

Roberto Bolaño, *2666*

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2666 was almost complete when Roberto Bolaño passed away. Published posthumously in 2004 (English translation 2008) it is the second “great novel” of the Chilean-Mexican-Spanish writer, after *The Savage Detectives* (2007 [1998]). *2666* offers one of the most horrifying accounts of the times, which we often call “the contemporary,” but Bolaño does something more radical than that: rather than reading the present as a continuation of modern times he reads both with a conceptual repertoire that pushes the readers to meet them in new terms. In what follows, I begin with a very general overview, which is followed by a discussion of three aspects of the work, namely temporalities, spatialities, and infra-realistic passions. I then conclude with why I think reading (and re-reading) *2666* can inspire understanding of folklore and culture, making the passion of fiction relevant to research.

Bolaño’s 900-page novel is divided into five parts that can also be read separately (initially, Bolaño meant for it to be published in five volumes). Violence plays a pivotal role in every one of them, particularly in the fourth one—“The Part about the Crimes,” which is set in Santa Teresa, a city modelled on Ciudad Juárez, where hundreds of real femicides took place at the turn of the millennium (and sadly continue). These atrocities loom over “The Part about the Critics,” “The Part about Amalfitano” and “The Part about Fate” presenting a very dark aspect of our globalized post-national era. Finally, “The Part about Archimboldi” presents stories of other forms of violence of the twentieth century. Further violent episodes are alluded to in the novel—from those committed against Afro-Americans to everyday deaths. Many commentators have discussed these forms of violence. Indeed, since

Bolaño's oeuvre is related in a number of ways to the historical avant-garde and to his self-identification as a neo-avant-gardist, it should be viewed in the context of the use of violence in (neo)avant-garde works.

Despite the horror and violence, *2666* is also enjoyable, not to mention funny (even the fourth part includes some breaks); "The Part about the Critics" in particular delivers a hilarious account of international academic interaction in the decades that preceded the Covid-19 pandemic.

The temporalities of *2666* are of particular interest, given that the book tells us much about the contemporary neoliberal age, highlighting the work-conditions in the factories on the Mexican side of the border with the US and the stream of people who make their way there desperately in search of hope. The mystery of the femicides in Mexico reveals a very actual story, which seems at first to have no history—just as the bodies appear in the desert for no evident reason. Indeed, the fourth part—"The Part about the Crimes"—is read as a combination of a news reportage with pathological reports spanning the time between January 1993 and December 1997. Its factual tone renders it real and it is delivered as if in the present continuous. Needless to mention, the world described is not one that progresses anywhere: time does not move us forward or backward from an imagined "good old days." At no point do we get a real resolution as the bodies keep piling up, particularly when we close the book and turn to the newspaper.

The first three parts revolve around the same period of time as the femicides of Santa Teresa, each offering some background to the adult life of the key characters who end up in the Mexican border city: the four academic Critics in the first part (a French, Italian, Spanish and British); Óscar Amalfitano in the second part (himself a Chilean professor whose career was launched in Spain before settling in Santa Teresa); and in the third part, the life of Quincy Williams (nickname: Fate), an Afro-American reporter who went to Mexico to cover a boxing match. Biographical details of these characters bare the marks of a much larger context of a recent Euro-American history—the Black Panther movement, the Chilean coup etc. As we engage with the femicides in Mexico we do not know what "history" might become relevant in deciphering the atrocities.

Modernity and postmodernity have provided us with certain temporal imaginations that fail in *2666*, not because these temporal legacies are ignored. In fact, the epigram for the entire novel is taken from a poem by Baudelaire, one of the literary modernist heroes. As in his previous masterpiece, *The Savage Detectives*, avant garde works in literature and the arts are referenced throughout *2666*. Yet, in the awful Mexican present portrayed in *2666*, the very idea of an avant-garde becomes impossible. Bolaño rejects the very language of "progress" as multiple times coexist and modernity does not lead anywhere, even if the contemporary condition keeps relating to it.

The same boldness is also offered in the way space unfolds in *2666*. Bolaño disrupts the taken-for-granted connection between culture and space in radical ways: von Archimboldi, the name of the German writer who stands at the core of

the fifth part of the novel, alludes to the Italian painter with the German preposition “von,” which typically indicates a seemingly stable origin of some sort (place or nobility affiliation). Bolaño’s literary world is made despite space, cutting across linguistic barriers: the academic critics who follow the literary career of Archiboldi come from different places, meeting in all sorts of academic venues, from the Netherlands to Mexico.

This approach to space is coherent with Bolaño’s work more broadly. In *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996) the entire Americas become the basis of a literary field, which can combine Ginzberg, Neruda, and European fascist works—real and made-up. North American literature in English is not separated from Latin American literature in Spanish, just as the politics of Chile’s Pinochet were not separated from North America’s policies; accordingly, the division of the literary world becomes futile. Nowhere is that more evident as in Bolaño’s lecture “Literature and Exile” which he was invited to deliver in Vienna. The Austrian hosts probably considered Bolaño, a Chilean who was almost killed in the coup, and who during that time living near Barcelona as a writer in exile (as in the German paradigm of Exilliteratur). Bolaño disengaged from this altogether, asking rhetorically: “Can one feel nostalgia for the land where one nearly died?” (Bolaño 2011: 41–42). He ends his talk with a quote from a poem by Nicanor Parra to stress his point (43):

Chile’s four great poets
are three:
Alonso de Ercilla and Rubén Darío

Bolaño then discusses this poem concluding (45) that “Parra’s poem teaches us ... that probably our two best poets, Chile’s best poets, were a Spaniard and a Nicaraguan who swung through these southern lands ... neither of them with any intention of staying, neither with any intention of becoming a great Chilean poet, simply two people, two travelers ...” Following in Parra’s footsteps, the entire novel of *2666* leaves any sense of spatial stability behind—people are forced to leave or choose to travel for whatever reason: whether they are soldiers mobilized to the frontlines or academics on a way to a conference or a journalist who sets out to tell a story. Culture is made along these routes and their intersections.

With space and time flowing in different directions, perhaps the key to the novel is the way Bolaño engages culture as a totality where everything, even the slightest detail, can be relevant—nothing is too mundane to be written about. Although many “great writers” are mentioned in *2666* with reflections on what a “great work” is, the novel disengages from the idea that culture is something that should be searched for in those “lofty peaks.” In this sense, it is an infra-realistic novel—which is not surprising given that Bolaño was one of the key members of the *infrarealistas*, a neo avant-garde Mexican poetic movement founded by Mario Santiago Papatquiaro in the mid-1970s. According to Rubén Medina “[f]or Bolaño, Santiago Papatquiaro, and their fellow *infrasoles*, the name Infrarealism stood for their efforts to represent the whole reality (an infra-world) that lies beyond the range

of hegemonic regimes of perception” (2017: 10). The Infrarealists were very much aware of being *neo* avant-gardists, relating in profound ways to ideas and poetic devices pioneered by the Surrealists in particular. Yet, “[u]nlike Surrealism which, as its etymology suggests, sought to surmount this reality (*sur* = over or above), Infrarealism delves beneath it (*infra* = under or below) to probe the primordial forces that generate our world” (Heinowitz 2017: 101).

This infra-realism is manifested in all parts of *2666* in a number of ways—from the use of metaphors and parallels, through the syntax of sentences that can last for half a page or include a single word to the very structure of the entire novel. I focus here on one such device—the art of digression, which in literature (as opposed to academic writing) is often used as a narrative strategy. The part about Archimboldi follows closely the biography of this fictional writer, but some figures he encounters become the subject of seemingly extensive digressions into other life-stories. For example, Archimboldi’s whereabouts as a Wehrmacht soldier are told in detail. These include an extensive episode in which Archimboldi, still called by his original name, Hans Reiter, rested in Kostekino on the banks of the Dnieper, after a bullet pierced his throat in a battle nearby:

One night, as he was having coffee at the brick house, Reiter heard a different account of the villagers’ disappearance: they had neither been conscripted nor fled. The depopulation was the direct consequence of the passage through Kostekino of a detachment of the Einsatzgruppe C, which proceeded to physically eliminate all the Jews of the village. Since he couldn’t speak he didn’t ask any questions, but he spent the next day studying the house more closely (706).

Reiter’s first encounter with the Jewish Holocaust is with a rumor that is presented as different from the official narrative. Reiter is speechless, but for other reasons than those that we attribute to the way a person is speechless when confronted with shocking news or events. While in this village, Archimboldi discovers accidentally the hidden papers of a Jewish resident—Boris Abramovich Ansky. The next 30 pages are devoted to Ansky’s life and writings. In fact, the digression into Ansky’s story is spent mostly in telling of the latter’s relationship with another writer—Ephraim Ivanov as we figuratively open one Babushka doll after another. It is still unclear to me whether Bolaño references the famous Jewish-Russian folklorist and writer Sh. Ansky (i.e. Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport; 1863–1920). Ivanov’s story is tied to the Stalinist purges and the way literature is produced in face of the constant threat of death.

Later, we learn in detail of the atrocities of the Holocaust, again as a digression—a story told by Zeller (i.e. Leo Sammer), a Volkssturm soldier whom Archimboldi encountered coincidentally at a prisoner-of-war camp after the War ended. Zeller’s stories are told in twenty pages including a detailed account of the “troubles” he went to in killing a few hundred Jews that in the chaos of the Eastern Front he was ordered to “eliminate.” This episode is told in a factual manner that includes further

historical episodes, which typically occupy entire volumes, and are mentioned here in passing in Zeller's narrative of his "Jewish problem":

Then I received a new order. I was to take charge of a group of Jews from Greece. I think they were from Greece. They might have been Hungarian or Croatian. But probably not, the Croats killed their own Jews. Maybe they were Serbian. Anyway, let's call them Greek. They were sending me a trainload of Greek Jews. Me! And I didn't have anywhere to put them ... so what would I do with these Jews? ... Then I phoned a friend, who put me in touch with a man who ran a camp for Jews near Chelmno. I explained my problem, asked what I could do with my Jews (752).

The sentence about Croatia is shocking—although a known historical fact (which is of course more complex than that), here it is told in passing as part of this digression from Zeller's story, which itself is a digression from Archimboldi's life-story. Zeller's detailed account confronts the reader with issues that for historians of the Holocaust may be of colossal dimensions: where were these Jews from? Zeller contemplates this question and eventually chooses for the sake of simplifying his narrative to "call them Greek."

All such tales of the Stalinist purges and Nazi crimes are presented *as if* they were a side-story to the biography of what is essentially "The Part About Archimboldi." Ultimately, we learn that the part about Archimboldi is never just about Archimboldi and what seems like digressions are in fact the very core of what happened to Archimboldi who encountered other people's stories that echo the real history—the real horror—of the twentieth century.

One of the most important attempts to study the everyday was carried out by avant-gardists who famously attempted to break the division between art and life. Bolaño's *2666* does this in ways that stay with the readers. Many detailed descriptions of the femicides and other horrors are read as reality to the point that the idea of *l'art pour l'art* crumbles. *2666* engages every aspect that make up the illusive notion of "culture" in a passionate way. The vast assemblage of events, people, names, habits, atrocities, jokes, places, quotations, and stories told in this novel can also be instructive of the kind of imagination and poetics that are so essential in engaging folklore and everyday life. Reading what is seemingly fiction can help trigger the same passion in research—which is to say that reading *2666* mattered to me in many ways, but one in particular. *2666* takes the idea of everyday culture into new realms: although folklorists expanded their interests from festive events and perhaps peasant life to encompass the everyday of workers and city dwellers, an important step wasn't fully fulfilled – the shift to the everyday entails also an examination of habits and practices of the so-called elites. By positioning everyday life of intellectuals on the same level as their literary artifacts and aligning their everyday anxieties and passions with their unearthly interests, Bolaño essentially 'folklorizes' such elites and thereby arrives at a fuller outlook on culture.

Reading matters, but not more than people; after all, everything, every encounter, matters.

Works Cited

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