Latin America through the Literary Looking-Glass, And What Bolaño Found There

“Death is the staff of Latin America and Latin America cannot walk without its staff” (Bolaño 2006, p. 75).

Abstract

This article provides a broad overview of social, economic, and cultural politics in Latin America, especially concentrating on what became known as the Latin American literary “boom” in the 1960s and 1970s, and the region’s political context – colonial past, neocolonial/neoliberal present, the role of intellectuals within the state and cultural affairs. The second part focuses on Roberto Bolaño – the writer who put Latin American literature on the world map which has not been seen since the boom years – and his novel The Savage Detectives. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that literature not only shares common elements and possible intentions with social and political critique, but that it can also be an effective form of social and political criticism. In such a case, Bolaño’s work may be read not as inferior fictional account but as a complex, intersectional investigation of socioeconomic as well as ontological condition in Latin America that other modes of inquiry may overlook.

Keywords: Latin America, Roberto Bolaño, lines of flight, literature, cultural politics

Santrauka: Šis straipsnis plačiai apžvelgia socialinę, ekonominę ir kultūrinę politiką Lotynų Amerikoje, skiriant daug dėmesio septintojo ir aštuonojo dešimtmečio literatūrinio „bumo” fenomenui, bei regiono politiniam kontekstui – kolonijinei praeiciai, neokolinijinei/neoliberaliai dabarčiai, intelektualų rolei valdžios ir kultūros sferose. Antroji straipsnio dalis koncentruojasi ties Roberto Bolaño (ir jo romanu Pašėlę detektyvai), rašytoju, kuris paženkino Lotynų Ameriką pasauliniame literatūros žemėlapyje mastu, panašių į sėkmingiausius bumo pavyzdžius. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra parodyti, kad literatūra ne tik gali sietis bendrais elementais ir galimais tiksiais su socialine ir politine kritika, bet kad ir gali būti efektyvi sociopolitinės kritikos forma. Tokiu atveju, Bolaño darbai gali būti perskaityti ne tik kaip antrarūšė fikcija, bet kaip ir daugiasluoksnis tyrimas apie socioekonominę bei ontologinę Lotynų Amerikos būklę, kurios kiti tyrimo būdai gali ir neužčiuopti.

Raktiniai žodžiai: Lotynų Amerika, Roberto Bolaño, vengimo linijos, literatūra, kultūros politika
“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”, Walter Benjamin once (famously) proclaimed (1969, p. 256). The tropes of civilization and barbarism are prominent in the literature on, and of, Latin America. It remains utterly other, frequently abject, at the same exotic and erotic, desirable and despicable – ultimately a playground for fantasy. The New World, although clearly linguistically and historically divided, served not only as a terra incognita for colonial and imperial expansion of Europe but also as a constitutive part of the European modernity. Revolutions and national liberation struggles achieved formal independence but often remained subsumed under European and later under American influence, not only in terms of the economic and social development but also in the sphere of knowledge production. Walter D. Mignolo succinctly summarizes the importance of the Western Hemisphere in world history terms as follows:

The “Americas” are the consequence of early European commercial expansion and the motor of capitalism, as we know it today. The “discovery” of America and the genocide of Indians and African slaves are the very foundation of “modernity,” more so than the French or Industrial Revolutions. Better yet, they constitute the darker and hidden face of modernity, “coloniality.” Thus, to excavate the “idea of Latin America” is, really, to understand how the West was born and how the modern world order was found (2005, p. xiii).

Navigating this postcolonial or neocolonial context became a difficult task not only for the political regimes that were weak within the framework of this modern world order, but also for the emerging strata of writers and intellectuals who wanted to have “authentic” voice (and say) in the new sociopolitical formations.

After revolutionary period which fended off Spanish and Portuguese domination, the main power player in the region became the United States with its military and economic power. Among the influential policy documents was the Monroe Doctrine dating back to 1823, which was designed to prevent further interventions from European powers in the hemisphere. However, within Latin America it came to be seen as a tool of domination over the national developments, especially with the Roosevelt’s corollary to the doctrine in 1904, which made plain willfulness to intervene in Latin America if American interests would be perceived jeopardized. In any case, there were periods, especially immediately after WWII that looked promising for the continent. But the 20th century, overall, was a century of intense geopolitical shaping – or attempts to shape – of Latin America by the United States in variety of forms. The Cold War only sharpened this trajectory, the US being fearful of the “domino effect” of communist influence. The peak was reached, of
course, with the Cuban revolution and subsequent Cuban missile crisis in 1962, which culminated in a near-nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States.

At the same time, Cuban Revolution was among the most influential events in Latin America in the 20th century, providing the unprecedented impetus for cultural exchange, artistic and political interventions and innovations, criticism, and heightened feeling of revolutionary hopes and possibilities for a largely left-leaning Latin American intelligentsia (this, however, was not the case with the official political establishment in the continent which kept Cuba isolated (Castañeda 1993, p. 184)). It was a dream realized on a tiny island that provoked imagination into what may be achievable in other parts of the continent, thus ending de facto centuries-long domination and exploitation. If a small country could resist such a powerful neighbor a mere hundred miles up north, larger countries could follow the lead and pursue similar paths. Cuba and its cultural institutions, such as Casa de las Américas, became a rite of passage for whole generation of Latin American writers, artists, and intellectuals, who flooded the island in order to experience Revolution first-hand and participate in the vibrant environment of cultural exchange. For almost a decade Cuba was among the prime concerns for intellectuals of Latin America, who became unofficial cultural attaches in their respective home countries and it was only after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which was supported by Castro, that almost unanimous support started to diminish and bifurcate (ibid, p. 185).

The time of Cuban Revolution is approximately the time of what became known as Latin American boom in literature. The insider account of the boom, especially in its less glorious form, is provided by José Donoso, who states that the boom itself was constructed by the critical establishment, whether through flattery or envy, endless boundary drawings of who is in and who is out that became self-perpetuating system in its own right, but it never consisted of a single formation (1977). Whether it was porous formation or not, whether it had a single trajectory and project is beside the point, since the boom came to be perceived as real and remains such till this day. If it was discursive formation, it had material counterpart to it, namely the shifts in the marketization and expansion of Latin American novel through integration into larger flows of mainstream publishing apparatus within Latin America and globally, where these two spaces operated synergistically since pan-Latin American book market was in part fueled by the global prestige of the boom writers (De Castro 2008, p. 100). Although Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Year of Solitude was published in 1967 – perhaps the most famous novel of the boom – the movement, if it can be called that, is often dated to the early 1960s. The reasons for the emergence of the boom were numerous. According to Idelber Avelar, such (diverse) authors as Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Octavio Paz,
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converged [...] in presenting Latin American literature’s extraordinary achievements not only as detached from the continent’s social backwardness but also as effective surrogate for it. The boomer’s notorious disavowal of any links with the tradition and their insistence on the foundational, almost Adamic role played by their generation [...]. The discarding of the past was part of the portrayal of their own writing as a resolute catching up with history, an Oedipal assassination of the European father that finally integrated Latin America into the universal movement of modern literature (1999, pp.11-12).

The novelty of this new literary tradition, however, did not emerge in an empty space, but rather was a discursive formation, which attempted to conceal its origins not only in European modernist works but also in the works of Latin American literary production of the first part of the 20th century (Meter 2004, p. 155). Part of this new emergence was backlash against the novela de la tierra (novel of the land) which, not unlike in the pre- and Socialist Lithuania, was searching for innocence, social and environmental harmony set in agrarian countryside, as opposed to alienation and corrupting influence of urbanization and industrialization, for ontological roots of Latin American identity. Additionally, according to Roberto González Echevarría, “The Latin American novel [...] was straitjacketed by the constraints of nineteenth-century realism: a third-person, omniscient narrator who views reality from the perspective of bourgeois common sense, a prose that tries not to be dissonant or call attention to itself; a plot that follows consecutively without interruptions toward an end that is consistent with the preceding action” (Echevarría 2012, p. 90). The writers of the boom, however, did not abandon the rural trope as such, but this time it served to resolve the contradictions by favoring modernity/universality of the city against tradition of the countryside (ibid, pp. 26-27). In short, the boom’s writers saw themselves as a vanguard ahead of their own time, embodying the consciousness of the continent, as Cortázar overly optimistically asserted: “What is the boom if not the Latin American people’s most extraordinary achievement of consciousness of its own identity?” (quoted in Avelar, p. 28). Against this self-congratulating bravado, Avelar, contrary to the near-universal espousal of magical realism, as a fresh blood in a stale, Western-dominated literary world, makes a claim that

[…] the magical effect […] stemmed from some instance irreducible to the rationalization of modern capitalism […]. Magical […] realism thus depended, for its effect, on the conflict between the two irreconcilable logics. [It] was always inseparable from the demonization of a subaltern culture […] carried out from the standpoint of modern capitalist forms ready to subsume them, the prototypical example being the submission of the circular, mythic time of the anecdote to the
linear, onward-flowing time in García Márquez novel. This dynamic should be kept in mind as one works through critical bibliography that still reads magical realism as magical realism read itself, celebrating the genre’s “subversion” of “Western” “rationalism” and its “openness to diversity,” when not outright proposing it as the sum of Latin American identity (ibid, pp. 73-74).

Two problems emerged, or can be articulated retroactively. The first problem was that the “alternative” vision expressed by aesthetic means was not that different from the ongoing Western project which boom writers critiqued as in part responsible for the backwardness of their part of the continent. In sum, it was the same modernity project pursued by other means but having the same goal. The second problem, for left-leaning theorists in particular, is that aesthetics and politics were taken to be seen as one – or rather aesthetics became substituted for politics – even if the social, political, and economic conditions were attesting to the contrary (ibid, p. 29). While the boom writers experienced unseen popularity there was no corresponding explosion in other spheres of social life. According to Jorge G. Castañeda, the intellectuals of 1960s occupied certain void which was left by absence of what he calls “civil society”. Intellectuals were listened to and exerted discursive power, but, paradoxically perhaps, they were at the same time powerless to influence the larger structures governing their societies. In that sense, they were tolerated by the governments, they operated as spokespersons for the larger international sphere, they felt that they represented the poor and the oppressed, but most often they did not have any real contact with those who they claimed to represent (ibid, pp. 186-189). Their prestigious position opened the doors to the economic and political elite circles and they were frequently seduced (and then disillusioned) by power. Gabriel García Márquez, who himself maintained very close friendship with Fidel Castro, described the position of intellectuals as follows:

There is a curious relationship between intellectuals and political power in Latin America. The State and the powers-that-be both needs us and fear us. They need us because we give them prestige they lack; they fear us because our sentiments and views can damage them. In the history of power in Latin America, there are only military dictatorships or intellectuals. No wonder then – and it is a fascinating thing – that there was so much coddling of the intellectuals by the State. Under these circumstances, one cannot be always completely independent (quoted in Castañeda 1993, p. 196).

However, this alliance typically was exercised in a relatively “democratic” setting.6 Once the military dictatorships, for example Brazil (1964-1985), Argentina (1966-1973, 1976-1983), Chile (1973-1990), and Uruguay (1973-1985), were installed, the intellectuals often had to flee or face the consequences.
The military regimes tried to clear out all opposition, cultural milieus among them, in order for the transition to a truly free market to be achieved. Avelar, following John Beverly, proposes the date of September 11th, 1973 (the date of Chilean coup and beginning of Pinochet’s rule) as the “allegorical date of the decline of the boom” (1999, p. 13). In some sense, it was also the end of the developmentalist modernization project that at least tried to present itself as democratic. The new paradigm now was to create change via authoritarian grip on the economy and avoid all the semi-socialist precautions (welfare, redistribution, agrarian reforms etc.) that were perceived as obstacles to the swift reorganization of society at large.

Although so much ink has been spilled discussing the evil nature of military dictatorships in Latin America as barbarous and evil manifestations that are intrinsic to the continent with a lack of democratic tradition, Roberto Arlt in his novel *Los Siete Locos* already in 1929 was able to articulate the essence of the problem within the literary work: “Do you believe that future dictatorships will be military? No, sir. The military is worth nothing next to the industrialist. They can be his instrument, that’s all. Future dictators will be the kings of oil, steel, wheat” (quoted in Avelar 1999, pp. 91-92). That the first truly neoliberal experiment was instituted in Chile may not be incidental. Although Salvador Allende’s short lived government was nowhere close to Cuban experiment, it was the closest attempt throughout the Latin America and perceived as an enormous threat by the ruling class at home and the United States abroad. After the coup and after long decades of Keynesian economics, Milton Friedman and The Chicago School of Economics finally had an opportunity to test and implement their theories of free-market radicalism. Naomi Klein’s inquiry into regime of “shock treatment” – or what she calls the shock doctrine – provides an overview of what it meant for Latin America. In such context, the utopian impulse started to vanish not only from the political horizon but from the literary and artistic one as well. Néstor García Canclini divides the position of arts in terms of their temporalities or “social time” in Latin American cultural milieu into three stages – utopia, memory of defeat, and instantaneity (2004, p. 13). In this somewhat melancholic essay Canclini seems to evoke the first two moments in order to critique the present art practices “If you want to live in the hyperpresent, you have no time for memory or for utopia“ (ibid, p. 19), however, within this article, the focus is on utopia and defeat, as constitutive parts of post-boom literary and social landscape. With the decline of the boom new literary voices emerged and the intellectuals, once again, played a certain role in the “transition” period to “democracy”. Their role, however, was variegated. Some strove towards the reconciliation, which became the tactic of choice in many countries with pardons or merely symbolical acts against the enactors and executioners of the military regimes, which often orchestrated transition on their own terms. The new literary genre of testimonio – testimonial novel – served to commemorate
and remember tortures, deaths, and disappearances, but even this genre often was conservative and reconciliatory, unable to articulate what happened or what consequences it bears to the present.

At the same time, the role of the intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s for various reasons became less important. There were market forces and the “culture industry” that was now in advanced stage. Also, there were many voices and series of actors that did not look up to a few distinct literary figures for guidance, since many of them started to be seen as a merely complicit part of the socioeconomic elite. For intellectuals in Latin America the state was always a frame of reference – whether taming it, reforming, or overthrowing it, the state was politics proper (Castañeda, p. 198). With a post-dictatorial neoliberal turn, the movements that emerged often treated the state with suspicion, since the state, in whatever form, was the manager of all affairs with dubious results. Culture, trade unions, and other forms of “civil society” were for too long directly or overtly micro-managed by the state (ibid). The multiplication of middle-class had something to do with the student population increases, in some places as much as fifteen times from the 1960s to 1980s; various social movements were articulating visions that were not aligned with the modernist views of the 1960s literary boom (ibid, p. 191). Roughly similar period (mid-1970s to 1990s) is the background of Roberto Bolaño’s novel *The Savage Detectives*, elements of which will be analyzed below. But it should be seen as a background, relation and not determination, the notion that I share here with Juan E. De Castro, who states that “The correlation between social, economic, and literary […] should not be taken as implying a vulgar Marxist perspective in which modifications in the economic infrastructure – the full establishment of colonial economic relations, capitalist modernization, globalization, and so on – directly determine the evolution of literary styles – American baroque, modernism, and post-boom. Nor does the fact that Latin America has been economically subordinated to Europe and North American capital necessarily imply that the region’s literary and cultural production is unoriginal, backward, or merely reactive” (2008, p. xix).

“Literature is not made of words alone”10: Roberto Bolaño

Roberto Bolaño (born in Santiago, Chile, 1953, died in Blanes, Spain, 2003) was a son of a truck driver father and a teacher mother. After living in various towns in Chile, the family moved to Mexico City in 1968. Shortly afterwards Bolaño dropped out of school and plunged himself into literature (mostly poetry) – writing “masochistically” and taking “a sadistic pleasure in his reading” – and bohemian youth street culture. Together with Mario Santiago (a.k.a. Ulises Lima in *The Savage Detectives*) they conceived a poetic
movement-of-sorts known as Infrarealism, “a kind of Dada a la Mexicana” (Bolaño 2009, p. 66), which drew on various avant-garde literary and artistic traditions and was set, apparently, in stark contrast to prevailing literary and cultural establishment in Mexico at the time. Among the favorite pastimes were the group’s rowdy disturbances of poetry readings by state-funded poets, who were perceived as too closely linked with PRI government. Although it is still a contested fact, according to his own account, he went to participate in Allende’s “building socialism” experiment in 1973 shortly before the Pinochet’s coup. On the night of the coup, he was assigned to guard a desolate street with no incidents. Six weeks later, when he was leaving the country he was detained and remained in an improvised prison, but was eventually released by the two ex-classmates who worked as a prison guards. Much of this intense youthful rebellion in the 1970s is portrayed in The Savage Detectives, which will be discussed in the next section.

In 1977, Bolaño and Santiago left for Europe (Santiago eventually returned to Mexico, where he died in an accident in 1998). Bolaño travelled and worked at casual jobs, still reading and writing poetry. Endlessly repeating that reading was more important (and pleasurable) than writing; still trying to be non-compromising and true to his ideals – avoiding literary establishment, following the path of poet maudit. “Rejecting a career in poetry was in fact a way of taking poetry as seriously as life itself – and vice versa” (Wimmer 2012, p. 583). It is rumored that at some point he developed heroin addiction, although the fact remains disputed. In either case, in the early 1990s he was diagnosed with a heavy form of liver disease. At that time, having a family, he started to write short stories of prose and submit them for literary competitions throughout Spain, aiming at the prize money. His first short experimental novel Nazi Literature in the Americas, a work of fictional encyclopedia tracing lives and works of literary figures with extreme-right sympathies in the continent, as well as The Distant Start, brought him some recognition, but it was the award-winning The Savage Detectives that brought him something close to fame, some critics making statements that it was the first time since Gabriel García Márquez that a Latin American was the cause of literary sensation. Among the epithets one can encounter are “an exemplary literary rebel” and “literary genius”. This newly acquired recognition, however, was at the same time the period of decline in physical – but not in literary – terms.

Having understood that the illness he developed was terminal and there is no time to waste, Bolaño set himself up to the task to write as much as possible. He became a literary contributor to newspapers’ arts sections in Europe and Latin America, produced over dozen shorter novels, few collections of poetry and prose, and two seminal, large-scale works – The Savage Detectives and 2666. In some ways, he fell clearly into the post-Boom topology, blending fictional narratives with historical events, concerned with memory and Latin American defeats. Among his recognized novels – and, for some, more explicitly
political ones – stands out *The Distant Star*, which deals with the elusive fascist-leaning young poet/pilot Carlos Wieder, who engages in literature on paper and plane-writings in the sky, just as much as he is engages with post-coup regime, serving the Air Force, but also materializing fantasies of eroticized torture and murder. *By Night in Chile* is another somewhat similar work, tracing regime-friendly priest (advising Pinochet on cultural matters), who is also a literary critic. Among the most notable (and frequently analyzed) scenes is the party at the house of influential patron of the arts and letters, the house that at the same time serves as torture cell for dissidents in its cellar. *Amulet* is another fictionalized, although claimed to be based on real event, account of Auxilio Lacouture, who locked herself at UNAM’s bathroom during the student repression by the military and Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City in 1968, which although never came to conclusive account is believed to have claimed several hundreds of lives. Auxilio Lacouture, self-proclaimed “mother of Mexican poets”, in fact an undocumented Uruguayan immigrant doing odd jobs at the Department of Literature and Philosophy and associated with the younger generation of street poets is retelling a story of her entrapment, which is among the most notable of Bolaño’s works, for its inventive and intentionally delirious treatment of history and memory. *Lacouture* is also one brief but memorable character in *The Savage Detectives*.

What all these works share (including *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*), as has been pointed by several critics, is that they expose and point out to a thin line separating culture/civilization and violence/barbarism: “It all begins with poetry and literary workshops, and ends with murders, torture, and violence, whether in the Northern desert of Mexico or in the forests in the South of Chile” (López-Vicuña 2009, p. 156). However, this should not be perceived as some simple predetermined teleology or some epic battle of good and evil (literature or culture representing the good, of course). Rather it calls to investigate, often through literary intertextuality and constant references to real or imagined writers, what good and evil is constituted of, to suspend judgment, avoid simple opposition. In Deleuzean terms, Bolaño works as a physician, diagnosing the condition of the world, the self, and literature as such. Thus his apparent dislike or references to fascist-leaning cultural figures is not a simple political stance – a stance firmly on the left, one would suppose – but rather one among multiplicity of stances that investigate and question the political in general, at some more fundamental level. In the acceptance speech for Rómulo Gallegos Award, one among the most prestigious ones in Latin America, Bolaño offers a glimpse at the complicated – if somewhat sentimental and dramatic – engagement with political militancy and its literary intersections:

[T]o a great extent everything I’ve written is a love letter or farewell letter to my own generation, those of us who were born in the 1950s and who at a certain moment chose 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. It goes without saying that we fought our hardest, but we had corrupt leaders, cowardly leaders with propaganda apparatus that was worse than a leper colony, we fought for parties that if they had won would have sent us straight to labor camps, we fought for and put all our generosity into an ideal that had been dead for more than fifty years, and some of us knew it, and how could we not know when we’d read Trotsky or were Trotskyites, but we did it anyway, because we were stupid and generous, as young people are, giving everything and asking for nothing in return, and now those young people are gone, because those who didn’t die in Bolivia died in Argentina or Peru, and those who weren’t killed there were killed later in Nicaragua, Colombia, or El Salvador. All of Latin America is sown with the bones of those forgotten youths. And that’s what moves Cervantes to choose military service over poetry. His companions were dead too (2011, p. 35).

“Literature is a dangerous game”, he claimed (ibid, p. 36). To live dangerously was to live up to poetic standards that he set for himself. Although his bohemian and nomadic life was now over as he settled in a small coastal and touristy town in Costa Brava, he pushed himself to the limits, often writing to the point of exhaustion, sometimes for days without sleep, chain-smoking, often forgetting his doctor’s appointments. He was strong-willed and opinioned and his opinions sometimes appeared to be set in black or white, but his literature always worked in the grey, fascinated by contrasts, but at the same time exposing contingency and reversibility, clear cut linguistic simplicity and ontological unheimlich-ness14.

Lines of flight and revolutionary hopes in The Savage Detectives

“Poetry, today, has perhaps more to teach us than the economic and human sciences put together” (Guattari 1996, p. 202).

The Savage Detectives is many things. It may be described as literary machine15 par excellence: it is productive, connective, fleeing, de-subjectivizing. It is a multiplicity that exceeds itself; enters into other machines for the purpose of creating lines of flight16 and becomings. It spans two decades and several continents. The main shadowy heroes of the story are Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, two poets and leaders of Visceral Realism – avant-garde artistic movement. But they never speak through their own voices; they are spoken about, allowing the world and not themselves to present their becomings. The bulk of the novel – the largest middle part entitled “The Savage Detectives” – is a story told through the voices of 52 characters, which provides testimonies
and interpretations of Lima’s and Belano’s lives and encounters them. But to say that they are really at the center of the novel would be a mistake. It is the world, the particular sections of the world, poetic world that is explored, in all its contradictory, contaminated, and fragmentary forms. The first and third parts (“Mexicans Lost in Mexico” and “The Sonora Desert”) are told in the form of diary by a teenage poet Juan García Madero, starting in 1975. *The Savage Detectives* undoubtedly has autobiographical component to it, but it would be gross oversimplification to categorize it as such: “To write is not to recount one’s memories and voyages, one’s loves and grieves, one’s dreams and phantasms. It is the same thing to sin through an excess of reality as through an excess of the imagination” (Deleuze 1997, p. 2). Bolaño does strike a balance – it is a richly imaginative and daring work, at the same time it is a recollection of a bygone era, with all its social, political, and cultural manifestations. It is not a sentimental tale of nostalgia, youth, and rebellion that one remembers with the bittersweet sense of once lived naivety. Instead, while containing some aspects of it, it asks how to live whenever: without succumbing to identity, norm, and architecture of the subject-hood. A difficult, perhaps impossible and doomed, but, still, a noteworthy task.

“We dreamed of utopia and we woke up screaming”

The aims of resistance and escape, inevitably, cannot be achieved through aesthetic means alone. “Literature isn’t innocent” (Bolaño 2012, p. 137) and it is not omnipotent. Thus, like in other avant-gardes of the earlier era, within *The Savage Detectives*, there is a component of political militancy. Aesthetic and political need to merge in order to achieve temporal break—typically understood as a revolution – for the ideals to materialize. Thus, various degrees of involvement and references to Latin American insurrections are inserted within the text. However, this thread does not constitute major explications in the novel, but is situated in the background. One of the ambiguous, simultaneously sad and humorous, descriptions of the visceral realists’ (and their families’) political contexts are found in Juan García Madero’s diary entry of November 20th, 1975:

Political affiliations: Moctezuma Rodriguez is a Trotskyite. Jacinto Requena and Arturo Belano used to be Trotskyites.
Maria Font, Angélica Font, and Laura Jáuregui (Belano’s ex-girlfriend) used to belong to a radical feminist movement called Mexican Women on the Warpath. That’s where they supposedly met Simone Darrieux, friend of Belano and promoter of some kind of sadomasochism.
Ernesto San Epifanio started the first Homosexual Communist Party of Mexico and the first Mexican Homosexual Proletarian Commune.
Ulises Lima and Laura Damián once planned to start an anarchist group: the draft of a founding manifesto still exists. Before that, at the age of fifteen, Ulises Lima tried to join what remained of Lucio Cabañas’s guerrilla group. Quim Font’s father, also called Quim Font, was born in Barcelona and died in the Battle of the Ebro. Rafael Barrios’s father was active in the illegal railroad workers’ union. He died of cirrhosis. Luscious Skin’s father and mother were born in Oaxaca and, according to Luscious Skin himself, they starved to death (ibid, pp. 66-67).

What is of interest in this passage is that politics and history overlap generationally, but the younger generation, namely visceral realists, are portrayed as searching for new forms – feminism as relatively new phenomenon with quite absurd name of the group, homosexual communist party, anarchism and guerrilla group, even Trotskyism, which had a long history in Mexico. One character, Luis Sebastián Rosado, unaffiliated with visceral realism explains groups’ literary-political position within the Mexican milieu as follows: “the visceral realists weren’t part of any camp, not the neo-PRI-ists or the champions of otherness, the neo-Stalinists or the aesthetes, those who drew a government salary or those who lived off the university, the sellers or the buyers, those who clung to tradition or those who masked ignorance with arrogance, the whites or the blacks, the Latin Americanists or the cosmopolites” (ibid, p. 330).

“There is a time for reciting poems and a time for fists” (ibid, p. 6). But one gets an impression that throughout the novel Bolaño’s preoccupation with poetics and politics tends to privilege the poetic over political. Both are interrelated, both have failed, but the failure politically is sharper, more devastating, beyond repair. Whether this position is installed retroactively or already present at the time of novel’s setting is difficult to determine, but it is quite plausible, that by the mid-seventies, there were too many failures politically to plunge into it wholeheartedly. Life, the last resort, becomes political through unruliness, through rejection of circulation within established cultural domain, through disturbances of poetry readings, through sowing seeds of real or perceived threat to established figures, through borderline madness. The self, fragmented and contradictory, through poetry and the everyday life, becomes the political weapon.

One of the telling episodes is the fates of two revolutionaries, acquaintances of Belano, as told by Felipe Muller: “the Peruvian wrote poems and the Cuban wrote stories. Both believed in the revolution and freedom, like pretty much every Latin American writer born in the fifties” (ibid, p. 468). Both lives ended somewhat tragically. The Peruvian Marxist poet gained recognition, travelled the world, but upon the return to his homeland encountered hostility by the state and the extreme right wing. He adjusts his beliefs, but remains
treated with suspicion. He is incapable to appeal to anyone, lives in poverty and isolation, and eventually drifts into madness.

The Cuban was a different story. He was gay and the revolutionary authorities weren’t prepared to tolerate homosexuals, so after a brief moment of glory during which he wrote two excellent novels (also brief), it wasn’t long before he was dragged through the shit and madness that passes for a revolution. Gradually, they began to take away what little he had. He lost his job, no one would publish him, he was pressured to become a police informer, he was followed, his mail was intercepted, in the end they threw him in jail. It seems the revolutionaries had two aims: to cure the Cuban of his homosexuality and, once he was cured, to persuade him to work for his country. Both were a joke. The Cuban held out. Like all good (or bad) Latin Americans, he wasn’t afraid of the police or poverty or not being published (ibid, p. 470).

The Cuban eventually is able to escape the island, lives in Miami and New York, publishes quite successfully, but eventually contracts AIDS: “His last days were days of loneliness, suffering, and rage at what he had lost forever” (ibid, p. 471). Several, admittedly in no way original, questions may be formulated from these and previous examples. Is Bolaño hinting that the political, even in its revolutionary aims, is doomed to failure? Does political, or revolution for that matter, inevitably lead to “the shit and madness”? Are these failures bound to particular times and geography (Latin America)? He does not provide the answers – not that he should – but the questions are felt, if not directly posed, throughout the novel. And here is where Bolaño comes to starker contrast with the writers of literary boom of previous generation.

What preoccupied writers of Latin American literary world, preoccupies Bolaño as well, albeit in different forms, namely the meaning and faith of modernity. Whereas the boom writers have hoped to accelerate processes of modernity in aesthetic as well as developmentalist ways, Bolaño takes on a much more ambiguous position. It is possible to extract that the degree of freedom, especially in its aesthetic manifestations, is made possible by modernism. The drawback, clearly, is that at the same time there is a sweeping wave of rationalization, institutionalization, law, control, and discipline. These, however, should not be seen as competing modernities, one liberating, based on desire and free association and the other oppressing and authoritarian, based on the controlling power of sovereign state, as argued by Hardt and Negri in their *Empire* – but integral parts of the same process. Even what is called rationalization, in modernity needs to undergo moments of crisis and restructuring. According to Gerald L. Bruns, “modernism in Heidegger’s sense – conceptual self-questioning – is more of an unruly, open-ended process than he thought it was, namely an anarchic process that [...] dispenses with the concept of foundations, whether old or new” (2006, p. 4). Flux, complexity, instability, absence of all-knowing and all-dictating center come to define the
new age. But is it really the case? Deleuze and Guattari claim that, “Civilized modern societies are defined by processes of decoding and deterritorialization. But what they deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other” (Deleuze and Guattari 2011, p. 257). This tension plays out prominently in The Savage Detectives as well.

The State, which increasingly plays the role of supporting staff for capital, is not defined by a mere controlling role. It allows for a certain degree of spontaneity and movement, even if at the same time it tries to channel newly decoded flows of sociality into a particular, appropriate, normative ways and forms of being. However, the process is dynamic and infinite and the role of resistance, evasion, imperceptibility becomes crucial in this hide-and-seek game. The Savage Detectives appears to express these tensions rather well, utilizing variety of formal, content and context scenarios. The frequent statement – or sentiment – by various characters in the novel, understanding, anticipating, or feeling without articulation, is to express inevitable outcome of this scenario negatively. Ontological and sociopolitical concerns seem to collapse into each other. But even this negativity with teleological underpinnings, I would argue, is taken humorously, lightly, and indeterminately. If nothing else, it serves as a provocation. Few examples below to illustrate this claim:

At certain point during the night, Maria said to me: disaster is imminent (Bolaño 2012, p. 71).
The problem with literature, like life, said Don Crispin, is that in the end people always turn into bastards (ibid, p. 101).
There’s no such thing as purity, boys, don’t fool yourselves, life is shit (ibid, p. 332).
And when she left I began to think about Álvaro Damián and the Laura Damián prize, which was finished, and the madmen of El Reposo, where no one has a place to lay his head, and about the month of April, not so much cruel as disastrous, and that’s when I knew beyond a doubt that everything was about to go from bad to worse (ibid, p. 281).

“The attempts at a consistent ethic-aesthetic”

What are the dangers of this ethic-aesthetical consistency and what are the tools to prevent it? For one, humor and playfulness in Bolaño play a particular role. Simon Critchley talking about the social function of humor says that “jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. […] Humor defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves” (2002, p. 1). There is death and disaster on the horizon, or even right here, breathing to one’s ear, but as if reiterating Beckett’s formula “I can’t go on, I’ll go on”, Bolaño annuls and
complicates too readily available oppositions of order and disaster, life and death. This is precisely the space of literature, it does not merely immortalize or provide with an afterlife, but point out, according to Blanchot, to the impossibility of dying, to the fact, that, contrary to the Christian tradition, “afterlife is our actual life” (1995, p. 8, emphasis added). In some ways, Bolaño’s writing frequently borders on nihilism, but at least in The Savage Detectives, the meaninglessness of life constantly meets affirmation of life. And this affirmation is frequently expressed through humor. Negativity serves as a stimulus, background, material, force. There is quite a bit of hope, but this hope is not placed upon resolution or any happy, even less inevitable, end, but that practice, the practice of life, is of importance. It is not the meaning or meaningfulness of life that is sought after, but the life itself, doing life, understanding that the choice is unavailable. “While we search for the antidote or the medicine to cure us, the new, that which can only be found in the unknown, we must continue to turn to sex, books, and travel, even knowing they will lead us into abyss, which, as it happens, is the only place we can find the cure” (Bolaño 2010, p. 142). This sums up Bolaño’s impossible quest – we must continue even if we cannot continue.

Community becomes one of those impossible quests and spheres of tension. Bolaño does not create binary oppositions of community versus individual or community versus society. Community portrayed is contingent, casual, telos-less. It is a constant flux based on loyalties, intensities, desires, alliances of love, literature, and friendships. The visceral realists are portrayed as a sect reminiscent of avant-gardists of the earlier part of the century, except without the seriousness which came to define those earlier formations. Purges of members do occur, but they are so informal, so unmotivated, without warning or argument, that nobody even knows whether they really took place or is it some kind of ongoing in-joke. Community is found elsewhere. It is not a formation that has clear-cut boundaries, rites of passage, norms and forms of behavior. It is rather Jean Luc-Nancy’s being-in-common, which does not create opposition of individual and community and neither does it call for an individual which is defined and bound in its selfhood:

The community that becomes a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...) necessarily loses the in of being-in-common. Or, it loses the with or the together that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being of togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is made of what retreats from it (1991, p. xxxix).

In Bolaño community or rather being-in-common occurs without predictable reasons, without set patterns. It simply exists. Community is not some longing for the secular paradise set against the coldness and cruelty of industrial state. It is also not something that is unavailable for the modern individual who finds no meaning in his or her existence. Being-in-common is immanent. How
exactly any given configuration occurs is a matter of intentions just as much
as it is a matter of pure chance, luck, coincidence. This somewhat delirious
and humorous passage – a work of memory – could serve to illustrate the
contingent nature of being-in-common in *The Savage Detectives*:

little by little the group began to dwindle, and meanwhile we kept talking, and
we talked and talked, or now that I think about it, maybe we didn’t talk much, I
would say instead that we thought and thought, but I can’t believe it, at that time
of night no one thinks much, the body is begging for rest (Bolaño 2012, p. 181).

And then there is literature – that mediated space of *being-in-common*,
crossing spatial and geographic, linguistic and cultural, present and past, life
and death. It would not be incorrect to state that Bolaño values greatly this
literary community which consists not so much of writers and poets but of
works itself. This literary space is another dimension that creates intangible,
intertextual, virtual world where one draws, adjusts, and readjusts lines of
alliance, seeks oneself and loses oneself. Literary references may appear
excessive and unnecessary, as empty significations, encyclopedic trivia, but
for Bolaño real and virtual collapse precisely in this register. He refuses to
privilege the real and material over the virtual. Literature does not constitute
inferior realm, secondary, supporting role for life. Life is literature and literature
is life. It is not the case that one seeks refuge and escape in literature when life
becomes unlivable and inhospitable. Literature may be that as well. Literature
is also a space of intensities, desires, hopes, dangers, and betrayals.

There is no purity in literature like there is no purity in life. Literary
community, like any community, is not something that is achieved, something
that becomes a bounded and final structure. Nancy’s point is that “a community
of literature [...] is a community of articulation and not of organization” (Nancy
1991, p. 77). It is articulation of singularities, which differs from individuals
which refers to indivisibility. For Deleuze and Guattari it is a practice of
becoming, of infinite potential to merge, connect, disconnect, transform,
assemble and disassemble. In other words, it is a tool of desubjectivization,
deindividualization. This literary community is like “infinite conversation”,
communication that does not communicate direct messages, but rather provides
structures for expression. It is a community that is boundless and always
resistant to its own closure.

This being-in-common should not be perceived as antithetical to singularity
with its ever expanding horizons of expression. Lines of flight occur against
and within the structures of domination (society, politics, state, capital, identity,
etc.) but they remain within being-in-common. In fact, this singular expressivity
is made possible by being-in-common. “Lines of flight [...] never consist
in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs, as when you
drill a hole in a pipe; there is no social system that does not leak from all
directions, even if it makes its segments increasingly rigid in order to seal the
lines of flight. There is nothing imaginary, nothing symbolic, about a line of flight. There is nothing more active than a line of flight, among animals or humans” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 204). In that sense, singularity is not in the position of exteriority. Once again, humorous illustration might serve to exemplify the point. Joaquín Font, placed in the asylum for the mentally ill, describes the visit of his friend:

Álvaro Damián said: I had to tell you. And I said: what did you have to tell me, Álvaro? And he said: that the Laura Damián prize was finished. I would’ve liked to ask him why, why he felt the need to tell me in particular, but then I thought that many people, especially here, had many things to tell me, and although the urge to share was something I couldn’t quite understand, I accepted it completely, since there was no harm in listening (Bolaño 2012, pp. 280-281).

Community and communication, in this case a bit delirious, point out to the contingency. There is something basic and in-common (speaking and listening) but it is not structured to the extent that the meaning needs to be passed and received as ordinance or command. Madness and deliriousness may also be constitutive of lines of flight. “From the viewpoint of micropolitics, a society is defined by its lines of flight, which are molecular. There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus, and the over-coding machine: things that are attributed to a “change in values”, the youth, women, the mad, etc” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 216). It points to limitations of structured discourses and it evades the confines of reason. In The Savage Detectives the trope of madness plays that role as well. Those who become mad or border on madness are portrayed not insane in the clinical sense, but as those who strive, willingly or not, for another kind of experience, insight, transgression. Thus they are able to articulate, or the articulation is possible to extract, something that is otherwise unavailable through rigidity of rational language. Bolaño, like with many other spheres, attempts to question, if not to collapse entirely, the oppositions of sanity and madness, health and illness. “In a brief moment of lucidity, I was sure that we’d all gone crazy. But then that moment of lucidity was displaced by a super-second of super-lucidity (if I can put it that way), in which I realized that this scene was the logical outcome of our ridiculous lives” (Bolaño 2012, p. 454). Madness, or presumed madness, serves to interfere into the over-coded flows, which channel actions and desires into acceptable forms within the apparatus of social production.

But desire should not be understood as unqualified good in itself, positive and active force. Desires can have much darker side to them. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, following Wilhelm Reich, we need to also attempt to account for desire that desires its own repression. This darker side of desire also constitutes a component within The Savage Detectives. Although unleashing of desire, most appropriately without consistency or proper object,
is among the major tropes in *The Savage Detectives*, thus being largely attuned to Deleuzean lines of flight and impulses of deterritorialization, at the same time, it attempts to grasp desire that is repressed. This repression occurs throughout the novel on various levels. Sometimes it is what could be called exterior factors (economic concerns, state interference, rigid organizations, social norms), but just as often, or more often, it is self-repression. These two forms of repression, of course, should not be seen as completely separate, rather they form intricate architecture of mutual dependence, it feeds on one another, becomes synthetic and interconnected. “Desire produces reality, or stated another way: desiring-production is one and the same thing as social production. It is not possible to attribute a special form of existence to desire, a mental or psychic reality that is presumably different from the material reality of social production” (Deleuze and Guattari 2011, p. 39).

Thus self-repression of desire takes places in *The Savage Detectives* in often banal and predictable ways. Deterritorializing impulses are substituted with territorializing ones. What drives it, are “human, all too human” concerns. For some it is safety, whether in economic or mental terms, for others stability, since uncertainty is too costly. Still, for others, it is appeal of the structure that offers status and various rewards. In other words, switching into regime of self-governance within the expected and acceptable confines of sociality and economic rationality, which turns incremental towards the end of 20th century. Exhaustion. Disillusionment. Cynicism. Realization of failure and attempt to leave behind, to forget naïve belief of even trying. This perception of failure, I would suggest, is intricately tied to self-repression of desire in *The Savage Detectives*. It would not be accurate to claim that those who become delirious, self-marginalized, some would even go so far as calling them “anti-social”, are the only ones resisting repression, while others, those who accept any respectable position within the world order, accept it. The initial impression might be correct along these lines, but upon closer reading, Bolaño articulates vision that is much more microscopically nuanced. The grey areas occur everywhere, no one is ever set in their position. Of course, the initial impulse is the strive for purity expressed through poetry, intensities of doing and being, rebellion, belief in revolution, but as the time passes, nuances become more pronounced. Figures of establishment might unexpectedly display complete disregard for established order through delirious drifts, marginal figures preoccupied with disavowal of “power” might suddenly display aberrant fascist-like features of their in-tact egos.

Thus, although overall the narrative is very much concerned with ways of resistance it does not succumb to providing clear-cut patterns of heroic resistance and consistency nor of top-down, external power which could be identified and battled. One character, Abel Romero, remembering the small gathering by Chilean exiles commemorating the 10th anniversary of Chile’s coup attempts to clarify this position:
Then I said what had been going around in my head. Belano, I said, the heart of the matter is knowing whether evil (or sin or crime or whatever you want to call it) is random or purposeful. If it’s purposeful, we can fight it, it’s hard to defeat, but we have a chance, like two boxers in the same weight class, more or less. If it’s random, on the other hand, we’re fucked, and we’ll just have to hope that God, if He exists, has mercy on us. And that’s what it all comes down to (Bolaño 2012, p. 372).

Of course, the statement above contains a hint of irony. What Bolaño seems to tackle is precisely the difficulty, or, perhaps, even impossibility, in distinguishing purposeful from random. Amadeo Silvatierra: “life makes us so fragile and anesthetizes us too (almost without our noticing it, gentlemen)” (ibid, p. 183). This ability to notice, to distinguish, to resist anesthetization are not portrayed as easy, easily accomplishable tasks. Agamben says that “the art of living […] is the capacity to keep ourselves in a harmonious relationship with that which escapes us” (2011, p. 114). And that is one of the features of this novel that is simultaneously productive and unsettling. It is not a simple morality tale or example of “committed literature” that would lead into mimetic re-enactments for those who are seeking new or improved ways of resistance.

Neither is it hopeless, resentful, disillusioned tale of failure, reminiscing youthful rebellion that was doomed to die off. It surly contains these elements, but at its best, it remains deeply concerned with the world, or rather with life, with all its layers, contradictions, riddles. In other words, it remains relevant and political precisely for its lack of closure and resistance to answers. As Agamben states: “The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them” (ibid, p. 113). It works as a literary desiring machine because so many of its elements are up for flexible assembling and disassembling. Perhaps it may connect with melancholy – or defeatist-machines, but it does not have to, it is not inscribed in its form, content, and structure. And here lays its strength.

Conclusion

In this essay an attempt was made to show how a region (in this case Latin America) can be approached through literary analysis. Literature may be an important tool for social and political critique, but at the same time it is not reducible to that, or to any other singular function (e.g. entertainment). Literature functions most successfully as social and political critique when it is approached as desubjectivizing, a-signifying, fragmentary, and a contradictory space of expression that refuses to be put into categories of either “pure” art
(implying apoliticism) or the political (implying that it should be directly applicable to advance a particular political agenda). Rather – and here I would follow the insights from Jacques Rancière – it should continuously work in tension with each extreme pole, without attempting to collapse one into the other. We should not expect from literature simple answers to our problems. Too many other fields are already doing that (with very modest results). Literature is the space where problems, conditions of our times (or those of the past or future) are approached in ways that are indirect, indefinite, ambiguous. When we feel that it has failed to provide us with sufficient answers, then that might be the hint that literature has succeeded. Our questions and emotions, which multiply when literature takes us into its labyrinths, become directly productive. Literature’s productivity stems from its potential to create new becomings. It expands, overspills into the world and thus it can no longer be seen as a contained object.

References

Castañeda, J., G. 1993. Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold
Notes

1 Most famously in seminal *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, a book written in 1845 by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento.

2 According to Qujano and Wallerstein, proponents of Marxist world-system theory: “The modern world-system was born in the long sixteenth century. The Americas as a geo-social construct were born in the long sixteenth century. The creation of the geo-social entity, the Americas, was the constitutive act of the modern world system. The Americas were not incorporated into an already capitalist world-economy. There could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas” (1992, p. 549).

3 “To excavate coloniality [...] one must always include and analyze the project of modernity, although the reverse is not true, because coloniality points to the absences that the narrative of modernity produces” (Mignolo 2005, p. xii).

4 “During this dizzying period of expansion, the Southern Cone began to look more like Europe and North America than the rest of Latin America or other parts of the Third World. The workers in the new factories formed powerful unions that negotiated middle-class salaries, and their children were sent off to study at newly built public universities. The yawning gap between the region’s polo-club elite and its peasant masses began to narrow. By the 1950s, Argentina had the largest middle class on the continent, and next door Uruguay had a literacy rate of 95 percent and offered free health care for all citizens. Developmentalism was so staggeringly successful for a time that the Southern Cone of Latin America became a potent symbol for poor countries around the world: here was proof that with smart, practical policies, aggressively implemented, the class divide between the First and Third World could actually be closed” (Klein 2007, p. 55).

5 The views, of course, remain conflicting. Dissenting voice in that regard, Carlos J. Alonso, argues that there was no radical break between the *novela de la tierra* and the novels of the boom: “It is now a customary attitude to extol the merits of modern Latin American literary works by measuring them against the works that preceded. But if our reading of these texts has established anything, it should be that the literature of the “Boom” can no longer define itself in contradistinction to the *novela de la tierra* except in a superficial and uncritical fashion. In fact, the condescension with which these novels are alluded to masks a continuity between them and the novels of the “Boom” that we are only now beginning to understand from the perspective offered us by the post-“Boom” ”. See Carlos J. Alonso 1990, p. 165.

6 Castañeda mentions not only García Márquez, but also Carlos Fuentes, befriending President Luis Echeverría and becoming ambassador to France, supporter of Sandinistas in Nicaragua; Octavio Paz being a member of Mexican foreign service and late in his life becoming staunch supporter of the PRI; Mario Vargas Llosa running for president in Peru in 1990 (1993, p. 196).

7 “Friedman first learned how to exploit a large-scale shock or crisis in the mid-seventies, when he acted as adviser to the Chilean dictator, General Augusto Pinochet. Not only were Chileans in a state of shock following Pinochet’s violent coup, but the country was also traumatized by severe hyperinflation. Friedman advised Pinochet to impose a
rapid-fire transformation of the economy – tax cuts, free trade, privatized services, cuts to social spending and deregulation. Eventually, Chileans even saw their public schools replaced with voucher-funded private ones. It was the most extreme capitalist makeover ever attempted anywhere, and it became known as a “Chicago School” revolution, since so many of the Pinochet’s economists had studied under Friedman at the University of Chicago. Friedman predicted that the speed, suddenness and scope of the economic shifts would provoke psychological reactions in the public that “facilitate the adjustment”. He coined a phrase for this painful tactic: economic “shock treatment”. In the decades since, whenever governments have imposed sweeping free-market programs, the all at-once shock treatment, or “shock therapy”, has been the method of choice. Pinochet also facilitated the adjustment with his own shock treatments; these were performed in the regime’s many torture cells, inflicted on the writhing bodies of those deemed most likely to stand in the way of the capitalist transformation. Many in Latin America saw a direct connection between the economic shocks that impoverished millions and the epidemic of torture that punished hundreds of thousands of people who believed in a different kind of society. As the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano asked, “How can this inequality be maintained if not through jolts of electric shock?” (Klein 2007, p.7).

“In the 1960s, art worked as a herald of utopia, trying to include in the present a future that seemed feasible. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was a memory of the defeat – seeing to it that the future that could never be would continue to have a place in the present, albeit by evoking the dead and the losses, the exiles and the hopelessness. Since the 1990s, a large number of artists speak of the instant: instead of works that portray long-term possible or historic scenes from history or long-term possibilities, they put forward installations and performances to be seen right now” (Canclini 2004, p. 13).

Among the major features of this turn was relations of debt that less-developed countries were increasingly incapable of managing, which lead to more severe “structural adjustment policies”, which became a hegemonic economic policy model known as Washington Consensus in mid-1990s. David Harvey states: “Hardly any developing country remained untouched, and in some cases, as in Latin America, such crises became endemic. These debt crises were orchestrated, managed, and controlled both to rationalize the system and to redistribute assets. Since 1980, it has been calculated, “over fifty Marshall Plans (over $4.6 trillion) have been sent by the peoples at the Periphery to their creditors in the Center”. “What a peculiar world”, sighs Stiglitz, “in which the poor countries are in effect subsidizing the richest”. What neoliberals call “confiscatory deflation” is, furthermore, nothing other than accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005, p.162).

Bolaño 2009, p. 50.

PRI – Partido Revolucionario Institucional – The Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled the country for over 70 years.

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – National Autonomous University of Mexico.

For an argument about “becoming-memory” in Amulet, see Bogue 2010, pp. 108-131.

For analysis of one of Bolano’s works in terms of “uncanniness” see Rodriguez 2010.

Literary machine could be described as an assemblage of enunciation or expression
(Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 88), which is fleeing the laws of representations, even if, at the same time, are entangled in them. “Reading a text is never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier. Rather, it is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force (Deleuze and Guattari 2011, p. 106).

16 Lines of flight refer not to a mere act of fleeing or passive resistance that it may imply, it is an active process which combines the actual and the virtual of deterritorialization: “Writing weds a war machine and lines of flight, abandoning the strata, segmentarities, sedentariness, the State apparatus (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 2).

17 Asked how much of his work is a self-portrait, Bolaño answers: “A self-portrait? Not much. A self-portrait requires a certain kind of ego, a willingness to look at yourself over and over again, a manifest interest in what you are or have been. Literature is full of autobiographies, some very good, but self-portraits tend to be very bad, including self-portraits in poetry, which at first would seem to be more suitable genre for self-portraiture than prose. Is my work autobiographical? In a sense, how could it not be?” (Bolaño 2009, p. 65).

18 From “Infrarealist’s manifesto” in Bolaño 2012.

19 See Hardt and Negri’s Empire 2000, especially pages 69-92 for this argument.

20 The full sentence, once again from Infrarealist’s manifesto, reads “The attempts at a consistent ethic-aesthetic are paved in betrayal or pathetic survivals” (Bolaño 2012).

21 Retelling of an anecdote might not be the best example of humor in The Savage Detectives but it may serve as an illustration: “A man goes walking in the forest. Like me, for example, walking in a forest like the Parco di Traiano or the Termes di Traiano, but a hundred times bigger and more unspoiled. And the man goes walking, I go walking, through the forest and I run into five hundred thousand Galicians who’re walking and crying. And then I stop (a kindly giant, an interested giant for the last time) and I ask them why they’re crying. And one of the Galicians stops and says: because we’re all alone and we’re lost” (Bolaño 2012, p. 401).

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