



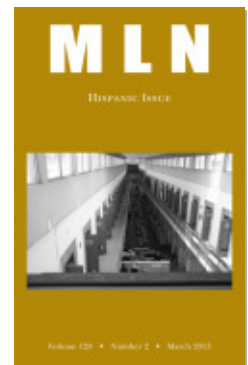
PROJECT MUSE®

"A la pinche modernidad": Literary Form and the End of History in Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes*

Emilio Sauri

MLN, Volume 125, Number 2, March 2010 (Hispanic Issue), pp. 406-432
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/mln.0.0257](https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.0.0257)



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mln/summary/v125/125.2.sauri.html>

“A la pinche modernidad”: Literary Form and the End of History in Roberto Bolaño’s *Los detectives salvajes*



Emilio Sauri



Roberto Bolaño, *Los detectives salvajes*

“Soñábamos con utopía y nos despertamos
gritando.”

Roberto Bolaño,
“Déjenlo todo, nuevamente”

I. The Aesthetic Event

In a lecture entitled “El cuento policial” [“The Detective Story” (1978)], Jorge Luis Borges observes that, “The detective novel has created a special type of reader,” and adds, “If Poe created the detective story, he subsequently created the reader of detective fiction” (492). Borges’s interest in this particular genre, of course, inspired a good deal of his own fictions, though what his remarks will point to here is a more generalizable concept of literature that entails a certain notion of the relationship between reader and text. For Borges, this “special type of reader” confronts literature with such “incredulity and suspicions” that he or she might turn any narrative into a detective story; if “told

that *Don Quixote* is a detective novel," this reader, he contends, will invariably conclude that, "Cervantes was the murderer, the guilty party" (492). Yet, what Borges describes is neither a reader who is liable to a misinterpretation of Cervantes's novel, nor simply some understanding of detective fiction in the sense of literary history or genres. Rather, his account draws our attention to what appears to be an insight into the general ontology of literature that detective fiction provides. For what literature is, according to Borges, is "an aesthetic event" that "requires the conjunction of reader and text" (491); and what the detective story highlights, he suggests, is the way in which the reader—any reader—forms the conditions of possibility for this "aesthetic event." Arguing that, "It is absurd to suppose that a book is much more than a book. It begins to exist when a reader opens it," Borges imagines that the participation of this reader is neither extrinsic nor secondary to but constitutive of the literary text. Thus, to the extent that the distinction between detective fiction and other kinds of fiction is afforded by "the way texts are read" (491)—rather than, say, a set of formal elements found within the work itself—the conceptualization of literary form implicit in this account ultimately requires an insistence on the primacy of this reader. Absent the "aesthetic event"—that is, this encounter between reader and text—the literary itself remains indefinable and indescribable. Borges subsequently maintains that the aesthetic "event" or "phenomenon" "can be similar to the moment when the book was created" (492); as such, the participation of the reader is assimilated to the role of the writer to suggest that both are equally constitutive of the text. For this reason, however, we might say that what is involved in the example of the reader who approaches Cervantes's seventeenth-century text as a detective novel is not so much a form of *méconnaissance* as it is a kind of rewriting of that same text.

No doubt the somewhat paradoxical conclusions drawn from Borges's remarks are familiar to his own readers and critics alike. Nevertheless, what appears to be as a typical Borgesian anomaly finds a number of ready equivalents in Latin American literature since the 1960s, not least in Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* [*The Savage Detectives* (1998)]. That this novel and Bolaño's work more generally engage the conventional elements of detective fiction certainly offers a means toward explicating this continuity, although a more meaningful set of connections between these and other authors is made available by a shared understanding of what literature is. Indeed, it is the exhaustion of this same conception of the literary that is dramatized,

this essay argues, in *Los detectives salvajes*, a novel in which both the story of a fictional band of poets known as the visceral realists and the history of literary modernism ends in the Sonora Desert in 1976. And as we will see, this exhaustion was precipitated by a continuing crisis in the production of global wealth that has not only had the profoundest consequences for literature, but which has also been brought to bear on the formation of contemporary Latin American cultural studies.

Thus, in the opening pages of *Los detectives salvajes*, Bolaño's diarist, Juan García Madero, provides us with a description of what he calls "real poetry," a more naive version of Borges's "aesthetic event" that nonetheless points to a similar conception of literary form. For García Madero, then, "real poetry" is something "you can sense," "you can feel it in the air, the way they say certain highly attuned animals (snakes, worms, rats and some birds) can detect an earthquake" (15/5).¹ And to the extent that an earthquake is felt—not read—what this analogy suggests is that a poem is intuited rather than understood. For García Madero, therefore, "poetry (real poetry)" is distinguishable from other forms of literary representation only insofar as it creates an effect, which, producing a reaction in its reader, gives rise to something "you can sense" or "you can feel." The distinction between poetry and "real poetry," in other words, is informed here by a notion of the literary that privileges the experience of the reader in such a way as to invest the encounter between reader and text with a constitutive function, recalling Borges's conviction that a "book" is not "much more than a book" without the reader. Without this subject there can be no experience; absent any experience as such, the words written on the page constitute anything but poetry.

And it is this experience that the novel's poet-protagonists, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, later imagine as being interchangeable with their reading of "Sión," the only example of visceral realist poetry included in the novel. Written by Bolaño's fictional poet, Cesárea Tinajero, "Sión" comprises not words, but three lines drawn onto the page; on top of each line, moreover, appears a small box. Amadeo Salvatierra, who provides Belano and Lima with the poem, subsequently explains, "I've been looking at it for more than forty years and I've never understood a goddamn thing" (376/354). What follows is the portrayal of an exercise in interpretation, an attempt, that

¹I quote both original texts and translations (when available), respectively, throughout the essay.

is, to answer two fundamental questions: What is a poem? and what does it mean? Salvatierra's efforts to understand what "Sión" means, nevertheless, are initially frustrated by Lima and Belano's response, "no, Amadeo, a poem doesn't mean anything, except that it's a poem, although this one, Cesárea's, might not even be that" (375/353). For his part, Salvatierra continuously refers to "Sión" as a "poem" even though he insists, "it doesn't mean a thing"; urged on by the question, "So why did you say it's a poem," Salvatierra explains, "because Cesárea said so If that woman had told me that a piece of her shit wrapped in a shopping bag was a poem I would have believed it." Belano and Lima, nonetheless, attempt to demonstrate that "Sión" has a meaning irrespective of its status as a poem. To this end, they tell Salvatierra, "Let's begin with the title What do you think it means?" (398/374). Moving through a handful of choices, Belano and Lima eventually convince him that it must allude to "Mount Zion." The next move is telling: "What does the straight line *suggest to you*, Amadeo? . . . Before you saw a straight line and that *made you think* of calmness" (399/375, my emphasis). Culminating in the revelation of the word *navegación* (navigation) hidden behind the word "Sión," Belano and Lima's cross-examination proposes a solution to the "mystery" (377/374): the three figures represent "a boat on a calm sea, a boat on a choppy sea, and a boat in a storm" (401/377), an interpretation corroborated by Belano, who recalls having seen the same three lines "when he was little," "In a dream" (375/353). What this scene suggests, therefore, is not that "Sión" is a poem "because Cesárea said so"—and in fact, it "might not even be" a poem—but rather that its meaning—the object of interpretation—is indistinguishable from the effect it has on its reader/ beholder. Transforming acts of interpretation into a consideration of what the artwork "made you think of," moreover, requires the visceral realist to locate the meaning of the poem/drawing on the side of the subject; a subject, that is to say, whose experience of the work of art (the reactions it elicits), becomes the very meaning of the poem.

At this point it might occur to us that seeing three lines drawn on a page is not quite the same thing as reading a text composed of words. Yet, it is precisely the attempt to undo the distinction between *seeing* and *reading*—as well as between *lines* and *words*—that underlies this scene. Further, the same operation that collapses the difference between *meaning* and *effect* will also result in a formal leveling of the difference between artworks and objects. For insofar as various objects like the lines in Belano's dream might provoke the same reaction as

Cesárea's poem—that is, cause someone to think of “a calm sea,” “a choppy sea” and “a storm”—then the distinction between the poem and the dream, to say nothing of “a piece of her shit,” vanishes altogether. What “Sión” is, in other words, in no way bears on its capacity to communicate meaning, since meaning is conceived here as being interchangeable with the effect; the effect, that is to say, which the text creates and the reader experiences. Hence, Belano and Lima's indifference to any question regarding the status of “Sión” as a poem. At the same time, if “a poem doesn't mean anything, except that it's a poem,” then any attempt to understand the meaning of Cesárea's “Sión” becomes an attempt to understand what it is. For reasons we have already touched on, however, what a poem is (as well as what it means) is in this scene determined entirely by its capacity to create an experience for the reader. And what this conflation of literary form and the reader's experience suggests is that words are no more constitutive of poetry than lines drawn on a page. To the extent, then, that this concept of literary form is afforded by the breakdown of the distinction between meaning and effect, as well as between reading and experiencing, Belano and Lima's interpretation ultimately results in a privileging of the subject's encounter with that object (the reader's experience), and in so doing imagines “Sión” as a particular form of what García Madero calls “real poetry,” and what Borges describes as the “aesthetic event.”

Thus, the concept of literary form explored here is attended by the effort to dovetail the interpretation of the text (our beliefs as regards its meaning) to the experience of the text (what “you can feel,” what it “made you think of”). Yet, this articulation of reading and experiencing entails a transformation of the text into an object, which, as we have seen, requires the visceral realist to insist on the primacy of the subject (reader, beholder) *vis-à-vis* the work of art (poem, picture). What this means, moreover, is that any interpretation of a given text constitutes nothing but an account of a particular reader's experience. Salvatierra's responses to Lima and Belano's questions reveal nothing with respect to what he believes “Sión” means, but rather provide a description of his responses to the “poem.” For this reason, however, we might say that Bolaño's protagonists seek not to convince Salvatierra of an interpretation, but instead to have him see what they see (“a calm sea,” “a choppy sea,” “a storm”).² For Belano and Lima, in

²This is not to say—far from it—that the reactions a given individual has to particular persons, things or ideas cannot be conceived as objects of interpretation. Rather, the point is that our reactions to persons, things, or ideas are in no way constitutive of

other words, the difference between interpretations is the difference between what one reader/ beholder and another see when looking at the same object. And insofar as what the reader/ beholder sees is determined entirely by his or her standpoint (the position, that is, from which he or she is able to view the object), then the difference between one interpretation and another must be conceived as nothing more than the difference between subject-positions; what the reader/ beholder sees, and therefore what the lines drawn on the page mean, are imagined as being inextricable from the different positions he or she might assume (literally where one stands).

II. "To goddamned modernity"

Bolaño's novel, then, points to a theory of poetic form in which neither the ontology of the work of art (what a poem is) nor its interpretation (what the poem means) is conceivable without reference to the subject. The issue centering on the relationship between the literary text and the reader, nonetheless, is not characteristic of Bolaño's or Borges's fictions alone, and indeed the attempt to define this relationship has in many ways been central to much Latin American literature since the 1950s. One need only think of Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch* (1963)], in which the distinction between what its author had notoriously described as "el lector cómplice" ["the reader accomplice"] and "el lector-hembra" ["the female reader"] is afforded by the several ways in which the novel might be read.³ Cortázar, we

what we believe about them. And while our experiences may no doubt inform those beliefs, these remain irreducible to any account of the manner in which we come to have them. Indeed, no individual is "convinced" when he or she has an experience, inasmuch as that experience is nothing more than the effect created by a particular stimulus (verbal, physical, cognitive). One might think here of Rorschach blots, which are not "understood" but used to provoke responses (create an effect). Further, even if Belano and Lima can be said to be attempting to convince Salvatierra of the reaction each figure ought to provoke, disregarding several of his responses, while privileging others, interpretation here would involve either something like the effort to convince Salvatierra of what he should think of while looking at a Rorschach blot, or the attempt to persuade Salvatierra that he is, in fact, having an experience about which he remains unaware. Of course, the comparison to the Rorschach inkblot test is not unintentional: in Bolaño's *Estrella distante* [*Distant Star* (1996)]—a novel that centers on both the poetic vanguard and Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile—Arturo Belano recounts the first time he sees Carlos Wieder aerial poetry, recalling, "Over Concepción the symmetrical outline of the plane looked like a Rorschach blot" (39/29).

³ *Rayuela*, as is well known, can be read either sequentially, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 56, or in the order prescribed by the table included in the introduction, whereby readers "hopscotch" between chapters in a non-linear fashion. Cortázar's introduction

know, repeatedly draws this distinction throughout the novel's third section, "From Diverse Sides," in which the fragments devoted to the fictional author, Morelli, lay bare the aesthetic principle that underlies *Rayuela's* formal structure.

Nowhere is this principle more evident than in Cortázar's account of the manner in which Morelli "tried to justify his narrative incoherencies, maintaining that the life of others, such as it comes to us in so-called reality, is not a movie but still photography." Here the narrator explains that for Morelli, "giving coherence"—which "would have been so very pleasing to the reader he called the female-reader"—requires the writer to fill in "with literature, presumptions, hypotheses, and inventions the gaps between one and another photograph." Alternatively, narrative "incoherencies" would "place the reader in conditions ripe for taking a chance, for participating almost, in the destiny of characters" and for creating "the bridges between one and another instant" (646–47/468). Needless to say, the contrast between "coherence" and "incoherencies" (or "movie" and "photographs") corresponds to the different ways in which one might read *Rayuela*: whereas the sequential reading reduces events to a series of effects and causes to provide readers with a unified narrative, the non-linear reading preserves the "gaps" between these instances to form the very conditions "for participating." For this reason, the narrator explains, "The book would have to be something like those sketches proposed by Gestalt psychologists, and therefore, certain lines would induce the observer to trace imaginatively the ones that would complete the figure" (647/469). And what this comparison between "book" and "sketches" points to is a text—in particular Morelli's book, though also *Rayuela's* "second" book—that does not simply allow for, but requires, the participation of the reader ("the reader-accomplice") to achieve a certain completeness. What Cortázar imagines here, in other words, is the conjunction of reader and text that Borges understands as the "aesthetic event," but which in *Rayuela* becomes the condition of possibility for not only the reader-accomplice, but also a normative distinction between active and passive modes of reading—that is, between what is imagined as better and worse ways of reading the text.

No doubt the same aesthetic principle that underlies this concept of literary form had already been familiar to the European avant-gardes

consequently claims, "In its own way, this book consists of many books, but two books above all" (n.p.).

that sought to undermine those modes of reception sanctioned by the so-called institution of art. To this end, the efforts of early twentieth-century vanguards were most often directed at the production of effects capable of provoking particular responses—usually experienced as shock—from its audience, though movements like Dada and surrealism also mobilized artistic techniques such as montage as a means of prompting the reader or beholder to actively participate in the construction of the “work.” Yet, the development of this concept was, from the perspective of the historical avant-garde, not simply the upshot of an enthusiasm for a different kind of artwork; on the contrary, the attempt to eliminate the distinction between producer and recipient—or writer and reader—was intended to annul the category of “work” altogether.⁴ It might come as no surprise, then, that Morelli expresses a similar desire for a new novel, which would, nonetheless, entail “a rejection of literature.” That Cortázar is able to imagine an investment in the literary congruent with this rejection of literature, nevertheless, depends entirely on the conceptualization of a text, which, making an “accomplice” of the reader, would efface the difference between reading and writing entirely. In this way, “the reading will abolish reader’s time and substitute author’s time,” giving rise to what Morelli calls an “antinovel” (560/397), a literary conceit which we have described more generally as the “aesthetic event,” and which is animated here by the desire for a specific type of reader.⁵

That Bolaño’s visceral realists are meant to recall something like Cortázar’s “reader-accomplice” can be clearly seen in the conclusion of Lima and Belano’s interpretation of “Sión.” Here they explain that, “The poem is a joke,” and tell Salvatierra, “Amadeo, look: add a sail

⁴As Peter Bürger observes, “Given the avant-gardiste intention to do away with art as a sphere that is separate from the praxis of life, it is logical to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient.” And what this means for Bürger is that, “Beyond the coincidence of producer and recipient that this demand implies, there is the fact that these concepts lose their meaning: producers and recipients no longer exist” (53).

⁵Needless to say, it seems unlikely that this “antinovel” would bring about the self-negation of the category of “work” anticipated by the historical avant-garde, and certainly *Rayuela*’s failure to produce anything quite aside from “the female reader” is as remarkable as the boldness of its aims. Nevertheless, the point is not to underscore the practical shortcomings of Cortázar’s literary conceits, but rather to understand that those conceits are indicative of an effort to create a specific type of reader; an effort that for Cortázar necessarily remains incomplete. Indeed, Neil Larsen reminds us that this failure is already signaled by the narrating voice itself, while Brett Levinson has similarly argued that, “The avant-garde components of modernist literature exhaust themselves in the Boom that recites them. This indeed is the point of Cortázar’s great experiment, *Rayuela*: the exhaustion and even absurdity of literary representation. In *Rayuela*, experimentation and its parody coincide” (23).

to each of the rectangles, like this" (376/376); Lima and Belano subsequently suggest that Tinajero's poem is not unlike those "sketches" whose lines, according to Cortázar's narrator, "would induce the observer" to "complete the figure." And if we understand the visceral realists in this way—as active readers who participate in the construction of the text—then, Bolaño's readers have not so much modified as they have completed Tinajero's poem. To the extent that "Sión" reproduces the relationship between reader and text that Cortázar believes a non-linear reading of *Rayuela* might afford—and which, as we have already seen, Borges's "aesthetic event" requires—we might say that *Los detectives salvajes* points to a concept of literary form unique to an earlier generation of Latin American writers. Of course, the more or less commonly recognized profundity of Borges's and Cortázar's influence on the literary tradition of Latin America certainly offers a means toward explaining the continuity between these moments; that Bolaño himself cites his "permanent debt" ("Acerca" 327) to both of these authors presents another means. The point here, nonetheless, will not be to trace Borges's and Cortázar's influence, but to demonstrate how this concept of literary form is expressive of a cultural logic, which, as we will see, reaches a point of exhaustion in *Los detectives salvajes*.

At the same time, however, what visceral realism is remains somewhat unclear, even to most of the visceral realists themselves. Taking their name from what García Madero believes had been "a Mexican avant-garde group" that was "active in the twenties or maybe thirties," but which had "vanished in the Sonora desert" (17/6–7), Bolaño's visceral realists do nevertheless lay claim to a kinship of sorts between themselves and the *vanguardistas* of the past, and certainly their desire to "change Latin American poetry" (17/7) and "create a movement on a Latin American scale" (36/25) echoes the aims of countless twentieth-century avant-gardes that appeared throughout Latin America and beyond. And although the contempt with which they treat the "institution" of Mexican poetry (and art more generally) will lead characters such as Manuel Maples Arce to conclude that, "All poets, even the most avant-garde, need a father. But these poets were meant to be orphans" (177/161), the visceral realists will turn to the "mother of the visceral realists" (461/434). Belano and Lima are subsequently described throughout much of the novel's first section as searching for information about Cesárea Tinajero, the obscure poet who, having vanished from Mexico City decades earlier, appears to have left nothing behind, except for the poem "Sión."

That the two poets decide to travel to the Sonora Desert “to find Cesárea Tinajero” and her “Complete Works” (553/522) soon after reading “Sión” may very well suggest something about its significance to visceral realism, although it is Salvatierra who gives us some indication of the aesthetic possibilities that Belano and Lima seem to recognize in the only poem Tinajero published. Indeed, Salvatierra’s monologue not only recalls their interest in Tinajero, but also and more importantly gestures toward a commitment to aesthetic innovation that, historically, had underwritten the formation of Latin America’s literary vanguards. In *Los detectives salvajes*, that commitment is in many ways embodied by *estridentismo*, the Mexican artistic movement founded by Manuel Maples Arce and described here as bearing a desire to intervene in—rather than merely represent—reality, as suggested by Arce’s “plan for an avant-garde city, Stridentopolis” (355/332–33). Needless to say, this same desire had informed the objectives of many competing avant-gardes throughout the twentieth century, though it will acquire a somewhat different valence within the context of Latin America. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Salvatierra’s final conversation with Tinajero: “[A]ll of us Mexicans are more visceral realists than stridentists, but what does it matter? Stridentism and visceral realism are just two masks to get us to where we really want to go. And where is that? she said. To modernity, Cesárea, I said, to goddamned modernity” (460/433).

Significantly, Tinajero remains unconvinced and shortly thereafter departs from Mexico City never to return; Salvatierra, nonetheless, lays bare the promise of aesthetic renewal that had defined countless Latin American *vanguardias* throughout the twentieth century. To be sure, the European movements Adorno and Lukács had conceived as “the most advanced stage of art” of an equally advanced “bourgeois society” responded to radical transformations brought about by the processes of modernity.⁶ Yet, in Latin America, where vanguards encountered those limitations endemic to semiperipheral cultural production, underdevelopment had rendered literature into a means of achieving that same modernity. And insofar as this approach to modernity requires one to cross geographical fault lines rather than temporal discontinuities, the production of new vanguards in Latin America was more often than not undertaken with an eye to “the world republic of letters” and to overcoming the impasses of uneven development.⁷

⁶See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* 1.

⁷In her *World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova provides an account of what she calls the world literary system. “The key to understanding how this literary world operates,”

What Belano and Lima discover in Tinajero's poem, however, is not some means of getting "to goddamned modernity" and instead, for reasons that will become clearer, we might understand visceral realism as driving literature to its very exhaustion. And it is in this sense that *Los detectives salvajes* presents us with neither a new chapter in the literary history of Latin America, nor the realization of a "new" Latin American novel, but rather the "end of literature" itself.

III. From "Boom" to Bust

Needless to say, the affinity to the aims of the historical avant-garde found in Cortázar's novel had similarly informed the work of an earlier generation of Latin American writers, who had at various moments appropriated literary techniques and experimental forms from their European counterparts. Any appropriative gesture as such, however, acquires an entirely new significance in the context of the "boom" literatures of the 1960s. Of course, a number of the writers themselves—not least Cortázar, but also Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa—had promoted the "boom" both as the apogee of Latin American literature and as heir to literary modernism; and indeed *Rayuela* is generally read as ushering in what would become the "new Latin American novel." Here the avant-garde and antirealist tendencies indicative of a European and Anglo-American modernism is taken up not with an eye to the demolition of the "institution of art" but as a means toward the construction of what a number of "boom" writers and their critics would describe as a "modern" literary tradition with Latin American characteristics.⁸ (It is not a mere

Casanova writes, "lies in recognizing that its boundaries, its capitals, its highways, and its forms of communication do not completely coincide with those of the political and economic world" (11). There are, of course, any number of instances in which these do coincide, and indeed countless Latin American writers, particularly from the 1950s through the 1970s, had imagined literature as a way of overcoming the asymmetries of both economic and cultural production. More importantly, the concept of world literature proposed by Casanova, as Roberto Schwarz points out, ultimately separates "the work from the energies supplied by its historical context" (66/91). What this emphasis on "literary capital" entails, in other words, is a diminution of its relationship to real capital, which produces both these asymmetries as well as the impetus to overcome them. Indeed, it is as if Casanova reproduces—rather than critiques—what we might understand today as the somewhat naive, though no less utopian, sentiments of twentieth-century Latin American vanguards.

⁸Idelberg Avelar argues that, "The denial of tradition, however, rather than a simple repetition of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde gesture, displayed a rather unique and complex dialectic. The image of the ultramodernist radically breaking with every-

coincidence that this moment saw the “discovery” of both Borges and Alejo Carpentier as well.) And although literary historians are today less inclined to take these pronouncements at face value, few would disagree that the emergence of the “boom” bears witness to a historical shift that has had a lasting impact on cultural production within Latin America. Considering that this shift takes place in the course of a period marked by profound changes in not only the region’s social and economic structures (to which we will return later), but also in the political reality of the continent, it is not surprising that the critical tendency has been to read the “boom” and its modernizing impulse as a radicalization of the Latin American novel.⁹

From this perspective, then, the appropriation of modernist aesthetics beings to look less like a purely “cultural revolution,” and more like what Ernesto “Che” Guevara had in the course of the 1960s called the “vanguard” of Latin American politics: the Cuban Revolution. This is the viewpoint, for example, Diana Sorensen assumes when she notes that, “The sense of revelation that impregnated the cultural production of the sixties . . . must be read in conjunction with the inaugural impulses of the Revolution” (9). This reading appears all the more justifiable when we recall the commitment to Cuban politics that a number of “boom” writers openly claimed in the early 1960s. Further, Cortázar’s own remarks on the artistic possibilities afforded by the Revolution certainly gesture toward a similar relationship between cultural and social revolution, and indeed, as critics have already pointed out, his “lector-cómplice” is in many ways a literary

thing that preceded him/her was never valid for Latin American literature, a region where the persistence of tradition was so ineluctable that it could not possibly be disregarded” (31). Yet, considering the degree to which “the persistence of tradition” equally marks the work of a U.S. Southern writer like William Faulkner, one wonders whether this “persistence of tradition” is instead a function of modernism itself. To be sure, both the U.S. South between the world wars and Latin America after World War II are regions similarly located on the semiperiphery of Capital; and yet, the so-called “return to origins” can be said to be equally indicative of modernist literary production in metropolitan centers such as the United States, England, and France alike. The question, in other words, is whether this desire to preserve the past—which, in modernist art, and the novel specifically, more often than not exists alongside a desire to break with that same past—is not constitutive of modernism itself.

⁹No doubt the industrialization of national economies set in motion in the 1930s had produced alterations in Latin American societies, which would, nearly three decades later, result in the professionalization of writers, the creation of a wider readership, and new patterns of consumption—patterns, moreover, that any number of commentators have argued stamps the “boom” as little more than a market phenomenon. See, for example, Angel Rama’s essay “El ‘boom’ en perspectiva” [“The ‘boom’ in Perspective”].

equivalent of Guevara's *foquismo*.¹⁰ But this commitment on the part of the "boom" authors and the Revolution tells us very little about the possible continuity between artistic ambitions and political objectives, if only because neither is absolutely reducible to the other. For this reason, a critic like Sorensen will maintain that the relationship between artistic and political vanguard "is less a matter of origin and causality than a productive conjunction that should be read in unison as a set of conditions of possibility contributing to the quality of inter-related experiences" (16). It is this "productive conjunction," then, that allows her to conceive the "boom" as a conjunction of "formal experimentation and political engagement" (187) in a reading that reproduces the general tenor of much Latin American criticism.¹¹

¹⁰For an account of the parallels between Cortázar's writing and Guevara's *foquismo*, see Jean Franco's essay "Julio Cortázar: Utopia and Everyday Life." We should remember, moreover, that the Cuban government's own investment in state cultural institutions such as the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) and Casa de las Américas signals a similar dovetailing of political commitment and art, particularly of film and literature.

¹¹More precisely, what Sorensen discovers in the "boom" is "a sense of history that is both utopian and nostalgic"—a sense of history that does not simply reflect "the immanence of transformation" indicative of the political aims of the Revolution, but which "coexists with a yearning for origins." The return to "origins" that underlies novels like Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* [*The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962)], as well as García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, Mario Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* [*The Green House* (1965)] and Cortázar's *Rayuela* had, according to Sorensen, presented readers with those possibilities refused by the economic, political, and social impasses endemic to the region. "Nostalgia" is here shorn of its traditionalist—to say nothing of reactionary—connotations to suggest a "look back" to a past that, in effect, could point to a future radically different from the present. That this nostalgia is articulated exclusively in "national and continental terms" (187), moreover, indicates that the remembering subject alluded to cannot be any subject, and is instead located within particular national (Mexican, Columbian), regional (Latin American), and transnational contexts. And it is in this sense that the "origins" that the "boom" longs for belong strictly to a cultural past—that is, a past that one might claim as a Mexican, Columbian, or Latin American. The "nostalgic" thrust of the "boom" novel, therefore, is toward the creation of a kind of cultural memory, the recollection of one's own past. For Sorensen, this emphasis on cultural memory is subsequently attended by negotiations between different identities (cultural, national, gender, class) that take place within various contexts, and which she conceives as the key to understanding the politics of the 1960s. For insofar as the relationship between past and present is mediated by the subject alone—mediated, that is to say by his or her memory—, any conception of the future, she suggests, will ultimately be determined by the identity of this subject as well as by the position he or she assumes within the totality of social relations. And yet, if remembering (the "look back") might constitute "a precondition for imagining other possible outcomes" (187)—constitute, that is, the conditions of possibility for any form of politics directed at transforming the present—then the political is for Sorensen nothing more than an expression of one's identity.

But from this perspective, politics—the commitment to a given ideology (capitalism or socialism)—is ultimately reduced to a form of "identity politics"—the commitment

But this conjunction of aesthetic and politics will in the context of the “boom” produce various outcomes, so that questions about the relationship between reader and text central to Cortázar’s *Rayuela* will in a novel like García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1968)] bear entirely different results. Here the modernist emphasis on formal experimentation gives rise to effects that recall the work of avant-garde movements such as surrealism, though, as García Márquez himself has suggested, the well-known juxtaposition of the everyday and the extraordinary associated with “magical realism” is not simply intended to shock readers out of stultifying modes of reception, nor even to produce Cortázar’s distinction between active and passive modes of reading. Responding to the comment that his European readers “often note the magic of the things you recount, but not the reality that inspires them,” García Márquez maintains that this is “because their rationalism prevents them from seeing that reality does not end in the price of tomatoes or of eggs.” He continues: “One need only open the newspapers to know that among us extraordinary things occur every day. I know plain folk who have read *Cien años de soledad* with great pleasure and very carefully, but without being surprised, because in the end I’m not telling them anything that is all that different from the lives they live” (48, my translation). Of course, although there are any number of reasons to be skeptical about García Márquez’s comments, they do nonetheless gesture toward the theoretical underpinnings of an idealized form of “magical realism.” For what appears to be nothing but the mere application of modernist techniques of estrangement turns out to be a commitment to an authentic representation of reality that draws a line between those readers who consider the novel’s “magical” elements (walking dead, levitating priests) as “extraordinary” and those who regard these same elements as “quotidian.” That this distinction corresponds to the difference between “Latin American” and “European” perspectives or positions, moreover, indicates that the interest in the relationship

to who we are. To be sure, the history of colonialism, dependency, and uneven development may certainly have informed the ascendancy of a socialist politics throughout the region in the 1960s, though the commitment to this politics and the claims to a particular cultural past are structurally irreconcilable. Any claim as such, in other words, is merely an assertion of the subject’s identity, which, corresponding a specific position with wide-ranging networks of social relations (as a man, Cuban, or Latin American), may inform the commitment to a political ideology, but in no way determines the validity of those beliefs (as right or wrong). Identities, that is, constitute nothing more than objects of affect, whose loss is felt (mourned) precisely because these were at one time or another one’s own.

between reader and text is attended here by the introduction of an entirely new consideration: the identity of the reader. In this way, magical realism transforms the literary text into a primary technology for the production of a particular identity—an identity, in other words, that would allow readers to count themselves among the Latin American “us” that García Márquez evokes here.

Thus, the appropriation of avant-garde tendencies characteristic of the “boom” bears witness to a shift away from the effort to create a specific type of reader to an investment in the identity of the reader. And insofar as the difference between one identity and another (barring essentialism) can be understood as the difference between those positions individual and collective subjects occupy within wide-ranging networks of social relations—as, for example, a Latin American—then what “magical realism” allows readers to do is assume a particular subject-position. For this reason, however, we might say that the reading of the “boom” as a marriage of aesthetics and politics is justifiable only if the political aims of the Cuban Revolution are rewritten as solely anti-imperialist in scope, and in such a way as to evacuate its socialist content altogether. Needless to say, the ideological core of Cuban socialism had conceived the thoroughgoing restructuring of property relations (both in Cuba and throughout the world) as the only alternative to those structures of inequality constitutive of liberal capitalism. But while a number of writers, including García Márquez, had believed this investment in a Latin American identity could afford a form of subjectivity capable of being bootstrapped up to a regional politics, the distinction insisted on by the Revolution—between socialism and capitalism (right/wrong beliefs)—is itself irreducible to the difference insisted on by the “boom”—between regions or cultures (different identities); and indeed, the ideological commitment to either socialism or capitalism renders identities as such irrelevant. One need only remember here that the anti-imperialist commitment to regional identity indicative of the “boom” was something both the socialist Left and pro-capitalist Right in Latin America could agree to celebrate throughout the 1960s, precisely because it left the issue they would disagree on—the problem of economic inequality—untouched.

But if this interest in the relationship between text and reader finds a sort of afterlife in *Los detectives salvajes*, it is only to signal the complete exhaustion of the literary itself. For while visceral realism may be said to innovatively revise the literary project of the “boom,” it nonetheless appears all but worn out as early as 1977 in a narrative that extends to 1996, so that what remains after Belano and

Lima leave Mexico City subsequently proves little more than a mere parody of previous avant-gardes, replete with meaningless purges and schisms and reduced to a collection of outdated and derivative artistic technologies. To understand why this might be the case we must remember that what Bolaño describes elsewhere as a “generational defeat” at the heart of his novel had not been experienced as a literary defeat alone, and insofar as *Los detectives salvajes* is the story of a fictional band of poets known as the visceral realists, it is also the story of an entire generation of Latin Americans devastated by the rise of military dictatorships and the dismantling of political utopias alike, a story underwritten by a brutal integration into the market precipitated by the “neoliberal turn” of the 1970s.¹²

At the same time, it is equally important to keep in mind that this turn was, in effect, a response to a crisis in the production of global wealth, which, in the context of Latin America, would result in not only the capitulation of what the Second World conceived as a genuinely alternative modernity, but also the foundering of both socialist and non-socialist versions of the interventionist state. And if the “boom,” as Brett Levinson has shown, could imagine itself as a “successful and completed Latin American *modernist* (artistic) endeavor, deemed to compensate for Latin America’s incomplete *modernization* (economic, political) process” (22), the conviction that literature could afford (what Octavio Paz had called) a “compensatory modernity” vanishes altogether soon after the illusions of development populism give way to the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. There is no question therefore that by 1975—the year in which Bolaño’s novel begins—the conditions of possibility for cultural—to say nothing of economic—modernization had been radically altered, if not altogether eliminated. Set in motion by the failure of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) in the 1960s and consolidated under the debt crisis of the 1980s, this “collapse of modernization” everywhere points to the impossibility of overcoming the impasses of uneven development.¹³

¹²Roberto Bolaño, “Acerca de «Los detectives salvajes»” 327.

¹³Citing *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung* [*The Collapse of Modernization*], Neil Larsen explains that, according to Robert Kurz, “the effective failure of the third (and ‘second’) world’s nationalist modernization projects, whether carried out or not in the name of an ideology of cultural nationalism, results from a deepening, global crisis of capital accumulation and capitalist reproduction that, in the *very process* of shifting the social burden of the crisis on the one ‘newly industrializing’ economies, also marks its own increasing incapacity to exploit this fact to advantage in expanding the basis of accumulation as a whole.” For this reason, “The attempt to carry out a ‘recupera-

But for this reason, what appears in *Los detectives salvajes* to be an exclusively literary problematic will entail a specifically political problem originating from this same crisis. For while Lima and Belano's identity is in no way brought to bear on their interpretation of "Sión," Bolaño simply literalizes the difference between identities as the difference between where one stands, thereby reproducing the bare-bones structure of identity at the heart of the "boom" novel. Further, to the extent that the insistence on the primacy of the subject's position renders interpretation (what one believes the text means) inextricable from the position the reader/ beholder occupies in relation to the text (quite literally where you stand), the difference between particular beliefs (concerning its meaning) becomes descriptive rather than normative. And it is precisely the complete absence of this normative dimension that Francis Fukuyama had notoriously described in 1989 as marking the "end of history," in which disagreements with regard to political ideologies—not least the conflict between socialism and capitalism—had been superseded by what he imagined as the "total exhaustion of viable systemic alternatives" to political liberalism and the free market.

IV. "What's outside the window?"

What is understood here as the "end of literature," then, signals a change both in the social meaning and constitution of this particular art form; a change, in other words, that points not simply to the emergence of a new hierarchy among the arts, but more importantly to an exhaustion of aesthetic and political possibility afforded by the literary. And insofar as this exhaustion signals a no less than total subsumption into the market under the sign of neoliberalism, then the "end of literature" emerges from the same transformations in the political configuration of the world economy that would culminate in the end of the cold war; a moment that was described as the triumph of capitalism, but which is, in effect, a deepening of a crisis in the global economic system. Meanwhile, as many critics have pointed out, it is in this series of capitulations that contemporary Latin American cultural studies finds its origins. And yet, there is an equally important

tive modernization' (Kurz's *nachholende Modernisierung*) [...] was the first to fall victim to the present global crisis of capitalism" (*Determinations* 49). My own understanding of the "collapse of modernization" is indebted to Larsen's account, as well as to the Portuguese translation of Kurz's book, *O colapso da modernização*.

sense in which cultural studies not only extends the investment in identity and difference that had defined the “boom,” but also, as John Beverley has noted, ends up “legitimizing in some ways the market” (“After Communism” 42).

At the same time, Beverley has recently observed that neoliberalism has achieved a form of “cultural dehierarchization” that has rendered a “normative vision and standard” characteristic of an older Left obsolete; it is moreover precisely this “normative” function and the developmentalist commitment to national and regional modernization, as well as the desire for modernity more generally, that he believes precipitated the downfall of socialism proper.¹⁴ Rather than abandon the project of the Left, however, Beverley proposes a “new Latin Americanism” “bound to the question of how to imagine a new version of the socialist project not tied to a teleology of modernity,” a socialist project divested of modernizing impulses and capable of producing a more effective mediation between popular sectors and regional politics by wresting decentralizing energies from the market. Articulating the “affirmation of what is Latin American” with “the necessity to displace capitalism,” this new Latin Americanism would combine a politics of “los de abajo” [“those below”] and a politics of “el otro” [“the other”], and in so doing, provide the foundations for what he identifies as the “multinational state.”

To be sure, the slow unraveling of the Left and the more conspicuous death of Communism in Latin America involved the liquidation of what the Second World offered as an alternative modernity. And while the State was (on both the Left and the Right) widely conceived as the primary means of achieving that modernity, the collapse of “actually existing socialism” has also occasioned a hollowing out of “orthodox” ideologies as well as the emergence of new social movements.¹⁵ The subaltern subsequently emerges from this field as a sort of excess that earlier narratives of modernity proved incapable of absorbing. For this reason, Beverley proposes a commitment to the politics of “the other” as a means of integrating this excess into a more

¹⁴My translation here and throughout.

¹⁵That these social movements presuppose a reformulation of political subjectivity itself is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Hugo Chávez’s “Bolivarian Revolution” in Venezuela and in Evo Morales’s presidency in Bolivia, in which we glimpse something like the translation of Lenin’s well known dictum into “oil plus indigenous movements equals socialism.” (Lenin, of course, has famously concluded that “electricity plus Soviets equals socialism.”) Beverley’s account therefore not only reproduces the general tenor of recent commentary on Latin America, but also provides a picture of the ideological field that underlies politics within the region today.

inclusive and multicultural form of Latin American regionalism. Yet, to the extent that this commitment entails a rejection of socialism as the negation of capitalist modernity, Latin Americanism becomes purely affective rather than, as Beverley suggests, “effective.” Absent negativity as such, Beverley’s subaltern represents little more than an “affirmation of what is Latin American” (who we are) that transforms the “necessity to displace capitalism” (what we believe) into a type of cultural expression. Thus, the leveling of “a normative vision and standard” presupposed by the commitment to the subaltern necessarily reduces the conflict between competing ideologies (socialism and capitalism) to the difference between cultures (dominant and marginal). Indeed, what Beverley describes elsewhere as an attempt to “derive from multiculturalism more radical consequences” (“After Communism” 43) remains absolutely compatible with neoliberalism. Working toward the development of something like a pluralist regional identity, this Latin American “multinational State” requires nothing more than a respect for “the other” that in no way prevents us from exploiting “those below.”

It is the persistence of this politics of identity and difference, then, that provokes Alberto Moreiras’ critique of Latin Americanist discourses in one of the most significant contributions to cultural studies written in the last decade, *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001). For although Latin American cultural studies, as Beverley suggests, finds its origins in the breakdown of those identitarian discourses that had marked both development populism and the literary, Moreiras maintains that “the master concepts of identity and difference keep finding a new if precarious life in the new space of cultural studies” (4). Yet, as Moreiras makes clear, the “dialectics of identity and difference has been exhausted” under the “expanding powers of cultural commodification that defines our regime of capitalist accumulation” (53), a regime of accumulation we call neoliberalism. Thus, the emphasis on heterogeneity, cultural hybridity, and multiculturalism typical of contemporary Latin American studies merely reproduces the “affirmation of an identitarian space-in-resistance” (4) that nevertheless lacks a “real concept of critique” (5), and as such, remains wholly consistent with the aims of neoliberalism throughout Latin America.

Nevertheless, cultural studies must, according to Moreiras, not only “seek the undoing of the inside-outside polarity on which all aesthetic historicism and all culturalist theories of modernity rest,” but also and perhaps more importantly work toward the recuperation of “the postaesthetic and posthistoricist language that the literary promise

still withholds and could provide.” Here the identification of critical reason with deconstruction results in both a reconceptualization of the aims of cultural studies and the discovery of new possibilities in the “literary labor of translation” (16). Yet, if Moreiras believes that Latin Americanist reflection involves a kind of “translational or translative thinking,” it is not to signal the possibility of bridging the gap between subject and object—that is, between Latin American studies and Latin America—and in fact he maintains that “the minute the labor of translation transmutes into a result,” fulfilling its structural goal, is the minute that it allows for an appropriation or expropriation of the object itself; translation in this sense always entails a “betrayal.” Rather, Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” is invoked in order to emphasize the manner in which the Latin Americanist reflection must everywhere give way to an “untranslative excess,” an excess that renders this “literary labor” incapable of realizing its appropriative aims.¹⁶ And although Latin Americanist reflection consequently runs up against a certain limit—conceived here as that which eludes translation altogether—it is precisely this limit that Moreiras insists forms the conditions of possibility for a type of cultural studies whose object would remain irreducible to local and global identity alike.

It is the production and preservation of this “excess” or “remainder,” then, that underlies what he describes as “an alternative understanding of critical reason that makes of subalternity, as the ‘constitutive outside’ of hegemonic consciousness, a privileged reference” (57). This privileging of the subaltern, of course, echoes Beverley’s own reformulation of Latin American politics “after communism,” in which a subalternity linked to the “autoconstitution of multicultural

¹⁶Moreiras’ conceptualization of this “translative excess,” of course, finds a parallel in Paul de Man’s own reading of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” included as the conclusion to *The Resistance to Theory*. In his account of Benjamin’s text, de Man proposes that translation becomes yet another way of understanding the inbuilt failure at the heart of language itself; an argument that de Man revisits in countless texts, though perhaps most famously in “The Purloined Ribbon.” What de Man’s account attempts to demonstrate, then, is that Benjamin, who here gives the lie to translation, believes that the “translator has to give up in relation to the task of redefining what was there in the original” (80). Further, the significance of this text to de Man’s own deconstruction becomes all the more apparent in his discussion of what Benjamin calls “pure language,” which, according to de Man, should not be understood as “that which is most sacred,” but rather as “a language completely devoid of any kind of meaning function, language which would be a pure signifier” (96). For de Man, something is always lost in translation, so to say, not simply because there are certain concepts or ideas that cannot be rendered into another language, but precisely because language itself always fails to communicate any meaning. What translation provides, therefore, is simply a more powerful experience of this failure.

identities” (43) becomes the foundations for a particular version of identity politics that is “potentially anticapitalist” (44).¹⁷ For Moreiras, however, the point is not to engage in “multicultural” or “identitarian representation,” and indeed he insists that identity politics itself is “doomed to failure not simply because it can never be strong enough to counter neoliberalism, but also because it is no different from it” (275). In other words, the emphasis on heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiculturalism that has characterized Latin American studies since the 1990s (and which Beverley imagines as the theoretical underpinnings of his “multinational state”) is not only resonant with the belief that today there are no “viable systemic alternatives” to the market, but is also of a piece with the processes of neoliberalism itself. From this perspective, what identity politics has achieved to date is nothing more than the creation of flexible identities for a new regime of flexible accumulation; whereas Beverley believes that identity politics “will necessarily have to question the rule of capital” (43), Moreiras suggests that the turn toward this politics is the rule of capital itself. For this reason, he proposes “an understanding of the subaltern position in merely formal terms, as that which stands outside any given hegemonic articulation at any given moment” (267); an understanding, in other

¹⁷For Beverley, this form of politics gives rise to a “popular subject position” (a term he borrows from Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau) that “would tend to divide the political space into two antagonist blocs: the bloc of ‘the people’ and the bloc of the elite ruling class.” Yet, in contrast to those development populisms that had marginalized and suppressed a heterogeneity he conceives as “multicultural,” “the people” is “self-constituted as internally fissured, heterogeneous, multiple,” becoming the conditions of possibility for a “*new concept*” of the “national-popular,” in which “instead of ‘the many becoming one,’ the one would become many.” What identity politics offers, in other words, is a means toward the construction of a more inclusive form of Latin Americanism afforded by a commitment to multiculturalism that not only preserves a heterogeneity that national and regional populisms had suppressed, but also “will necessarily have to question the rule of capital” (“After Communism” 44).

That Beverley himself cites the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (along with the Rainbow Coalition) as exemplifying—albeit as an “idea (perhaps more than a reality)” (“After Communism” 44)—the form of identity politics he has in mind—and which he understands as the foundation for a “‘postmodernist’ form of communism”—provides us with another way of understanding the political dead end, so to speak, at which his account arrives. For rather than constitute a more aggressive engagement with the forms of economic inequality endemic to the region—an engagement, moreover, that had defined the presumably “modernist” form of communism—the PT has in fact streamlined rather than hindered the neoliberalization of the Brazilian economy, which in 2005 (two years after Lula assumed office) boasted a Gini coefficient of 56.7; an index of inequality that places Brazil slightly better off than Columbia and Bolivia alone. For a description of the manner in which the PT had extended rather than revoked the economic policies of Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s pro-neoliberalism administration, see Francisco de Oliveira’s “The Lenin Moment.”

words, which, in contrast to substantive descriptions of the subaltern, cannot be reduced to questions of cultural identity and difference. What is at stake, therefore, is not a more inclusive or broader form of politics in the sense of multiculturalism, nor an attempt to bring this “outside” in; on the contrary, subalternity emerges in this account a “privileged reference” or “position” only insofar as it marks the site of an excess that remains unassimilable to any hegemonic articulation as such. And if, as Moreiras claims, “no political work can be done outside the labor of hegemony” (285), then any political work as such must first locate that subaltern position or perspective marginalized or excluded by a given hegemonic relation.

This is not to say that the emphasis on the “labor of hegemony” entails that collapsing of the distinction between political ideology and identity put into play by Beverley’s account of post-cold war politics; rather, Moreiras’ intention is to underscore those conditions of possibility and impossibility that underlie any notion of the political today. Subalternism subsequently becomes a privileged point of reference for any comprehension of these possibilities and limitations, but only as that which any hegemonic discourse must exclude in order to constitute itself. As such, subalternism is marked by what Moreiras calls a “double articulation” that comprises both a “fictitious register” and a “negative register”; a “double articulation,” in other words, responding to the “political need for hegemonic action” as “tactically hegemonic, or populist” (289), while maintaining the “negative presentation of the subaltern” (287) as that which hegemony marginalizes. On one hand, then, the “negative register” of this “double articulation” points to the constitutive “outside” of hegemony that allows for the articulation of its “fictitious register,” and hence political action; on the other hand, to the extent that any change in the configuration of a given hegemonic relation produces its own set of exclusions, this “negative register” signals the limits that the “fictitious register” of subalternism everywhere confronts. That is, although hegemony always fails to achieve closure of any kind, it is precisely this failure that reveals the space of an “outside” or remainder” that for Moreiras “preserves the site of subalternist politics”—a site, that he identifies as a “savage hybridity” (294).¹⁸ What “perspectival or relational subalternism” affords therefore is a “sort of abyssal ground for a critique

¹⁸ As Moreiras himself notes, this term is taken from Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*. Further, we should keep in mind that, according to Moreiras, “Savage hybridity” is not the subaltern, and instead is “the site of the subaltern” and “preserves the site of a subalternist politics” (294).

of the social,” which, according to Moreiras, would prove capable of confronting fundamental questions about “sustainable development” and “intractable poverty” (267).

But while “perspectival or relational subalternism” emerges as a privileged reference from this critique of an identity politics whose internal logic proves no different from that of contemporary capitalism, we might ask to what extent the notion of the political proposed here reproduces, rather than transcends, the insistence on the primacy of the subject’s position essential to that concept of the literary we have been exploring throughout this essay. For although Moreiras conceives subalternity as the site “not just *of* negated identity, but also *for* a constant negation of identity positions,” which are “always the product of the hegemonic relation,” and “therefore, not an autonomous site for politics” (268), there is an equally important sense in which this account reduces identity to a bare-bones structure that recalls the visceral realist’s conception of poetic form. As Moreiras explains, the moment of critique, and hence the articulation of a viable politics, is predicated upon an encounter (on the level of thought) with this “savage hybridity”—a space of absolute exteriority or “radical otherness” (294)—that not only signals the “radical finitude of all particularism” (294), but also gestures toward “a thinking of totality” essential for any notion of the political. What is interesting, then, is how, in an effort to define the political, Moreiras is required to draw an analogy between this “savage hybridity” and the Kantian sublime, which similarly affords the experience of the failure of representation that attests to the subject’s limited position *vis-à-vis* the unbounded object, and in so doing reveals “in him the consciousness of an unlimited ability” (295) and the possibility of overcoming this very conceptual impasse. But what this parallel between “savage hybridity” and the sublime points to is not a means toward overcoming the problem of the subject’s position in relation to the object, but rather toward preserving its primacy. And what this suggests is that the possibility of articulating any political alternative remains inextricable from this experience. Thus, although the identity of the subject is in no way brought to bear on Moreiras’ account, we might ask whether this emphasis on the subject’s position completely avoids leveling the structural difference between belief and experience.

Or, to ask the question in a slightly different way, does perspectival or relational subalternism put the problem of the subject (and his or her position) before the truth of politics (the belief in a particular ideology)? If so, Moreiras’ “savage hybridity” not only fails to produce a

way out of the “end of history,” but also, like Bolaño’s savage detectives, becomes symptomatic of that very end. Despite its forceful critique of identity politics, this version of subalternism would, from this perspective, reproduce an insistence on the primacy of the subject (here emptied of all substantive descriptions) that reduces questions about political beliefs (what one believes) to questions about perspective (where one stands), so that politics at the “end of history” would turn out to be something like the recuperation of a problematic constitutive of literary modernism itself.¹⁹

At the same time, what emerges in *Los detectives salvajes* is an even more powerful version of this problem that results in a refusal not simply of identity, but of the subject’s position altogether. This is made clear in the conclusion of Bolaño’s novel, in which García Madero’s diary closes with a series of pictographic riddles that ask its readers to identify “What’s outside the window?” (608–09/576–77). Represented as a box drawn on the page, the first and second “window” frame the reader’s perception of “what’s outside,” the object that is neither completely hidden nor in full view, but which is only revealed by García Madero’s responses. One might say these riddles amount to nothing more than exercises in perspective; a perspective that—in the first and second instance—is entirely determined by the window itself and, therefore, remains invariable.²⁰

And yet, the three windows that appear at the conclusion of *Los detectives salvajes* might also be read as a sequence. Appearing on the left-hand side of the first box, the small triangle in the first frame constitutes a part of the whole hidden behind the window. But while this whole remains hidden from the perspective of the reader, the figure nonetheless corresponds to an object whose contours, shape and

¹⁹Indeed, as Nicholas Brown has demonstrated, the sublime itself has been essential to not only modernist aesthetics, but also literary aesthetics throughout the twentieth century, forming what he calls the “modernist sublime.”

²⁰Encapsulated in miniature in here, then, is the selfsame structure of Bolaño’s novel, wherein the numerous first-person accounts that comprise *Los detectives salvajes* function as a kind of framing-device through which Lima and Belano’s narrative is revealed. Interwoven with the narrators’ account of their own lives, the story of Bolaño’s poet-protagonists is filtered through the impressions and views provided by the (anonymously) collected testimonies and García Madero’s diary alike. But while this multiplicity of voices gives rise to a varied perspective through which Belano and Lima’s narrative is refracted, this perspective is no less limited than the perception of the reader/ beholder suggested by the García Madero’s windows; a perspective, moreover, which, rendering their story contradictory, fragmented and incomplete, gives rise to an impression that many characters themselves have of Belano and Lima: “as if they were there but not there” (150/308).

dimensions might be inferred: the star revealed in García Madero's response. In the second instance, the depiction of a sheet extended behind the window confronts a type of limit, wherein the nonappearance of any figure as such suggests the problem of representing flatness on a two-dimensional plane. This frame, then, not only refuses the mimetic operation suggested by the first, but also implies an engagement with form itself; an engagement, in other words, that both recalls a kind of formalism and points to the lack of any adequate figure for the presupposed concept (the flatness of the sheet). The realist modes of representation reproduced in the first picture, therefore, yield to the anti-realist techniques indicative of modernism in the second. And insofar as the first half of this sequence can be said to imply a shift whereby the limitations inherent in realism are overcome by modernism, the inclusion of the third frame evokes the exhaustion of modernism itself.

For although Bolaño's diarist provides the solution to the first and second riddle, the third remains unresolved. *Los detectives salvajes* subsequently ends with an empty box composed of line dashes to suggest something like a moment of pure speculation, marking the conclusion of the novel with a radical incompleteness that refuses any form of closure. Yet, insofar as this question elicits some response, the last entry also suggests that the reader herself might afford such closure by completing the riddle. It is in this sense, then, that the last window proposes a means of overcoming the problem of perspective—a problem indicative of realism and subsumed under modernism—by reducing the object of representation to an expression of the reader/ beholder herself, transforming the object of representation into a description (or representation) of the subject herself. Here the issue centering on the relationship between the literary text and reader is driven to a point of exhaustion, and in this way resolved, but only insofar as it is the dismantling of literary form that provides a means of overcoming the problem of perspective, and therefore of the subject's position. And it is precisely this insistence on the primacy of the subject (the reader/ beholder) vis-à-vis the text that signals both the "end of literature" and the exhaustion of modernism itself.

In the opening pages of Bolaño's novel, Lima tells García Madero that "the present-day visceral realists walked backwards," "gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away from it, walking toward the unknown" (17/7). García Madero fails to understand the meaning of his remarks, though Lima's image is no doubt intended to evoke Walter Benjamin's well-known description of the angel of history,

whose “face is turned toward the past” as he is propelled “into the future to which his back is turned” by the storm “we call progress.” And indeed, like Benjamin’s angel, Bolaño’s visceral realists bear witness to “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front” (257–58) of them; the catastrophe, moreover, that Bolaño describes as a “certain generational defeat.” But while the messianism of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” could still envision a future capable of redeeming the past, *Los detectives salvajes* everywhere points to nothing more than the foreclosure of any possibility as such. Whereas the modernisms of both Benjamin and generations of Latin American writers and critics had previously conceived the literary as an opening onto that future, Bolaño’s novel signals the end of this particular aesthetic ideology, if only to suggest that history must now be found beyond it.

University of Illinois at Chicago

WORKS CITED

- Avelar, Idelber. *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Banjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 257–58.
- Beverley, John. “After Communism.” *boundary 2* 26.3 (Autumn 1999): 39–46.
- . “El latinoamericanismo después del ‘9/11.’” *Revista de la Casa de las Américas* 241 (n.d.): (n.p.) 28 May 2008 <<http://www.casadelasamericas.com/publicaciones/revistacasa/241/johnbeverley.htm>>.
- Bolaño, Roberto. “Acerca de ‘Los detectives salvajes.’” *Entre paréntesis: ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)*. Ed. Ignacio Echevarría. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2004. 326–27.
- . “Déjenlo todo, nuevamente: primer manifiesto infrarrealista.”
- . *Distant Star*. Trans. Chris Andrews. New York: New Directions Books, 2004.
- . *Estrella distante*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2007.
- . *Los detectives salvajes*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1998.
- . *The Savage Detectives*. Trans. Natasha Wimmer. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007.
- . “Vida de Anne Moore.” *Llamadas telefónicas*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2008. 175–204.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. “The Detective Story.” Trans. Esther Allen. *Selected Non-fictions*. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. 491–99.
- Brown, Nicholas. *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-century Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004.
- Cortázar, Julio. "Algunos aspectos del cuento." *Literatura y arte nuevo en Cuba*. Ed. Iguasi Riera. Barcelona: Editorial Estrella, 1971. 261–76.
- . *Hopscotch*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Pantheon, 1966.
- . *Rayuela*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2001.
- de Man, Paul. "Conclusion: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator.'" *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. 73–105.
- de Oliveira, Francisco. "The Lenin Moment." Trans. Neil Larsen, *Mediation* 23.1 (Fall 2007): 82–123.
- Fanco, Jean. "Julio Cortázar: Utopia and Everyday Life." *Julio Cortázar en Barnard*. Ed. Mirela Servodidio and Marcelo Coddou. Spec. issue of *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica* 10–11 (1985): 108–18.
- Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" *The Geopolitics Reader*. Ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, Paul Routledge. London: Routledge, 2006. 107–14.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *El olor de la guayaba: conversaciones con Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza*. Mexico: Editorial Diana, 1993.
- Havery, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Kurz, Robert. *O colapso da modernização: Da derrocada do socialismo de caserna à crise da economia mundial*. Trans. Karen Elsabe Barbosa. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1992.
- Larsen, Neil. *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas*. London: Verso, 2001.
- Levinson, Brett. *The Ends of Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.
- Moreiras, Alberto. *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Rama, Angel. "El boom en perspectiva." *Más allá del boom: literatura y mercado*. Ed. David Viñas. Mexico: Marcha editores, 1981. 51–110.
- Rother, Larry. "Venezuela Wants Trade Group to Embrace Anti-Imperialism." *The New York Times*. 19 Jan. 2007, late ed.: A12.
- Sorensen, Diana. *A Turbulent Decade Remembered: Scenes from the Latin American Sixties*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007.
- Schwarz, Roberto, "Leituras em competição." *Novo estudos* 75 (July 2006): 61–79.
- . "Competing Readings in World Literature," *New Left Review* 48 (Nov–Dec 2007): 85–107.