put it more directly, an "official" or "sanctioned" publication directly linked to Yugoslav self-governing institutions and the socialist state. This, on top of the fact that Ugrešić's postmodern novels were instantly recognized and officially acclaimed by institutions in the field, seems enough to make the case that the Yugoslav literary field was, as Williams claims, an exception in the socialist bloc. To an extent, that may be the case. But this claim needs to be refined by the observation that it was not an exception because its discursive regimes and forms differed significantly from those in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, but simply because it recognized and encouraged those forms. As the examples above demonstrate, it can be said that the Yugoslav literary field was an exception only to the extent that its "other fiction" was at the same time also its "sanctioned fiction". This reflects, as we have already mentioned, the relatively liberal relation of the Yugoslav state to its literary field, itself a consequence of a specific model of socialist development that tried to decentralize the power of the state and aimed, at least in theory, to create autonomous institutions of self-governance independent of state bureaucracy.

Consequently, the Yugoslav exception is important here only insofar as it can help us demonstrate that the poetics of "other fiction" exists across socialist countries even in the "sanctioned" capacity, i.e. even when there is no significant opposition or censorship on the part of the state. Put differently, the Yugoslav exception can be read as suggestive of the possibility that understanding discursive regimes and forms of socialist bloc literature, as well as the social institution of the literary field under socialism, should not be attempted solely, or even primarily, from the perspective of their relation to the state, as this does not yield a sufficiently clear explanation of their historical motivations and origins. If it is true that "other fiction" appears across the entire Eastern bloc, even in contexts where it could not define itself against "sanctioned" literature because it was not censored in the first place, if it is true, as Chitnis argues, that its precursors and gradual emergence can be traced back long before the *glasnost* period[61], and finally, if it is true that the period of "transition" represents in essence "the culmination of a period of disinformation and misrepresentation, when not only writers, but also critics served 'extra-literary' purposes, the 'final' caricaturing of the recent and distant literary past necessary to liberate writer and critic from this service" (Chitnis 13) – then it seems reasonable to make the point that the historical motivation for that particular form of literary discourse could not come simply from the struggle of socialist-era writers against state censorship, or from some abstract demand for freedom of expression culminating in the fall of socialist regimes and the establishment of liberal democratic ones, as liberal historical imagination often assumes. Instead, one should make the claim that its emergence should be explained in relation to broader, world-systemic dynamics and that such

[61] Chitnis mentions attempts to outline the genealogy of "other fiction" that stretches back to the 1970s or even late 1960s, although he notes that critics of the *glasnost* period were reluctant to stress such continuity: "Despite this continuity, critical discussions of 'other fiction', while noting precursors, focused almost exclusively on writers whose work was not associated with an earlier period, even though it had often been written in the 1970s or early 1980s. The major anomaly was *Moskva-Petushki* (Paris 1973, Moscow 1989, dated as written 1969) by Venedikt Erofeev (1938-90, no relation of Viktor), which had already been published and reviewed abroad and in *samizdat*, but became for critics a defining example of the 'new' aesthetic." (6)

writing represents a literary expression of what we would not be amiss to call socialist postmodernity.

2.2 Dubravka Ugrešić: "Postmodern" or "Political"?

The example of Dubravka Ugrešić is uniquely well-suited to illustrate this point. As we already emphasized, her 1980s novels are written in the context of a socialist state that, as a consequence of its homegrown and experimental model of socialist development, was positioned as a balancing act between the "East" and the "West". Although entire sectors of its society were de-commodified and official state ideology remained socialist, its economy was simultaneously export-driven and, as a consequence of the self-governing model, dependent on market competition between individual units of production, as well as deeply integrated into the global flows of capital and the world market. Such a position, with all its cultural consequences, is addressed, narratively formalized, and analyzed very precisely in Ugrešić's 1988 novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. In fact, it would not be excessive to observe the novel's narrative form as homologous to the structure and dynamics of the Yugoslav literary field, since its discourse and plot development depend on the logic of the field's regulative framework. In other words, the text is a rumination on the institutional conditions of the Yugoslav socialist literary field, perched as it was between the constitutive poles of the late 20th century world-system.

It is important to emphasize that the novel appeared in 1988, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and some 4-5 years before the key turn in Ugrešić's writing career – her exile from Croatia, expulsion from the post-Yugoslav literary field(s), and consequent re-positioning as a "transnational" or "post-national" author in the globalizing, Western-dominated field. The dramatic circumstances under which this occurred, as well as the apparent shift in thematic focus and preferred form (from novel to essay) that characterize her post-socialist writing have led to the

common critical emphasis on discontinuity in Ugrešić's writing. Thus, for instance, Jasmina Lukić in her article "Writing as an Anti-politics" makes a clear distinction between Ugrešić's "postmodern" writing, mostly done in the form of the novel, and what we might call her "socio-political" writing[62], mostly done in essay form, with the year 1991 marking the caesura. Similarly, the emphasis on this caesura seems further justified by Ugrešić's quick rise to international fame as a post-socialist author. Her particular position at the intersection of a minor literature and the globalized literary field, of East and West, of high literary culture and the global culture industry, opens up a range of important questions and yields interesting results when analyzed as a case study in the sociology of literature, fluctuation of cultural capital, and trends in the literary industry. Thus for instance, Iva Kosmos, in her 2015 study *Mapping of Exile in Works of Post-Yugoslav Authors*, which focuses on the latter part of Ugrešić's career, entitles the subchapter dealing with the first phase of Ugrešić's career using the word "predpriča"[63], meaning "pre-story" or "*Vorgeschichte*", and suggesting indirectly that her Yugoslav writing is politically relevant only insofar as it set up the necessary foundations for her later entry into the globalized literary field in what Kosmos analyzes as the tripartite role of "dissident", "culture broker", and "high culture elitist". (92-145)

Even though Kosmos' analysis is comprehensive, informative, and systematic, it is our contention here that a single-minded emphasis on discontinuity, however, neglects not only what

[62] Lukić does not use the term "socio-political writing" but a descriptive label referring to "essays which deal primarily with the social and cultural problems in the territory of former Yugoslavia." (73) Cf. Lukić 2001.
[63] The full title is "Predpriča: jugoslavenska zvijezda, hrvatska vještica", or "*Pre-story*: Yugoslav Star, Croatian Witch". The "witch" in the title is a reference to one of the most infamous episodes in the sustained attack on Ugrešić in early 1990s Croatia, the unsigned article known colloquially as "Witches from Rio" but originally entitled "Croatian Feminists Raping Croatia". (cf. Globus) It was published in 1992 in Globus, a weekly newspaper with one of the highest circulations in the country, and was a delusional denunciation of Jelena Lovrić, Rada Iveković, Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, and Vesna Kesić for supposedly lobbying at the PEN congress in Rio de Janeiro against Dubrovnik as the next host-city and for supposedly relativizing instances of war crimes of rape in the 1990s conflicts. The author of the article was Slaven Letica, a sociologist, publicist, future presidential candidate and member of parliament, who was also in the position of personal advisor to Franjo Tuđman in 1990-91.

Andrea Zlatar identifies as "internal poetic continuity" (123) in Ugrešić's writing, but that it also serves a more complex discursive and ideological purpose of establishing her as a "political" author only insofar as her work can be shown to operate within a specific conception of the political. In other words, Ugrešić is read as a political author only insofar as she addresses the issues of ethno-nationalist identity politics characteristic of the Yugoslav post-socialist "transition" or only insofar as this helps the ethnographic mode of reading under which she can be read as a "culture broker"[64] mediating the exoticism of peripheral history for an audience in the core of the world-system. One of Ugrešić's biggest champions in the core, David Williams, who also served as her translator and critic, represents this tendency quite clearly even though he is aware of what he calls "the literary republic's division of labour" under which Eastern European authors "would only be considered for work on the political pole" (43), i.e. under which peripheral authors are always and only understood as figures of collective enunciation, ambassadors of the exoticized regions they arrive from, as opposed to the "free individuals" with the right to produce aesthetic discourse outside of political or ethnographic concerns and tackling topics of "universal" import. This sort of argumentation, of course, strikes quite a familiar chord and has been developed in discussions of "third world" and post-colonial literature for decades now. What is interesting about Williams'

[64] Kosmos takes over the term "culture broker" from Graham Huggan's 2001 *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, who takes it over himself from Kwame Anthony Appiah. The passage in which Huggan elucidates the logic of cultural capital and the functioning of the postcolonial field encompassed by the term is worth quoting in full as it largely applies to Ugrešić and other post-socialist or peripheral authors as well: "They may still be seen, in spite of themselves, as more or less reliable commentators, and as both translators and exemplars of their own 'authentically' exotic cultures. (Note that exoticism functions here as in both 'does' and 'is'—Brennan 1997:115.) In this sense, it is perhaps less accurate to think of them as cultural translators than as culture brokers mediating the global trade in exotic—culturally 'othered'— goods (Appiah 1992:149). Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose formulation this is, sees the trade as being negotiated from the margins, but it surely makes more sense to see it as being conducted from the 'centre'. The most successful postcolonial writers/thinkers, it could be argued, are those, like Achebe or Naipaul or Rushdie, who have proven adept at manipulating the codes of metropolitan realpolitik (Huggan 1994b: 24; 1997a: 428). They are latter-day 'eloquent orators' with first-hand knowledge of the empire's workings, but who use that knowledge to challenge, not endorse, imperial codes (Cheyfitz 1991). Brennan would no doubt call these writers 'cosmopolitan' in sensibility, meaning not so much that they are, or present themselves as, socially mobile and multiply affiliated as that they respond to and creatively rework metropolitan demands for cultural otherness in their work." (26-27)

arguments in *Writing Postcommunism* is that, while he champions a peripheral author's right to "disinterested" aestheticism, he simultaneously disavows the possibility that it is precisely that aestheticism that serves as the discursive strategy which makes the text political. The disavowal is necessary because such a conception of the political implies a conception of the text that renders the opposition between the political and aesthetic moot – since it points out that the text is always and inescapably political by virtue of its always and inescapably being historical, i.e. embedded in the context of social relations under which it emerges. As we mentioned above, such a conception does not suit the liberal identitarian "politics of recognition" which represents the dominant form of politics at the End of History and which inflects the ethnographic modes of reading in the world-system. Thus, instead of mining Ugrešić's early texts for nuggets of authentic insight or formal innovation that her position in the peripheral Yugoslav field might have offered, Williams insists on demonstrating how, actually, she is "just like us". This is done by establishing a dichotomy, equivalent to the one by Lukić above, between her "postmodern", and thus "ironic" and supposedly apolitical or at least only marginally political, and her properly "political" phase. Despite pointing out the existence of a certain thematic continuity or homologies in Ugrešić's body of work[65], Williams insists that

> while Ugrešić was once a writer of witty and ironic postmodern metafiction, her post-Yugoslav literary output is characterized by an unprecedented engagement in politics, a palpable bitterness at the national homogenization of each of the

[65] "In this regard one can point to the fact that Ugrešić's essays maintain the interest in the trivial and the commonplace that marked her earlier fiction – the banal evil of provincial warlords, the nationalist kitsch of their intellectual sponsors, and the *poshlost'* of the fledgling ruling elite having replaced the personal soap operas of her Hrabalian 'little people'." (42)

> individual Yugoslav peoples, and a deeply felt nostalgia provoked by the 'confiscation of memory' and almost total loss of the world of yesterday. (42)

In a similar manner, Williams also considers unfortunate the disoriented reception of *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* in the core, characterized as it was by misunderstanding, factual inaccuracies, and disappointed expectations. The novel, he recounts, was translated into English and published in the core at a time when it was expected to serve as a source of information on Yugoslavia in the middle of the wars that erupted in the process of its breakup. Since it was not, he insists, a "political" novel, and did not lend itself to reading for ethnographic purposes easily, what it produced was confusion on the part of its critics. Williams describes the novel in the following manner, cementing the earlier dichotomy between "postmodern" and the "political":

> While containing thoughtful observations on the misunderstandings between 'easterners' and 'westerners,' the novel can in no way be read as 'political' or 'engaged' fiction. It is, rather, playfully postmodern, containing overt citations and intertextual references, parody, metafictional techniques such as a novel-within-the novel, not to mention much metacommentary on the process of writing. (43)

This, it is our contention here, is a serious misreading of Ugrešić's 1988 text. The misreading is a consequence, once again, of incommensurable conceptions of the political that the novel explores and that its liberal critics operate with, or in other words a misunderstanding of the social imaginary significations that constitute the novel's social world. Even if we simplify our interpretation of the categories that Williams' uses and take into consideration the definition of "political" or "engaged" as meaning something akin to "addressing everyday politics or

contributing to the debates on the burning issues of the day", it is absolutely unjustified to call "unpolitical" a novel that strives to give narrative form to Cold War polar tensions (in episodes such as the unfortunate defection of a Soviet writer to the West), the constitution of the public sphere and the function of cultural forms within it (in the episode where a group of international writers visits production workers at a sausage factory), or numerous episodes detailing widely different cultural expectations and economically motivated experiences of people occupying equivalent positions as writers in the core and the (semi)periphery.

Such a conception, quite common among interpretations of Ugrešić's texts, is a result of a facile equation of the political in literature with conceptions of "engagement" that emerged in 20th century debates and polemics around modernism, perhaps most famously in and around the mutually contested views of writers like Adorno, Lukács, Brecht, and Sartre or in related debates that characterized the episode known in Yugoslav literary history as the "Conflict on the Literary Left." In this sense, it is both superfluous and anachronistic to emphasize that *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* is not an "engaged" text because it could not historically, by virtue of the changed historical conditions of its emergence, have been one anymore. With the transformations characterizing the late 20th century world-system, the switch in the regime of capitalist accumulation, and with the changing configuration of the public sphere and relation of cultural production to capital under those conditions, "engagement" as a category known from the aforementioned modernist debates wanes and disappears together with the rest of the modernist categories that did not survive the passage into postmodernism as a cultural logic of late capitalism. This, however, does not automatically mean that Ugrešić's late socialist novel is unpolitical and the text itself points that out in quite explicit ways. The argument of Williams, Lukić, and other critics who insist on the opposition between the "postmodern" and the "political" phase of Ugrešić's work is therefore based on a fallacy: the claim that "the novel is not 'engaged', so it

must not be political" – is a *non sequitur*. Indeed, it is odd that Williams himself would insist on the supposedly apolitical nature of Ugrešić's 1980s texts without realizing this, since he is familiar with and quotes extensively from the philosopher Borislav Mikulić's 1992 and 2000 texts on the political-cultural conflict that drove Ugrešić into exile. Both Mikulić's texts contextualize, reiterate, and develop the claim about the need for the autonomy of literary production. But he understands autonomy not as a pre-condition for the supposedly autotelic nature of literature, or the condition of possibility for its naively conceived "freedom" from the social – but as the condition of possibility of thinking the social in a critical manner. Or, in Mikulić's own words: "In order to write socially, literature has to think aesthetically."[66] (Mikulić 1992) This "aesthetic thinking", or the particular autonomous form literary discourse must find in order to be able to produce its socially critical charge, as Mikulić himself recognizes[67], develops in different modes under different historical circumstances. We will be returning to that point in order to demonstrate how the logic of capitalist realism post-1989 infiltrates the very form of Ugrešić's writing, but before we do that, more interpretative attention to *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, her last novel before the fall, is necessary.

2.3 *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* – Literary Autonomy and Representation of Historical Possibility

We have already said that the novel not only examines the institutional framework of the late socialist literary field in Yugoslavia, but that its narrative is a representation of the dynamics,

[66] A less elegantly economical translation, but one more faithful to the vocabulary of the original would be "In order to write socially, literature has to think in terms of *l'arte pour l'arte*."
[67] Mikulić echoes here the dialectical arguments of both Miroslav Krleža and Theodor Adorno in their defenses of modernism, literary autonomy, or even *l'arte pour l'arte*. These arguments overlap to a degree in the way they theorize cultural form in history. Adorno's are more systematic and better known, but Krleža's were instrumental not only for interwar discussions of *engagement* but also for post-1948 (i.e. after the Tito-Stalin break) institution of Yugoslav self-governance and the literary field as free of state intervention.

outcomes, practices, and relations characteristic of that field. Therefore, the structure of the narrative depends on them. Of course, as the autonomy of the literary field is only relative, the narrative can be said to stage a series of "stress tests", revealing the intersections of the logic of the field with other social logics, those of the state, social institutions such as marriage, the broader public sphere, and indeed the world-system as a whole. It recounts the events occurring around an international congress of writers, critics, and cultural functionaries held in Zagreb and hosting people from both the Eastern and the Western bloc. Most of the events concern the interactions of the writer-characters: affairs, friendships, rivalries, and partly also official events of the conference, like papers, parties, or a visit to a local factory. These are recounted in a series of episodes revealed as interconnected by a mysterious narrative thread binding them all together at the end. Another crucial discursive element of the novel, framing the fictional narrative of the conference, are a series of autobiographical fragments that recount details from everyday life of the narrator-writer Dubravka Ugrešić, and that are separated from the fictional plot and related to it only thematically, providing a non-fictional counterpoint.

A common observation about the novel's discursive strategy, or to be more formally precise – its main rhetorical device, is that it is written in the ironic register. In all of the critical texts we engaged with above, from Lukić and Kosmos to Williams and Mikulić, irony as a device is then immediately linked to "postmodernism". The key question one needs to raise, though, in order to avoid a superficial understanding of either "irony" or "postmodernism" and in order to place that particular rhetorical device/narrative strategy in a historical context so that its meaning can be revealed beyond purely formal negation and distance is the following: in what way, or why, is a particular rhetoric, or in this case a particular form of narration, registered as ironic? Or in other words, what does the perceived irony ironize, in relation to what is it ironic? In order to answer that question, one needs to go no further than contrast the variety of writer-characters in the novel,

who despite their different positions, roles, and functions in the narrative are presented similarly, in their banal everyday dilemmas and contradictory social roles, in their flaws and limitations, or as Williams puts it, in their "personal soap operas as Hrabalian 'little people'". (42) Thus we find the Czech writer Jan Zdřazil who laments the imbalance and anxiety resulting from his conflicting social roles as a family man and a writer, and who, it seems, is robbed of dignity and mocked by history itself: "while others went on strike," Ugrešić writes, "he had to go get sauerkraut at Havel's Market." Or: "when the Russians were occupying Prague, he was, during exactly the same week in August, on his honeymoon with Zdenka in Varna on the Black Sea, with Zdenka paying for it all[68] […]" (119) Or, in another example, we see the occasionally-employed young Yugoslav/Croatian writer Pipo, who lives with his mother, as annoyed by what he feels to be the claustrophobia of his peripheral culture, the provincialism of his city, and the mundanity of everyday bourgeois life. And so, quite literally, he dreams in Technicolor, often fantasizing in the form of a film script, making up a more adventurous life for himself. When he is invited by an American writer friend to meet in Amsterdam, he is conflicted about travelling there and burdened by dilemmas equivalent to those of Jan Zdřazil: "Easy for him to say! […] He, Pipo, first has to check whether he has a few dinars in his account, then how much a plane ticket even costs, then borrow some money from Mom (*Here you are, lazy! I've been supporting you ever since I gave birth to you!*" (225) And even though he hypes himself up to do something – "Action, Pipo, moving, that is what you wanted, no? […] Come on, turn the lens. Write a better script for yourself, since life itself is so untalented. Get unstuck! Take off already! Move, Pipo!" (ibid.) – in the final episode he appears in, in the form of a movie script, he is shown indecisive as ever, daydreaming, while the scene fades out and the soundtrack to the episode comes on in the background. The

[68] Translation ours, as are also those of all other texts quoted in this study and unavailable in published English translations.

soundtrack is nothing less than a postmodern ballad of the monotony of adventureless, materialistic middle-class life, and unconscious aspirations of escape – Talking Heads' *Once in a Lifetime*.

The point of these examples, and there are many more like that throughout the novel, is to establish a fundamental contrast: how different these fictional writers are from the canonical modernist *Künstler* figures and their Utopian exaltations, figures like Joyce's Stephen Daedalus who vows euphorically and decisively: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated consciousness of my race." (*A Portrait* 196) Or how different their meandering justifications and hesitant rationalizations are to the stern, immutable, uncompromising imperative tones of the modernist imaginary, exemplified in the wordless injunction issued by Rilke's Apollo statue: "*Du mußt dein Leben ändern.*" ("Archaïscher Torso Apollos" 38) In contrast to such forms of affect, and the narrative forms it is mediated by, Ugrešić's characters are truly "little people", if that means that their narcissism is petty and hedonistic, instead of megalomaniacal and visionary, and that the desire to change their lives rarely registers with the sternness of an imperative, taking instead the form of nagging, contradictory everyday anxiety.

These characters cannot, however, be properly understood – either in their social position as "little people", or as narrative functions – without their modernist predecessors. The ironic register of the text, or irony as a narrative device and metacommentary, is established and emerges precisely in relation to the legacy of modernist ideologies of the aesthetic and in contrast to modernist rhetoric of affective exaltation. From this perspective it becomes apparent that what is ironized, the primary target of the irony, are not the "little people", characters like Pipo or Zdřazil. Their obvious "littleness", their lack of strength, conviction, or simply luck, would make ironizing them straightforwardly sadistic. Instead, the primary targets are the high modernist figures looming above the literary and political history of the 20th century that Ugrešić's "little people" are

unsuccessfully trying to model themselves after as writers. Figures like Stephen Daedalus, Malte Laurids Brigge, Filip Latinovicz, figures that function as a kind of absent cause for the narrative and the literary field represented in it. Put differently, the narrative form of the novel is structured around an absence: it is this conspicuous absence in the discourse of the novel that is a structural necessity for the novel, or more precisely, that is necessary for irony to register as its central discursive strategy.

But this absence is not, as many interpreters of Ugrešić dubiously claim, an absence of the political. Instead it is an absence of a specific conception of the political and an absence of literary form (and by extension, historical conditions) in which that what is absent can be articulated. It is an absence, as we already mentioned above, of modernist Utopianism, or, if we use the formalist terminology we developed earlier, an absence of Utopian objects the narrative could be structured around. Therefore, Ugrešić's text is first and foremost a literary-political reckoning with modernist rhetorical, affective, political, but also formal, exaltations. This, it is important to emphasize, is not simply an abstract interpretive proposition, but can be demonstrated on the level of the text's narrative form.

The novel stages an introduction of what we could call *reality principle* to the Utopianism immanent to the modernist literary and political projects. It achieves its internal consistency by demonstrating how forms of this reality principle simultaneously function both in the "fictional" (the plot) and "factional" (the autobiographical discourse) universes contrasted in its text. It dramatizes moments in which social imaginaries erected in modernism hit the wall of objective conditions of material, institutional, political reality of the world-system and crumble under the influence of external forces and new principles regulating the dynamics of the literary field.

As we have already mentioned, the text is divided into two separate elements, or organized into two different discursive forms, the "fictional" and the "autobiographical". These two are not

integrated narratively but serve to establish the metafictional framework under which the perennial question of the relation between representation and reality is invoked, and the possibility of an equivalence between the everyday experiences of the "real world author" and the fictional writer-characters is suggested. The fictional narrative occupies most of the book and is framed by the autobiographical introductory and closing parts entitled "I." and "II.". These consist of a series of numbered fragments recounting observations and everyday details from the writer's life. There are thirty fragments in each of the parts, with the first part numbered from 1. to 30. and the second from 999. to 1029., suggesting a continuous and linear temporality, although fragmented by incompleteness of representation and memory. The temporal coordinates of the autobiographical frame are quite clear, as the introductory part opens with the sentence "I spent August 1983 in bed with sciatica" (5), and the closing part with the fragment "In late April 1986 disaster struck at the Chernobyl nuclear plant, which we found out about several days later. The front page of our daily newspaper featured *Danger from radiation!* printed in large letters. Right next to it: *Our biggest danger is nationalism!* Closing the windows, my friend Nenad said: *A new age has begun…*" (229) Obviously, these also establish the political coordinates of the text: the rising nationalism is observed in an analogy to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the "little person" of the author-narrator suffering from sciatica pain finds herself in the midst of it all.

The fictional narrative of the international writers' congress develops between these two and occurs around the same historical period. It is also explicitly announced and/or discussed in both autobiographical parts. This metafictional treatment of the plot is in the service of establishing a de-sentimentalized, ironic relation of the autobiographical narrator to the fictional narrative. In the first autobiographical part, Ugrešić-the-narrator describes writers in general as "small" and pitiful, setting the tone and the specific type of sympathetic ironic relation to the writer-characters:

> In August I bought a notebook and wrote in it – *I have a hatful of characters! What is the character I am holding in my hand to do?* – with a firm intention to write a novel, although I did not really know what kind. *This all comes from a lack of exercise*, my friend Grga said while we were having coffee. My friend Snježana dropped by and asked me what I would write about. *Well, I'd like to write about writers*, I said. *But you always write about writers*, she said. *Only the good writers can write about anything, while the bad ones must be careful about their topics*, she added. *What can I do, I like writers because they are so small, and I feel sorry for them*, I said, deciding to place the still non-existent plot in Zagreb. (12-13)

In the second autobiographical part at the book's closure, a large part of the above paragraph is simply repeated in the same vague, noncommittal manner. In addition, as the opening fragments of both parts remind us, there is a 3-year gap between the original iteration and the repetition, suggesting that the writing of the mentioned novel is not advancing very efficiently (another equivalence between the fictional writer-characters and the autobiographical author-narrator is thus established by pointing out her indecisiveness and the intrusions of reality into her literary vision):

> I decided to write a novel, although I did not really know what kind. *This all comes from a lack of exercise*, my friend Grga said while we were having coffee. Snježana also dropped by and asked me what I would write about. *Well, I'd like to write about some kind of circular movement, which is no more pointless than movement in a linear direction*, I said vaguely. *This will surely be something boring*, Snježana said. (236)

The repetition is also registered self-referentially in the comment about circularity and linearity, which equates the circular and linear conceptions of movement, thereby relativizing the assumed binary opposition between them. One is, of course, bound to think about temporality here: the comment can be read as a "postmodern" objection to the privileging of linear, teleological conceptions of temporality, and a somewhat nihilistic comment ("no more pointless than") on the possibility of progressive historical development. As such, it again serves to establish a distance from modernist visionary teleology and messianic self-importance. Such an ideological position is a complement to the thematic emphasis on the mundane in the novel and to its formal arrangement in which the fragment is given precedence over the whole. In which the whole, indeed, is a dynamic, accidental after-effect of an arrangement of fragments[69]. In addition, this relativistic perspective, determining the very form of representation of Ugrešić-the-narrator's experience, is structurally related to the representation of mundane repetitiveness of the fictional writer-characters' lives, trapped as they are by the implacable demands of their socio-historical positions. Therefore, another proof of a straightforward equivalence established in the novel between these instances can be found here. Ugrešić-the-narrator does not make distinctions: all writers are "small" according to her, and all are trapped by equivalently petty contradictions in their historical lives, all face equivalently dire individual failures of will and imagination. The one who wrote her autobiographical fragments is no exception.

If we focus solely on these equivalencies and narrative devices upon which they are established, it is possible to claim that the narrative complex of the novel enacts the very "logic of impasse" we analyzed earlier. The relativistic attitude towards competing conceptions of temporality, the suspicious critique of rhetoric of exaltation, the repetitive and ignoble failures of

[69] This position will be explicitly developed in the prologue to the *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the major novel written and published during the early years of Ugrešić's exile.

any kind of "transcendental" effort (each of the writer-characters in the fictional part fail in their attempts to escape, and almost all of them try to escape in some way, either by defecting to the West in the case of the Russian Trošin, by losing themselves in a comically passionate love affair in the case of the Minister of Culture, etc.), all of these seem to offer the same example, an enactment of the logic of impasse. Put together, they seem to overwhelm any attempt to break through into an alternative framework. There are no redemptions, no major Daedalian "epiphanies", no counterexamples, either in the form of sentimental happy endings, or at least ambiguous exits into new and promising situations. From this perspective, the narrative whole appears like an example of capitalist realist historical fatalism before the fact.

However, before rushing to make this point, we need to take note of two important things: firstly, capitalist realism operates by producing a network of social imaginary significations that make invisible the contingent, historical logic regulating the institutional arrangement of the world. Secondly, as a semantic matrix, it naturalizes this logic and erases the difference between "reality" and the Real, thereby discrediting attempts to produce imaginary significations that disrupt this arrangement by making them appear comically fanciful, if not downright pathological. *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, as we shall demonstrate shortly, does exactly the opposite.

We mentioned above that the novel stages an ironic introduction of the reality principle into the two narrative situations found in its fictional and autobiographical parts, thereby bringing the expectations of modernist political Utopianism and its ideologies of the aesthetic (i.e. the assumptions about the transformative potential of modernist literary form) down to earth. But this anti-Utopianism should not be equated with capitalist realism[70] as the novel simultaneously works to clearly delineate a historical logic, to give narrative form to the "absent cause" of historical

[70] Indeed, an argument could be made that capitalist realism itself with its disavowal of future-oriented temporality of Utopianism, and End of History discourse, is simply an attempt to equate Utopia and the present.

development, i.e. to history itself, which is gradually erased, as we know from Jameson and Fisher, by both postmodernism as a cultural logic and by capitalist realism as its intensification. As a consequence of this, what emerges from the narrative complex of the novel is a conception of historical development as contingent, graspable, de-naturalized. In other words, the novel engages in speculation about and produces "historical development" as a social imaginary signification. As we shall soon see, it not only insists on identifying and representing the "driving force", a socio-historical logic, behind (heteronomous) development of social institutions like the literary field, but integrates the representation of that logic into its narrative form as a central principle of plot development, thereby also not excluding itself from determination by that same logic. From a contemporary perspective mired in capitalist realist mystifications, this historicist demonstration, the insistence not only on representing the contingent historical totality, but representing it as comically mono-causal – graspable, demystified, and banal – acts as a defamiliarizing device, as it insists on the materialist pettiness of history, instead of conceiving it as either irreducibly complex, or ordained by natural laws its institutions are merely reflections of. From that same perspective, a Utopian object emerges as a consequence of such a narrative reduction – the possibility of history itself.

To be more specific: each of the two discourses in the text, the autobiographical and the fictional, are tied together by a specific form of the reality principle. In the autobiographical parts of the text, the principle is represented by sciatica pain. Every few fragments, there is a mention of Ugrešić-the-narrator either suffering pain, or going to treatment, or receiving a note by a writer friend asking about her health. This occurs both in 1983 and in 1986, both at the beginning and at the end of the novel. The pain is an important signifier here because it establishes difference: unlike any of the other details of her professional life, like travels to conferences, writing workshops, or encounters with various people, the pain is neither occasional, nor predictably repetitive, but

constant. There is no rhythm to it, it is simply there, like an ontological fundament determining a specific form of being-in-the-world. Unlike the rest of her fragmentary experiences that offer slight variation, contingent and seasonal, and can as such give form to a particularly circular conception of time, sciatica is analogous to physical time itself. For the one in pain it is the very medium in which life unfolds. The analogy between physical pain and physical time is also formally supported in the novel since time is the only other theme addressed continuously in the autobiographical discourse. Beyond dating the fragments and the emphasis on their numeric/chronological sequence, there is a peculiar reference to time measurement at the very close of the book. In fragment 1003., a Serbian writer named Radoslav meets the narrator on an Adriatic island, where they have a long conversation about "life and literature" on the beach. This is followed by the following odd exchange:

> […] When we got tired, Radoslav asked me what time it was. I didn't know because I didn't have a watch. *It's not nice that you don't have a watch*, Radoslav said, *a writer should have a watch. When I return to Belgrade, I'll call some writers to put together some money and buy you a watch. Thank you*, I said, *but I don't really wear a watch. Don't you worry*, Radoslav said, *and now sit here and watch how beautifully I swim*." (230)

Fragment 1029. – the concluding paragraph of the novel – offers a conclusion to the episode: "A small parcel from Radoslav arrived. *We bought you a very nice watch. You can use it freely when diving in water, and it also glows in the dark...*" (236)

What is one to make of this exchange in which not only the pushy, "mansplaining" fellow writer, but a whole group of colleagues pitches in to force the indispensable time-measuring device

onto Ugrešić-the-narrator? The episode would be forgettable and easy to overlook were it not for the fact that it was chosen to end the novel with, thus bringing attention back to the issue of temporality already implicit in the formal arrangement of the fragmentary, diary-like autobiographical discourse, and in its insistence on dating, numbering, and linear development. The emphasis on temporality seems especially odd if we accept the standard "dictum that time was the dominant of the modern (or of modernism) and space of the postmodern." (Jameson, "End of Temporality" 696) Also, the emphasis here is not on physical time or temporality as such, but on a very specific historical conception of temporality: linear temporality, or what Walter Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" called "homogenous, empty time", the time of modernity, the time of the clock and the calendar. (cf. 253-264, esp. 260-261) The emphasis also appears, unexpectedly, only a few paragraphs after the narrator's relativistic claim that "circular movement" is "no more pointless than movement in a linear direction." To explain this, we must remember two things: firstly, that a specific form of temporality historically embedded in culture emerges, if not exclusively then certainly to a large extent, from the experience of organizing labor. And secondly, that homogenous, empty time, the time of the clock and calendar, is the time of capital.

Fording the Stream of Consciousness is a novel about the labor of writing, written at the moment when the historical contradictions of the really existing socialist system were becoming untenable and some form of "transition" increasingly inevitable. From a broader historical perspective, we can say that at the moment when modernist obsession with temporality is replaced by a postmodern insistence on space, and in which the modernist cult of autonomy is gradually weakened by the "anxiety of the market", the symbol of the clock forced onto the narrator at the end serves to turn our attention to the fact that the "reality principle" introduced here is the reality of capital, the reality of the literary field subsumed under it. Paradoxically, this heteronomy of the

field can only be shown by an obsessively autonomous focus: in a novel the operative social totality of which is the globalizing literary field (or the world republic of letters), in a narrative about the marginalia of writers' lives and the banality of the material conditions under which writing unfolds. Such a focus is not meant to demonstrate what Ugrešić's colleague Branko Čegec (who, according to Borislav Mikulić, later joined the army of nationalist critics that drove her into exile, cf. Mikulić 1992) designated as a liberating turn into pure formalist autonomy, "the analysis of external and internal laws of the text." Instead, it is meant to show precisely the opposite – that the text itself, together with the institutions of the literary field by which it is mediated, is a historical process. Ugrešić's late socialist dive into autonomy is, indeed, a demonstration of its impending impossibility, a warning about the anxiety of the time of homogenous, empty time. Which is also, if we remember that the watch is bought for her and sent to her despite her insistence she does not wear one, the anxiety of the heteronomous rule of the market. In other words, at the very moment that the basic postmodern conception of representation – that there is nothing outside of the text, or as Ugrešić herself would say, that books are always and only about other books – is established, the novel directs our attention to the fact that be that as it may, those other books are also and inescapably emanations of their own moment in history.

This is also the point at which the autobiographical discourse of the novel formally connects to the fictional discourse it surrounds. An equivalent reality principle is also introduced at the end of the fictional narrative, the plot of which unfolds as a series of episodes connected only, the reader is led to believe, by the fact that various characters participate in the same literary congress. However, by the end it is revealed that there is not much randomness to either the participants' attendance, or their individual fates in the narrative, and that there has, all along, existed a secret regulative principle leading the plot (and subplots) to a pre-determined end.

This principle is embodied by the mysterious character Jean Paul Flagus, a power-hungry distant relative of Gustave Flaubert, who he obsessively hates: "many people have a rich life thanks to love, while I have it thanks to – hate […] Every Mozart has to have his Salieri […]" (211) Flagus, whose very name is a contraction of Gustave Flaubert, is therefore Flaubert's twisted doppelgänger and opposite. But unlike his 19th century predecessor whose meticulous focus on style and adherence to aesthetic autonomy have wielded immense influence over 19th and 20th century literature, Flagus, a self-proclaimed "Agent of Totalitarian Literary Control", is not focused on writing but on the political and institutional manipulation of the literary field as a whole. He, with the help of his assistant and possibly lover Raul, a doctor of comparative linguistics and a computer expert, is responsible for a number of deaths and denunciations, career advancements and rewards in the fictional narrative, socially and institutionally engineering the globalizing literary field in accordance to his unifying vision: "Isn't it wonderful […] to have the power to pull the strings?! A similar feeling of power is felt by writers when they decide their characters' fates. My pleasure is greater because I do the same with – living writers. Isn't that the same creative effort? To invent and realize fates?" (211)

Flagus' mysterious motivation and disruptive intervention into the field invokes a comparison with Bulgakov's Professor Woland, who wreaked havoc in the literary circles of the 1930s Moscow, but as opposed to Woland's supernatural interventions, Flagus is a bureaucratic, calculatingly efficient, Cold War devil-figure whose aspirations are distinctly global and secular: "And uniformity is, my dear, a great thing. Admit it, what are the things that unite the world today? There are only a few such inventions: coca-cola, hamburger, the Bible… Great wealth and power are necessary in order to be able to offer the world such a symbol of equality…" (198)

Flagus makes a key point here. Because what else is he describing, with this conception of top-down institution of equality, or more precisely: uniformity, ensured by mass commodity

production and religious-ideological dogmatism, but the process of colonization of the world by capital, already well under way or fully accomplished in most spheres, even though the literary field might still be holding out? It is precisely this field, or its principle of autonomy, the establishment of which is difficult to imagine without Flagus' nemesis Flaubert, that he sets his sights on. Because the ultimate aim of such uniformization is the colonization of the subject to ensure social control:

> All in all, my dear, thanks to total literary control, we will one day be able to change the image of literature, to call the shots, to create conducted works, to influence awards, to produce bestsellers, to induce literary models, to create literary stars and epigones, to intrude into literary history, to erase and to write… We live in a technocratic world, my dear. Total literary control is a great idea, it would make literary engineering possible. We would finally be able to analyze scientifically the process of literary production and, on that basis, program models. Global literary engineering! You must admit, a magnificent thing! All in all, the duty of all of us who love literature is to gather information for some kind of an imagined big computer in the future. The one who has control over all this information, maybe even us, will have great power and undreamt-of spaces for creating new forms, new type of literature, new type of culture […] (199)

The bleakness of this conception of literature as data and its relation to a vision of technocratic control is perhaps the reason why the work of Franco Moretti's Stanford Literary Lab and their procedures of literary data collection and analysis has been attacked and seen as damaging by many 21st century literati. But unlike Moretti and his methods, the aim of which is

emancipatory scientific insight, Flagus is dreaming here about subjugation and ideological control. Having this Bond-villain megalomania in mind, as well as the fact that Flagus turns out by the end of the fictional narrative to be the conductor and driving force of almost the entire plot, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* can be read as an interesting variation on the theme of Cold War paranoia and the form of conspiracy plot. This literary form was significant for postmodern US literature of the 1960s and 1970s, and there are numerous intertextual references to US culture throughout the plot that further contextualize the choice of that generic model. A quote from a 1975 essay on Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* by Scott Sanders is useful to elaborate this point further:

> Our recent fiction yields so many instances of conspiratorial vision that I am tempted to paraphrase Richard Hofstadter and speak of the paranoid style in American literature. Thomas Pynchon, whose novels confront us with every degree of paranoia from the private to the cosmic, offers the most thoroughgoing example within literature of the mentality Hofstadter has identified in politics, a mentality which assumes 'the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character.' (178)

However, in comparison to Pynchon's universal paranoia and complex, mysterious conspiracies, Ugrešić's conspiracy is a very modest one, appropriate to the "smallness" of writers themselves, and is as such quite a believable one. Instead of Pynchon's paranoid kaleidoscope, in which a myriad of co-existing individual paranoias overlap and dynamically interact, in Ugrešić's small world of writers it is hard to speak about paranoia on the individual level at all: her characters

are hardly paranoid themselves, they do not suspect events are organized by conspiratorial networks or connected by particular ploys, and if they do, they tend to focus on the apparent and mundane dangers of the Cold War, like censorship or political control by the state. What goes on, goes on behind their backs while they pursue their own limited interests. Such a modest conspiracy plot, one could argue, even resembles the experience of modern citizenship in which a person is aware that there are "things going on" but they do not imagine that what is going on is centered upon themselves, as a true paranoiac would. Consequently, the problem that Sanders criticizes Pynchon for does not apply to Ugrešić, despite her reliance on the conspiracy plot: "The paranoid style of understanding the world is inevitably solipsistic. The paranoiac is capable of imagining only plots which center upon himself; and since few of a society's energies are ever in fact polarized upon any given individual, the paranoiac can never understand more than a minute fraction of his." (190)

The modesty of her conspiracy saves the novel from the representational pitfalls of the "paranoid style" and the problems raised by that modest conspiracy prove in hindsight to be politically much more realistic, as we can demonstrate on the example of the mastermind of conspiratorial political control in the novel, Flagus himself. As we have already said, by the end of the fictional narrative, it is revealed that his machinations drive and structure the entirety of the plot and that far from being just one in the gallery of characters featured in the narrative, his conspiracy is a central organizing principle connecting the other characters into a unified narrative framework. The conspiratorial work he is doing is in the service of defeating the Romantic ideology of the aesthetic, he wants to extinguish the "creative genius", and institute a literary field based on the principles of efficient commodity production, standardized, predictable, pre-formatted, just like the uniform social order this will help bring about. Flagus' totally controlled literature, in other words, is not too different from Mark Fisher's theorization of cultural

production in the 21st century, where the extensive institutions and efficient processes of cultural commodification ensure that cultural forms emerge as pre-corporated within the framework of the existing system, i.e. that the production of social imaginary significations remains within the limits set by the horizon of ruling ideology. The vision Flagus has for his new culture, his gospel of uniformity and unification, is something akin to capitalist realism.

Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to read the fictional narrative in Ugrešić's novel in the allegoric mode: Flagus' conspiracy, his attempt to replace the literary field's autonomy with heteronomy, can be read as an allegory of capitalist universality, an allegory of what would, within a year after the initial publication of the novel, become known as the End of History. What in the 1980s looked like a playful Eastern take on the paranoid style in Western literature, from a contemporary perspective looks like a peculiarly precise insight into the institutional dynamics of globalized cultural production.

In this sense, it is obvious how mistaken it is to regard Ugrešić's trajectory as a writer as split into two phases, the pre-1989 pre-political, "postmodern", and the post-1989 political one. To go back to the point made by Borislav Mikulić we mentioned above: it is precisely by focusing her attention exclusively on the literary field – that museum of modernist ideologies of the aesthetic and ethics of autonomy – that she is able to convincingly demonstrate the world-systemic (and world-consuming) logic of political-economic forces at play in the broader socially instituted world. The retreat into the field and the narrative staging of its internal dynamics, against Čegec and other postmodern formalist idealists, thus leads to a demonstration of the field's historically contingent social institution at the moment of increasing volatility of the world-system – what from today's perspective looks like a prophetic globalizing vision, Flagus' idea of world domination, is insightfully represented as the triumphant one.

There is only one alternative to that vision hinted at in the novel, and it is a relatively expected, not to say unimaginative, one. The only one familiar with Flagus' plans, and the only one who manages to outsmart him, is the US writer Marc who befriends the Yugoslav Pipo Fink over alcohol, marijuana, and rock records. Marc's easy-going, anarchic, countercultural, even anti-political individualism stands in clear opposition to Flagus' systematic politics of control. One could easily argue that between these two poles, the limitations of the postmodern social imaginary are also reproduced: the tension between them clearly establishes the logic of *l'apres*-May theoretical impasse we described in the introductory chapter. Not even a hint of a possible third term going beyond the impasse exists, and the narrative remains suspended and unresolved between the two poles.

However, it can also be argued that the point is precisely in this lack of resolution: Marc flees to Amsterdam, Flagus and Raul decide to follow, maybe even Pipo will end up there. Speaking in terms of narrative politics, perhaps this openness is enough. Perhaps it is precisely, as we have already argued, the representation of historical possibility itself that is the Utopian object here. Boris Buden, in his book *Zona Prelaska*/*Zone des Übergangs*, which is in our opinion one of the best theoretical texts written on post-socialist transition, wrote very precisely about the logic of historical possibility appearing to citizens of the Eastern bloc on the eve of its dissolution. Crucially, he reminds us that the memory of this possibility was one of the first victims of the triumph of liberal democracy, for which its radically democratic, revolutionary charge has always been excessive. Buden writes:

> The final act of receding communism was played out as a drama of founding society anew, a drama the outcome of which was at first still open: everything seemed possible again – even a better socialism. The thing playing out on that historical

> scene is truly a kind of radical politicization of everything that exists. […] The politicization in question does not simply encompass people in a society, or in other words the basic issues of their life in that society, but society as such, its own foundations. (33-34)[71]

With this in mind, Ugrešić's 1988 novel can be read as a narrative formalization of that very moment of historical possibility, the moment when Flagus' vision seemed defeatable. The problem, however, is that no one, including Ugrešić, managed to figure out how to do it.

2.4 "Post-socialist Neo-dissidence" at the End of History: *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*

Maybe the traumatic awareness of that missed opportunity is the reason why Ugrešić's next novel, 1997's *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* (translated into English in 2002 as *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*), strives to offer as much resistance as possible to formal uniformity, only to give up in resignation at the very end. Indeed, the text is a veritable compendium of various formal devices, discourses, and structural principles: it seems that even getting to the "main" text is difficult, as the novel opens with a long sequence of narrative framing devices: an inscription, table of contents, epigrammatic photograph, and a prologue containing a programmatic metafictional musing on how to approach reading the text. This complex distancing operation, which immediately establishes several levels of self-referential and metafictional frames, makes it apparent that it is difficult to be sure what exactly the "main text" of the novel even is: divided into seven major parts, the text includes numbered autobiographical fragments (the type of

[71] For the purposes of this study, we are translating into English the 2012 Serbian translation by Hana Ćopić. Buden's book was originally published in German in 2009.

discursive technique already used in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*), dated diary entries, footnotes, cookbook recipes, anecdotes (historical and contemporary, personal and of others), essayistic excursuses, repetitions, repetitions with variations. Additionally, the text is divided, beyond the main seven parts, into numbered subchapters (numbered simultaneously with Roman and Arabic numerals) but also subchapters that have word titles, appearing in a seemingly scattered fashion. Such formal complexity is addressed self-referentially in the prologue and metaphorically related to the random objects found in the stomach of Roland the walrus, who, the narrator duly informs us before proceeding to catalogue those objects, lived in the Berlin zoo and died in 1961. The narrator goes on:

> The visitor knows that their museum-display fate has been determined by chance (Roland's whimsical appetite) but still cannot resist the poetic thought that with time the objects have acquired some subtler, secret connections. […] The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way. […] the connections will establish themselves of their own accord. (xi)

We already suggested one should read this fragmented, formally complex novel in relation to Flagus' vision of "total literary control", as a discursive strategy of resistance. Unlike his controlled and standardized, hierarchical meanings, the meaning of *Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is lateral and horizontal, contingent, almost accidental. It "establishes itself" through associative connections, "of its own accord", differently for each reader and for the different associative chains, interpretive habits, and horizons of expectation they bring to the text. This individualistic principle of semantic generation – meaning which is not decoded or accessed as a pre-existing object, but generated in the present – is the structural equivalent of the principle

embodied in the earlier novel in the literary individualism and optimistic anarchism of the Brooklyn writer Marc, the counterpart to Flagus. This is, however, a problematic strategy of resistance. The same critical question which Fredric Jameson poses to Deleuze and Guattari's theorizations in *Anti-Oedipus* can be posed to Ugrešić. If we understand Marc's semantic libertarianism as equivalent to the associative principle of semantic generation proposed in the *Museum*, and if we understand both as proposing a form of freedom (from the past and future, from routine, from territoriality and semantic master codes), a freedom of deterritorialized desire, of perpetual present characteristic of Deleuze and Guattari's anarchic figure of the "ideal schizophrenic", then the Jamesonian question has to be answered: are not such propositions, far from representing radically critical alternatives to the uniformity of commodity production and the order of capital, simply "projections" or "replications of [capital's] most fundamental tendencies"? (Jameson *End* 711, cf. *Singular Modernity* 194)

There exists something of an awareness of the futility of such a semantic generative strategy at the very end of the novel, where we find the resigned narrator giving up on the struggle against unification. Reflecting on the condition of exile in one of the autobiographical fragments, Ugrešić writes:

> An exile feels that the state of exile has the structure of a dream. […] The exile suddenly sees in reality faces, events and images drawn by the magnetic field of dream; suddenly it seems as though his biography was written long before it was to be fulfilled, that his exile is therefore not the result of external circumstances, nor his choice, but a jumble of coordinates which fate had long ago sketched out for him. Caught up in this seductive and terrifying thought, the exile begins to decipher

signs, crosses and knots and all at once it seems as though he were beginning to read in it all a secret harmony, the round logic of symbols. (236)

If the modest conspiracy plot in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* managed to avoid, as we tried to argue, the solipsism immanent to the "paranoid style", it seems that at the end of the *Museum* the paranoid style, or more precisely the paranoid imaginary, emerges as a consequence of the anxiety of exile. This is further confirmed in the last paragraph of the novel where the narrator finds herself in a stereotypical situation of the atomized, solipsistic consumer. In that episode, at the very end of the novel, a telling symbol, with its "round logic" arises, as if unifying everything that the discourse of the novel tried to differentiate and expose in its irreducible particularity. The novel cannot, by the end, keep its own promise, and ends with an instantly recognizable symbol of capitalist universality rising over the very city which was itself a symbol not simply of division, but of differentiation and alterity:

At number 13 Tuentzienstrasse [sic], on the fourth floor, there is a JOOP women's fitness centre. Dr Jürgen Joop is the powerful proprietor of a fitness-chain. The huge windows of the studio, beside which are arranged a succession of exercise machines, face the street and look on to the Europa-Center and the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche, which the Berliners call a 'soul-silo'. On top of the Europa-Center the three-pronged, metal Mercedes star slowly revolves.

In this city the fitness centre is my healing temple, the price of soothing is cheap, I come here more and more frequently. I stand on the moving steps, the only exercise machine I use, and direct my gaze towards the three-pronged Mercedes star. One-two. One-two. Standing on the spot I climb stairs which lead nowhere.

> […] The three-pronged metal star revolves slowly, its rotation puts me into a hypnotic half-sleep. The metal goddess like a laser strokes the rough sears of the city, reconciles times and the different sides of the world, the past and the present, West and East… (237)

The tone of this description is a long way from the ironization (and denunciation) of bourgeois rituals we find in modernist literature. We only need to remember the opening of Joyce's *Ulysses* where Buck Mulligan appears at the top of the stairhead in a priest-like manner, about to perform his morning routine, with shaving paraphernalia in the place of ritualistic tools necessary for the Catholic mass[72]. In terms of signifiers, there is difference there, even opposition (secular vs. religious, body vs. soul, etc.), which is missing from the ritualistic bourgeois submission to late capitalist biopower in the form of gym exercise described in the *Museum*. The paragraph, and the novel, ends with the narrator gazing out of the gym window, and observing the migratory birds arriving to Berlin from Russia, who also look back at the narrator on her exercise machine, the "stairs which lead nowhere".

As in the above case of Marc from *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, it is possible to understand the nomadic birds in relation to the celebratory nomadism found in Deleuze and Guattari as a speculation on the forms of libidinal liberation. But this time, in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the symbol of the possibility of liberation, the Utopian object, is represented as the other: unreachable, on the other side of the glass. So at the end of this novel, we

[72] "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

— *Introibo ad altare Dei*." (*Ulysses*, 3)

find a kind of fatalist, detached resignation to the process of uniformization represented by the Mercedes star simultaneously rising over the city and occupying most of the narrator's attention, hypnotizing her into acceptance, even though she is aware of the negative implications of that acceptance. Thus, the final episode cements, reiterates and expands the implication contained in the novel's title: museum of unconditional surrender. In other words, the museum cannot simply be understood as the museum of the life-worlds of socialism, as the endless description of details and memories of the life before the dissolution of the Eastern bloc in the novel might suggest. The meaning of the signifier is broader, it refers to the conditions on both sides of the Cold War divide: it is a museum of Utopian expectations, a museum to the possibility of historical development.

2.5 *The Ministry of Pain* as Reified Literary Form

There is also a more concrete literary, formal implication to the resignation represented in this final episode, as we can observe with reference to the novel that followed *The Museum*, 2004's *The Ministry of Pain*, which closes the triad of Ugrešić's fictional texts we are examining here. According to a convincing analysis by Iva Kosmos, Dubravka Ugrešić's essayistic writing that appeared in the 2000s, after she was recognized by Western readership and established in her role in the "international" literary field, is deserving of criticism for reproducing what Kosmos calls "the dark imaginary of stereotypical representations of the Balkans." (112) She supports this criticism with a number of examples from Ugrešić's books published in the 2000s, and claims that her critique of the post-Yugoslav social reality tended at that time to reproduce Balkanist stereotypes for Western audiences. If Kosmos is correct in this criticism, and we maintain that she is, this phenomenon can be used to demonstrate how the trajectory of resignation from Utopia and historical possibility we mapped in Ugrešić's writing unavoidably also ends in reification of literary form. The incapability to narratively go beyond the logic of the impasse, or to contend

with the resigned affect and uniform monotony that permeates the End of History can be considered a failure of the imaginary and, if we go back to the Utopian poetics we postulated in the introduction, even an aesthetic failure. In combination with the systemic pressures of the globalized literary field and the "anxiety of the market" characteristic of it, this failure is reproduced as reified narrative forms and significations that are ideologically coded to reproduce what is essentially an imperialist imaginary, a cognitive map of the world aligned with the power realities of the capitalist world-system.

There is a great example of that particular problem in *The Ministry of Pain* and Kosmos also cites it in her study. The narrative of the novel is about a group of people, mostly ex-Yugoslav expats and exiles in the Netherlands, who meet while taking a Serbo-Croatian class at the University of Amsterdam where the narrator of the novel is temporarily teaching. In one particularly symptomatic episode, they meet to celebrate the end of the semester and the narrator's birthday in an Amsterdam pub. After a veritable catalogue of reminiscences, pop cultural and political references, nostalgic anecdotes, songs, and poetry recitations (many of which are explained in passing to the implied reader unfamiliar with them), the atmosphere of delight and camaraderie begins to turn ominous:

> The group temperature rose like beer froth. We must have been temporarily insane, the lot of us. We had no idea where we were. A Pioneer meeting? A Party rally? A school field trip? All of a sudden—from too much to drink or overexcitement or fatigue or some kind of group dynamics—Meliha burst into tears. Others followed suit or felt a lump in their throats. Something told me that we'd drunk the cup to the dregs and that from one second to the next the positive group dynamics could turn into something else.

Which is what happened. (120)

More precisely, after reciting a famous Yugoslav poem by Desanka Maksimović about a 1941 war crime in which the *Wehrmacht*, with the help of local collaborators, rounded up and shot 2778 civilians, dozens of schoolchildren among them, the atmosphere turns ugly. The poem, the narrator reminds us, was taught in Yugoslav schools as part of the mandatory curriculum and as such lost a lot of its solemnity throughout decades, until it became a kind of empty signifier. With time, as socialist state ideology was beginning to ring hollow, further and further removed as it was from the reality of socialist class inequality, alienated bureaucracy, authoritarianism, and gradual restoration of capitalist socio-economic forms exacerbating these further, the poem became a parody of itself, and an easy target and motive in criticisms and mockeries of the ruling order. This was only cemented when the 90-year old author in the late 1980s, as the narrator mentions, lent her reputation and symbolic capital to Slobodan Milošević for his cynical instrumentalization of signifiers "Yugoslavia" and "socialism" in the notoriously deadly attempt to stir up nationalism, foment conflict, and rule the destabilized country by force.

The scene builds up to the point where it ends in self-destructive violence, a sort of oil spill of Balkanist *jouissance*:

> Having recited the final line, he collapsed into his chair. No one said a word. The only sound in the room was Ante's soft accompaniment. Uroš pulled a twenty-five-guilder banknote out of his pocket, spat on it, and slapped it onto Ante's forehead. The accordion fell silent. Uroš brought his hand down hard on the cup in front of him, breaking it to pieces. Then he slammed his head against the table.

> As he raised it, I saw thin jets of blood trickling down his face. I heard a shriek coming from Nevena or Ana or Meliha. I saw Mario and Igor lifting him from the table and dragging him to the men's room. I was numb. I felt completely cut off. I could hear what people were saying, but their voices sounded infinitely distant. (*Ministry*)

Although it might not be apparent to the reader unfamiliar with the history of Yugoslav cinema, this episode from *The Ministry of Pain* is a literary recreation of a scene from an Oscar- and Golden Globe-nominated and Cannes *Grand Prix*-winning 1967 film *Skupljači perja/I Even Met Happy Gypsies*. Unfortunately, the recreation is a revisionist one: Saša Petrović's movie is known for its unflinching portrayal of poverty, social inequalities, and exclusion of the Roma minority in the ethnically most diverse region of socialist Yugoslavia. In other words, it is renowned for what was recognized by critics as its clear-sighted "realism" and political radicalism in representing sensitive and highly charged problems characterizing social relations of its time. In Ugrešić's recreation of the scene, the contextually-sensitive, realist (in the sense of "socially analytical") and politically radical approach to narrative characteristic of the movie is left behind. The episode, stripped of most context and realist motivation, becomes an opportunity to represent "the Balkans" as an obscenity: outpourings of narcissistic sentimentalism and infantile acting out become signifiers of its cultural "authenticity". After explaining (presumably to the implied Western reader) that Uroš just recreated the famous scene from the famous film, the following rhetorical question is asked, ringing with the familiar Balkanist stereotypes, and reproducing the internalized inferiority complex of the colonial: "Why do 'our people' always end up like this? Why do we make a bloody mess out of everything?" Expectedly, the question is not answered. Except with a kind of "it is what it is" shrug, a calculatedly circular argument meant to reinforce

the self-fulfilling prophecy of ethnic stereotyping: “Look, don’t get all upset over Uroš, said Meliha by way of consolation. Balkan bashes have Balkan endings.” (*Ministry*)

Iva Kosmos ascribes the motivation for such forms of representation scattered across the later part of Ugrešić’s oeuvre to the structural pressure of the globalized (or as she calls it “international”) literary field and the need to satisfy its commercial expectations. These forms and significations, as we claimed above, are reifications precisely in that same sense: they serve as narrative/discursive equivalents of specific historical, geopolitical, world-systemic relations, as their reflections. In that sense, when they are absorbed into narrative form itself and reproduced there as things-in-themselves, they are exactly the opposite of the Utopian objects we have analyzed. Despite a degree of self-reflexivity about this, and despite Ugrešić’s awareness of, to evoke Bourdieu, “the rules of the game”, such significations and representational strategies cannot be understood as other than being seamlessly integrated into the capitalist realist paradigm and the ruling social imaginaries.

We can further demonstrate this by way of comparison with Ugrešić’s earlier use of the same cinematic reference: namely, in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, the anxious Pipo Fink, dreaming of an emancipatory flight from his “small life” in Zagreb, idealizes the US and spends time drinking with Marc, voicing his frustrations and constantly comparing his country negatively to Marc’s. Pipo says the following:

> I live life like in the movies. I dream of living like in an American movie, where everything is constantly *moving*, but I live a Yugoslav movie where the *moving* consists of a guy smashing a beer bottle against his head, and then bringing the palm of his hand down hard on the broken glass. And he then weeps after that. Or in a Czech

movie, where guys soak their feet in a stream all day and ask each other questions in the style of: What is man's best friend? (155)

It is crucial to mention that Pipo's odium towards what we called above the "Balkanist *jouissance*" comes at the end of a long rant in which he catalogues a number of cultural stereotypes and clichés about Yugoslavia – but which are contextualized among similarly banal clichés and stereotypes about the US and Europe, and thus defamiliarized. In that context, they do not serve the role of reproducing imperialist imaginaries, but the role of characterization, of exhibiting the social logic of such imaginaries in specific historical contexts. In *The Ministry of Pain* there are no such contextualizations and, Kosmos is correct to notice, Western "customs" are described with "sympathy and understanding" while the "customs" of Ugrešić's compatriots are judged harshly and the Balkans represented as immutably barbaric. We could go on providing examples for this in the text, and in fact, an opportunity is presented immediately after the episode we cited above. As she is exiting the pub in the company of another character, the narrator gains her composure by immersing herself into the atmosphere of civilized Amsterdam, which is, it is put quite explicitly, innocent of the excesses of Balkanist *jouissance* and thus acts as a kind of salve for the souls tainted by said excesses: "The fog was as thick as cotton candy. The pain I had felt during the Uroš incident was giving way to the pleasure of Amsterdam and its childlike charm." (127)

The ultimate point of emphasizing such examples, however, is not policing Ugrešić's politically incorrect transgressions, or even pointing out, to put it in both harsher and theoretically more precise terms, her autocolonialist assumptions. What is much more interesting is showing how the abandonment of historical possibility as a narrative problem in her narratives necessarily results in ideological and formal-aesthetic alignment with expectations set by the institutional framework of the globalized literary field, expectations mediated by capital and motivating the

reproduction of reified narrative forms. Having that in mind, it is understandable why at the end of *The Ministry of Pain* we find the narrator on a deserted Dutch beach, "facing an imaginary wall." She stands there "gazing at the gray sea and gray sky", speaking her "Balkan litany" before leaving "calm and collected", soothed by the "good Dutch horizontals": "they are like the school blotters of yesteryear: they absorb everything." (280) What she does at the beach, before leaving, is a type of cleansing ritual: she speaks out loud a catalogue of violent and aggressive curses in Serbo-Croatian, addressed to no one in particular, a long catalogue carefully transcribed in the novel's final pages, finally cementing what everybody already knows, that the curious peninsula at the dark Southern edge of Europe is doomed to repetition of violent, self-destructive excess.

But let us not indulge in moralization. The purpose of the catalogue at the end is quite straightforward: it stands as a signifier of identity, of commodified cultural difference engineered for sale in the global literary market. As a literary device, it introduces a reified trope (ethnic-historical stereotype), a commodified model, which re-organizes narrative form to finally suppress and excise the problem of historical possibility that was immanent to the narratives of Ugrešić's previous novels. Ultimately, it verifies the text as a commodity safe for consumption, purged of leftover Utopian objects, offering not to raise or develop, but confirm ideologized expectations. Unfortunately, it simultaneously purges it of pretensions to literary autonomy: Flagus won.

CHAPTER THREE: CORMAC MCCARTHY

3.1 Cormac McCarthy with Dubravka Ugrešić: Global Post-socialism

The trajectory of the US writer Cormac McCarthy in the globalized literary field has been very different to that of Dubravka Ugrešić. Where she immediately rose to prominence nationally, in the context of a (semi)peripheral socialist literary field, and then re-positioned herself as a "post-national" author as a consequence of her exile and "post-socialist neo-dissidence", it took several decades for McCarthy to achieve an equivalent type of recognition in his own respective national field. That national recognition occurred in the 1990s, in the context of the post-Cold War triumphalism of the world's only remaining superpower and has almost by extension also meant immediate global recognition. The question we want to pose here is the same we posed above in the case of Dubravka Ugrešić: has this re-positioning in the field also required significant formal and discursive adaptation and, if yes, in what way can this adaptation be related to the post-socialist transformation of the world-system and the social imaginaries that mediated it?

We will try to answer those questions by analyzing a series of novels from McCarthy's Western cycle, beginning with 1984's *Blood Meridian, Or, the Evening Redness in the West* and ending with 2006's *The Road*. We will also try to compare our findings with those that emerged in the similar analysis we conducted above in the case of Ugrešić. We will do that in order to demonstrate that these two formal-discursive strategies of adaptation to the new post-socialist realities of the world-system and the globalized literary field are homologous, despite the significantly different socio-historical contexts in which they emerge. If that is true, then the existence of those homologies demonstrates not only the validity of a world-systemic perspective when interpreting these texts, the necessity to understand them in relation to the logic of the world-

system and its characteristic social imaginaries, but also the validity of our claim that the term post-socialism should be understood as referring to a global condition. In practice, this means that we will attempt to read Cormac McCarthy, somewhat unusually, or even eccentrically, as a post-socialist author. This will help us support our claim that despite the historical failure of really existing socialism – in fact, its unfeasibility within the capitalist world-system – its existence nevertheless was necessary to keep alive on a world-systemic level the social imaginaries, as well as narrative and other literary forms in which those social imaginaries were articulated, for which historical possibility, future-oriented temporalities, and Utopian expectations were not invalid.

3.2 Cormac McCarthy as a Figure in the Literary Field

From the initial press runs of Cormac McCarthy's early books, which have never exceeded a few thousand copies[73], to his breakthrough novel *All the Pretty Horses*[74], and finally the endorsement of his 2007 novel *The Road* by Oprah's Book Club[75], McCarthy's work has attained the level of cultural significance that ensures a writer's work will be regarded as an index of the socio-historical dynamics of its historical moment. Glaring examples of this can be found in the environmental activist and writer George Monbiot's assessment of *The Road* in a comment given to *The Guardian* as possibly "the most important environmental book ever", or the questions posed

[73] The first edition of *Blood Meridian* by Routledge had an initial run of 5000 copies.
[74] *All the Pretty Horses* was a New York Times bestseller which sold in 190 000 hardcover copies within the first six months after publication.
[75] In purely commercial/marketing terms, Oprah's endorsement has for individual authors and their books meant a sales boost bigger than winning the Nobel Prize (as was the case with Toni Morrison). Research by Craig Garthwaite of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management found that "within a week of being featured on her show, a book's sales shot up an average of 420 percent. Six months later, they were still 160 percent higher than before getting the Oprah seal of approval. Sales of those authors' other titles also increased, albeit less dramatically." Interestingly, Garthwaite's research also found that sales across the fiction books market simultaneously decreased: "In the twelve weeks following a recommendation, overall adult fiction sales fell by 2.5 percent. Mysteries, action novels, and romances saw a combined 5.1 percent decline." (Weismann) Weismann's article suggests that the reason for this might be the fact that Oprah's Book Club endorsed long, complex, often "highbrow" novels, which shifted the readers' attention from more generic fictional fare.

to McCarthy himself in the rare interviews he has granted, which characteristically hone in on his interest in science, especially physics.

In other words, since it found widespread popularity, McCarthy's work has very often been treated, in academic circles as much as everywhere else, with a reverence that can at times seem religious. It is important to note that this phenomenon is not simply external and should not be conceived strictly from the point of view of sociology of literary reception. It is also an effect of the way McCarthy's texts themselves construct their ideal reader. Their un-ironic annunciatory style, unapologetically (and also anachronistically) modernist in inspiration, is intended to performatively underwrite the solemnity of their philosophical narrative excursuses. In addition, McCarthy's reclusive private life lived outside of the institutional establishment of the literary field has also helped to bring into being that ideal reader, from whom a deferential attitude treating McCarthy's literary work as prophetic annunciation in no need of historical analysis is required. The 2006 publishing of *The Road*, his tale of the apocalypse, was perhaps the ultimate confirmation of his status as a seer and his work as a type of contemporary eschatology. In an interview with none other than Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy has reinforced this status directly by recounting anecdotes from his life, such as the one about how he got the idea to write *The Road* in the form of a vision in the dead of night: "an image of fires upon a hill [over El Paso]."[76] (McCarthy, "Oprah Interview") Analogously, phrases like "singular vision", or "fearless wisdom"[77] are coined to describe his poetics, carrying a rhetorical burden that makes it difficult to discuss the texts in relation to their historical context and discern concrete ideas expounded in them. In addition, and

[76] Perhaps it can be said that even his detractors play into this "prophetic narrative" by mockingly brushing off McCarthy for the pretentiousness of his often humorless writing – he was one of the targets in a widely read 2001 article appearing in *The Atlantic* entitled "A Reader's Manifesto" and written by B.R. Myers. It was subtitled "an attack on the growing pretentiousness of American literary prose". As we know, there have hardly ever been "prophets" who did not also face their detractors and unbelievers.

[77] We are quoting here the blurbs printed in our edition of *The Road* and *The Border Trilogy* but many other magazine or newspaper reviews of McCarthy's books contain similar coinages.

crucially, such rhetoric has also regularly been backed up by information about McCarthy's more than a decade long residence at the Santa Fe Institute, an interdisciplinary research institution dedicated to "complexity science", which has commonly been flaunted as an indication of a privileged, more-than-just-writerly insight.

Since prophetic annunciations at the End of History, with its technocratic governmentality and bureaucratized regimes of knowledge production, characteristically appear in the form of scientific (or more precisely "scientistic") discourse, it is no coincidence that McCarthy's public credentials are backed up by such information. Public appearances such as the April 2011 radio show on the US National Public Radio – where together with Werner Herzog and the theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss he discussed subjects ranging from the origins of man and the odds of long-term survival on Earth to the latest developments at CERN – further cement such a position of enunciation as characterized by epistemic privilege derived from science. This, for a body of literary work characterized by religious evocativeness and difficult, archaic style that could be well described as biblical, makes not simply for an interesting contrast, but for a specifically contemporary marriage of "scientistic" fatalism and prophetic certainty. This combination, we would not be amiss to mention, can also be said to characterize the public discourse of capitalist realism – especially when economic reforms such as austerity or the infamous "structural adjustments" in the periphery need to be legitimized.

But as we have mentioned, this is not simply a phenomenon of reception. The tension between the scientifically objective and the mythic which has fed the narrative of McCarthy's public persona also exists on a formal level in his literary discourse. They are fraught with detailed references to methods and procedures of the natural sciences, mechanics, anthropology, and other disciplines (e.g. Judge Holden's production of gunpowder in *Blood Meridian*, the protracted description of a Mexican doctor dressing a bullet wound in *The Crossing*, *The Road*'s detailed

descriptions of the dynamics of survival in the wilderness, etc.). This well-informed technical and scientific expertise contrasted with the elaborate biblical writing style produces a recognizable rhetorical effect present across McCarthy's literary work. As a formal device, it is in the service of constructing a narrative universe in which "science" functions as one of the few remaining, relatively legitimate, signifiers of universality under postmodern conditions. The religious symbolism and rhetoric which always reinforces it should be understood as supplementary, adding affective depth to the flatness of scientistic universality. Together, they operate synergistically, producing a narrative universe one of the main characteristics of which is a temporal framework of "deep time" – ungraspable, cosmic scale upon which human history unfolds only as a marginal, transitory, irrelevant glimpse[78]. The epistemic result of such a synthesis is a very concrete mystification: a tendency to represent events in the narrative, even when they are historically documented or ethnographically detailed, as unequivocally transhistorical, lacking a concrete historical origin. This "theology of fact" McCarthy's narratives depend on results in what could be called a suppression of historicity, and aligns those narratives very closely to the voided temporality of capitalist realism. In that, McCarthy's work can also be read as homologous to certain tendencies in academic discourse on literature, for instance the literary historiographies of the past several decades which have abandoned traditional historiography and its temporal conceptions, and focused on "deep time" instead of "history"[79].

Simultaneously, however, traces of the historical unavoidably exist in those texts at the level of form, or at the level of what Fredric Jameson has called "the political unconscious". We

[78] In this regard, a comparison between McCarthy's work and the cosmic horror of H.P. Lovecraft might yield interesting results.

[79] Wai Chee Dimock's work, for instance is representative of that tendency, which finds its historical equivalent in capitalist realist suppression of historicity, erasure of the future and the consequent weakening of the dimension of history itself, characterized by cultural weaving of retro-styles and endless reproduction of decontextualized historical signifiers. The consequence of this is the disappearance of history itself. Cf. Dimock 2001 and 2008.

will try to identify those traces and historically contextualize the formal shift in McCarthy's novels which can be detected in his output in the 1990s. In order to do that, we will take his sole 1980s novel, *Blood Meridian, Or, the Evening Redness in the West* as a reference point for a comparison.

3.3 *Blood Meridian*, Or, The Parable of Historical Possibility

In an online discussion on *The Road*, the British "weird fiction" writer China Miéville made an insightful observation about "the Apocalypse (moral, personal, sympathetic-geographical, et al), [being] the absolute horizon of all McCarthy's fiction." (Farrell) We will expand this observation here into a slightly different claim: the apocalypse is the absolute horizon of McCarthy's fiction because the recurring theme, or narrative problem, in his work since at least *Blood Meridian* is the problem of establishment and maintenance of social order. The apocalypse looming on the horizon of his narratives, therefore, serves a structural (simultaneously also ideological) purpose as a reminder of the fragility of contingent social orders the narratives refer to or represent. With this in mind, we will proceed to examine the narrative structures in the texts covered by this analysis precisely in relation to that particular problem and will try to contextualize this historically by showing how McCarthy's texts discursively engage with the historical situation of world-systemic transformation into post-socialism and the social imaginaries characteristic of it.

Blood Meridian, McCarthy's 1984 Western (or anti-Western) novel is loosely based on real historical events and recounts a violent, bloody episode from the history of the Southwestern US, expanding it into a broad allegorical meditation on the position of the human element in the history of creation. Focalized through the nameless young character of the kid, the novel begins with his escape from his home in Tennessee and details a string of bloody, murderous events he participates in as a member of a marauding band of mercenaries and intermittent paramilitaries historically

known as the Glanton Gang. The most memorable and the most depraved member of the group is the character who also serves as the most important narrative function in the novel, judge Holden. By the end of the novel, the judge develops into the antagonist, counterpart and nemesis to kid. This prophet of war, whose massive bulk, intelligence, seemingly supernatural abilities, and calmly unrelenting sadism mark him as clearly distinct from other characters, is easy to read as a Satanic figure, or – if we adhere to Leo Daugherty's reading of the novel as an allegory of Gnosticism – an "archon" within a gnostic universe[80]. (cf. Daugherty "Gravers")

The sparse plot, twisting and turning through a similarly sparse desert setting, can perhaps best be summarized by the title of a 2013 collection of critical essays about the novel entitled "*They Rode On* ", since the narrative logic of the text follows the nomadic, unpredictable movement of the runaway mercenary band as they kill and torture their way through Mexico and the US Southwest, with reiterations of the declarative sentence "They rode on" serving throughout the novel as a signifier of the next stage in their "progress".

The fable-like sparsity of the plot is an important narrative device in the service of representational reduction, a reduction which, together with the novel's resistance to any sort of realist paradigm, is also one of the narrative devices that motivates an interpretive approach based on allegoresis, as the writings of a number of critics demonstrate. In addition to the already mentioned Leo Daugherty, Sara L. Spurgeon, for instance, reads *Blood Meridian* as a narrative formalization of the historical moment in which the pre-modern sacred hunter myth decomposes and is replaced by its modern version, the myth of the American Frontier. The relation of the latter to the former is cannibalistic, it uses the infrastructure of the old myth in order to justify the political act of its destruction, or as Spurgeon states: "Once the prey of the sacred hunter becomes human,

[80] Let it be said that he is also, as the character-function of "superior nemesis", comparable to Ugrešić's Flagus.

imperialism itself becomes a sacred act, mythically justified by the very narrative on which it depends." (*Exploding the Western* 27) Steven Shaviro is even more direct: "*Blood Meridian* performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded. Or better, it traumatically re-enacts this ritual, for foundations are never set in place once and for all. More blood is always needed to seal and renew the pact." ("The Very Life" 20)

We are in agreement with most of the claims put forth by above interpretations, but the question we are more interested in here is how can *Blood Meridian* be read and understood from a world-systemic perspective? Why is this particular "traumatic re-enactment" of national myths compelling in the late twentieth century, and what historical purpose does it serve as a strategy of representation? From a comparatist world-systemic perspective we are trying to develop here, it appears that the meaning of the text is not exhausted by situating it in the national framework and reading it as a revisionist Western questioning the foundations of the genre and revising the nation-building myths that genre has historically sustained. In order to provide an answer to the above questions, we need to examine key aspects of the novel's structure narratologically and situate them in a literary-historical context.

The tight allegorical structural integrity of the narrative, the stylistic elevation of *Blood Meridian*'s language, the lack of psychologically complex characterization, as well as the "flatness" of the narrative world achieved by loose and shifting focalization and the irrelevance of psychological motivation for plot development, can be read as pointing to the genealogical affinity of the text to the form of classical parable. At first glance, it might seem misleading to point out this affinity, since the content of the parable's "narrative revelation" is supposed to be ethically straightforward, as its main historical function was an instructive, pedagogical one, it served as a reminder of communal truths. It is difficult, having in mind the ubiquitous and extreme, unrelenting

violence represented in the novel, to make this point. Except, however, if we simply take the novel for granted, therefore understanding its social lesson as a fully negative, Hobbesian one.

The three epigrams that frame the text point in that direction and justify such an understanding. The most explicit among them is the third one: a quote from a newspaper article from The Yuma Daily Sun[81] which establishes the reliance on scientific discourse as one of the epistemic foundations of McCarthy's narrative representation. The quote describes an archeological or anthropological expedition to Africa: "Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped." (1) The key element to notice here, beyond the ideological implication contained in the decision to represent the dynamics of human history as consistently, one-dimensionally violent, is the narratological aspect of the quote's claim to universality: as a narrative framing device, it subtly re-contextualizes the plot and expands the operative social totality of the narrative, which is geographically and historically contained to a relatively narrow region of the 19th century US/Mexico borderlands, to the global and trans-historical.

In other words, if the reference to science, its discourse, and procedures of validation functions as a signifier of universality, as we mentioned above, the rhetorical effect of this is a suggestion that the distinguishing aspect of the events represented in *Blood Meridian*, their savage violence, is timeless and placeless. This universalism of violence is the foundation of the novel's metaphysics[82]. Its main representative is judge Holden, the gnostic *archon*, who at one point implicitly reiterates the suggestion made in the third epigram: "What is true of one man […] is true

[81] The other two are quotes from Paul Valery and Jakob Boehme's texts.
[82] Which has commonly been analyzed as gnostic, in the sense of understanding life and the world as immanently crooked and fallen.

of many." (153, cf. Daugherty) Since even before the early homo sapiens, the epigram and the character-function of judge Holden suggest, violence has existed as a foundational fact of nature, men are no more than aggressive beasts. Throughout the rest of the novel this is confirmed time and again: violence is everywhere, in the random acts of destruction committed by the judge and the gang, as well as their enemies, in the traces left by unseen men that the characters come across wandering through the landscape, in the ruthlessness of the natural world they inhabit.

If we go back to the reading of the novel as a critical re-enactment of bourgeois imperialist national myths, it is necessary to point out that McCarthy's universalism of violence stands in an uneasy relation to that ideological legacy. As opposed to classical bourgeois ideology, although *Blood Meridian*'s metaphysics of violence depends on a claim to universality, it simultaneously abandons the conception of historical progress. This is reinforced by another interesting "abandonment" formally encoded in the narrative: the instance of the narrator is distant from the characters and avoids fixed hierarchies of focalization, sometimes even anthropocentric focalization altogether. This underscores the logic of the metaphysics of violence, where violence itself, with its repetitive, unsparing universalism, is the central principle.

As such, the text is also characterized by a lack of any hierarchy of ethical positions or a developed structure of social relations, on top of the already mentioned distancing of the narratorial instance from the characters. The characters, of course, do serve the purpose of focalization but only as elements of a bigger picture, as tiny figures in a vast landscape. The focus is unstable and often shifts suddenly and little, almost nothing, is revealed of the characters' affects, motivation, or other psychological processes. To demonstrate this, we can consider an illustrative passage from *Blood Meridian* in which there are several radical shifts of focus in the space of only a few lines. This not only flattens out the hierarchy of focalizers (in the passage below, as in many others, the focalizer is the group, not the individual), but also broadens the scope of possible ones (for

McCarthy, they do not necessarily have to be human). We find here, quickly shifting from one to the other, a retelling of a random action by an important character (without any mention of the affective charge it might have produced), then a shift of focus to the group and a description of terrain, followed by another shift of focus to a series of actions by a flock of birds the group encounters, and finally a circular return of focus not to the character the passage began with, but to the character's horse, in the moment of a sudden encounter with a bear. Such a constellation, like many other analogous ones that can be found in the text, suggests that there exists no privileged instance in the narrative – what the horses see is just as important as what the people, or the birds, or the bear see:

> The leaves shifted in a million spangles down the pale corridors and Glanton took one and turned it like a tiny fan by its stem and held it and let it fall and its perfection was not lost on him. They rode through a narrow draw where the leaves were shingled up in ice and they crossed a high saddle at sunset where wild doves were rocketing down the wind and passing through the gap a few feet off the ground, veering wildly among the ponies and dropping off down into the blue gulf below. They rode on into a dark fir forest, the little Spanish ponies sucking at the thin air, and just at dusk as Glanton's horse was clambering over a fallen log a lean blond bear rose up out of the swale on the far side where it had been feeding and looked down at them with dim pig's eyes. (143)

If we go back to the observation that the narrative exhibits genealogical affinity to the parable form, we should point out that similarly to that genre what is important in the narrative universe of *Blood Meridian* are *actions* of characters. The psychological motivation behind those

actions is secondary, if at all important, and as we also pointed out, the narrative shifts that disrupt the fixed hierarchy of focalizers also disrupt any easily discernible hierarchy of ethical positions of characters within the narrative. Even if we take seriously the implications of the novel's radical metaphysics, this makes it formally difficult to establish the function of the narrative as *exemplum*. It is difficult to read a moralist perspective into *Blood Meridian* because there are no available referents a coherent moralist interpretation could rest on – the novel is fundamentally a tale about a mercenary band of murderers. Consequently, an attempt to insist on extracting an ethical point from its parable-like structure, reading it, for instance, as a narrative of moral redemption (it is tempting to do that with the character of the kid and his final defiance to the ultimate antagonist Judge Holden), necessarily backfires and becomes itself a dubious projection of sentiments which do not have a place in the ruthless, non-anthropocentric universe of *Blood Meridian*. The oft-quoted passage below can in that respect be read as a programmatic statement of the novel's attempt to give narrative form to that non-anthropocentric perspective and/or ethics:

> They rode on. The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (261)

The "luminosity" of the landscape the narrator refers to in this description should not be reduced to the physical condition of *Blood Meridian*'s setting. It is supplemented by the use of such socio-political concepts as "equality" and "democracy", together with a symbolically powerful word "void", which imply there is more at stake here than simply a peculiar representation of landscape. The luminosity, or "optical democracy", is a fundamental condition of existence in a world where all the hierarchies of a moral universe are flattened out and supplanted by a wilderness of equality. It emerges from the passage that this is a universe conceived as a singularity, where what appears as separate phenomena is not irreducibly different, and rock and man and planet, etc. are one. This, however, does not guarantee either Utopian harmony or esoteric transcendence. Unlike the totalitarian social singularity envisioned by Ugrešić's Flagus, which is historically constructed, the singularity of *Blood Meridian*'s universe emanates as a fundamental characteristic of nature. As the narrator declares at the beginning of the passage, singularity is simply another term for "the greater void". Consequently, the only principle of social life that can be established in such a universe is the one based on sheer voluntarism of force. On the level of narrative form, this is also reflected in the simplicity of the plot, which is structured as a linear sequence of decisive actions by predatory characters.

Why is that so? Why is McCarthy's representation so predictable in its violent results as to be almost dull? A simplistic answer could be given by saying that this is a straightforward result of following the narrative logic of the choice to write about a band of killers. However, this does not account for the fact that almost everybody in *Blood Meridian* is a killer. Glanton's gang, the Mexican authorities, American paramilitary, Indians, nature itself. This fact has motivated a number of observations on the part of both McCarthy's critics and his admirers pointing out what can be read as his misanthropic, or at least pessimistic nihilism, and sometimes writing off the entirety of his literary project as a cynical, ultraconservative expression of a thinly veiled

imperialist sentiment justifying historically contingent instances of violence by representing it as inevitable and trans-historical[83]. It is truly tempting to follow this latter line of interpretation, but what we find more important in terms of this study is a purely formalist observation that the centrality and pervasiveness of violence in the novel serves the purpose of narrative reduction. If the narrative, as we have observed, is difficult to characterize as a parable, it can perhaps more productively be read, having in mind its close affiliation to the Western genre, as an instance and radical re-working of the genre of pastoral. Georg Guillemin's analysis of McCarthy's writing and what he terms his "pastoral vision" synthesizes those two formal determinants, while adding a description of their melancholic affective charge, a description that will be useful to us while relating *Blood Meridian* to later novels. Guillemin writes:

> [...] a compositional triangle is at play throughout McCarthy's work. One side of the triangle is formed by a pervasive spirit of melancholia, used – in keeping with a tradition going back to baroque times (or even biblical times) – as a literary device for creating narrative distance. In a way, melancholia itself seems to narrate the novels. Another side of the triangle is allegoresis, the encryption of narrative contents in parabolic images and story lines in the manner of fables. On the third side of the triangle we find the pastoral theme, understood as the principal quest for harmony in a better world. (3)

It is difficult, as we have argued earlier, to speak of harmony in the narrative universe of *Blood Meridian*, if this term is understood as fundamentally Utopian instead of purely formal (i.e.

[83] See Proyect for the latter reading, in which McCarthy appears as a literary arch-reactionary, and Bell for the former, in which his "ambiguous nihilism" is discussed.

harmony as unchanging predictability of a smoothly functioning cosmic order, no matter how destructive). However, that does not mean the problem of harmony, as an aspect or valence of a particular socio-historical order, is not implicitly present in the novel. It finds its negative image in the treatment of the pastoral theme, which we find central for the understanding of the novel, and especially for the understanding of its political implications, which are taken over and fully mature in McCarthy's later work.

At first glance, the classical pastoral genre – with its representations of the idyllic *locus amoenus*, temporality of the Golden Age, characters of shepherds, satyrs, virginal youth, benevolent supernatural beings, and above all the underlying philosophy of inert, organic harmony and peaceful unity – seems like it could not be further from what is represented in McCarthy's novel. And that is fundamentally true, since *Blood Meridian* is the exact opposite of a pastoral, an anti-pastoral[84], or a pastoral negative. It functions as an inverted image of the pastoral form and the elements of its narrative structure can consistently be compared to and identified as opposites to those of the classical pastoral. Its *locus amoenus* is anything but *amoenus*: in terms of setting, which is an important function in the pastoral mode/genre, instead of fertile land of lush forests strewn by meadows, surrounded by hills and grasslands, there stands a hostile, burning desert where murderers roam and endless war is waged. No characters of shepherds in a perpetual state of leisure, resting under tress by crystal clear streams inhabit this desert – their counterparts are mercenary scalp-hunters (who, unlike the pastoral shepherds, eventually turn on the ones they are supposed to protect) who never rest, are never at peace, never cease to be on the move, erratically changing course and plans as circumstances dynamically change around them. Instead of the rustic Pan of the pastoral Arcadia, the lord, or "suzerain" as he calls himself, of the southwestern

[84] This term is mentioned in passing by Daugherty in his text.

American desert as represented in McCarthy is no other than the technologically-minded *archon*, judge Holden.

The narrative-representational logic of the pastoral is a reductive one – it addresses the problem of historical complexity by engaging in a type of disavowal, by constructing and projecting an alternative order regulated by simplicity and constancy. At the most abstract level, this "pastoral process" is what the pastoral and *Blood Meridian* share: "putting the complex into the simple", in the well-known formula of William Empson. (23) The classical use of the pastoral mode, such as in Virgil's *Bucolics*, uses reduction as a device in the service of constructing a myth of the rural Golden Age in order to provide a comforting projection of the longings motivated by dissatisfaction and corruption of urban life. *Blood Meridian*'s relation to that mode is similar to its relation to the sacred hunter myth, it cannibalizes it and processes it into its opposite. A hyperbolized "reality principle" in the form of what we called metaphysics of violence is inserted into the harmony of pastoral Arcadia and let loose upon it. This results in another myth, a negative one, the purpose of which is the destruction of form into which bourgeois, national, urban rationalizations can be projected (although this also results in serious collateral damage: relativizing of historical responsibility – if history is always and everywhere just violence and murder, then specific instances of violence and murder lose their distinctiveness). In other words, *Blood Meridian* functions as a provocation to the classical US Westerns, which have justifiably been interpreted as national creation myths legitimizing US settler colonialism. It challenges the pastoral undertones of that genre and represents the final period of US settler expansion to the west as a tale of unspeakable violence, demonstrating that the "birth of a nation" is a birth from chaos, coincidence, and destruction, and not a preordained outcome of historical destiny or an inevitable consequence of progress.

In a book entitled *Beautiful Chaos: Chaos Theory and Metachaotics in Recent American Fiction*, Gordon E. Slethaug writes that "*Blood Meridian* is, then, a book about the fragility of the human idea of order, and its frequent retreat in the face of the inherent chaos of life." (132) This claim recapitulates the basic tenets of McCarthy's metaphysics of violence: that order is a "human idea", a weak and fragile one, and the "inherent chaos of life" (i.e. nature, cosmos or some other non-anthropocentric universal), resists that idea, thereby resisting also the human itself. However, in light of the novel's surprising epilogue, and in comparison to the tendencies exhibited in McCarthy's later work, Slethaug's claim comes across as simplistic.

The main narrative ends with the presumable murder of the kid by judge Holden, and an orgiastic image of a saloon full of drunks and prostitutes among whom the judge, the demon of chaos and the embodiment of metaphysics of violence, dances naked, claiming he never sleeps and will never die. The epilogue appears as a distinctly separated element of the text immediately after "THE END" and is worth quoting in full:

> In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some

> continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (355)

This cryptic passage describes a historical process that is quite concrete: a man using a post hole digger in order to prepare the land for putting up fences. He is followed by two groups, the one "in search of bones", presumably collectors of bison bones to be used as fertilizer or in other industries[85], and the other who are presumably agrarian settlers/homesteaders. The passage, in other words, describes a decisive moment in the history of settler colonialism, which is itself a key aspect of the inexorable movement of capitalist development. The signifier "their progress", together with the defamiliarizing description of labor and actions of the settlers, is relevant here as it again establishes the characteristic distance between the narrator and the characters, adding to the abstraction of the image. That abstraction again points in the direction of the allegorical mode: the image of depersonalized, but socially representative figures, moving together across a landscape, preoccupied by some strange business, might formally be linked to the medieval *Danse Macabre*, which is itself an allegorical genre. Both on the level of form and on the level of content, then, the novel complicates Slethaug's claim that it is about "the fragility of order": firstly, what the epilogue shows is precisely the moment of establishment of a new order, and secondly, the

[85] Steven Rinella, in the book *American Buffalo: In Search of a Lost Icon* writes: "Makers of fine bone china began to purchase the best of the bones […] Other big consumers of quality buffalo bones were the sugar, wine, and vinegar industries; […] By far, the biggest consumer of buffalo bones was the fertilizer industry. […] Firms that produced buffalo bone-meal fertilizer managed to sell a lot of the product to homesteaders on the Great Plains who were trying to produce corn and wheat on lands recently abandoned by buffalo." (178-179)

formal implication of the allegorical structure is precisely conceptual neatness, a correspondence between the structure of representation and the structure of its referent, or in other words order itself. So if anything, *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue reveals that the book is not simply about the fragility of social order, but about the conditions of possibility of its establishment. The chaotically iterative violence of the plot is driven by sequences of decisions and actions by heroically large and dramatic characters who react to the shifting dynamics of the conditions they find themselves in, and who, in their murderous meandering, prepare the terrain of history for the appearance of a de-individualized, collectivist element in the form of groups of settlers. These bring with them the inexorable movement of modernity. The Western frontier is closing, fences are being erected and resources extracted, a new order is emerging, and the novel enacts an apprehensive attitude towards this process and the new historical situation it is inaugurating. The apprehensiveness of the attitude can be inferred from the juxtaposition of the (anti)heroic individualism structuring the plot and the a-heroic collectivism structuring the epilogue, as well as from the melancholia permeating the text. If it is true, as we argued, that *Blood Meridian* attempts to rewrite and reorganize the forms of US national myths by inverting them and forcing them to face their own negative, the question remains what is the historical motivation for that in the context of the text's emergence?

We can refer here to Richard Slotkin's book *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1800*. Writing about the logic of transformation of myths, Slotkin points out:

> Only truly radical alterations of the images of hero and universe effect significant changes at the narrative structural level of the myth, for such changes (by definition) reflect a fundamental alteration of the culture's conception of the relationship of man to the universe, a revolution in world view, cosmology, historical and moral theory,

and self-concept. Hence such changes may be seen as marking the point at which a new epoch of cultural history or perhaps even a new culture can be said to begin. (9)

Blood Meridian is a novel that narratively enacts the appearance of historical possibility and the emergence of a new form of social order from that possibility. It demonstrates both the blood sacrifice required for that particular possibility to appear, and the unforeseeable consequences of the consequent emergence of order. As the text appeared just as the 20th century world-system was about to undergo a significant transformation, it can be claimed that such logic of the text is in the function of sublimating the collective unease at the emergent transformation. As Slotkin points out, if the text "radically alters the image of hero and universe and hence marks the point at which a new epoch of history begins", the mythopoetic operation of *Blood Meridian* should be read as much in relation to its own historical context and the historical possibility that followed it, as it is read in relation to the history and tradition that it engages with.

If the dominant attitude of the text towards the history of establishing social orders is conservatively apprehensive, it is still, as we demonstrated in the analysis of the epilogue, structurally dependent on a future-oriented temporality and a conception of historical possibility. The broader historical significance of this becomes clearly noticeable in comparison with McCarthy's later novels, as does the contradiction these novels produce by disavowing the horrific *exemplum* that *Blood Meridian* gave form to. By turning to these later novels, we will map out a trajectory of formal development which, it will become clear, is analogous to the one in Dubravka Ugrešić.

3.4 Melancholia as Narrative Structure: *The Border Trilogy*

A striking thing about *The Border Trilogy* is that at the very beginning of the trilogy's first novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, we are faced with the quotidian, pragmatic consequences of the historical process evoked in *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue. The trilogy is set in the period between 1930s and 1960s, the last years of the cowboy cattle drives, long after barbed wire fencing, introduced in the last two decades of the 19th century, became the standard in the US West, ending the days of the "open range" and the classic cowboy culture. Therefore, the trilogy offers itself to be read as a sequel to the *Danse Macabre* at the end of *Blood Meridian* and an exploration of the historical context that ensued, a context in which the fences have been long erected and the land mapped out, enclosed, and privatized, thus concluding the final step in the process of the continent's colonization.

This is explicitly confirmed by the mentioned episode at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*. While riding out to Mexico, two young cowboys, the central character John Grady Cole and his best friend Lacey Rawlins, often have to dismount and find a way to cross the fences and wires: "How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country?", asks Rawlins. "They don't", answers John Grady Cole. (*Border Trilogy* 31) The broader historical implications of this are addressed in the closing episode of the same novel in which John Grady, after a series of dangerous and dramatic adventures in Mexico, returns to Texas. The episode is also a good illustration of the melancholic affect characteristic of the narration and motivated by those same historical implications: "In four days' riding he crossed the Pecos at Iraan Texas and rode out of the river breaks where the pumpjacks in the Yates Field ranged against the skyline rose and dipped like mechanical birds. Like great primitive birds welded up out of iron by hearsay in a land perhaps where such birds once had been." (305)

The comparison between pumps in the Texas oil fields and the "great primitive birds" is not just formally evocative, but serves to establish a specific temporality and suggest a logic of historical development. The implication is that the birds are predecessors to the pumps ("where such birds once had been"), and that there might be some kind of a historical link, perhaps even a sort of evolutionary causality, between them. It would be easy to pass over this implication without the passage that immediately follows, and which develops it further, demonstrating the acutely ideological nature of McCarthy's conjuncture of modernity and prehistory:

> At that time there were still indians camped on the western plains and late in the day he passed in his riding a scattered group of their wickiups propped upon that scoured and trembling waste. [...] The indians stood watching him. He could see that none of them spoke among themselves or commented on his riding there nor did they raise a hand in greeting or call out to him. They had no curiosity about him at all. As if they knew all that they needed to know. They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish. (305)

Symbolization of historical development and the relation between the symbols of historical stages which is established in the first part of the quoted passage is further developed in the second part, where the Native Americans represent the pre-modern, the pumps the modern, and the cowboy the vanishing mediator between them. The Native Americans and the oil pumps function simultaneously as symbolic endpoints of the historical continuum this episode evokes but also coexist awkwardly and in opposition, as reminders of the complex temporality of combined and uneven development characteristic of modernity.

This is also an opportunity for McCarthy to endow, in a clichéd manner, the Native Americans with unspoken, organic wisdom: they "know what they needed to know" and show no interest in the rider. The import of this becomes clear if we also notice the abstract affinity that is established between the cowboy and the Native Americans. He is riding towards them, and away from the pumps, and they "know" what is happening to the cowboy historically, they understand his imminent disappearance (we should also notice that the episode itself is also a Western genre cliché – a lonely cowboy riding into the sunset), because their civilization has already gone down a similar path. The historical situation of the "old West", with its social relations, cultures, and codes, is turning into an archeological artefact to be lost under eons of history, stronger forces have prevailed, and the episode is charged with a sense of abstract melancholia. What is abstracted is the historical logic of the loss motivating the melancholic affect, there is no indication that there might be a concrete social mechanism or some particular responsibility behind it. As if whatever is lost in history, from the great prehistoric birds to colonized cultures, is lost as a consequence of an invisible cosmic force. We can observe in this an iteration of McCarthy's conception of history – developed on the basis of what we called the metaphysics of violence – as never-ending, blind conflict of powers abstractly competing and coexisting in violent competition for a period of time, until they are superseded and erased.

This, having in mind the history of European settler colonialism, is not only a mystification, but an example of imperialist nostalgia in which firstly, the perpetrators of historical violence (symbolized here by the cowboy) are recuperated through an equation with the victims of that violence, and secondly, the violence itself is relativized through an analogy with a different, more benevolent aspect of capitalist development and modernization (i.e. the disappearance of the social function and the need for cowboy labor). Having this in mind, the historical vision of *Blood Meridian*, despite its radical abstractions, proves to be a much more honest representation as in

what we called its "flatness" there is no such romanticization of historical succession. As opposed to that, *The Border Trilogy* is an instance of the conservative tendency, present across all of McCarthy's work after *Blood Meridian*, to use romanticized historical idealizations as pillars of narrative development.

This is visible already on the surface of the *Trilogy*'s narrative form. From a narratological perspective, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the three novels constituting it is the use of numerous (both classical and modern) narrative literary *topoi*. The plot of *All the Pretty Horses*, its twists and turns and philosophical meanderings notwithstanding, is a melodrama, a story of young lovers separated by the realities of class and ethnicity. *The Crossing* is a variation on the "pilgrim's progress", a quest or an obstacle path where the hero encounters adversaries, seers and common folk who help him or try to harm him, and *Cities of the Plain* is a juxtaposing of elements of melodrama (the idealistic hero saves the fallen lady), and a tale of friendship owing much to the contemporary, Western-inflected buddy-buddy plots. These, unlike *Blood Meridian*, do not lend themselves to allegorical readings and all of them are rooted in the literary-historical tradition of the romance.

The mentioned romantic idealizations, which extend to the characters in the novels as well, are therefore a structural consequence of the form, and not a technical problem in character development and motivation. Having in mind their reliance on the tropes and topoi taken over from the romance tradition, it is somewhat peculiar that some scholars of McCarthy point out that there are unmistakable elements of the picaresque in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*[86]. The

[86] Guillemin (2001 and 2004) uses the term often and relies on it to discuss the narrative structure of McCarthy's novels. Walsh uses it cautiously and loosely to emphasize "elements of the picaresque" (216) across McCarthy's "Southern works". Dorson ("Genre Turn") uses it in passing to describe the "picaresque adventures" of McCarthy's characters as they try "to escape the clutches of disciplinary institutions." Dorson argues that there is a "[…] sustained focus throughout McCarthy's work on what escapes modern institutions." This observation might be productively read in relation to the satirical elements of the *picaresque* form, were it not for the elements we

episodic plot of an alienated hero of low social status, trying to survive many adventures and turns of events in a hostile environment with only himself to rely on, seems to be the definition of the picaresque. However, this is somewhat misleading. Historically, the picaresque appears after the idealizations of medieval romance and can be read as the first "realistic", in some instances even satirical, response to that genre. The *picaro* in the tradition of the picaresque novel is often a low-life, a cynic, and an opportunist – an anti-hero. Although living in a corrupt society, the life of *picaro* is lodged fully within it, although he understands it as corrupt and mocks and satirizes it. None of this is true for Billy Parham and John Grady Cole, the central and interlocking heroes of *The Border Trilogy*. The "society" is what they flee from, not live in and satirize. They live in a dying world, longing for the "old days" and modeling their lives after the old cowboy code. Their escapist, anti-modern drive is not just juvenile negation, but a genuine conservatism, an attempt to live and preserve a vanishing tradition in spite of encroaching modernity. All this points to the fact that the literary precedent for the novels constituting *The Border Trilogy* should rather be looked for in the chivalric romance and not the *picaresque*.

This point can be substantiated by pointing out the reliance on the heroic model in the characterization of John Grady Cole, the central character of the first and last novels of the trilogy. The heroic elements in his case are quite easy to recognize, as the character is a particularly strong and consistent idealization. So much so, in fact, that it is tempting to call the character "flat", in the sense of his simplistic psychological motivations. This, however, in light of the chivalric romance genre, which we argue serves as the formal foundation of at least the first novel and for which characterological complexity in representation is irrelevant, would mean missing the point – the consistency of idealization is a narrative signifier as such.

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enumerate above and the general lack of the satirical and the poverty of the comical in McCarthy (with the notable exception of his 1979 semi-autobiographical novel *Suttree*).

As for the character himself, not only does he possess straightforward heroic traits such as bravery, loyalty, and determination, but also deep empathy and a superior intellect. This is illustrated in both *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, where he is represented as an unusually proficient chess player and a talented wrangler, whose instincts are supplemented by book learning, an unusual thing in the poor rural social environment he inhabits. Another formally important aspect of the character is that he does not change, or does not change significantly, in the course of the narrative(s) and his behavior retains the same laconic, determined heroism, if perhaps marked by increasing melancholia and detachment resulting from accumulated experience.

The key element of his psychological motivation, consistent with the figure of the knight-errant from chivalric romances, is his strong sense of duty and a strong libidinal investment in romantic affairs as the pinnacle of human social relations and experience. There are several of such liaisons throughout the narrative – at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* we see him parting from a young woman named Mary Catherine, after which there follows a passionate love affair with Alejandra in Mexico, leading to the disruption of his and Rawlins' cowboy bliss at the ranch where they are employed. Finally, the entire narrative of *Cities of the Plain* revolves around his desire to rescue and marry the unfortunate Magdalena. Each of these relationships is short, ends abruptly or even violently, but John Grady's life is completely structured around them and they can be said to function as its primary content and motivation. This is another instance where the character can be observed as an embodiment of a radical idealist ideology, which is, one could easily argue, oddly Neoplatonic in inspiration[87]. The conspicuous symbolism present in the

[87] It is interesting to note here the philosophical similarities between Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, which was important as a metaphysical (and, formally speaking, allegorical) foundation of *Blood Meridian*. (cf. Daugherty) Having this in mind, there might be an echo of the same type of Gnosticism in *The Border Trilogy* or at least in the character of John Grady.

representation of the episode of his first sexual encounter with Alejandra is a good example of this. More precisely, if Neoplatonism is characterized, as Christian Wildberg points out, by a postulation that "reality, in all its cognitive and physical manifestations, [depends] on a highest principle which is unitary and singular", and is "a strict form of principle-monism that strives to understand everything on the basis of a single cause that [it considers] divine", the monistic unification of opposites and the religious symbolism characterizing the mentioned episode is a good illustration of that particular metaphysics. The encounter occurs in a lake in the middle of the night, or in other words it occurs in water, a purifying element engulfing the lovers, who are also simultaneously described as burning. It is therefore suggested that even beyond sexual unification, they are also joined elementally in a monistic cancellation of opposites. Alejandra is described thus: "When she reached him he held out his hand and she took it. She was so pale in the lake she seemed to be burning. Like foxfire in a darkened wood. That burned cold. Like the moon that burned cold." (144) The description ends with John Grady's invocation of God, suggesting, in the context of other symbols of unity and purity, that desire functions as a mechanism of transcendence: "Me quieres? She said. Yes, he said. He said her name. God yes, he said." (145)

In a conversation with Rawlins at the end of the first novel, once back from Mexico, he laconically recapitulates the same radical idealism – for which there is no place in this world, or at least not anymore – in vaguely political terms: "Yeah. I know [this is a good country]. But it aint my country." (303) Like a true knight-errant, he then rides off to face "the world to come." (306) What that world is, we get to see in *Cities of the Plain*: working on a US ranch, he gets involved in another impossible romance on the other side of the border and attempts to save Magdalena, the object of his romantic affection and an enslaved Mexican prostitute, by taking her away from the brothel she is forced to work in and marrying her, despite Billy Parham urging him against it. In the end, John Grady's unchanging, monolithic determination and idealism tragically lead to the

death of Magdalena, and his own death in a fight with her pimp, who is also in love with her (and who also dies in the fight) – thus adding a tragic dimension to the plot of John Grady's life, in which his idealism appears also to be his *hammartia*.

On the other hand, the analysis of the narrative form of *The Border Trilogy* is incomplete without the other major character, Billy Parham, whose function in the narrative diversifies the discursive strategy of the texts. While certainly sharing some of the idealized characteristics of his younger friend, such as bravery, determination, and self-reliance, Billy Parham is psychologically more interesting and the function of that character in the narrative is more complex. First of all, he is represented in various phases of his life, unlike John Grady who we only see as an adolescent, and he changes from a solitary, burdened boy of *The Crossing* to John Grady's caring and honest friend, and finally to a homeless, guilt-ridden old man in *Cities*. The guilt is a consequence of a formative trauma which results from his decision to break the promise he gave to his father and suddenly ride off to Mexico to save the female wolf they trapped for killing their cattle. During this adventure, not only does he fail to help the wolf, but while he is away the family is attacked by a group of criminals, his mother and father killed, and their horses stolen. One of the reasons they were not able to protect themselves is the fact Billy had the family's rifle with him. After the initial decision to break the promise, nothing can be made right again in the chaotic universe that McCarthy's characters inhabit. This conception echoes throughout this and other 1990s novels: "And where is the remedy that has no unforeseen consequence? What act does not assume a future that is itself unknown?" (514)

So if John Grady is McCarthy's analogue of the heroic figure of the knight-errant adapted to the genre framework of the contemporary Western, what is the role of Billy Parham? As we have mentioned, he does not have John Grady's unchanging persistence, but he certainly understands, and abides by, the laws of traditionalist idealism guiding the behavior of McCarthy's cowboy

heroes. There is, however, a crucial difference in the extent of their radicalism: "There's a difference between quittin and knowin when you're beat./ John Grady nodded./ I guess you dont believe that. Do you?/ John Grady studied the distant mountains. No, he said. I guess I dont." (963) The ability of knowing when to quit, as opposed to John Grady's idealist zealotry, is what keeps Billy alive to witness the stories of his comrades and fellow travelers, his brother Boyd and John Grady (who are, basically, one and the same figure), on top of a string of others. However, the attachments that Billy forms are intermittent, often disrupted and unsuccessful and this makes him a truly solitary figure, without John Grady's opportunities for transcendence. His function in the trilogy's narrative(s) is passive: he is more of a listener, a witness, a perennial addressee, than a man of action. *The Crossing* is the best example of this as the novel is structured around a string of accidental encounters in which Billy's role is reactive. He listens to long stories and philosophical elaborations of other characters, never achieving the sort of transcendental interaction with his interlocutors that John Grady aspires to, most significantly in his romantic liaisons. Although Billy is a protector of his brother Boyd, their relations are strained, and Boyd in the end abandons him together with the Mexican girl they help along the way. One of their characteristic failed interactions is later echoed at the end of *Cities*, suggesting little has changed for Billy despite more than 60 years have passed. In *The Crossing* there is the following exchange: "Billy leaned and spat and looked back at Boyd./ You care for me to ask you somethin?/ Ask it./ How long do you aim to stay sulled up like this?/ Till I get unsulled./ Billy nodded. He sat looking at their reflections in the glass" (505), and in the final pages of the *Cities* there is the following sentence: "One night he dreamt that Boyd was in the room with him but would not speak for all that he called out to him." (1036) Even the only encounter of a sexual nature that involves Billy in *The Crossing* is simply his stumbling upon the bathing carnival troupe primadonna and watching her from a distance. To make matters worse, this detachment is supplemented by repeated failure, an impotence haunting Billy

whatever he does: he fails at restoring the wolf to the wilderness, he fails to protect his brother, he does not retrieve the stolen horses from Mexico. In *Cities* he repeats the pattern – instead of Boyd, there is John Grady to protect, which he again fails to do. And again we see him in the role of the listener/witness at the end of the novel when he meets a fellow homeless man and listens to his long retelling of a dream.

Perhaps the best illustration of the witness-function of the character is offered by one of the itinerants Billy meets during one his crossings: "Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all […] If the world was a tale who but the witness could give it life?" (462) Billy Parham, then, is a "life-giving witness to the world", a character that appears as an intradiegetic analogue to the extradiegetic narrator-function. At the end of *Cities* this is confirmed, as we find him telling stories to children. It is crucial to point out what these stories are, or to ask what the world he gives life to is. Quite explicitly, they are about "horses and cattle and the old days." (1036) In a ruthless world, where the customs of solidarity have all but vanished[88], Billy bears in him the life of a disappeared age, an age embodied by his best friend John Grady and his brother Boyd.

Here we finally turn to the crucial point: Billy Parham is not simply an appropriate but the ideal character to embody the "life-giving" witness-function in the narrative because there is a homology between the psychic structure of the character and the metaphysics of the narrative world as such. We should consider the following self-assessment by Billy in his old age at the end of *Cities:* "Betty, he said./ Yes./ I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me." (1037) This is another instance where we are reminded of Billy's formative trauma,

[88] Customs such as leaving cups beside springs for fellow travelers to drink from, as the narrator informs us near the end of the trilogy. See: *The Border Trilogy*, 1035.

his guilt-ridden life, and his loss. It also points into the direction of a Freudian understanding of the character. Famously, Freud mused on melancholia as a pathological reaction to loss "of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on." ("Mourning and Melancholia" 243) The pathological disposition of the melancholic is characterized by "impoverishment of the ego": "The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished." (246) In other words, Billy Parham is a melancholic. This is also why he cannot form the "transcendental bonds" characteristic of the life of the hero John Grady, nor assume the role of the idealized "knight" – the personality of the melancholic, according to Freud, is marked by a split ego-structure in which one part of the ego separates and "sets itself over against the other", most often "on moral grounds." (247-8) Therefore, it is the very melancholic structure of Billy's personality that is an obstacle to the mentioned "transcendence", but also what makes him an ideal "witness". We should also remember here, crucially, Guillemin's observation that the basic element of the "compositional triangle" that functions as a framing device for McCarthy's narratives is what he calls "pervasive spirit of melancholia". The character of Billy Parham, in his witness-function, is one narrative device that mediates this "spirit".

But there are others. As we have already mentioned, the melancholia is immanent to the way McCarthy's narrative representations are structured. Those are "fallen worlds" in which the present is at war with the past, and the future at war with the present, worlds characterized by the melancholy fracture, which sets various elements of those worlds against each other. As Sara Spurgeon notices, "it is the task of reconnecting those worlds [of nature and of men] that drives many of his characters." (54) The characters who inhabit those worlds often dream of bridging

these fractures, desiring a form of unification and "making whole again" of the world. We can demonstrate this on two vivid examples involving the trilogy's two central characters.

Billy Parham is enchanted with the wolf that he tries to save for the same reasons John Grady is enchanted with Alejandra – the interaction with the wolf opens a passage to a world of freedom from fences and maps, a world in which the romantic idealism of the "cowboy code" and the "old days" seems to have a place. "The wolf knows nothing of boundaries" (427), Billy says to the young don who captures it for dog fights, and repeats what he learned from the old man he had gone to for trapping advice:

> He said that men believe the blood of the slain to be of no consequence but that the wolf knows better. He said that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there. Finally he said that if men drink the blood of God yet they do not understand the seriousness of what they do. He said that men wish to be serious but they do not understand how to be so. Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them. (352)

The wolf is celebrated as the possessor of arcane knowledge lost to man in the process of naming[89] and absent from his "ceremonies". Naming, or dividing the singularity of the world into categories is a violent act, an act that is, as the wolf knows, "of consequence" because what gets lost in it is the wholeness of the world itself. The wolf also knows that the only true order there is in the world is the one installed by the metaphysics of violence, the order "which death has put there." This is the same type of primitivist mysticism and idealistic longing for the absolute that John Grady exhibits. A dream he has while in prison in *All the Pretty Horses* is about a union with a herd of wild horses. It is possible to find in it a description of the same anti-rationalist antagonism to "naming". If we remember the classical Aristotelian account of definition as consisting of *differentia specifica* and *genus proximum*, it is precisely the *differentia* produced in the process of defining, or naming things, that is abhorred by the mysticism of the cowboy heroes when they set out – they desire to experience, or to praise (as the passage below calls it) the world in what is imagined as its pre-modern, perhaps even pre-human, uncorrupt wholeness, where difference does not exist:

> That night he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wild flowers out of the ground [...] and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colors shone in the sun [...] and they ran he and the horses out along the high mesas where the ground resounded under their running hooves […] and there

[89] We should remember here that naming is exactly what the demonic figure of judge Holden does in *Blood Meridian.* He notes down, compares, categorizes. He is the ultimate rationalist, and this is the source of his terror and the fear he inspires.

> was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised. (163)

The mysticism of both the knight and the witness in *The Border Trilogy* is another narrative device around which the melancholic structure of the narratives is built. Unlike in *Blood Meridian* where there is only flatness, only the law of "optical democracy", here we find characters who explicitly long for depth, in the form of mystical unity. This particular difference, together with everything else we have remarked upon so far, marks a formal shift between *Blood Meridian* and McCarthy's post-1989 novels, a formal shift which is also reflected, as we have tried to show, in the development of the narrative structure of the novels away from the allegorical flatness towards melancholic depth. This change of direction can also be identified as a moralistic turn in McCarthy's fiction, in which the pervasive melancholia is often supplemented by a related, but explicitly political affect, namely nostalgia. We have already mentioned that at the very end of the trilogy the character of Billy Parham is assigned the role of recounting "the old days" to the generations that follow. However, the most explicit, and perhaps also the most banal, example of this can be found in the novel that followed the trilogy, *No Country for Old Men*, in which nostalgia is inscribed into the form of the novel at the level of narrative metacommentary.

3.5 Nostalgia as Narrative Structure: *No Country for Old Men*

A generic oddity, this thriller/jeremiad is a recapitulation of many of the themes and problems that have already been mentioned in the course of this analysis and does not offer many

deviations from the literary-philosophical framework established by preceding narratives. Therefore, we will concentrate only on the narrative function of the metacommentary.

The plot of the novel is structured around three main characters, Llewelyn Moss, Anton Chigurh and sheriff Bell. After Moss stumbles across a scene of a major drug deal gone awry in the desert, he picks up a satchel full of money and leaves unnoticed. However, driven by conscience, he makes a fatal decision to return to the scene in order to bring water and help one of the criminals he left behind barely alive. This triggers a string of events in which he ends up being hunted across Texas by the assassin Chigurh and several other people with ties to the organization the money belongs to as sheriff Bell tries to get to him first. The plot develops unusually, as Moss is abruptly killed by the crime syndicate that is after him about two thirds into the novel. The plot's "loose ends", i.e. the characters left behind by Moss, his wife foremost among them, are tied by Chigurh himself, who, driven by his strange and merciless code, has to finish what was started and so kills them off. However, the main standoff in this action-driven plot does not involve guns but ideological principles – the conservative humanism of Sheriff Bell and the rationalist anti-humanism of Anton Chigurh, who both occupy special places within the narrative structure.

Chigurh, whose comparison to judge Holden is impossible to avoid, is set apart from others by his glaring superiority, which manifests as pronounced intellectuality, self-sufficiency, consistently destructive anti-social behavior, and the simple fact he is always the last man standing. At the same time, the character-function of Chigurh is the narrative thread binding all the other major characters together. No other character directly interacts with or occupies the same narrative scene with others as Chigurh does. He confronts Moss in the border town shootout, kills the second assassin Carson Wells in the hotel room, waits for Carla Jean in her grandmother's house, and is even at the motel where Moss is killed at the same time sheriff Bell gets there after Moss's death.

The plot, in other words, structurally depends on Chigurh, as he is the unifying element of the separate narrative threads.

Sheriff Bell, on the other hand, plays a similarly important role as his first-person monologues provide the metacommentary for the narrative, framing the plot and occupying significantly more space in the discourse than the plot itself. Having that in mind, it is possible to claim that it is in fact the character of sheriff Bell who has a structurally more important role, but we should also point out that if all the parts containing sheriff's monologues were omitted, the plot would remain unchanged. Additionally, even if omitted from the discourse of the novel, it is easy to imagine a substitute character in the place of Bell – he is less individualized than Chigurh and has several counterparts in the novel, sharing both his job and broad ideological outlook. The character of Chigurh, on the other hand, is represented as *sui generis*, independent and without precedent. Finally, it is the very presence of Chigurh, as the embodiment of sheriff Bell's fears about the worsening condition of the world, that motivates and precedes the sheriff's commentary. The first of the monologues that opens the novel states that explicitly and suggests that Chigurh not only triggers the monologues, but continues to exist outside of the narrative they frame: "*But there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that's where this is goin. It has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd of come to.*" (*No Country for Old Men* 4) The mystery that is Chigurh, or the "order of the world that death has put there", as McCarthy wrote in *The Crossing*, precedes Bell's attempts to make sense of things. He is always already there and one step ahead, the "dark presence" of the narrative. That is why Bell calls him "*the prophet* of destruction" *(*4), he sees farther ahead, into the future Bell is so apprehensive about.

As we have already noted, Chigurh's dominance in the narrative is equivalent to judge Holden's in *Blood Meridian*. There is, however, a crucial difference. Whereas the judge permeates,

or indeed, *is* the entire narrative of *Blood Meridian*, an invincible, eternal[90] demonic presence, Chigurh is only the dominant of the narrative of *No Country for Old Men*. He is not the demonic creator, an embodiment of the fundamental organizing principle of the world, but a human, subject to the same rules as everyone else and physically vulnerable, as proven by the car accident at the end of the novel. He cannot be exempted from "the rule [he] followed that led [him] to this" (175) and the consequences of following the rule affect him seriously. He limps off out of the narrative wounded and nearly killed – unlike judge Holden who is seen dancing and playing the violin at the end of *Blood Meridian*[91]. Chigurh's references to following "the rule", and his insistence on accepting the validity of the determinism of the coin toss, by which he often decides if someone is going to live or die, betray a radical idealism not entirely dissimilar to the one of John Grady in the *Border Trilogy*, although the ethics of this idealism is predatory and violent. He is a dogmatic, a disciplined, ascetic monk: "I have only one way to live. It does not allow for special cases" (259), he tells Carla Jean in a manner peculiarly self-effacing and humble for a cold-blooded murderer. This zealotry is also the principle reason why he is the only one described by other characters, some of whom are also murderers, as a psychopath, or even inhuman.

This careful humility and the pedantry of his fatalism proves in the end to be a superior survival strategy. In a chaotic universe, where the initial conditions of a situation are complex and unknown, making it impossible to predict the outcome, individual human agency is simply one of the variables, not in any way privileged. The awareness of this is Chigurh's only advantage because he does not overestimate himself, carefully prepares for contingencies, and thinks ahead – at the beginning of the novel he is handcuffed and brought into a sheriff's office, from which he extricates

[90] "He says that he will never die" (*Blood Meridian*, 353).
[91] And who can, it is quite possible to argue, be seen again in another incarnation in the novel's epilogue as the man putting up the fences.

himself easily: “In the same motion he sat and rocked backward and passed the chain under his feet and then stood instantly and effortlessly. If it looked like a thing he'd practiced many times it was.” (5) At one point in the novel he describes that particular attitude:

> The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. In their minds. They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events where perhaps they are not. And it is always one’s stance upon uncertain ground that invites the attentions of one’s enemies. Or discourages it.
>
> And you? What about your enemies?
>
> I have no enemies. I dont permit such a thing. (253)

Such precaution is also what saves his life in the car accident. Although the accident itself is impossible to avoid, he succeeds in minimizing its effects: “Chigurh never wore a seatbelt driving in the city because of just such hazards.” (260) In this sense, the plot of the novel can be understood as a musing on probabilistic universe and the nature and consequences of stochastic processes. This is also supported by the peculiar resolution of what until the final third or fourth of the novel appears to be the central line of plot development: the fact that Moss’s death comes abruptly and surprisingly, that he is killed not by the superior Chigurh but by the second faction of the drug dealers, the deindividualized Mexicans, and that this event is highly anti-climactic. It occurs at a random point in the narrative, and is not even represented directly but reported on by the sheriffs arriving at the scene after it happens. Such a narrative development decenters the climax of the narrative, or perhaps entirely displaces it, drawing further attention to the chaotic dynamics that underlies its structure.

One mode of dealing with these principles is Chigurh's probabilistic approach. Self-effacing and curiously humble, he is aware, in his anti-humanism, that he can do no better than manage probabilities. The other mode, sheriff Bell's, represents a counterpoint to this approach. His monologues, which are formally separated from the rest of the text by the fact they are numbered and italicized, as well as by the fact that they are narrated in the first person as opposed to the third person narration of the main plot, have an ordering function in the discourse of the novel. They are the only constant in this dialogue-driven narrative, characterized by unpredictable and quick shifts in focalization. But even though sheriff's metacommentary serves the purpose of framing and ordering the narrative, adding a higher level and self-referential diegetic instance, it is also a reflection of the sheriff's inability to impose order on the plot itself: a complex situation with many variables, out of his control, and impossible for him to fully understand. Throughout the novel he is also shown as always failing at what is his primary task, maintenance of social order. He arrives late, misses important information, fails to help Moss, is unable to catch Chigurh or any other criminal perpetrators. The failure is not a result of professional incompetence, but of the inadequacy of the conceptual apparatus he uses to explain the events he is a part of. In essence, it is an ideological failure because the image of the world he relies on and orients himself by is inadequate to provide him with an effective understanding of what is going on around him. He is a conservative humanist, motivated by the same conservative nostalgia for the "old days" and the moral categories of decency and propriety as the cowboy heroes of *The Border Trilogy*. But, unlike them, he is stuck where he is and cannot, as an older man, simply follow the projections of his longing wherever they might lead. By the end of the novel, he is acutely aware of his defeat: "*I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more.*" (298) This change of heart, the realization of his impotence in the face of a world he sees

as out of control, motivates his nostalgia as he tries to counterbalance his disorientation by erecting a myth of the Golden Age, conceiving history as a narrative of degradation.

The novel ends with a retelling of a sentimental dream in which the sheriff's stereotypical Christian conservatism[92] is elevated to mythopoetic heights. In the dream, the sheriff and his father find themselves "back in older times", his father carrying fire in a horn, riding ahead of him to make the life-giving fire in the "all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there." (309) This string of clichéd symbols is the pinnacle of nostalgia in the sheriff's metacommentary which, in *No Country for Old Men*, replaces what we called the "melancholic structure" of the earlier novels with a more explicitly political nostalgic one. However, it is crucial to point out that when read in the broader context of McCarthy's work, this nostalgia for the Golden Age backfires in an unfortunate way. Because we have already had the opportunity to see a rather graphic account of what these "old days" and "older times" looked like: it was demonstrated quite unambiguously in *Blood Meridian*. Therefore, the nostalgic yearning for the "old days", present as a structural device in the metacommentary to *No Country* and appearing intermittently as a motif in *The Border Trilogy*, is revealed as not only delusional but positively obscene. Examined from this perspective, McCarthy's "moralistic turn" in the 1990s thus appears as an attempt to narratively undo the radical damage inflicted by *Blood Meridian* to imperialist, nationalist founding myths. Unsurprisingly, this ideological and narrative maneuver has also coincided with a re-positioning in

[92] The conservatism is emphasized to such an extent that it is easy to argue that the sheriff is not simply "a conservative character" but is conservatism itself, or in other words – that the character-function of the sheriff serves as a conduit for US Christian conservative discourse, which, in the form of sheriff's character, is represented as naively baffled and overwhelmed by the dark and foreign forces at play in the country. This is demonstrated in the sheriff's numerous lamentations and discussions of perennial topics characteristic of ideological wars in the US public sphere, from abortion rights to school shootings, in which he, throughout the novel, expresses disappointment with "people with green hair and nosebones" (295, 305), the way "this country is headed" (197) and argues that the causes of heightened criminality he perceives everywhere can be traced to "overlooking bad manners." (304)

the literary field from the aesthetic margins to the heart of the "middlebrow", a shift that can productively be compared to Ugrešić's, as we will attempt to do below.

3.6 *The Road* to Post-Socialist Theology

McCarthy's final novel, 2006's post-apocalyptic narrative *The Road*, can in the context we set up above be read as an extension of the "nostalgic structure" to its ultimate point: in that text, it is not only that the "old days" are gone, but the world as such. This radicalized abnegation of the world, however, instead of establishing nostalgia as a narrative dominant, results in an unexpected turn as in the hostile post-apocalyptic context, in the grey, sunless, ashen landscape devoid of both flora and fauna through which the characters move, nostalgia is not a useful affect anymore since its passivizing reflexivity is counter-productive as a survival strategy. What takes its place, as we shall see, is quite interesting.

The narrative explores the aftermath of an absolute catastrophe whose exact nature is unknown. As there is no radioactive fallout, radiation sickness or any other necessary consequence of a nuclear warfare scenario, it is reasonable to conclude that the destruction was caused by a naturally occurring event, a consequence of processes beyond human control. Although we had reservations towards Slethaug's claim that *Blood Meridian* is a narrative about "the fragility of the human idea of order", the same claim can be applied to *The Road* more pertinently as *The Road* conjoins such a conception of social order as fragile and always under threat to the narrative explorations of stochastic processes and cause and effect characteristic of *No Country for Old Men*. In comparison to that, in *The Road* not only the fate of individuals is decided by chance, by a cosmic coin toss, but the fate of the entire human world. The fatal moment comes without a warning, and the protagonists are unprepared:

He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?

I dont know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not. (52-53)

In addition to the uncertainty about the origin of the catastrophe, the historical and geographic markers, which were always quite precise in all of the earlier novels, are also missing. The only thing a reader can reasonably assume from the geographical, cultural and technological references in the text such as the shopping cart that the two main characters, a father and son, use to haul their possessions in, a scavenged can of Coca-Cola the son tastes for the first time, or the backyard bomb-shelter full of commodities they find, are the rough historical coordinates of the destroyed world, suggesting contemporary USA. The exact scope of the catastrophe is also a mystery. We do not know what happened to the rest of the world, or what the broader social reaction to the destructive event was. The narrative focuses exclusively on the father and son and the necessary mechanics of survival in an environment extremely hostile to life. Since most of the survival resources are gone, survival is as much a game of chance as of intelligence and perseverance. In such conditions, where blind luck is a significant determinant and means of sustenance cannot be stocked, future ceases to exist as a point of orientation:

Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands

> row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. (187)

Indeed, the characters' horizon of expectations is by necessity extremely narrow, limited to immediate surroundings and short-term goals. The father and son are nomadic scavengers and they move through the present of the post-apocalyptic space perceiving only traces and fragments. The shape of the totality of the historical conjuncture they are a part of is unknown. Having this in mind, it is quite tempting to relate the characters' social imaginaries, or the fractured operative social totality constructed by the narrative, to the logic of capitalist realism and consequently read this novel in the allegorical mode too. If we remember the other famously epoch-making pronouncement issued by Margaret Thatcher, "there is no such thing as society", we can say that this is quite true for the characters in the novel. They live in a world without political order, or at best a world where political order appears only in streaks and fragments, located in randomly scattered, out-of-sight enclaves. Only twice in the narrative do they encounter collectives that could be said to exhibit elements of a consistent social rationality[93], and one of those times they have to hide because what they encounter is sinister. Solitary figures and bands of marauding cannibals account for most of the human presence in the narrative.

It is impossible to know whether this is a global state of affairs. The narrator keeps the focus narrow: we cannot know whether there might not be parts of the world where the catastrophe is not

[93] The comparison between these two encounters reveals a Manichean conception of the social: the first of the encounters is with what seems to be some kind of a hostile hierarchical warrior-cult, and the second with a commune of "the good guys".

so vast, or where there has been some social effort to relieve its consequences. The primary narrative concern is always with the dynamics of the father-son relationship, i.e. with the specifics of their personal interactions, and with their reactions to the practical difficulties of life in the wasteland. Both the reader and the characters themselves are oblivious of their exact position in the historical totality. The narrative emphasis is always on the quotidian – the practical details and the mechanics of eating, sleeping, finding shelter, etc. References to spheres of social reality broader than that are sporadic and vague.

In other words, the central narrative device the novel relies on is one of reduction. Heaping fragmentary information about what is right in front of the characters, and withholding even a hint of what the historical totality they inhabit might look like forms the basis of *The Road*'s narrative strategy. This radical reduction, in which history seems to have reached its endpoint and inaugurated a civilizational regression to a state of prehistoric scarcity without any form of social contract, seems like the ultimate development of McCarthy's metaphysics of violence structuring the Western cycle narratives around a single consistent principle, a single social law, the one of force. This is a monochrome world, dull and predictable, where strangers are greeted with paranoid hostility, or cold aggression. In more than one way, such a setting resembles the anti-pastoral of *Blood Meridian*, although the significant difference is that the flatness of *Blood Meridian*'s optical democracy is supplanted in *The Road* by a focus on depth in the form of affective bonds between father and son which structure the plot and character relations and, most importantly, the theological structure inserted into the narrative.

The latter requires further elaboration as it is perhaps the most significant narrative innovation that *The Road* brings to the framework of the Western cycle. In order to observe the logic of this theological structure, we should remember that neither the pre-apocalyptic world in *The Road* is represented as harmonious. The cryptic closing paragraph of the book makes that clear

and reiterates the Gnostic themes McCarthy never really abandons: "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. […] On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery." (287) In other words, even the world before the catastrophe is understood as immanently crooked and by definition fallen. The creatures of that world bear the marks of its imperfection. After the process of its "becoming" had begun, everything was already over as the original state cannot be re-attained, the world cannot be made whole again, the return to the source is impossible. From this perspective, it appears that the apocalypse, far from being a radical rupture, is an organic aspect of such a world, simply the logical progression of its "becoming".

We can say that this equation results in transforming history as such into eschatology. There are several structural consequences of this for the novel's form: the first one is that such a conception necessarily dispenses with the nostalgic projections around which both *No Country* and *The Border Trilogy* were developed. Since the pre-apocalyptic world is understood as immanently imperfect, impossible to be "made right" from the moment of its creation, nostalgic mythopoiesis characteristic of the earlier novels is redundant and simply rings false. In its place, however, there is an odd turn towards the future, an unexpected staging of a peculiarly Utopian dynamics, openly religious in inspiration[94]. The religious Utopianism, or more precisely, the messianism of the narrative is more than just a connotation as it is inscribed into the very logic of narrative development. A messianic archetype is inserted into the narrative to counterbalance the logic of radical reduction that we identified above: the apocalypse in *The Road*, even in comparison to the

[94] In our introductory chapter, we pointed out that there is an interesting development in the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre in which the apocalyptic is a condition of possibility of the Utopian and the apocalypse is a pretext for Utopian speculation. *The Road*, although not quite a straightforward example of this, exhibits a similar tendency by way of its theological implications.

usual standards of the genre, is unusually bleak. It is represented as so overwhelmingly hopeless – grey, sunless, ashen, dead, cannibalistic – and devoid of any hope of reconstruction that one is justified to wonder what narrative sense there is in representing it as such.

The answer can be found on the level of narrative structure, as it depends on a Manichean dualism set up between this apocalyptic desolation and the messianic archetype, a form of a Utopian object, which it is not difficult to recognize in the figure of the son. The father himself recognizes this explicitly, determining it is necessary to protect the child at all costs. But the determination is more than simply a strong paternal instinct: it is a pseudo-religious mission reminiscent of the one of Saint Joseph: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God." (77)

In such a grim and hopeless world, simply taking care of the child physically is not enough, and the father also has to deactivate the psychological traps and dangers they might come across: "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some word that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you." (189) This passage provides a good example because it succinctly recapitulates the opposition between the "Utopian" and the "realistic", the imaginary and the instituted, that represents another iteration of the dualism structuring the narrative. The basic survival philosophy the father instructs the boy in is a type of stoical realism: they have to accept their circumstances for what they are, no matter how bleak they might be, because if they indulge in reality-denying fantasies, all will be lost. The call of the imaginary and the Utopian is a siren's call in the hostile world they inhabit. However, at the same time, the father and son supplement this elementary philosophical survival strategy by a makeshift ideology that is explicitly Utopian. They construct a personal narrative which endows their terrible struggle with a simple teleological structure which is effective in providing meaning and an ethical context for their efforts: recapitulating the same

symbolism we found at the end of *No Country for Old Men*, the father and son often repeat throughout the narrative they are "the good guys", who "carry the fire". These are not simply clichés (as they were, one could easily argue, in the previous novel). Nor are they just tales for children, instructive little narratives the father recounts to the son to help him understand the world in a specific way. In the context of the impoverished apocalyptic world, these are no less than the contours of a rudimentary metaphysics, imaginary significations with a very concrete historical purpose for the pair. In opposition to the father's pragmatic disavowal of fantasy and the Utopian in other contexts, the metaphor/imaginary signification of "carrying the fire" is never censored, disavowed, or forbidden because it is indispensable for long-term survival:

> We're going to be okay, arent we Papa?
>
> Yes. We are.
>
> And nothing bad is going to happen to us.
>
> That's right.
>
> Because we're carrying the fire.
>
> Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (83)

At the very end of the novel, when the boy is found by another survivor after his father dies, the question he asks in order to ascertain who he is dealing with is: "Are you carrying the fire?" (283) After a bit of confusion, the stranger realizes what he is being asked and gives a positive answer before bringing the boy to the safety of his group.

With this final emphasis, the narrative demonstrates the historical necessity of Utopian imaginary significations (and thus departs from the logic of capitalist realist closure under which

such significations are impossible). As we have already mentioned, the symbolic charge of the motif indicates a messianic teleology: the characters are carrying the fire in a world of ash, keeping alive the possibility of rebirth and reconstruction, the possibility of history. The messianism is also confirmed in the characterization of the son. His uniquely benevolent nature is in strong contrast to the extremity of predatory violence they witness daily. Like the other idealized hero in the Western cycle, John Grady, the son is radically consistent in his emphatic solidarity and love. The encounter with the man who steals their provisions near the end of the novel is paradigmatic: when they catch the thief, the father disarms him and takes back what he stole. But he also takes revenge by leaving the man naked. “I’m going to leave you the way you left us” (259), he tells the man, punishing him according to the Old Testament principle. The son, however, begs the father not to do that, not to leave the man helpless even though he tried to harm them. He rejects the father’s Old Testament principle, and cries and begs mercy for their enemy. As it soon becomes apparent, this is not the naïveté of a sensitive child but an expression of a deeply felt ethical conviction: “You're not the one who has to worry about everything”, the father angrily tells him. “Yes I am. I am the one” (259), answers the boy enigmatically, professing a deeper understanding of the situation. The son, consequently, is revealed to be the real carrier of the fire, the messianic archetype and the central figure of the narrative, his benevolence the only hope of resurrection for the dead world. Earlier in the novel, the father acknowledges that explicitly. Talking to the old man Eli, one of the wanderers in the apocalyptic wasteland they encounter, he describes the boy’s as divine:

> [...] When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.
>
> You thought he was an angel?

> I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen.
>
> What if I said that he's a god? (172)

The theological reference in this segment is important not only as a device supporting the messianic structure of *The Road*'s narrative. It also helps to reveal, together with everything we said so far, the ideological trajectory of McCarthy's work in the Western cycle. As we tried to demonstrate, all the narratives in the cycle are motivated by a conception of original historical loss, narratively processed and formalized into structures whose affective equivalent is melancholia. With the inauguration of the End of History, a consequence of post-socialist world-systemic transformations, this underlying melancholic structure in McCarthy's work is supplemented by a more politically explicit, and more conservative nostalgic metacommentary in the service of projecting a myth of the Golden Age to justify the lack of historical possibility perceived in the present and disavowed as a narrative problem. However, *The Road*, stretching the world-denying logic of nostalgia as far as it can go, ends up in the Utopian, inserting the formal object of messianic archetype into this broader ideological trajectory. Although this shift returns us to the problem of representing historical possibility, addressed earlier and ambiguously by the allegorical formalization of *Blood Meridian*, one should not forget that the dualist social imaginary that can be detected in *The Road* is characteristically conservative. The social relations represented in the novel are all dependent on this dualism, they are Manichean and familial, and the salvation at the end appears as the conservative Utopia of the family (the boy is taken in by another group of the "good guys" and held by "the woman" who "would talk to him sometimes about God"). (286) What this achieves within the ideological trajectory of McCarthy's Western cycle is the replacement of the technocratic, "scientistic" signifier of the universal with a theological one, thus

adding depth and a future-oriented temporality to the flatness of *Blood Meridian*'s optical democracy: "She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time." (286) However, the equation of history with eschatology characteristic of the novel means that it is not capable of breaching the historical fatalism of the End of History and, by extension, the desolate consumerist utopias of neoliberalism, which it superficially denounces. The impoverished social imaginary of *The Road* proves incapable of processing historical possibility in any collectivist, emancipatory, autonomous form.

What the novel achieves instead, we want to argue finally, is a narrative formalization of the logic of social order characteristic of post-socialism and its fractured temporality. There are two key arguments we can use to demonstrate this. In a 1996 book entitled *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next*, Katherine Verdery put forth a provocative thesis that the transition to post-socialism in Eastern Europe can be understood as a return to feudalism. (cf. 204-228) If we remember that the form ideology took under that mode of production was religion, it becomes clear that McCarthy's theological imaginary, with its messianic Utopian objects, is post-socialist/feudal precisely insofar as it is eschatological and religious. Secondly, beyond the theological Utopian objects in the novel, we must consider its narrative structure and the fact its operative social totality is wholly familial and privatistic, equated throughout most of the narrative with the individual perspective of the main pair of characters. We can add to that our above observation that the social rationality constitutive of its narrative world is represented as radically fragmented. This is analogous to Perry Anderson's claim, in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, that the constitutive characteristic of the feudal mode of production was "parcelization of sovereignty." (148) In other words, the narrative of *The Road*, together with a host of other texts in the post-apocalyptic genre, Robert Kirkman's comic *The Walking Dead* perhaps the most explicit and foremost among them, is structured around precisely such a conception, with its

scattered social groups and roving bands free of allegiance to any central authority or a unifying social logic. Having that in mind, it can be said that *The Road*, as the culmination of McCarthy's novelistic work, is the ultimate post-socialist text. (At least if our criterion is mimetic identity, i.e. mimetic reflection of characteristic social relations and dominant social imaginaries.) If we push this conclusion as far as it can go, we can even use it to argue for an allegorical mode of reading: Verdery claims in her book that "Although one might investigate the parcelization and reconstitution of sovereignty [characteristic of post-socialism] in any number of areas, a central arena for them is privatization." (209) In other words, privatization, or reconstitution of property relations during the "transition", is the central mechanism of said parcelization. In the post-socialist allegory we examined, it follows, the analogous parcelizing mechanism is – the apocalypse.

CHAPTER FOUR: ROBERTO BOLAÑO

4.1 Roberto Bolaño or A Portrait of the Artist as a Post-Socialist Utopian

In the previous two chapters we have tried to take a careful look at the transformation of narrative form in the novels of Dubravka Ugrešić and Cormac McCarthy and observe it as a discursive response to the socio-historical problems engendered by world-systemic transformations characteristic of post-socialism. We can use Roberto Schwartz's provocatively cryptic insight into the historical logic of form to expand this productively here. If form is, as Schwartz postulated, "the abstract of social relations" (53), that means that in the republic of letters, the socio-historical problems hinted at above appear as representational problems, problems of form. To make them intelligible, or in other words, to make social relations, the logic of history, appear visible or readable for the collective in literary form, requires devising appropriate "formulas of formalization." Their ideological valence, the particular socio-cultural effect of literary discourse in a historical context, depends on a particular formal strategy devised to address the above issues. As Caroline Levine points out in an interesting recent neo-formalist discussion of the problem of form, particular forms have particular "affordances." She borrows the term from design theory and explains that it is used "to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs." (6) In other words, particular (literary-)formal arrangements do particular things, they are limited by the affordance, the semantic-pragmatic value of a chosen formal arrangement.

In the cases of Ugrešić and McCarthy, we have tried to chart the trajectory of their changing formal responses to the socio-historical problems of the post-socialist period. We have tried to follow these responses chronologically, and discuss the changing affordances of the variously devised "formulas of formalization". We followed these trajectories throughout the first two post-

socialist decades and tried to show that both authors responded to if not the same, then homologous representational problems despite different historical contexts they found themselves in, positions in the literary field they occupied, and ideological outlooks they can be identified with. This is a consequence of the dynamics of the world-system and both authors' reliance on the same network of social imaginary significations that makes up the global post-socialist "world." Both these authors also ultimately ended up in a similar place: Ugrešić's historical retreat and abandonment of the representational problem of historical possibility is analogous to McCarthy's re-articulation of the problem in the form of nostalgic metacommentary. Both of these strategies of representation exhibit an acquiescent attitude to the post-socialist imaginary closure.

With this final chapter, the topic of which is Roberto Bolaño's narrative project, we will try to do something different and reveal that there can exist a different type of relation to the closure of the contemporary social imaginary, i.e. that literary forms can be crafted whose affordance is suited for re-articulating the very problem of historical possibility that Ugrešić and McCarthy abandon. We emphasize the word "project" here. Unlike Ugrešić and McCarthy, whose literary work we characterized as a shifting arrangement of formal strategies motivated by a changing attitude towards the social imaginary closure, we see nothing of the sort in Bolaño. In fact, it is *de facto* impossible to trace a long-term trajectory of formal shifts in his narrative work for the simple reason that it was written and published in a very short period of the last ten or so years of Bolaño's life, from 1993 to 2003, when he died awaiting a liver transplant in Spain.

We do not, however, consider the integrated nature of Bolaño's work as a mere historical accident, but as a result of a systematic and single-minded attempt to address an important representational problem: historical possibility, or possibility of history, at the End of History. This perspective helps understand not only the formal integration of Bolaño's work, but the much-

discussed phenomenon of his radically enthusiastic reception at the very moment history was violently re-introduced by the biggest systemic crisis in at least a generation.

4.2 Reception Motivated by Crisis?

Bolaño was virtually unknown before the string of publications in the 1990s and early 2000s which culminated in what are his most celebrated novels, *Los detectivos salvaje/Savage Detectives* (1998) and *2666* (2004). This explosion of reception in the late 1990s and the 2000s can be observed as proceeding in two waves. Firstly, winning the *Rómulo Gallegos* prize established him as an author of note in the Hispanosphere. Then, perhaps even more significantly for his reception across the globe and placement into the contemporary canons of world literature dictated by the market, his novels were translated into English and published in the US where he achieved a kind of apotheosis as the incarnation of the new spirit of Latin American literature, finally dethroning, or at least that is how it was understood at the time, the somewhat stale "magical realism", which had in the US, as in many other places, for some thirty years been wholly identified with Latin American literature.

If we put aside the complexities and institutional and ideological dynamics of that canonization process, it serves at least to demonstrate the importance of the US literary field as a mediating mechanism for global dissemination and reception[95]. This role will be well-known to those of us living in the (semi)peripheries of the world-system, where publishing companies' interests are often attuned to market trends in the US, which are often quickly copied in attempts

[95] The case of US mediation of Bolaño is comparable in many ways to the global reception of Jacques Derrida and French post-structuralism that followed Derrida's famously well-received paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" given at a Johns Hopkins conference in 1966. Derrida's reputation was quickly established in the US after that, after which his work also boomeranged back to rest of Europe and the world by way of mediation by the US academic field.

to simulate the occurrence of the same trends in peripheral markets: ready-made cultural commodities are cheaper to produce than wholly new ones. World literature is, from this perspective, an effect of the market[96], which raises the question of how much does this process change the text itself: how much does such a process of mediation by the core prepare, influence, prefigure reception in the periphery? We will not try to answer this question directly, but we should keep it in mind and will return to it as we try to analyze Bolaño's narrative form as an attempt to re-articulate historical possibility/Utopia as a narrative problem in the post-socialist context.

In any case, the latter part of the 2000s, the first years of the aftermath of the most serious capitalist crisis in a generation, became the Bolaño years: at one point it seemed that everybody had an article on Bolaño to write[97]. One of the most circulated texts in the Bolaño debates from that period is the tellingly entitled "Bolaño Inc." by the Honduran writer Horacio Castellanos Moya, published in 2009 in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* and then quickly translated and published in the US journal *Guernica* in English. Castellanos Moya begins the essay in a tone of exasperation and fatigue: "I had told myself I wasn't going to say or write anything more about Roberto Bolaño. The subject has been squeezed dry these last two years, above all in the North American press, and I told myself that there was already enough drunkenness." The essay is short and acerbic and makes the point that the canonization of Bolaño was a calculated effect of US

[96] A similar point is made by Pedro Ángel Palou in his article "Coda: la literatura mundial, un falso debate del Mercado" and reiterated in a short online essay entitled "¿Existe eso que llaman literatura mundial?" published on the literary blog *El Boomeran(g)*. Palou writes: "world literature is an effect of reading, it is an effect – today more than ever – of the market." ("la literatura mundial es un efecto de lectura, es un efecto – hoy en día más que nunca – de mercado.") Interestingly, in the same essay he quotes Dubravka Ugrešić, calling her a "radically peripheral" author ("escritora radicalmente periférica"). It is difficult to agree with this assessment after everything we have pointed out in this study, especially since the other "radically peripheral" Eastern author for Palou is Milan Kundera.
[97] Garth Risk Hallberg's article "The Bolaño Myth and the Backlash Cycle" provides a succinct overview of parts of the late 2000s debate and a criticism of the hypothesis that Bolaño's sudden and dramatic rise to popularity is due to cynical marketing and imperialist presumptions of US readers.

capital in the publishing industry, reliant on imperialist paternalism and ideological prejudice of the US reading public:

> The market has its landlords, like everything on this infected planet, and it's the landlords of the market who decide the mambo that you dance, whether it's selling cheap condoms or Latin American novels in the U.S. I say this because the central idea of Pollack's work is that behind the construction of the Bolaño myth was not only a publisher's marketing operation but also a redefinition of the image of Latin American culture and literature that the U.S. cultural establishment is now selling to the public. ("Bolaño Inc.")

In essence, Castellanos Moya reiterates succinctly and in harsher rhetoric the argument made by the academic Sarah Pollack in an article published in the *Comparative Literature* journal and entitled "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's 'The Savage Detectives' in the United States." We will be returning to that article and Pollack's argument, but for now, suffice it to say that she attributes the "meteoric rise" of Bolaño to a "number of perceived economic values and marketing strategies", which

> combined and coalesced - the actors, institutions, and concrete practices that determine literary value, in Casanova's terms. Bolaño's creative genius, compelling biography, personal experience of the Pinochet coup, and untimely death from liver failure at the age of fifty, on July 15, 2003, as well as the labelling of some of his works as Southern Cone dictatorship novels, all contributed to "produce" a Bolaño well suited for U.S.

reception and consumption and, in doing so, anticipated the reading of his work that has been propagated in this country. (355)

According to Pollack, the ideological effect of that reading propagated in the US – and by extension, in national literary fields which imported Bolaño as a literary commodity mediated by the US market – is the reaffirmation of an exoticist understanding of Latin America. Or in other words, the containment and depoliticization of the more radical aspects of the narratives within a paternalistic relationship in which any semantic and political excess that does not fit with the dominant imaginary is explained away and depoliticized as a curiosity of exotic "culture" or "temperament."

Pollack's analysis is convincing but we would like to suggest an argument that supplements it. While it is true that texts from the periphery are treated voyeuristically in the core, and the Goethean understanding of world literature as national exchange and window into other cultures is still dominant[98], in this case we want to draw attention to the fact that this particular explanation of Bolaño's enthusiastic reception ignores its other important determinant. More precisely, it is rarely mentioned that this reception exploded in the historical context of a dramatic systemic crisis of capitalism that dynamized the stasis of the End of History, and to which many of the socio-

[98] David Damrosch's work, for instance, is an influential contemporary emanation of the Goethean, liberal hermeneutic tradition in world literature, although Damrosch updates Goethe for the "age of globalization." He defines world literature in the following manner: "My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike. This book is intended to explore this mode of circulation and to clarify the ways in which works of world literature can best be read." (5) For a criticism of this position from a peripheral post-socialist position, see our essay "Globalizacija, književnost, turizam." In it, we argue that Damrosch's conception of world literature as a mode of reading is based on a contradiction: the interests and needs of world literature's readers are assumed to always already be guided by the same noble affects that the engagement with world literature is yet to produce. Some enthusiastic readers of world literature have, on the contrary, been known to command and manage entire genocides with one hand, while leafing through Goethe and Shakespeare with the other.

historical events immediately following – from the EU management of the Greek sovereign debt crisis to the rise of right-wing populism and proto-fascist political formations across the globe, to Donald Trump – can be related in a causal chain. That crisis, in other words, has been a socio-historical experience that transformed the horizon of expectations of readers both in the core and the periphery of the world-system in a way that has not been seen since 1989, and has therefore exerted a significant amount of pressure on the stale social imaginaries of the post-socialist world. That changed horizon of historical expectations finds an appropriate formal equivalent in Roberto Bolaño's literary work. If we include this formal-historical correlation in the explanation of Bolaño as a publishing phenomenon, we can derive from it a more convincing materialist argument than the one that would understand his meteoric rise as a top-down manipulation by capital reliant on imperialist prejudice, as both Castellanos Moya and Pollack do. This does not deny the validity of their analysis, but integrates it into a dialectical understanding that also includes autonomous subjective activity both at the points of production and reception: firstly, Bolaño's work uncannily resonated with a multitude of readers across the world-system because its narrative arrangement was capable of articulating the logic of historical possibility that was revealed behind the curtain of capitalist realism in the immediate post-crisis period. And then secondly, the process of commodification of Bolaño, i.e. the translation, branding, marketing, and dissemination of his work, was conducted in such a way as to contain the semantic (and therefore political) excess articulated through his narrative form. The very fact that made his work so compelling (and by extension profitable) at the time it appeared, is also the fact that needed to be re-written, repressed, and pushed into the background in the process of commodifying this work and preparing it for the market. The former, i.e. the narrative possibilities that his work opened for the post-socialist novel, will be our primary focus in what follows. We will discuss three key points: firstly, the dialectical movement of Bolaño's literary discourse, secondly, the function of the trope of "metafictional

hyperbole" as a narrative device, and lastly, the way Bolaño's narrative form, works to de-fuse what Boris Buden has called the ideological mechanism of "repressive infantilization" deployed in the post-socialist public sphere.

4.3 Bolaño's Literary Dialectic: Auxilio Lacouture in *Amulet* and in History

One of the most important things to consider when discussing Roberto Bolaño's narrative work is the complexity of "world building" across the entirety of his opus. Different texts are integrated and interrelated by a range of narrative devices and techniques into what we will call an "emergent simulacrum" – a trans-narrative totality or a higher-order narrative "world" that appears as a consequence of the integration. The main narrative devices used to achieve this are recurring characters, iterations of same episodes in different contexts and across different narratives, use of the same settings and chronotopes in different narratives, etc. This narrative interweaving gives Bolaño's work a labyrinthine quality that could lend itself very well to network analysis or even hypertext coding. *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* defines network analysis as "a set of integrated techniques to depict relations among actors and to analyze the […] structures that emerge from the recurrence of these relations." ("Network Analysis") This type of contemporary network analysis is already being used for narratological purposes and has both a professional academic presence (for instance, in the work of the Stanford Literary Lab), and an amateur online presence. An example of the latter is the PynchonWiki, a wiki-type webpage systematically charting the network of relations and the structure of the narrative universe in Thomas Pynchon's work[99]. There does not, as yet, seem to exist a similar BolañoWiki, but the hypertextual logic of his texts calls for a similar treatment.

[99] See pynchonwiki.com.

As opposed to Pynchon, however, the thematic focus of Bolaño's work is strictly speaking narrow: his "emergent simulacrum" simulates the dynamics of the global(ized) literary field, the historical life of the "world republic of letters" within the broader context of the history of the world-system. This characteristically narrow focus is easy to observe in the vast catalogues of writers, real and fictional, enumerated in the narratives, the often absurd conflicts over literary marginalia that drive them, the desires of characters tightly bound with the literary, or simply by pointing out that most of the numerous characters in Bolaño's work are literati: poets, writers, humanities professors, marginal intellectuals, critics, editors and other literary enthusiasts that mill about the literary simulacrum as focalizers, protagonists, or whose names are empty signifiers, absent causes of narrative development.

One of the paradigmatic examples of such an approach to structuring narrative is the semi-autobiographical character of Arturo Belano, who appears across numerous narratives, novels and short stories alike. The intertextual and structuring function of the character is easy to point out simply by looking at the consistency and the complexity of his deployment within Bolaño's narrative universe: he appears as either a protagonist or an important secondary character in the novels *Estrella distante/Distant Star*, *Los detectivos salvaje/The Savage Detectives*, *Amuleto/Amulet*, *2666*, as well as numerous short stories. But he also appears as a hetero- and homodiegetic narrator, sometimes named, sometimes unnamed, sometimes named simply "B"[100], etc.

As we have mentioned, there as yet does not exist a dedicated BolañoWiki to map all these interconnections, variations, recurrent structures, and networks, but the English Wikipedia itself

[100] In addition, according to the afterword to *2666* written by Bolaño's friend and literary executor Ignacio Echevarría, the author's notes on *2666* contain the following line: "The narrator of *2666* is Arturo Belano." (*2666* 898)

may be said to contain an embryo of one since a number of articles on Bolaño's works contain sketches of possible systematizations. For instance, the Wikipedia page dedicated to the character "Arturo Belano" also attempts to categorize Bolaño's narratives according to the narrative function the character has in them. These are, however, still undeveloped and lack both a systematic terminology, a consistent narratological analytic, or categorizing principles. We will not be trying to develop this project here, but it was relevant to draw attention to it in order to draw the basic contours of the complex structure of Bolaño's emergent simulacrum and to notice its constitutive self-referentiality. This will be important to keep in mind as we proceed to analyze the dialectical movement of Bolaño's literary discourse and point out that it cannot be understood without the concept of totality, or in other words, that it can be understood only in constant reference to the whole of the emergent narrative simulacrum.

Fortunately, we can begin developing this analysis economically, with reference to a manageable number of particular examples, namely the novel *Amulet* and a subchapter from the novel *The Savage Detectives*. The comparison of the two texts reveals one of the above mentioned integrative narrative devices and provides insight into what we described as the dialectical movement of Bolaño's literary discourse. There is a tight intertextual connection between *Amulet*, a short novel published in 1999, and *The Savage Detectives* published a year earlier. *Amulet* develops further a narrative from one of the earlier novel's subchapters. The connecting intertextual reference and narrative device that the two share is the main character and homodiegetic narrator, a Uruguayan poet named Auxilio Lacouture. The subchapter of *The Savage Detectives* that also features Lacouture as a homodiegetic narrator prefigures *Amulet*, but narrates, to use classical formalist terminology, the same *fabula* as a much more succinct *syuzhet*. The reiteration of Lacouture's narrative and Lacouture as a narrative function, however, is not the only integrative device referring to the larger narrative simulacrum. Lacouture is a close friend of Arturo Belano,

one of the central characters (but not a narrator) in *The Savage Detectives*. She refers to this connection at the very beginning of *Amulet*, immediately establishing a dense intertextual network and logic of self-reference. This is the opening of *Amulet*:

> This is going to be a horror story. A story of murder, detection, and horror. But it won't appear to be for the simple reason that I am the teller. Told by me, it won't seem like that. Although, in fact, it's the story of a terrible crime.
>
> I am a friend to all Mexicans. I could say I am the mother of Mexican poetry, but I better not. I know all the poets and all the poets know me. So I could say it. I could say one mother of a zephyr is blowing down the centuries, but I better not. For example, I could say I knew Arturito Belano when he was a shy seventeen-year-old who wrote plays and poems and couldn't hold his liquor, but in a sense it would be superfluous and I was taught (they taught me with a lash and with a rod of iron) to spurn all superfluities and tell a straightforward story. (1-2)

As opposed to that, Auxilio opens her subchapter in the *The Savage Detectives* in the following manner: "I'm the mother of Mexican poetry. I know all the poets and all the poets know me. I met Arturo Belano when he was sixteen years old and he was a shy boy who didn't know how to drink." (*The Savage Detectives*)

We have already hinted at the fact that the central problem appearing from this comparison is an old literary-formalist one: the relation between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. The two iterations of what we can tentatively recognize as the same *fabula* are discursively processed in very different ways. In addition, this problem only appears in an intertextual ("trans-narrative") comparison, as a higher-order problem of the emergent simulacrum and as such has consequences for Bolaño's work as a

whole. In fact, it is one of the central problems of that work. To avoid any doubts about this, a range of homologous examples of Bolaño's "trans-narrative integration device" can be offered, from narrative episodes which recur in different narratives (often involving the semi-autobiographical Arturo Belano) or hint at narrative developments which are then processed in different texts, to re-development of what are in one context episodes into autonomous narratives in other contexts (as is the case with Auxilio above). Another important example of such "trans-narration" is the *fabula* of Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, which appears as one *syuzhet*-form in the final chapter of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, and then re-appears in another *syuzhet-form* in *Distant Star*, a novel published immediately after *Nazi Literature* in 1996. In *Distant Star*, which is narrated by "Arturo B.", the *fabula* which first appeared as the lexicon entry on Ramírez Hoffman, a poet-aviator-psychopath who uses smoke canisters and a WWII *Messerschmitt* to write poetry in the sky of Pinochet's Chile, is re-developed into a different *syuzhet* whose protagonist is named Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, a literary pseudonym for the aviator Carlos Wieder[101].

We should go back to Roland Barthes' narratology in order to begin making sense of this trans-narrative device beyond a mere game of literary emplotment. As we have pointed out above, the recurrence of the same characters as iterative functions across different narratives contributes to the appearance of a secondary narrative whole, an emergent simulacrum. Put in more technical, narratological terms: the characters, as structural units, are transformed from narrative *functions* of individual texts (i.e. "proper" characters within the narrative, driving it forward horizontally) to narrative *indices* of the emergent simulacrum (i.e. integrative, metonymical functions that vertically integrate semantic relations in the text(s), and as signifiers contribute to the appearance of the higher-order semantic construct of the narrative simulacrum).

[101] And whose performance art also has a real historical precedent in the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita's sky poetry written above New York City in 1982.

According to Barthes, “in order to understand what purpose an index [indice] or indicator serves, one must pass on to a higher level (actions of the character or narration), for only there can the ‘index’ be clarified.” (“Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” 247) Let us do precisely this, pass on to a higher narrative level, and try to clarify what is “indexed” by such interconnections and iterations between the texts.

The appearance of the higher-order narrative simulacrum with the help of trans-narrative integration devices has two important consequences: we can provisorily call them *formal-mimetic* and *epistemological*. By the formal-mimetic one we mean that trans-narrative integration apparent in Bolaño is nothing else but an attempt to establish a mimetic relationship between narrative form and historical conditions of capitalist globalization. Trans-narrative integration serves the purpose of re-organizing narrative into forms appropriate for mediation of globalized chronotopes and operative social totalities. This was already pointed out by Alexander Beecroft, who analyzed what he calls the narrative trope of *entrelecement* as an attempt to process in narrative form the historical experience of the global literary ecology. (cf. “Tropes”) In other words, Bolaño’s trans-narrative integration is a contemporary device of narrative *mimesis* and finds its historical referent (or equivalent) in the trans-national, globalized flows of capital and commodities. In other words, form “indexes” its own historical conditions: autonomy of individual narratives is dissolved in a manner analogous to the dissolution of national autonomy under a globalized regime of capital accumulation. This has many other consequences for narrative form, as can be seen from the fact that the central social imaginary significations that guide character interactions and structure the plots (such as “literature”, for instance) are unequivocally trans-national and global. But beyond mere reflection of its material conditions, the trans-narrative device also has its epistemological consequence.

As we have already established, another effect of trans-narrative integration, which is in Bolaño often achieved by narrative iteration and cross-referencing, is making visible the tension between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, or story and discourse. Trans-narrative integration thus not only serves as a form of *mimesis*, indexing the material conditions of its historical moment, but also indexes an important epistemological problem related to the dynamics of knowledge- or truth-production in that historical moment. We can demonstrate this – and the problematic relation between *fabula* and *syuzhet* – on the example of Auxilio Lacouture's two approaches to narration that we quoted above.

In *Amulet*, Auxilio is hesitant, distant, her rhetoric, i.e. the language of narration, is replete with conditionals and syntactic meanderings: "I could say", "It would be", "I better not", "Told by me, it won't seem […] Although in fact […]", etc. In the space of two short paragraphs, the number of conditionals is overwhelming. This could, on one level, be interpreted as a device of characterization: Auxilio's avoidance of apodictic judgements, her self-denial and cautiously conditional syntax, the benevolence and generosity connoted by the very signifier "Auxilio", as well as her use of diminutives ("Arturito"), can all be read as elements of the discourse of the mother – "the mother of Mexican poetry." They can also be read as the discourse of a trauma victim since Auxilio is, let us not forget, an illegal immigrant from Uruguay who finds herself trapped in a bathroom stall of Mexico City's *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* for two weeks, without food and alone, hiding as the army invades the university[102]. Moreover, she also mentions in the same opening paragraph that she was taught "with a lash and a rod of iron", or in other words, that she was tortured or subjected, to use the shameful contemporary US euphemism, to "enhanced interrogation techniques."

[102] The events recounted in the narrative occur in the period leading up to the infamous 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City in which the army opened fire on political protesters, killed hundreds, and wounded over a thousand more.

But focusing on Auxilio's discourse as a characterization device remains on the level of *Amulet* as an autonomous text. If we, however, pass on to the level of trans-narrative integration, we must notice the difference between Auxilio's discourse in *Amulet* and *The Savage Detectives* and treat it as a signifier. Although the difference is on the whole not radical, the opening of Auxilio's discourse in *The Savage Detectives* is, in comparison to *Amulet*, straightforward and direct, simulating the chronicler's or reporter's objectivity: "I am X. I know Y. I met Arturo Belano before." It would seem that, between the two, this is the one that strives for "objectivity", that announces itself as the discourse producing a form of knowledge/truth, whereas the one in *Amulet* is the vague, poetic one, aspiring to no claims of either objectivity or straightforward truthfulness. However, it is also in *Amulet* that Auxilio negates her discourse's "objectivity" implicitly, on the level of form (by conditionals, meandering syntax, and other elements of its rhetoric of distance) at the same time as she claims for herself that very objectivity by another, this time explicit, negation: "[I will not tell the story of Belano because] I was taught (they taught me with a lash and with a rod of iron) to spurn all superfluities and tell a straightforward story."

The logic of this double negation is at the heart of Bolaño's literary dialectic. When observed in comparison to Auxilio's "straightforward" discourse in *The Savage Detectives*, it achieves a crucial thing. Firstly, it problematizes, as Auxilio says, the "straightforwardness" of truth-construction, i.e. the idealist claim that truth has a single language and unchanging form. By doing that, it draws attention to the production of truth/knowledge as a historical process and an effect of historical forms of discourse. Secondly, it subverts the implicit truth claims of the earlier "straightforward" discourse by escaping the confines of the earlier context in *The Savage Detectives*, where Auxilio's discourse was just a subchapter.

This subversion has important consequences for the understanding of the literary dialectic in its historical context. If we abstract the difference between two discourses of Auxilio into

categories of "non-fiction" and "fiction", we should remember that these two categories also form the basic, commercial distinction that organizes commodities exhibited on the shelves of contemporary bookstores (at least in the Anglosphere). In other words, the binary opposition between "fiction" and "non-fiction" invoked by the difference in the opening of Auxilio's two discourses contains a rudimentary epistemology that is also the official epistemology of the global capitalist book market[103]. That particular distinction, speaking from our personal experience of bookstores in the post-socialist periphery, is vehemently historical. It was non-existent, for instance, in Dubravka Ugrešić's Yugoslavia before the "transition", but introduced (not uniformly and not everywhere) with the appearance of bookstore chains and in step with the thorough subsumption of the literary field under capital. One could speculate, having this in mind, whether the vulgar epistemology based on the binary opposition between fiction and non-fiction might be an integral feature of the literary commodity. But even if we leave this only as a speculation, what is certain is that this regulating distinction is an import from the core, an effect of the asymmetries of the world-system.

But let us go back to Auxilio. When given the opportunity to recount a story where she herself is the protagonist, Auxilio informs us she will do so in a straightforward manner: and then proceeds by producing a rhetoric that does exactly the opposite. We should not, however, conclude from this that Auxilio is lying. Instead, she uses precisely the rhetoric of conditionality, conditionality emerging from difficult, even horrific, historical experience, as the device of truth-production. She thereby re-writes and in a way renounces her earlier simpler chronicle in *The Savage Detectives*, and by extension the simple-minded, "objective" language of the non-fiction

[103] Amazon, for instance, has the odd category "Literature and Fiction", which nevertheless aligns the literary strictly with the fictional, as opposed to the historical, non-fictional. This odd category is also used in Amazon's German iteration: "Literatur und Fiktion".

bookstore shelf, the police report, or the "objective" newspaper. In this context, and in Bolaño 's work in general, this procedure is no simplistic privileging of fiction over non-fiction, a relativist conception of truth under which "anything goes", and that ends up in the *schlechte Unendlichkeit* of radically relativist epistemology. For we must remember that Auxilio's language is also a language of historical praxis: her ability to tell a "straightforward story", i.e. to produce a viable truth-form, a truth-form with a materialist grounding and validity derived from experience, was taught to her "with a lash and with a rod of iron." Her language, the narrative form she makes historical experience visible in, is materially grounded in really existing history, or as she herself puts it: in "horror." Therefore, the "fictionality" of Auxilio's discourse in *Amulet*, or the semantic excess produced by her rhetoric of distance, folds back onto its own historical experience in a dialectical reversal, sublates the binary opposition between the categories of fiction and non-fiction, the uneasy distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, form and content, and as such becomes a crucial narrative device in the production of literature not as fiction, but as truth, as a form of history itself.

Literature thus emerges from Bolaño's simulacrum not as idealist, romanticized "imagination" – privileged, as a formalist game, at the expense of "reality" – but as inextricably, dialectically bound with historical reality: without one, the other also does not, cannot appear for us. In other words, literature is simply a name for the form of discourse and a set of procedures in which a specific configuration of historical experience can be made to appear visible (as truth). As such, it is not fictional, but – to use the words applied by Bolaño himself in his description of Borges – "Like all men, like all living things on earth, […] inexhaustible." ("Borges and Paracelsus")

4.4 Narrative Hyperbole: What is *Nazi Literature?*

Having this in mind, we will disagree here with those readings that, as Gavin Arnall points out, "typically read [Bolaño] as a chronicler not of the inexhaustible but of the total exhaustion of modernity's categories and promises, including the exhaustion of literature itself as a practice external to, rather than complicit with, everyday horror and violence", or on the other hand, which understand him as a "melancholic leftist." (238-239) Instead, we want to emphasize the Bolaño of inexhaustible historical possibility, the post-socialist Bolaño, Bolaño of Utopia.

In order to develop this understanding further, it is important to emphasize another literary device universally present in his work. The particular details and narrative devices we selected and analyzed so far cannot be understood within Bolaño's emergent simulacrum without being supplemented by what we call "metafictional hyperbole." By that term, we do not simply mean that everything in his narratives is overblown, exaggerated, or overly dramatic. We also do not mean to tie the hyperbole firmly to a specific "mode", such as the comic, or the tragic, etc. One should remember that the historical uses of hyperbole as a literary trope vary across genres: from love poetry, to comedic drama, to heroic sagas. From a purely formal perspective, hyperbole is semantically empty, it is not constitutively affiliated with any particular content, or affective register. To put it in Caroline Levine's formalist terms: its affordance is broad.

This particular flexibility of the trope serves Bolaño well, as he deploys hyperbole for different purposes across his narratives. For instance, the generic qualification of *Amulet* as a "horror story" in the very first sentence of the novel can be understood as hyperbolic (despite the historically horrific events that the term refers to by association or the novel recounts directly). The same could be said – from the standpoint of a creative writing textbook that would insist on minimum redundancy in narrative development – "The Part about the Crimes" in *2666* where the reader is faced with about three hundred pages of iteration and variation of grisly murder

descriptions. On the other hand, a good example of hyperbole used for absurdist comic effect is the gradual appearance of Cesárea Tinajero, the avant-garde poet and the founder of "visceral realism", whom the detective-poets of *The Savage Detectives* try to locate in the first and third parts of the novel. As they travel from municipality to municipality in Sonora, they find historical traces of Tinajero and meet people who used to know her. Tinajero's physical appearance can be gleaned from those traces and memories as gradually changing, or more precisely, as gradually growing in size throughout the years of her life: first she is described in a newspaper article they find as "tall, attractive, and reserved"; then she is remembered by a former friend and colleague: "now she was fat, hugely fat. […] Her neck had disappeared behind a giant's double chin, but her head was still Cesárea Tinajero's noble head […]" When the four literary detectives – Arturo Belano, Ulises Lima, Lupe, and the narrator Juan García Madero – finally find her, Tinajero is not simply hugely fat as before, but positively elephantine, a black hole whose gravitational pull draws them towards itself:

> Seen from behind, leaning over the trough, there was nothing poetic about her. She looked like a rock or an elephant. Her rear end was enormous and it moved to the rhythm set by her arms, two oak trunks, as she rinsed the clothes and wrung them out. Her hair was long, it fell all the way to her waist. […] Cesárea's eyes were black and they seemed to absorb all the sun in the yard. (*The Savage Detectives*)

But the emphasis we want to make is not on individual uses of hyperbole as a trope, but on "metafictional hyperbole" as a structural element, or narrative device. More concretely: what we mean by that term is that it is impossible to avoid noticing that Bolaño's simulacrum is constructed

on the basis of an obsessive emphasis on the field (sphere/social institution/etc.) of literature. As we have pointed out, the "savage detectives" mentioned above are bohemian poets-provocateurs, members of a dynamic 1970s literary movement or sect, and most of the myriad other characters in that novel also write or have literary aspirations. Auxilio Lacouture is the "mother of Mexican poetry", the recurring protagonist/character/narrator Belano is always a poet, Benno von Archimboldi in *2666* is a German writer, while Pelletier and Espinoza, the duo that tries to find him, are literary scholars, the variously named Carlos Wieder/Ramírez Hoffman/Emilio Stevens/Juan Sauer is a pilot and fascist psychopath but also a poet, etc.[104] "The literary" is everywhere in Bolaño's narrative world, implicated in everything from institutions of the state, to instances of sadistic murder, to underworlds of youthful bohemia, to experiences of pseudo-religious revelation. In the era of the absolute dominance of *image*, such emphasis on the centrality of the *word* certainly seems hyperbolic, and it would not be unjustified to try to read it as an elaborate joke, a satirical take on the *word*'s marginality in comparison to *image*. Here is a detail from *Nazi Literature in the Americas* suggestive of that theme. When the detective Abel Romero meets the narrator, named Bolaño, in an attempt to find Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, he brings with him video material that might help with the investigation:

> Four days later he turned up with a television and a VCR. These are for you, he said.
> I don't watch television, I said. And it shows, said Romero. I don't mean that as an insult, he said immediately, I've always respected priests and writers who own nothing. You can't have known many, I said. You're the first. (218)

[104] Even some of the narratives that do not involve literary figures, such as the novel *The Third Reich*, have at their center a formalist obsession analogous to the literary obsessions of the above characters (a grand strategy wargame based on WWII in this case).

The reading of metafictional hyperbole as satirical would, however, be a reductive and unsatisfactory reading. Especially having in mind the fact that the particular uses of hyperbole as a trope in the narratives cannot be pinned down to a single, or even a dominant register: hyperbole appears, as we mentioned above, in various guises, from horror to comedy, and on all levels of narration[105]. This universal applicability and discursive presence of hyperbole as a trope is important: it has no privileged semantic effect, it can be used both in horror stories and in comedies, the literary fascists and the literary liberals are as hyperbolized as the literary communists in Bolaño, the trope is used across different narrative contexts unpredictably. The consequence of this is that the metafictional hyperbolization of "literature" that emerges from Bolaño's narrative simulacrum seems then to emerge in the form of the meaningless formula "literature is everything." In other words, by way of this universal mediation through metafictional hyperbole, literature seems to appear as an "abstract universal", indifferently subsuming all content of the narrative simulacrum under a single identity. A universality, to paraphrase Adorno, "which has emancipated itself from the meanings it subsumes."[106] (*Zur Lehre* 67) In other words, it seems from this perspective that it could be justified to read the metafictional hyperbole in Bolaño – the representation of literature as a universal and instrumentally important historical presence – as

[105] For instance, the example of Cesárea Tinajero is a good example of hyperbole appearing as a comic trope on the level of single narrative units, or indices, and the narrative structure of *Nazi Literature in the Americas* is based on an extended, metafictional hyperbole.

[106] Charlotte Baumann points out that in his criticism of abstract universality, Adorno goes further than Hegel "as he regards not only the price mechanism, but also history and state institutions, as abstract universals: since technology is developed for profit, not to improve the lives of individuals, progress and history are 'a universality which has emancipated itself from the individuals it subsumes'. Institutions are 'external to the subject, heteronymous', social reality is 'alien and reified over against the subject'." (78) The fragments she quotes from Adorno can be found in *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit* (67), *Ontologie und Dialektik* (331) and *Volesung über die Negative Dialektik* (29). The original quote we are paraphrasing here is as follows: "Aber - und das ist das Problem; ich maße mir nicht an, das Problem Ihnen zu lösen, aber ich möchte Sie wenigstens auf dieses Problem hinweisen, das mir außerordentlich schwer und ernst erscheint - dadurch, daß nun die sich selbst erhaltende Vernunft zu der Selbsterhaltung der Gattung Mensch gemacht wird, besteht eine immanente Tendenz, daß diese Allgemeinheit von den unter ihr befaßten Individuen sich emanzipiert, wie schon Kant in der ‚Rechtsphilosophie' ja gesagt hat, daß die allgemeine Freiheit aller soweit einer Einschränkung bedürfe, wie es die Freiheit eines jeden Einzelnen von einem jeden Einzelnen erfordere." (67)

literature's idealist apotheosis. This interpretation cannot hold, however, even superficially, when faced either with Bolaño's acerbic polemicism against abstract universality embodied in some institutions of the literary field (specific canons, state artists, socio-literary identities, etc.), or against his materialism and the dialectical insistence on historical praxis that we analyzed above as a structural characteristic of his literary discourse[107].

Instead, we should understand the metafictional hyperbole in Bolaño as referring to and helping to produce within the narrative simulacrum the category "literature" as a concrete universality. To elaborate the meaning and importance of the latter concept, we can quote Charlotte Baumann in her discussion of Adorno and Hegel:

> The problem a concrete universal responds to is how to unite many distinct entities without denying their difference. In an abstract universal, particulars appear to be nothing but examples of a universal concept. A concrete universal, on the contrary, is, as Hegel says, the 'unity of distinct determinations', the universal's 'determination is ... the principle of its differences' (78)

The determination of concrete universal as "the principle of its differences" is crucial to notice here as the conception of literature as history that emerges from Bolaño's work hinges on it. That conception is developed in his work in the following manner: firstly, the hyperbolization of literature's historical presence in a historical context in which literature is not the dominant

[107] Presumably, the political criticism of Bolaño as collapsing the difference between left and right in his literary treatment of the political might come about from a misapprehension of metafictional hyperbole as "abstract universal."

medium (and seems to have outlived the social need for all of its unique historical roles, like nation-building for instance) indexes the presence of history, invokes history as a medium of literature's being. Put differently, the hyperbole is a device of defamiliarization: we become aware of literature's marginal historical position by way of contrast with Bolaño's overblown representation. This indexing of history occurs simultaneously with the establishment of literature as a universal category (as we have pointed out, literature is everywhere in the narrative simulacrum, and all characters either write it or relate to it in some way). This means then that the purpose of the self-referential device, the metafictional hyperbole, is not isolating the narratives from history and secluding them in a sphere of pure form, but exactly the opposite. Metafictional hyperbole in Bolaño's narratives draws attention to their very historicity. We can see in this process another dialectical *Aufhebung*: the metafictional device makes history appear precisely by negating it (it negates history – and every referent outside itself – since it is self-referential). The appearance of history is then immediately sutured to the universal "literature" and in turn negates the universal as abstract.

When literary discourse is structured in this way, it follows that the category "literature" produced by it cannot be an idealist (or, speaking ideologically, idealized) eternal abstraction, but that it represents the concrete, processual, historically-bound appearance (or better yet: re-appearance) of the literary in history, as history. For Bolaño, literature cannot appear outside of historical practice. To go back to Baumann's elaboration of Hegel above, Bolaño's category "literature" is determined differentially, in a relational unity with history, it is a concrete universal. It is not and cannot exist as abstract, unchanging or "true", literature – subsuming all its particulars and separating itself against and above them. Literature is no more and no less than its myriad concrete related historical emanations.

This can be shown quite clearly on the example of the most explicitly metafictional of Bolaño's works, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, formally organized as a literary-historical lexicon providing in each chapter, or encyclopedic entry, a biographical and bibliographical account of a writer of "Nazi literature in the Americas." It is absolutely crucial to notice and understand correctly the determination "Nazi literature" which appears as a signifier here. To understand it correctly, we must take it for granted, i.e. understand it as an autonomous concept. Nazi literature is not "literature written by Nazis" but precisely "Nazi literature." In other words, it is literature *precisely because* it is Nazi, and not *in spite of* it. Nazi literature is the discursive form that felicitously expresses, within the boundaries and procedures of literary discourse, the historical visions and affective terrains of Nazism. This conception demystifies literature, it removes from it every hint of sentimentality and idealist mystification that would postulate literature as structurally incapable of being fascist. An idealist would say: if it is fascistic, then it is not literature. Roberto Bolaño says simply: fascistic literature.

In the book itself, there are two crucial moments when this issue is addressed in important ways. At one point, when the detective Abel Romero, who is in search of the "infamous" Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, meets the narrator Bolaño and asks for his help in locating the mass murderer responsible for numerous sadistic killings during Pinochet's regime, Bolaño seems to flinch and distance himself from the above idea of the possibility of literary complicity with fascism:

> How can I help you, I asked him. By advising me on poetic matters, he said. This was his reasoning: Ramírez Hoffman was a poet, I was a poet, he was not. To find a poet, he needed the help of another poet. I told him that in my opinion Ramírez Hoffman was a criminal, not a poet. (218)

This is precisely the humanist, idealist logic that we described above, and it is meant to save the face, the imaginary innocence, of literature in history (although, by that very operation of isolating it from history, literature is inadvertently doomed to irrelevance). Abel Romero, however, immediately points Bolaño back in the right direction: "All right, all right, maybe in Ramírez Hoffman's opinion, or anyone else's for that matter, *you're* not a poet, or a bad one, and he's the real thing. It all depends, don't you think?"

And after that, Bolaño's moment of idealist weakness passes: "How much are you going to pay me? I asked. That's the way, he said, straight to the point. Quite a bit: my client isn't short of money. We became friends. The next day he came to my apartment with a suitcase full of literary magazines."

It might seem, however, that Bolaño's original idealist disavowal of literature as history is then replaced by a banal and cynical understanding. The narrator's pliability when an opportunity to earn some money presents itself, suggests a heteronomous understanding of literature as an instrument of commerce, an abolishment of literature in exchange value. But this would be another idealization, a negative one. And as such, it is implicitly but systematically refuted in the narrative as it is not the narrator Bolaño – who does not even have a television set, who renounces spectacle and makes a pledge to the word, not image – who wants to abolish literature. It is, in fact, the Nazi literati who do that repeatedly, who relate in a hostile manner to the literature they are trying to write, or who dream of a total performance that would make its mediations unnecessary. From the wretched Haitian social climber and plagiarist Max Mirebalais, who observes how he can achieve social status either through violence, for which he is too timid, or through literature "which is a surreptitious form of violence" (138), and who makes his final bid to fame through musical performance, to Ramírez Hoffman, the Ur-fascist himself, who forges a different kind of performance by merging the literary with the militaristic, writing in the sky Latin verses from the

Holy Scripture and metaphors of death that immediately dissipate in the wind, and who theorizes the "barbaric writing" that his petty bourgeois followers[108] then put into practice:

> The ex-concierge began his career in May 1968. While the students were building barricades, he shut himself in his cubicle-like caretaker's apartment and devoted himself to masturbating onto books by Victor Hugo and Balzac, urinating onto Stendhal novels, smearing shit over pages of Chateaubriand, cutting various parts of his body and spattering the blood over handsome editions of Flaubert, Lamartine or Musset. (219)

What these and other analogous attempts by Nazi writers suggest is a pervasive fascist unease with literature. The fascists strive to deface and to abolish it, to dissolve its historicity into the total present of the performance[109]. Or in other words, to subsume it under the abstract and false universal of the fascist order. The question remains as to why they are driven to do this. Why do

[108] The class determination is quite explicit in this place in the book: "The group of 'barbaric writers' was made up of sales assistants, butchers, security guards, locksmiths, lowly bureaucrats, nursing aides and movie extras." (219)

[109] We can find further confirmation for this interpretation in the Chilean theorist Willy Thayer. Thayer theorized the emergence of performance art that tried to oppose the Pinochet regime in Chile as being fatally misguided: by opposing it in this particular form, Thayer claims, the performance artists did nothing but re-establish the performative logic of the fascist regime itself. In her book *Witnessing Beyond the Human*. *Addressing the Alterity of the Other in Post-coup Chile and Argentina*, Kate Jenckes relates Thayer to Bolaño: "Throughout his work, Bolaño repeatedly stages literature and art as demonic reflections of repressive structures or pathetic undertakings that lead nowhere. He is particularly disparaging of aesthetic practices that aspire to be modernist or avant-garde, which, like Baudelaire's voyage, seek to depart from the old in search of the New. He depicts not only their impotence vis-à-vis the evils of modernity, but also their complicity with them. In what has become a fairly celebrated debate on the nature of aesthetic production both in and beyond Chile, Willy Thayer echoes such a condemnation (albeit with no acknowledgment of Bolaño) in his critique of Nelly Richard's account of the Chilean neo-avant-garde. Thayer rejects Richard's assessment that the Chilean neo-avant-garde, active during the first decade of the Pinochet dictatorship performed a disruption or insubordination of repressive discourse, since in his view the military regime executed a rupture that effectively absorbed or deflected any other form of rupture: he provocatively calls the coup the avant-garde event par excellence. He makes this argument in relation to another primary facet of modernity, as well, characterizing contemporary capitalism as the 'rupture of all normality,' a condition of rupture in which an aesthetics based on disruption is ineffectual or, worse, becomes absorbed into its logic." (*Witnessing*)

fascists want to transcend literature? The answer lies precisely in the fact that literature itself cannot transcend politics. Therein, counter-intuitively, lies its strength. "Nazi literature", as we have said, makes the historical truth, the "deep structure" of fascism appear. That truth is pure horror, and as such it has to remain hidden, it has to be disavowed. The desire to transcend literature, which is a discourse that can make this degenerate horror appear and be felt, is therefore nothing but an attempt to hide it.

There is an interesting early episode in *Nazi Literature* in which this logic is problematized in a seemingly ambiguous way. In that episode, one of the luminaries of Nazi literature, Luz Mendiluce Thompson, falls madly in love with a Trotskyite poet Claudia Saldaña but is turned down:

> 'We are mortal enemies,' said Claudia sadly. This affirmation seemed to interest Luz. […] Why? Because I'm a Trotskyite and you're a Fascist shit, said Claudia. Luz ignored the insult and laughed. And there's no way around that? she asked, desperately lovesick. No, there's not, said Claudia. (29)

It would seem that Claudia understands the claims we have made above and therefore is compelled to reject Luz. But Luz insists, and Claudia's understanding is revealed as faulty: "What about poetry? asked Luz. Poetry is pretty irrelevant these days, with what's going on in Argentina. Maybe you're right, Luz admitted, on the verge of tears, but maybe you're wrong." The relativization introduced in the last sentence seems to suggest that we cannot know (whether poetry can transcend irreconcilable ideological differences), that it might be this way or that. In other words, it seems to suggest that the claim we made above – that literature, for Bolaño, is "relevant" precisely because it is historical, precisely because it cannot ultimately transcend politics – depends

on pragmatics, on the particular stand that one decides to take at a given moment. But this is, if we are careful in reading the text, explicitly negated: Claudia might be right in claiming that their differences cannot be reconciled in poetry, but she is right for the wrong reasons. She mistakenly claims, establishing the binary opposition between history and literature, that the differences cannot be reconciled because there are currently more important things, political things, going on, things which require urgent attention and make poetry irrelevant. It is certainly true that there might be more important things, but Claudia's reasoning misses the point because, let us repeat our claim, it is precisely in poetry that these differences will appear more visible. And it is easy to see from the text why Claudia makes this wrong assumption: she is explicitly described to be a bad, untalented poet. As such, she does not understand literature, does not understand that it is dangerous, as Bolaño has repeatedly claimed. (cf. "Caracas Address") The danger lies, among other things, in the fact that it is a discourse that formalizes truth in history, that can pull ugly, disavowed historical secrets into light and display them precisely in their authentic ugliness. In other words, as a concrete universal, it is able to encompass those secrets and establish relations between them without imposing an abstraction over them, without blurring their hideous particularity.

From this perspective, we can supplement Walter Benjamin's famous observation that fascism is the aesthetization of politics, or more precisely "introduction of aesthetics into political life." ("The Work of Art" 241) Fascism is driven to aestheticize its politics not purely because it relies on the logic of spectacle to mobilize masses, but because it needs to defuse the truth-making property of aesthetics. Fascist politics is a grand instrument of subsumption of aesthetics and other truth-making procedures under the abstract universality, the false promise, of eternal order.

We would not be going too far here – and would certainly not be the first to do it – if we characterized the totality engulfing and regulating the world today as affiliated with the fascistic. Adorno himself, as we pointed out both at the beginning of this study and in this chapter, was

making the same claim about "total order" of the immanently expansive logic of the commodity-form as early as the 1940s. The "eternal order" of the End of History, and the logic of pre-corporation of cultural forms by capitalist realism appear from this perspective as attempts to defuse the potential of discourses such as literature to produce uncontainable semantic excess, to produce what we called Utopian objects and place them in a formal arrangement in which they become historically intelligible and evocative. Pre-corporation of cultural forms, its integration into the order – the "perpetual present" – of the commodity-form is thus nothing else but an attempt to divorce culture from history in order to render history invisible.

In this sense, Bolaño's work appears as a paradigmatic example of what we called the poetics of Utopian objects, a felicitous re-introduction of history, of Utopian defamiliarization, into that "eternal order." His achievement is in finding a literary procedure to re-historicize literature, to re-invent literature as a discourse of historical defamiliarization and historical possibility, a discourse in which the truth of the post-socialist condition can be made visible in relation to the possibility of its transcendence, dialectically, and not simply by way of mere reflection as we have seen is the case in the narratives such as *The Road* or *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

4.5 On the Side of Militancy: *Romantic Dogs, Savage Detectives,* Cervantes

Above we have tried to point out several narrative techniques or discursive procedures by which this "dialectical vision" is achieved. But the most interesting such technique can be found at the level of narrative structure across a range of Bolaño's texts, the novel *The Savage Detectives* perhaps most notable among them. In what follows we will mostly try to discuss *The Savage Detectives* by not talking about it directly, reaching it only at the end, after we pass through a number of other texts, or even fragments of discourse, which share with that novel a peculiarly simple, and a peculiarly important formal characteristic.

The materialist dialectical logic of negation of a negation that is inscribed in Bolaño's discourse can perhaps also be said to operate in the facts of his historical life. Finding himself in Chile in 1973, and witnessing the infamous military coup which deposed of the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende, made Bolaño and other Chileans experience a kind of post-socialism *avant la lettre*. The story of Chilean post-socialism is gruesome, but it is also a globally important one: post-socialist Chile, Chile under Pinochet's dictatorship, served as a laboratory for political-economic forms that took at least a decade or two more to become officially established across the globe[110]. Margaret Thatcher herself, who nurtured warm relations with Pinochet and was his staunch supporter, pointed out this chronology of uneven post-socialist development in an outraged (and outrageous) speech on the occasion of Pinochet's arrest in the UK in 1999, which she interpreted scornfully as leftist *revanchisme*: "the left lost the Cold War in Chile, as they lost it everywhere else." ("Speech on Pinochet")

The dawn of global post-socialism found the already post-socialist Bolaño, who was imprisoned in Chile for a short while under the dictatorship and released by pure luck, in Spain. His literary work is saturated with the experience of the very loss that Thatcher gloats over. But the importance of that work, as we have pointed out, does not lie in the fact that it simply reflects the logic of the post-socialist social imaginary closure, or revels in masochistic enjoyment of processing post-socialist affect, as is the case in the examples of Ugrešić and McCarthy. Bolaño's work is interesting to us here because it goes beyond merely indexing the closure and tries to

[110] For the history of the "Chicago Boys", a group of neoliberal economists from the University of Chicago who served in high government positions in Chile during the dictatorship, see Harvey *Brief History of Neoliberalism*. For an overview of alternative "transnational networks", from Yugoslavia to Peru, that does not assume an easy global victory of neoliberalism and focuses on the field of historical possibility written out of history (precisely the same field that Buden bases his criticism of "transitology" on), see Johanna Bockman's article "Democratic Socialism in Chile and Peru: Revisiting the 'Chicago Boys' as Origin of Neoliberalism."

establish figures of thought and find forms of narration that make historical possibility thinkable or representable after history has been proclaimed dead.

The novel *The Savage Detectives* is a paradigmatic example of such work and the point that we want to make about it is a relatively simple one. We claim that the peculiar formal organization of the narrative provides an elegant formal solution to the narrative problem of representing historical possibility. That solution makes possible the insertion of Utopian objects as integral elements of the narrative without disavowing the historical experience of (socialist) failure. In other words, Bolaño's work does not simply claim Utopia for itself in a kind of idealist blindness, really existing history be damned. Nor does this work indulge in nostalgic retrophilia, it does not try to resuscitate abandoned modes of representing Utopian possibility in order to safely enjoy them. Instead, it dialectically passes through the experience of historical failure of socialist emancipatory dreams and integrates this experience into a modernized discourse of historical possibility, thus providing a possible way out of the problem of the loss of historicity in contemporary culture.

In order to elaborate how this is accomplished on the level of narrative form, let us begin by returning to the point about Bolaño's US and global reception that we started with. Both Horacio Castellanos Moya in his essay and Sarah Pollack in her academic article notice how the branding of Bolaño as a new Latin American literary star has depended on emphasizing his bohemian, itinerant youth and tried to emphasize the autobiographical element in his novels. An especially interesting signifier of this is a rare 1970s photograph of Bolaño, appearing in the first US edition of *The Savage Detectives*, which shows him as one of the savage detectives himself: very young, long-haired, wearing a denim work shirt, signs of combined and uneven development – dilapidating modernist urbanity co-existing with what seems to be new high-rises in mid-construction – in the background. This autobiographical treatment emphasizes what it sees as excesses and idealistic foolishness of 1970s youth from the periphery represented in the novel, and tries to find evidence

for this interpretation in the image of the novelist constructed by marketing campaigns attending his translation in the core. These lifestyle myths depict Bolaño as a bohemian tight-rope walker: romanticized drug-addict and a bum (in the US, the literary precedent for this image are the beats). Castellanos Moya, who was Bolaño's friend and is himself a political exile from Honduras, is irritated by such treatment and tries in his essay to recuperate Bolaño and clear his image:

> No North American journalist highlighted the fact, Sarah Pollack warns, that *The Savage Detectives* and the greater part of Bolaño's prose work "were written as a sober family man" during the last ten years of his life—and an excellent father, I'd add, whose major preoccupation was his children, and that if he took a lover at the end of his life, he did it in the most conservative Latin American style, without threatening the preservation of his family. ("Bolaño Inc.")

Castellanos Moya's essay raised important questions, but what it did not seem to be entirely aware of is that the media image of his friend that he objects to cannot simply be corrected by pointing out falsities and replacing them with facts because it is an effect of a systematic ideological operation. Even if the author's image were to be corrected and autobiography de-emphasized in discussions of Bolaño's work, the very same ideological operation would still be at work as an integral element of the hermeneutic matrix through which his work, *The Savage Detectives* especially, is received as disillusioned, mature processing of youthful mistakes.

There is a precise concept that captures very well the logic of this ideological operation. It was developed by Boris Buden in his critiques of the ideology of the post-socialist transition in the former Eastern bloc. The term for the concept is "repressive infantilization" and Buden calls it "the key feature of the so-called postcommunist condition." What he means by that is that the

ideological language of "transitology", the ideology of the transition, depends on a "curious set of metaphors[111]" that imagine post-socialism as a re-birth that marks the beginning of the transition to political and historical maturity (understood as the social institution of Fukuyaman "liberal democracy"). Buden, however, notices in this a contradiction which he calls "the greatest scandal of recent history." In other words, "those who proved their political maturity in the so-called 'democratic revolutions' of 1989–90 have become thereafter, overnight, children!" ("Children of Postcommunism")

However, the ideological operation of repressive infantilization is not limited to the language of "Eastern transitology." As we have pointed out elsewhere (cf. Tutek "Literary Narration" 256-257), the same language is deployed in the periphery and in the core of the world-system, whenever the need arises to discipline those that challenge the frameworks of ruling ideologies and question the limits of the capitalist realist closure.

The same procedure of repressive infantilization we can see at work in the interpretations of Bolaño's work that read his narratives as either nostalgic, as paeans to lost energies of a generation, or even worse, as disillusioned, mature reckonings with fantasies of youth. It could be claimed, looking at how Bolaño himself often talked about his work, that such an interpretation is justified. In his "Caracas Address", the speech he gave on the occasion of receiving the *Rómulo Gallegos* literary prize, he says the following:

> […] everything that I've written is a love letter or a farewell letter to my own generation, those of us who were born in the 1950s and who at a certain moment chose

[111] Some of these metaphors are: "education for democracy, classrooms of democracy, democratic exams, democracy that is growing and maturing, but which might still be in diapers or making its first steps or, of course, suffering from children's illnesses." (Buden "Children of postcommunism")

> military service, though in this case it would be more accurate to say militancy, and we gave the little we had – the great deal that we had, which was our youth – to a cause that we thought was the most generous cause in the world and in a certain way it was, but in reality it wasn't. ("Caracas Address")

Sarah Pollack, in the article we mentioned, goes further than this self-reference and tries to argue that a justification for reading Bolaño as a writer of mature – or in other words, post-socialist – disillusionment can be found in the text of *The Savage Detectives*: "although this most recent darling of the publishing industry ostensibly realigns the coordinates of the Latin American novel, it also foments a (pre) conception of alterity that satisfies the fantasies and collective imagination of U.S. cultural consumers." (347) Pollack is very careful in her "reading of a reading" to historically contextualize such fantasies and to detect in the interpretations based on them a "certain generational and cultural paternalism." (361) She also points out that such readings are anticipated and processed by Bolaño himself on the thematic level:

> Unwittingly – or perhaps with provocative deliberation – *The Savage Detectives* plays on a series of opposing characteristics that the United States has historically employed in defining itself vis-à-vis its neighbors to the south: hardworking vs. lazy, mature vs. adolescent, responsible vs. reckless, upstanding vs. delinquent. In a nutshell, Sarmiento's dichotomy, as old as Latin America itself: civilization vs. barbarism. Regarded from this standpoint, *The Savage Detectives* is a comfortable choice for U.S. readers, offering both the pleasures of the savage and the superiority of the civilized. (362)

Despite this awareness/provocation written into the novel, Pollack's ultimate point is that it nevertheless offers stereotypical representations of "savagery", which are then comfortingly tempered by the mature distance of "civilization." She thus suggests that the novel is, to a significant degree, complicit with the paternalistic, imperialist conceptions of its readers in the core. This, we believe, is a mistake that emerges from insufficient attention given to the structural logic of the narrative, an omission to observe the formal arrangement of the novel as itself an autonomous signifier, and a signifier of a higher order, a framing device for all the isolated episodes that function as the novel's "content." On that higher level, the paternalistic interpretations of *The Savage Detectives* as a novel of youthful delusion – a paternalism which is an instrument in the service of repressive infantilization and "Western transitology" – are unambiguously resisted, and the fantasies and simplistic readings that Pollack carefully contextualizes and criticizes are revealed not simply as reductive ideological projections, which they are, but as unambiguously wrong.

Let us go back to Bolaño's "Caracas Address." Even in that text, where he seems to be most explicit about the disillusionment that followed the waves of de-colonial, revolutionary and Utopian activity in Latin America, just before he will call the entirety of his work "a love letter or a farewell letter" to his generation, he makes the following reference to Cervantes:

> I'm reminded of the passage from *Don Quixote* in which the relative merits of military service and poetry are argued, and I guess the real argument is about the degree of danger, which is also an argument about the intrinsic value of each pursuit. And Cervantes, who was a soldier, makes military service win out, makes the task of the soldier triumph over the honorable work of being a poet, and if we read the passage carefully […] we get a strong whiff of melancholy, because Cervantes makes his own

youth, the ghost of his lost youth, triumph over the reality of his labors in prose and poetry, so thankless thus far. (“Caracas Address”)

After that, he refers to his own work in the section that we quoted first, and from which it would be possible to extract an interpretation that Bolaño prioritizes mature disillusionment over youthful Utopianism, favors a retreat from the storm of history into the greenhouse of literature. But, to refer for a moment to Cormac McCarthy, Bolaño rides on:

> All of Latin America is sown with the bones of these forgotten youths. And that’s what moves Cervantes to choose military service over poetry. His companions were dead too. Or old and forgotten, poor and weary. To choose was to choose youth and to choose the defeated and to choose those who were stripped of everything. And that’s what Cervantes does, he chooses youth. And even in this melancholy weakness, in this sense of loss, Cervantes is clear-sighted, because he realizes that writers don’t need anyone to sing the praises of their work. We sing its praises ourselves. […] Cervantes, who wasn’t dyslexic but who lost an arm in the service, knew perfectly well what he was talking about. Literature is a dangerous game. […] Let me be clear: like Cervantes’s veterans of Lepanto and like the veterans of the ceremonial wars of Latin America, all I have is my honor. I read this and I can’t believe it. Me talking about honor. […] (ibid.)

It is crucial to notice the dialectical movement of this excursus, which is only superficially about youth and maturity, and is truly about literature and history: Cervantes – mature disillusionment – Cervantes again. Or, since Cervantes “chooses military service over poetry”, in

the same way that the Utopians of the Latin American and global anti-systemic movements in the latter part of the 20th century chose what Bolaño calls "militancy", we can also use other terms to formalize that dialectical movement. For instance: militancy – cynical detachment – militancy. Or, the final, literary scheme: Utopian projection – realistic reflection – Utopian projection. The "realistic reflection" is, in other words, couched in this discourse between two Utopian musings. But we should be careful, because the structure of the discourse is not circular, and there are more than two elements in it. It is not simply that the element we described as "realistic reflection" is opposed to the one of "Utopian projection" and then the latter is chosen over the former. The movement is dialectical: Utopian projection passes through realistic reflection in a specific manner, and then emerges from this passage transformed. So the final, and correct formula of the above discourse is actually: Utopian projection – realistic reflection – Utopian realism. Utopian realism signifies the change that the Utopian projection undergoes when it is sutured to the historical experience of its failure. It is also important to point out that this formula does not represent a succession of stages, a simplistic (and incorrect) linear conception of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The formula emerges only when the discourse is observed as a totality. This is perhaps easier to demonstrate on a textual form – poetry – that by its very logic, as Roman Jakobson famously theorized, prioritizes the non-linear, paradigmatic relations between its elements over the syntagmatic, linear ones. (cf. "Linguistics and Poetics")

We also wish to point out here that this structure is reiterated and formally embodied across Bolaño's work and related to other dialectical movements of his discourse that we identified. It can be seen quite clearly, for instance, in the poem *Los perros románticos/Romantic Dogs* which is no more and no less than a poetic reiteration of the above excursus from the "Caracas Address":

THE ROMANTIC DOGS

Back then, I'd reached the age of twenty
and I was crazy.
I'd lost a country
but won a dream.
As long as I had that dream
nothing else mattered.
Not working, not praying
not studying in morning light
alongside the romantic dogs.
And the dream lived in the void of my spirit.
A wooden bedroom,
cloaked in half-light,
deep in the lungs of the tropics.
And sometimes I'd retreat inside myself
and visit the dream: a statue eternalized
in liquid thoughts,
a white worm writhing
in love.
A runaway love.
A dream within another dream.
And the nightmare telling me: you will grow up.
You'll leave behind the images of pain and of the labyrinth and you'll forget.
But back then, growing up would have been a crime.
I'm here, I said, with the romantic dogs
and here I'm going to stay.

Without going into too much detail, let us elaborate the logic of the poem's development: the subject of the poem, who speaks from a position of realistic reflection, begins by a negation ("back then I was crazy"). Then the subject continues recollecting "the dream", which was itself a

negation (it made nothing else matter). The dream is Utopian and made up of contradictions: dynamic, intangible, impossible, "a statue eternalized in liquid thoughts", "a dream within another dream." Then "the nightmare" appears with a threat: "you will grow up", "you will forget." The nightmare speaks the language of repressive infantilization: stop dreaming, you child, disown the dream in order to reach the position of mature, realistic reflection. Maturity itself functions here as an abstract universality: it is superordinate and opposed to its particular content (youthful dreams, experiences, etc.) and as such it makes the particularity of youth disappear in a haze of mature disillusionment. But the poem refuses to simply grow up into abstract universality: instead of reiterating the realistic reflection's original negation ("I was crazy"), it follows in the footsteps of Cervantes. Like Cervantes, at the very end, it takes the side of militancy. But it takes that side only by first passing through the negation of mature realistic reflection that echoes throughout the poem (the poem as a whole is told by the voice of realistic reflection that recollects the experience of youth). Only by completing this passage can militancy then speak directly for itself, convincingly, in the projective language of Utopia: "I'm here, I said, with the romantic dogs/and here I'm going to stay."

If one was still tempted after this short elaboration to enter the paternalistic mode of reading we described above and to argue for an understanding of the text as a poem of "mature disillusionment" or nostalgic reminiscence, one should pay closer attention to those final two lines. In those lines, we get not only the reiteration of the Utopian, but the suturing of the past, present, and future economically expressed in quick grammatical succession of three different tenses. In other words, all the iterations of subjectivity that appear in the poem coexist at that final moment: the youthful I of the original Utopian projection ("I'm here"), the I of realistic reflection which tells the story ("I said"), and finally the synthetic I of the futuristic projection, which announces

itself as eternal ("I'm going to stay[112]"). The tension between the initial echoing negation of the "realistic I", and the announcement of infinity by a Utopian subject that no longer exists (since the poem is a recollection), again creates a dialectical fold from which a Utopian object – historical possibility, Utopian realism, reflexive militancy – emerges in the form of a concrete universality.

We can take here Slavoj Žižek's concise elaboration of the logic of Hegel's concrete universality in *The Ticklish Subject* to show how the poem embodies it. The only way for a universality to become concrete, Žižek points out, is to "stop being a neutral-abstract medium of its particular content, and to include itself among its particular subspecies." (92) This is precisely what happens in the poem: the I of realistic reflection, which includes the other I's in the poem since they are its recollection, also includes itself among its particular subspecies. This occurs at the very end of the poem since the very end of the poem – uttered in the past by the I of the original Utopian projection – makes a claim that encompasses the future in which the I of realistic reflection is located. In addition, Žižek says, the first paradoxical step towards concrete universality is "the radical negation of the entire particular content: only through such a negation does the Universal gain existence, become visible 'as such'." (ibid.) This radical negation of the entire particular content inaugurates the poem and echoes throughout: "I was crazy." Therefore, by the poem's end, through this dialectical movement, we reach the concrete universality of Utopian realism, the formalization of historical possibility at the End of History.

Finally, we find the same dialectical movement in the novel *The Savage Detectives*. This can be gleaned immediately from the novel's dynamic and peculiar structure. It is divided into three dated parts: "Mexicans Lost in Mexico (1975)", "The Savage Detectives (1976-1996)", and "The Sonora Desert (1976)." The first and the third parts are narrated in the form of diary entries by the

[112] This is the original, also containing a succession of three tenses: "Estoy aquí, dije, con los perros románticos/y aquí me voy a quedar." (*The Romantic Dogs*)

17-year old poet Juan García Madero and the narration is consistently chronological (the third part continues where the first one abruptly stopped). They recount, in the first part, García Madero's raucous experiences among the writers, intellectuals, and criminals of Mexico City after he is "cordially invited to join the visceral realists", although, he adds immediately after, producing an initial negation: "I'm not really sure what visceral realism is." (*The Savage Detectives*) The two central figures of resurrected visceral realism are Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, whom the youthful narrator meets at a literary workshop, and who do not feature as narrators in the novel. The literary movement itself was originally founded in the 1920s and, according to Belano, "vanished in the Sonora desert." After a series of romantic exploits, bouts of drinking, book stealing, poetry readings and mock-purges of the group, Lima, Belano, García Madero and Lupe, a prostitute who runs away from the pimp Arturo and is involved with García Madero, end up escaping Mexico City in a Chevrolet Impala and going to Sonora in search of Cesárea Tinajero, the mysterious founder of visceral realism. The third part continues the story and details their criss-crossing of the state of Sonora until they finally find Tinajero, but are then in turn found themselves by Arturo the pimp and his policeman friend in the middle of the desert. In an ensuing gun fight, Belano and Lima manage to kill Arturo and the policeman with the help of Cesárea Tinajero, who also dies in the fight. They then split up, Lupe and García Madero going one way, Belano and Lima the other.

The second part, on the other hand, which takes up almost three quarters of the entire text, is an arrangement of twenty-six chapters in which each chapter features several narrators, some of which appear multiple times, with the total number of narrators in that part being fifty-three and the number of separate "instances of narration" ninety-five. (Wood 122) Not to mention the fact that the fractured, episodic narrative spans two decades and a range of countries across Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. All the instances of narration, i.e. subchapters, focus on the

narrators' sporadic encounters with Lima and Belano in the twenty years after the events in the Sonora desert. Lima and Belano appear in these instances of narration from various perspectives, and are often nothing but excuses for the narrators to go on talking about their own lives. The order of the chapters in the second part is mostly chronological, with the obvious exception of subchapters narrated by the old poet Amadeo Salvatierra, whom Lima and Belano befriend and hold dear because his dedication to literature resembles their own and because he has known and remembers Cesárea Tinajero. His subchapters, narrated in 1976 in Mexico City, are also distinguished by the fact that they form a continuous narrative of a single event, a conversation/meeting between Salvatierra, Belano, and Lima in which Salvatierra shows them the only copy of Tinajero's magazine *Cabeza* in which they, for the first time, read her work (a "poem", i.e. a drawing of three different shapes/lines with a rectangle on each of them entitled, importantly, *Sión*). The other recurring narrators, as opposed to that, appear in different places at different times and do not recount the same narrative continuously. In addition, the telling of Salvatierra's narrative is distinguished by the fact that it is dated January 1976, the same time that the search for Cesárea Tinajero culminating in tragedy unfolds in the Sonora Desert, as recounted by García Madero in the third part.

Quite obviously, the structure of the novel is complex and dynamic. "Polyrhythmic", as Tahir Wood calls it, is a good approximation and a systematic narratological analysis of that structure could yield interesting results. But the complex structure is regulated and its elements integrated by the comparatively simple over-arching dialectics of form that we elaborated above. Dialectical movement, we emphasize again, is revealed only when narrative structure is observed as an integrated totality and its elements defined relationally. It is precisely the omission to do that, the separation and autonomization of elements of the novel's narrative structure, that leads Sarah

Pollack and other critics, as we have pointed out, to read *The Savage Detectives* as complicit with the interpretations that emphasize "the dynamics of disillusionment" as its main theme.

Such an interpretation depends on a prioritization of the second, by far the longest, part of the novel and its separation from the other two. The essentially conservative idea of idealistic, radical youth followed by sober maturity seems to find confirmation in the fact that the middle part of the novel represents Lima and Belano as leading a life of global wandering, aimless itinerancy, and unproductive disappointment. This judgement is certainly echoed throughout the text itself. One of the narrators, the rich, pretentious (he is fond of name-dropping and Latin) defense attorney and literary gatekeeper Xosé Lendoiro describes Belano in Rome in 1992 in the following way, emphasizing his point by quoting Ovid:

> The eighties, which had been such a disastrous decade for his continent, seemed to have swallowed him up without a trace. From time to time poets of the right age or nationality, poets who might have known where he lived or what he was doing, would come by the magazine's offices, but the truth is that as time went by his name was blotted out. Nihil est annis velocius. (The Savage Detectives)

However, to read the novel in this fashion – insisting that the middle part expresses the final truth of García Madero's narrative and the Utopian search for Cesárea Tinajero – is to commit a fallacy. Indeed, to read it in such a way requires forgetting that the text is a narrative, literary form. More precisely, that the narrative literary form is an ordered structure, a formal totality and that the specific arrangement of formal devices it depends on, a specific iteration of formal-organizational possibility, is not arbitrary. It means forgetting that, indeed, it is not an accident that the "mature disillusionment" or as we called it earlier, realistic reflection, is in the middle, couched between

the two Utopian projections. To interpret the narrative in a commonsensically linear manner and insist on a chronology that leads from exuberance to disappointment, without taking into consideration the (dialectical) return to youthful Utopianism at the end of the narrative, means violating the structure of the novel, straightening out by force the final dialectical reversal that re-contextualizes "maturity/disappointment" in relation to "youth/Utopia" and sublates that reified opposition. It is essential to notice: the novel is structured as the same movement or passage from Utopian projection, to realistic reflection, to Utopian realism as the textual fragment and the poem we analyzed above.

In order for this dialectical structure to work, as we have seen on the example of *The Romantic Dogs*, it is not enough to simply arrange opposing formal elements in a linear succession or a circular reversal. These elements have to be related in a way that allows for a dialectical relation, that starts a negative movement that does not let the opposing elements cancel each other out, but that fashions from the negation of their opposition a new element. How does this work in *The Savage Detectives*?

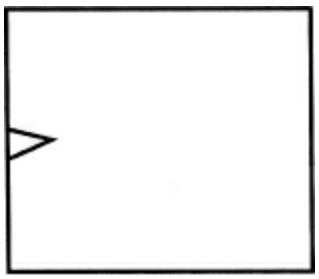
Firstly, the initial part sets up the parameters of what we called *Utopian projection*: the visceral realists (who are defined entirely in the negative, no one really knows what visceral realism is) embark on a search for the mysterious point of origin, Cesárea Tinajero. Secondly, the parameters of *realistic reflection* are set up in the middle part in which we get to see that the search did not result in any sort of transcendent rapture – the searchers are now themselves lost in the tall grass of disappointed maturity (although Amadeo Salvatierra's narrative complicates any sort of uniform chronology here as it stubbornly brings us back to and never lets us forget the moment of initial Utopian projection). Finally, the last part sets up the dialectical sublation by returning us to the moment of initial Utopian projection, after we passed through realistic reflection. But it does not simply return us to where we were initially, disavowing the passage through the middle. Nor is

the return cynical, leading us to paternalistically gloat over the stupidity of the Utopian searchers from the newfound position of knowing that no transcendence is ultimately found in the novel. Instead, the final return is not a return at all, but an *Aufhebung*: it opposes the very opposition between the first two parts by demonstrating that the search for the mystery of visceral realism has neither failed, nor has it succeeded, but that it goes on. Indeed, that it has gone on throughout, even if we cynically assumed it failed as we were passing through the tall grass of the middle section. We reach, in other words, by way of this dialectical passage, the concrete universality of *Utopian realism*.

More concretely: the novel ends shortly after Tinajero's death with a series of three evocative and puzzling images which García Madero scribbles in his diary. The images are reminiscent of the wordless style of Tinajero's *Sión*, "the only poem in the world" by Tinajero, as Salvatierra points out. This is odd. García Madero has never seen Tinajero's poetry himself. *Sión*, the only poem, is in the only copy of her magazine, which is in possession of Amadeo Salvatierra. This final passage of García Madero into the wordless style of Tinajero's visceral realism is therefore uncanny, as are the images themselves:

FEBRUARY 13

What's outside the window?



A star.

FEBRUARY 14

What's outside the window?

A sheet.

FEBRUARY 15

What's outside the window?

Adding to the uncanniness is the signifier "window" itself. The final Salvatierra subchapter in the middle part (which is also the closing section of that part) iterates the signifier in a series of variations, a procedure that draws attention to the signifier and places it in a prominent role. Indeed, the variations prefigure the novel's ending and the absent García Madero's diary (again, if we remember that García Madero is absent from this episode, this is uncanny). The episode unfolds and the middle section ends in the following manner. Firstly, one of the "boys" (Lima and Belano) promises Salvatierra that they will find Tinajero, and he does so by speaking in his sleep (in other words, speaking the language of what is in *The Romantic Dogs* called "the dream"):

> we're not doing it for you, Amadeo, we're doing it for Mexico, for Latin America, for the Third World, for our girlfriends, because we feel like doing it. Were they joking? Weren't they joking? And then the one who was sleeping breathed in a very strange way, as if he were breathing with his bones, and he said: we're going to find Cesárea Tinajero and we're going to find the Complete Works of Cesárea Tinajero. (*The Savage Detectives)*

Salvatierra shivers: "I think something's wrong with your friend. And the one who was reading raised his eyes and looked at me as if I were behind a window or he were on the other side of a window, and said: relax, nothing's wrong." Salvatierra looks around his room, agitated with the boys' ease in making the grand promise above, and then he looks at the boys again: "and then I looked at them and I saw them as if through a window, one of them with his eyes open and the other with his eyes shut, but both of them looking, looking out? looking in?" Finally, an inexplicable coldness engulfs the room, a spectral negation, "as if the North Pole had descended on Mexico City", and the boys grow pale with cold. Salvatierra points out that "if they were cold all they had to do was move away from the window, and then I said: boys, is it worth it? is it worth it? is it really worth it? and the one who was asleep said Simonel." Salvatierra then embraces the dialectical movement towards Utopian realism, and finally, in the closing sentence of the middle part, negates the negation: despite the cold, he opens all the windows, and switches off the light.

The key thing to notice beyond the iteration of the signifier "window" – which prefigures the novel's ending and thus establishes Salvatierra and García Madero as specular doubles – is the odd signifier "*Simonel*." Its appearance, the second of only two in the novel, only confirms the mentioned logic of doubling. At the very moment "window" launches us towards the end,

prefiguring García Madero's drawings, "Simonel" returns us to the beginning, to one of García Madero's diary entries in the first part of the novel: "No one gives the visceral realists ANYTHING. Not scholarships or space in their magazines or invitations to book parties or readings. Belano and Lima are like two ghosts. If simón is slang for yes and nel means no, then what does simonel mean? I don't feel very good today."

This movement across narrative frames, as well as the doubling of character-functions of García Madero and Salvatierra, leads us to a crucial point, which we will put bluntly: Cesárea Tinajero lives! Or more precisely: if García Madero is to Belano and Lima as Salvatierra is to Tinajero (Salvatierra used to know and spend time with her when he was young), that points to the fact that Belano and Lima are a specular double of Tinajero and take over her function after she is killed. Indeed, as the two leave Sonora after her death, they disappear, just like Tinajero did a long time before that. The kaleidoscopic middle section, by far the longest part of the novel, refers precisely to their post-Sonoran disappearance and is simply a catalogue of traces, clues, and indexes of their presence (or more precisely, absence). The replacement of Tinajero with Belano and Lima in the middle part has an important consequence: it frees up the narrative function of the "detective" looking for the mystery of visceral realism and transfers it onto the reader, who thus becomes the specular double of Belano and Lima, but the Belano and Lima in the youthful phase of Utopian projection, in their search for *Sión*.

This is the final movement of the literary dialectic, the suturing of literature to history, the passage into Utopian realism: the paternalistic reading of the novel as the narrative of youthful radicalism that runs aground reality, the repressive infantilization of Utopians in search for *Sión* that such a reading implies, is made to comically backfire as it is precisely the reader who is forced by such narrative movement into the very role which the reader paternalistically mocks.

Bolaño's novel, then, like Bolaño's Cervantes, explicitly takes the side of militancy. And like Cesárea Tinajero herself, who dies unceremoniously and with her myth deflated, but who – more importantly – dies politically, in solidarity. This final taking of sides, this exposure and ironization of the paternalistic reader, the reader who takes the side not of poetry over militancy, but much worse, who takes the side of "reality", points to an important logic: Cervantes' original modern ironization was ironization of the reader who privileged fantasy over reality. Bolaño's late modern ironization is ironization of the reader who privileges reality over fantasy. As Mark Fisher reminds us, taking the side of "reality" in the 21st century means taking the side of capitalist realism, which is simply the name for the "eternal order" under which "what already is" is always thought of as better than "what could be." Therefore, taking the side of fantasy, the radical imaginary, "what could be" is nothing less than a form of emancipation from the lie that is eternal order, a form of return from eternity back to history, a passage from contemporary neo-feudalism into the neo-modernity of tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

The World as End or as Historical Possibility

Above, we have tried to identify narrative techniques and forms that Roberto Bolaño uses to produce a re-historicized conception of literature in the context of global post-socialism. We have tried to elaborate the dialectical movement of his narrative devices, the metafictional hyperbole, the narrative iterations problematizing the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, and the broader logic of narrative form operative across his work. The central problem this work tackles, i.e. its central formal problem, is representation of historical possibility under historical conditions where this possibility is said to be exhausted. In tackling this problem, Bolaño re-conceptualizes the relation between literature and history and finds formal arrangements capable of avoiding the melancholy of mimetic reflection of post-socialist closure.

Thematically, his narrative project can be compared to Dubravka Ugrešić's, perhaps especially to *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, for which we established that it was only by narratively exploring the dynamics of literary autonomy that she reaches the political. However, one must note that in Ugrešić, as opposed to Bolaño, this remains an unfinished project: her novels never manage to sublate the dualistic conception in which literature, conceived as a realm of self-referential form, is always opposed to history. The reified opposition between fiction and non-fiction, despite the complexity of her narrative procedures and attempts to address the opposition through several diegetic levels, remains suspended and frozen as a problem within the novel(s) we analyzed. The most they manage to achieve is draw attention to the literariness of history, establishing in such a way an abstract universal of history as "fiction." This is easy to see if we revisit our own examples. Not only is the very narrative structure of *Fording the Stream of*

Consciousness dualistic (the autobiographical, "non-fictional" chapters are clearly separated from the fictional ones), but the dualism is constantly established and re-established as a problem in the fictional narrative itself. Literary aspirations of her characters, writers as "little people", are in constant conflict with the historical world. That conflict is represented as the constant intrusion of history into the literary, of the "non-fictional" into the "fictional." The characters like Jan Zdřazil or Pipo Fink are anxious neurotics, constantly struggling to find a clearly defined position: if writing, that position is one where the historical will not find them, a position from which they can "just write" instead of having to work or argue with family members. If engaging in politics, that position is one where they will not have to go to the market while others go on strike, and so on. The position they seek is one which will not require neurotic self-reflection, the constant nagging of the question from the *Talking Heads* song that plays in the background: "Well, how did I get here?" The problem with this, however, is that such a position is imaginary, it is an idealization, a projection meant to overcome the material logic of social institution, the dualistic structure of bourgeois life: the division between public and private, work and leisure, professional and amateur, literary and the political. A division that cannot be overcome by individual imaginary projections, but only in history.

From this perspective, Ugrešić's writers are indeed "little people", petty bourgeois whose nervous self-reflection is not a sign of deeper insight, but a neurosis that superficially reflects the very structure of the social order, the imaginary closure they are the subjects of. Ugrešić herself is, however, smarter than her characters in that novel and introduces, as we noted, a cruel reality principle in the autobiographical part that, by way of pain, slaps the romanticizations and imaginary identifications related to the "literary life" back into the material, the physical, the historical. If it was indeed necessary to represent her "little writers" in such a way in order to cut down to size the bloated megalomania of modernist myths, it was perhaps not so necessary to cut them down to a

size so small that they represent no obstacle. The consequences of this cutting down to size we find in her later novels, in the "post-socialist neo-dissident" part of her opus, where we find her on the "stairway to nowhere", speculating amusedly about the dream-like logic of exile, resigned to the abstract universality of the Mercedes-star that is subsuming the world under itself, or in which we find her characters dubiously comforted by the "child-like innocence" of Western cities, wrapped in the disorienting blur of exile and relative middle-class comfort, satisfied so long as they can dissipate the semantic excess of their peripheral unconscious by yelling their less-than-literary curses into the wind.

How different this cutting down to size is to Bolaño's elephantine proportions, restless meanderings, visionary ramblings, and zealotry of his characters. In comparison to Ugrešić's little neurotics and wounded exiles, Bolaño's sleepless bohemians and fascist megalomaniacs are utter, unrestrained maniacs. Even when they realistically are "little people", they are driven by desires that are anything but little. If we remember Ugrešić's claim that "all writers are small", we can respond to her and say: no, they are not. Cesárea Tinajero is so big that the sheer gravity of her mammoth body warps the sunlight of the Sonora desert while her acolytes risk their lives to find her. Or if exile is a state of dream-like abstraction in which symbols appear like in a poetic reverie, as she claims in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, we can respond to that too with a vulgar materialist common sense which, to paraphrase Chernishevsky, looks for in exile, as in everything else, for sausages first, and only then for Shakespeare. This is Bolaño on exile:

> Of course, a refrain is heard throughout Europe and it's the refrain of the suffering of exiles, a music composed of complaints and lamentations and a baffling nostalgia. Can one feel nostalgia for the land where one nearly died? Can one feel nostalgia for poverty, intolerance, arrogance, injustice? […] So who sings this horrid nostalgic

> refrain? The first few times I heard it I thought it was the masochists. If you're locked up in prison in Thailand and you're Swiss, it's natural to want to serve your sentence in a Swiss prison. The reverse — in other words, if you're a Thai locked up in Switzerland and you still want to serve the rest of your sentence in a Thai prison — isn't natural, unless that perverse nostalgia is dictated by loneliness. Loneliness is certainly capable of producing desires with no connection to common sense or reality. ("Literature and Exile")

Loneliness and nostalgia. Resignation and pessimism. Our study tried to point out that these are refrains sung not only by the authors of the "Eastern" post-socialist transition like Dubravka Ugrešić, but also authors of the "Western" one, like Cormac McCarthy. We tried to demonstrate that analogous concerns haunt their narrative form and that even a conservative author of the US Southwestern borderlands is not spared the historical obligation to process the sense of loss, loss of historical possibility, inaugurated by the End of History.

Unlike Ugrešić's comfortingly (or infuriatingly) transparent European cities with their little people, however, McCarthy's desert and mountainous landscapes are vast (if reduced by fences) and "hum with mystery." The romantic advancement of his heroes' melancholy masculinity on Gnostic quests for experience and salvation seems anything but little. But what kind of vision do they manage to conjure out of all of their adventures, what kind of dream do they ultimately pursue? Adolescent romanticizations, chivalric fantasies, nostalgic idealizations, fetish of the familial bond. Imaginary projections of thwarted desire, not that different than Pipo Fink dreaming of literary fame and Amsterdam in his mother's apartment. Only the murderers, the demonic presences in McCarthy's narratives, characters like judge Holden and Anton Chigurh have to offer anything other than these petty dreams of fulfillment, transcendence, and imaginary unity, these

false individualist Utopias. But what the murderers offer is always metaphysical abstraction. Violence as chief ontological principle, blind probability robbing history of subjectivity. This is precisely why Roberto Bolaño himself, writing about *Blood Meridian*, and writing from a position of cautiously respectful distance, feels the need to emphasize, or even insert history into the novel, to point out that it is there even though – as we observed in our analysis of its epigraph – the novel itself makes an effort to expunge it:

> [*Blood Meridian*] is a novel that, in part, tells the story of a group of Americans who launch a murderous raid into the state of Chihuahua and then, after crossing the Sierra Madres, into the neighboring state of Sonora, and whose mission, for which they're well compensated by the governments of both states, is to hunt down and scalp Indians, which isn't just difficult but also costly in time and lives, and so they end up massacring whole Mexican towns, where the scalps are ultimately similar enough that it makes no difference. ("Blood Meridian)

Being able to represent historical possibility, using literature in history and as history, as we have emphasized repeatedly, is the chief difference between Bolaño and those other two, Ugrešić and McCarthy. Put in ideologically and critically sharper terms, that difference appears as difference between the Utopian comedy of dialectics and the dryly repetitive psycho-drama of self-reflection, or the cloying idealism of melancholy romance. This particular materialist, ultimately comic stubbornness of Bolaño, built into literary form, is also the reason why his narrative work cannot be categorized as post-socialist *Trümmerliteratur*.

The other two, however, end up classified together in that very category almost by accident by Ugrešić's champion David Williams. In *Writing Postcommunism,* he relies on a metonymy of

"ruins" to develop a genealogical and periodizing grid helpful in approaching Eastern European post-socialist literature. Starting from the Slovenian writer Drago Jančar's observations about "literature of the east European ruins", and tying this to the literary-historical genre precedent of German post-WWII *Trümmerliteratur* (as theorized by Heinrich Böll in his programmatic 1952 essay "Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur") Williams explains in the opening pages of the book that the post-socialist literary paradigm of ruins has "not stood a chance either at home or abroad" (5) because it is disavowed and forgotten by the "European" (i.e. Western) politics of memory. This "genealogy of ruins" will serve him throughout his study, from observing character-functions in the novels he analyzes as *Trümmerleute*, to identifying the universal affect characterizing this literary-historical formation as a "certain post-1989 sadness", which "irrespective of the categories of 'winners' and 'losers' […] seems to have spread to almost everyone" (128), to extending it to all formerly socialist territories connected by the experience of the Eastern transition. By the end of his book, however, he takes a sudden and interesting turn.

In a concluding subchapter entitled "The ruin virus" (cf. 169-173), Williams examines several high-profile US advertisements commissioned by such companies as Levi's and Chrysler and even points out that the aesthetic of ruins their visual language relies on has been borrowed from John Hillcoat's 2009 cinematic adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. His point is that the aesthetic of ruins, or "the figure of the ruin" stands as a signifier of "dialectic at a standstill." This figure links the range of examples he offers that span a number of cultural forms that he analyzes in the book, from Eastern European novels, to US advertisements and French political manifestoes, to real-world anecdotes heard on a train to Munich. Connecting all these disparate phenomena and experiences together under the category of ruins, Williams reaches his final observation: "What interests me more at this stage is whether we will soon see a new literature of the European/capitalist ruins, an idea not as far-fetched as it might initially sound." (173)

This crucial point is one that Williams himself can never fully develop. Following its implications to the end would make his central organizing category collapse, although he does notice a number of cultural symptoms which point to the possibility that "ruins" is not a locally-bound, ethnographic category, but a global one. He then disavows this observation by projecting its implications into the future. Literature of the "European/capitalist ruins" – as opposed to the literature of "post-communist ruins" – is yet to appear. Therefore, what he calls "post-communism" becomes a prefiguration of the future of capitalism, a phenomenon at the avant-garde of global historical development. We suggested the same at the beginning of this study when we drew attention to Katherine Verdery's analysis of Eastern post-socialist transition as a transition to feudalism and then pointed out that a quarter of a century later Jodi Dean made the same observation about capitalism in the core transforming into what she calls "neo-feudalism."

However, there seems to be a problem with chronology here. Williams' own contemporaneous examples of "ruins" across world literature, culture, and politics, the global spread of homologous forms, motifs, and genre frameworks that he notices, contradict his conclusion. The figure of "capitalist ruins" has already been here for some time and is in this sense not really that much different from that of "communist ruins." This suggests a wider, unitary, world-systemic transformation that has been formalized in culture in analogous ways across the world-system. This global ruinophilia is motivated by world-systemic transformations, has been noticed quite often in the past several decades, and was perhaps summarized best by Fredric Jameson's (now overused) dictum that under the contemporary regimes of imaginary institution of society, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." We have tried to re-interpret this, by now almost self-evident, conclusion about the contemporary limits imposed to the imaginary and develop a poetics that emphasizes the imaginary's potential to produce semantic excess that can be creatively formalized in discourse, thus enabling us to see historical possibility

even in the stultifying fog of "eternal order." That poetics also allowed us to distinguish between literary forms that disavow the responsibility to search for modes of representing historical possibility, and those that do not. In our comparative analysis of Ugrešić and McCarthy as authors of Eastern and Western transitions, we have tried to show the dynamics and literary formalization of that disavowal, and then juxtaposed it to the work of Bolaño, which neither enjoys nor cries over or musealizes the ruins we live among, but reminds us that it is possible to excavate from them visions of a better future.

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