

## Imaginary and Symbolic Identity in Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante*

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In the preface to *Estrella distante* Roberto Bolaño indicates that the original version of this text, the final chapter of *La literatura nazi en América*, entitled “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame,” “se narraba tal vez demasiado esquemáticamente” (11). By means of “Arturo B” (Arturo Belano: an alter ego of Bolaño) he expresses the desire for “una historia más larga, no espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en sí misma” (11). The “espejo y explosión en sí misma” foreshadows something that is found in chapters 4 and 5 of *Estrella distante* that does not exist in the corresponding part of “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame”: a narrator with multiple imaginary identities. *La literatura nazi en América* is a fictional encyclopedia of writers with fascistic tendencies throughout the Americas. The thematic unity and stylistic virtuosity of this parodical anthology is reminiscent of Borges’s *Historia universal de la infamia*. In terms of a preoccupation with *la infamia* considered as evil, Bolaño is closest to the Borgesian model with the serial killer-poet of “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame.” The narrator of the preface to *Estrella distante* informs the reader that Arturo B told him the story of Ramírez Hoffman, and that the writing of *Estrella distante* was a collaborative effort in which his (Bolaño’s) role was limited to “preparar bebidas, consultar algunos libros, y discutir, con él y con el fantasma cada día más vivo de Pierre Menard, la validez de muchos párrafos repetidos” (11). This implies that Arturo B is the unnamed narrator of *Estrella distante*.

In “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” a fictional twentieth-century writer reproduces several chapters of *Don Quijote* word for word. A difference between the original and its reproduction is at the level of the signified: The meaning of a literary work changes according to

its historical context. Borges's story has become emblematic of this concept. Reference to Pierre Menard in the preface suggests that *Estrella distante* is a text about meaning within a historical conjuncture, an affirmation not inconsistent with Myrna Solotorevsky's Barthean comments on the many literary and historical references in Bolaño's novel: "No se trata en absoluto de un texto escribible, con un juego de significantes que intentan liberarse de los significados sino, al revés, de un exceso de significados, un exceso de referentes" (359). More specifically, *Estrella distante* is about the renewal of Latin American political identity in a time of transition to an uncertain future. This would seem to be a topic that held little interest for Bolaño, who, when asked in an interview by Mónica Maristain "¿Qué cosas lo aburren?" responded "El discurso vacío de la izquierda. El discurso vacío de la derecha ya lo doy por sentado" (339). In the "Discurso de Caracas" (his acceptance speech for the Rómulo Gallegos Prize) Bolaño maintained that he considered the Latin American Left to be politically and intellectually bankrupt (40). Nevertheless, Bolaño, who had been Trotskyite in his youth, was not an apolitical aesthete, as is suggested by the following sentence in "Carnet de baile" (a short story with autobiographical components): "Pienso en esas obras que acaso permitan a la izquierda salir del foso de la vergüenza y la inoperancia" (215). My thesis is that *Estrella distante* represents the Left's emergence from this "foso" at the individual level, in terms of a renewal of leftist identity. In an interview with Eliseo Álvarez, Bolaño remarked that as a leftist, as in other aspects of his personality, he was a contrarian: when he was with Stalinists he became a Trotskyite, with Trotskyites an anarchist. After arriving in Spain, he adds, "encontré muchos anarquistas y empecé a dejar de ser anarquista" (39). He does not specify what he became, but what takes place in the political development of the narrator in *Estrella distante* is a turn to Stalinism. This

conclusion will be upsetting to some, but it is consistent with the contrarian trend in Bolaño's political development.

The identity of the subject is always decentered in the process of identification: "to achieve self-identity, the subject must identify himself with the imaginary other, he must alienate himself—put his identity outside himself, so to speak, into the image of his double" (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 104). According to Jacques Lacan, imaginary identification is initiated in the "mirror stage," in which the infant recognizes her specular image as herself, in this way forming a primary identification with her body. Thus at the core of imaginary identification is the assumption of the other by the self as mirror image of the self. It is in this sense that imaginary identification functions in *Estrella distante* as "espejo en . . . sí misma" (11). As Jeremías Gamboa Cárdenas has observed, "El problema de la proyección del doble es central en la construcción de *Estrella distante*" (212). In *Estrella distante*, the significance of characters that seem to be repetitions of previous characters, or seemingly unrelated characters that complement each other in ways that are not apparent, can be understood in terms of a Lacanian reading.

*Estrella distante* combines a detective story centered on the hunt for a serial killer with stories about individual Chileans forced into exile for political reasons after Salvador Allende's socialist government was overthrown. The novel is to some extent based on the author's experiences in Chile and as an expatriate, although the narrator (in contrast to the narrator of "Ramírez Hoffman, el infame") never explicitly identifies himself as Bolaño.<sup>1</sup> The action of *Estrella distante* takes place mostly in Latin America and Europe between 1973 and 1994, a period of time that extends beyond Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (which ended in 1990) and includes the restoration of democratically elected governments in Chile. In the years following the 1973 coup, neoliberal policies put in place by the military junta—including the privatization

of public sector companies and services, the rollback of state-welfare institutions, business deregulation and the removal of trade barriers for foreign investment—had much in common with economic policies existing in several Latin American countries during the 80s and 90s. This economic model was maintained by the center– left governments of the Concertation coalition that governed Chile after 1989, although there was increased spending on programs targeting the poorest sections of the population (Winn, Introduction 4).

Even though *Estrella distante* is much shorter than *Los detectives salvajes* (Bolaño’s next novel in order of publication), the two works have several things in common. In *Los detectives salvajes* Arturo Belano reappears as a protagonist, but not as a narrator. Like *Estrella distante*, *Los detectives salvajes* is about Latin Americans who become expatriates. One of the most striking differences between the novels is a difference in tone. *Estrella distante* is a rather grim work, due to the treatment of the subject matter, including the sexual frustration of the narrator and his associates. *Los detectives salvajes*, though not bereft of violence and pathos, is a humorous work that contains a joyous exploration of sexuality. In *Estrella distante*, the protagonist is called Carlos Wieder rather than Carlos Ramírez Hoffman. After the coup against Allende, Wieder, an officer in the Chilean Air Force, becomes famous as a sky-writing poet. He is forced to leave Chile after displaying photographs that make it evident he is a mass murderer. Wieder is a “distant star” in several ways. At first he covers up his true personality and then becomes literally distant after leaving Chile. Like a star, he exerts an attractive force on others. When Wieder makes his first appearance in the novel, calling himself Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, he joins a poetry workshop composed of leftist students. Among the workshop members who have prominent roles in this novel are Verónica and Angélica Garmendia (beautiful and talented poets), Juan Stein (the leader of the workshop), and Bibiano O’Ryan (a close friend of the

narrator). Bibiano and the narrator envy Ruiz-Tagle because he is sleeping with the Garmendia sisters. As is evident in the following passage, the narrator suspects there is something Ruiz-Tagle is trying to hide:

¿Qué me contó Bibiano de la casa de Ruiz-Tagle? . . . Entonces, en aquellas visitas con las Garmendia, la casa le pareció *preparada*, dispuesta para el ojo de los que llegaban, demasiado vacía, con espacios en donde claramente faltaba algo. . . . En la casa de Ruiz-Tagle lo que faltaba era algo innombrable (o que Bibiano . . . consideró innombrable, pero presente, tangible), como si el anfitrión hubiera amputado trozos de su vivienda. O como si ésta fuese un mecano que se adaptaba a las expectativas y particularidades de cada visitante. (17)

That which is missing is compared to a “mecano” (a model construction kit) which changes form according to “the expectations and peculiarities of each visitor.” It is something unnamable but at the same time, present and tangible. Considered in terms of the mutual attraction of the narrator and Bibiano to the Garmendia sisters, this missing element is the void of their desire, captured by Wieder as “the subject presumed to know.” However, no fantasy can adequately represent the “unnamable” essence of the object of this desire. According to Lacan, the acquisition of language by means of entrance into the symbolic order eliminates this possibility, given that the use of language separates the subject from a state of nature, posited by the subject as a time of pre-symbolic enjoyment, henceforth experienced as lacking. In Lacanian terms, this lack is the void of the Real seen from the perspective of the symbolic order (*Ethics* 120-21).

The subject cannot experience the Real directly, but can perceive its imaginary objectifications, suggested in Ruiz-Tagle’s house by empty spaces, noises behind a closed door and a pungent odor (18). Bibiano informs the narrator that inside this house, he felt like Mia

Farrow in Roman Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby*, when she visits the Casteverts' apartment for the first time and notices hooks and clean spaces left behind by the removal of what turn out to be paintings of Satanic rituals (17). Like the subject's fantasy about what is missing or behind the door in Ruiz-Tagle's house, these paintings are attempts to express an impossible *jouissance*, an enjoyment inaccessible to the subject, but also "present, tangible" as the representation of an absence. The Lacanian designation for the structure exemplified by these phenomena is the *objet petit a*, which Slavoj Žižek has described as

this point of Real in the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolized, which is produced as a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation, a hard core embodying horrifying *jouissance*, enjoyment, and as such an object which simultaneously attracts and repels us—which *divides* our desire and thus provokes shame (*Sublime Object* 180).

To paraphrase Lacan, it is this object that is in *Wieder* more than *Wieder*, which makes the concept of a force field relevant to a reading of *Estrella distante*. (*Four Concepts* 278).

After the military coup *Wieder* is able to indulge in his homicidal impulses by participating in the state-sanctioned murder of leftist "subversives" such as the Garmendia sisters. The first person he kills in the novel is their aunt, who takes the place of the sisters' mother after she dies in a car accident. Although *Wieder* is responsible for the deaths of many victims, his only murder directly represented in the text is that of the symbolic equivalent of the mother. This offers a clue as to the origin of his identity as a serial killer. Desire for the mother, effectively renounced in the oedipal process, is a constitutive part of infantile subjectivity. In Freudian theory the father prohibits the male child's desire for the mother, but also makes it possible for the child to identify with him, in this way facilitating the construction of a

permissible desire. Wieder's father—a former landowner—makes an appearance during his son's photographic exhibition of torture victims. These images, primarily of dead women, are displayed in Wieder's bedroom. Most of his guests—his father, young army officers, pilots, journalists, a pair of poets and a woman of aristocratic origin—are upset by these photographs, and some of them leave. The father acts as if nothing extraordinary has happened: “su actitud era la de estar participando—acaso involuntariamente—en una fiesta de cadetes que por una razón que se le escapaba o que no le incumbía se había malogrado” (99). For him, like Wieder, women are disposable objects of the death drive. Wieder's symbolic murder of the mother signifies that his relationship to women is based on the supplanting of a permissible desire by the death drive.

The narrator distances himself from the events at this exhibition by having them narrated in the fictional autobiography of one Julio César Muñoz Cano, an army lieutenant.<sup>2</sup> He describes Wieder's father as being on “el borde del abismo,” an abyss that leads from aesthetic pleasure to what we would find if we could enter the Real as Wieder's guests can enter his bedroom: the place Lacan designates alternatively as “impassable or as the site of the Thing” (*Ethics* 213); a materialization of *jouissance* that inextricably involves evil—in terms of its connection to the death drive: “The drive as such, insofar, as it is then a destruction drive, has to be beyond the instinct to return to the state of equilibrium of the inanimate sphere. What can it be if it is not a direct will to destruction?” (212). As a psychological term, “the Thing” designates the maternal body for the neonatal child: “To begin with, it is in relation to that mythic body that the aggressive, transgressive and most primordial of instincts is manifested, the primal aggressions and inverted aggressions” (106). The death drive is among the “primordial instincts” manifested in the frustrated child's sadistic urge, motivated by lack of access to the object of his or her

libidinal need—the mother’s breast—to destroy the maternal body. In this early stage of development there is already an intermingling of libidinal drive with the death drive.

A phone call asking for Lucho Álvarez that absurdly interrupts the gathering, a voice that goes on talking about someone who is not there, is the *objet petit a*; a remnant in the symbolic order of the absent (impossible) kernel of *jouissance* emanating from the abyss. The absence of the intended recipient accentuates the characteristic of exclusiveness associated with Wieder’s guest list, suggesting that under the conditions of dictatorial repression represented in the text, there is an attempt to *privatize* the connection to the Real, to reserve it for a select few. Wieder’s exclusion from this more-exclusive list (he is not the one being called for) signifies the beginning of the end for him.

Jacques-Alain Miller and Juliet Flower MacCannell have argued that as a result of the undermining of traditional-theocentric values and a disavowal of the cult of the ancestor that took place in the Enlightenment, we live in a postpatriarchal, postoeidipal time, “where *semblants* of the father now reign” (Mellard 180). Following up on Miller and Macannell, James Mellard considers that in postmodern culture, “in place of the oedipal, patriarchal father, we now have the brother. In place of oedipal desire, we now have narcissistic *jouissance*” (180):

The brothers’ law mimes not the disinterested Symbolic gaze of the benevolent patriarch who permits our oedipal (erotic, reproductive) desire, but the narcissistic drive to *jouissance* of the phallic or primordial father of *Totem and Taboo*, a father who arrogates all desire to himself (180).

In place of oedipal desire (constrained by castration), Wieder is driven by thanatic *jouissance* (thus denying the constraints of castration) (Mellard 180-181). In place of the family structure underlying the traditional community, Wieder belongs to what Mellard describes as the

“neototemic regime of bonded brothers” (180), as is implied when one of his associates describes him as follows: “un joven enérgico, bromista y trabajador . . . cumplidor con sus subordinados, a los que trataba . . . como a hermanos menores, mis hermanitos, les decía Wieder” (118). The brother who arrogates enjoyment to himself denies it to others by repressing them. Until he is disgraced and forced to leave Chile, Wieder is perceived as a proprietor of *jouissance*, access to which is longed for and denied to everyone else who plays a significant role in this text. As Yannis Stavrakakis has observed: “it is the prevention of *jouissance* that sustains desire, a prevention which keeps the dream of attaining it alive” (45).

Wieder’s “primer acto poético” is sky writing verses from Genesis as he pilots he pilots a World War II fighter of German origin: “IN PRINCIPIO . . . CREAVIT DEUS . . . COELUM ET TERRAM” (36). These are read by political prisoners (including the narrator) in the courtyard of a detention center, one of whom remarks that World War II has returned (37). This episode parodies an event that took place in 1982, when Raúl Zurita, a poet and leading member of the Chilean neo-avant-garde movement, had 15 verses of his poem *La vida nueva* written by five airplanes across the sky over New York City. The World War II metaphor places Wieder’s repression within the context of a left-right political conflict in which he represents neoliberal Fascism. The message imparted by the juxtaposition of the heavenly verses with their leftist recipients is that in the new order, heaven will be reserved for fascists and *La vida nueva* of the Chilean Left will take place in prison where they will be the objects of fascist *jouissance*. Throughout *Estrella distante*, direct and indirect references to World War II are used to develop a political allegory of left-right conflict in Latin America from 1973 to the mid 90s.

In *Estrella distante*, an effect of this conflict is represented as a search for personal identity in a time of political instability. The starting point for this journey is a room full of maps.

Juan Stein “Tenía muchos mapas, como suelen tenerlos aquellos que desean fervientemente viajar y aún no han salido de su país” (58). The maps thematize the question of “Which way to go?” In chapters 4 and 5 of *Estrella distante*, starting with Stein, several individuals are described who were forced to leave Chile for political reasons. All of them should be considered in relation to Ivan Chernyakhovski, a Red Army general during the Second World War. Stein and the narrator describe Chernyakhovski, at length and in ideal terms, as the best general of the Second World War (59-63). Chernyakhovski is not mentioned again in *Estrella distante*, but his influence (or lack thereof) plays a crucial role in the psychological development of the narrator in the remainder of the text. Aside from dwelling on his military talent, Stein affirms that Chernyakhovski “era amado por sus hombres” (59). The narrator lists the numerous awards and honors he received: “fue dos veces Héroe de la Unión Soviética . . . obtuvo la Orden de Lenin, cuatro órdenes de la Bandera Roja . . . por iniciativa del Gobierno y del partido se erigieron monumentos suyos” (62). But a sense of distance from Chernyakhovski is created when Stein’s companions ask him how he, a Trotskyite, could have lowered himself by asking the Soviet embassy for a photograph of him. Stein explains that the photograph was given to him by his mother, who was Chernyakhovski’s cousin:

*No sé por qué tengo la foto [emphasis added], nos dijo Stein, seguramente porque es el único general judío de cierta importancia de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y porque su destino fue trágico. Aunque es más probable que la conserve porque me la regaló mi madre cuando me marché de casa, como una suerte de enigma: mi madre no me dijo nada, sólo me regaló el retrato, ¿qué me quiso decir con ese gesto? (62-63)<sup>3</sup>*

Žižek's conception of the *point de capiton* as "the point through which the subject is 'sewn' to the signifier, and at the same time the point which interpellates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master-signifier ('Communism,' 'God,' 'Freedom,' 'America')" provides a theoretically productive way to understand the passages under consideration (*Sublime Object* 101). For someone susceptible to communist ideological interpellation, Chernyakhovski could represent a subject supposed to know what defeated Nazi Germany as the referent of signifiers such as the Soviet Union, the Red Army, the Communist Party and Stalinism, with Stalinism as the master-signifier that determines the ideological meaning of these signifiers. The limit imposed in Stein's affirmation that Chernyakhovski "era amado por sus hombres (hasta donde pueden querer los soldados a un general)" (59) suggests an inaccessible object-cause of desire in the Real that would tend to encourage identification with these signifiers by means of identification with Chernyakhovski. Within this libidinal economy the "numerosas, incontables medallas" (62) awarded to the general are suggestive of gold and function on two levels: as so many glittering, imaginary objectifications of the possibility of *jouissance*, in terms of the function of gold as a universal equivalent that can purchase all pleasures, and also as metaphoric equivalents of excrement that are manifestations of the *objet petit a*, the inaccessible object of desire. Nevertheless, Stein, about whom the narrator portentously remarks that the presence of Chernyakhovski's portrait in his house was "infinitely more important" than all the honors received by the latter (62), admires the general as a military strategist, but, as in an affirmation of the saying that "all that glitters is not gold" *does not* identify with him at an imaginary level. Chernyakhovski's image does not represent someone he would like to be: he does not know why he has his photograph. Lacanian theory maintains that belief is always belief through an other, which implies that Stein does not identify with the

master-signifier associated with Chernyakhovski and that no ideological interpellation takes place: he continues to be a Trotskyite.

After leaving Chile, Stein assumes the role of a revolutionary activist:

Aparecía y desaparecía como un fantasma en todos los lugares donde había pelea, en todos los lugares en donde los latinoamericanos, desesperados, generosos, enloquecidos, valientes, aborrecibles, destruían y reconstruían y volvían a destruir la realidad en un intento último abocado al fracaso. (66)

From a Marxist point of view, most of the struggles in which Stein participated, including the civil war in Angola, the FMLN insurgency in El Salvador and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, ended in failure. The episode of “Stein’s double” at the conclusion of the chapter on Stein makes it questionable if he ever left Chile, other than in the imaginations of Bibiano and the narrator. In the process of trying to find out more about him, Bibiano visits a house where Stein’s mother lived and interviews the current occupant, “una de las mujeres más guapas que Bibiano había visto nunca” (71). She informs him that Stein never left Chile, that they were only casually acquainted, and that he died of cancer. The establishment of a sexual relationship with a substitute for the mother is a recompense for the castration endured by the male subject as a result of renunciation of desire for the mother and entrance into the symbolic order. Stein’s inability to establish such a relationship with a woman who is literally a substitute for his mother symbolizes his inability to establish sexual relationships with women in general, that is to say his *de facto* (as opposed to symbolic) castration.

The next identity is that of the bourgeois-intellectual expatriate as permanent tourist, represented by Juan Soto. Formerly acquainted with the narrator in Chile, he makes a living as a professor of literature in France, and is described as a “Turista latinoamericano, perplejo y

desesperado a partes iguales (. . .) pero turista al fin y al cabo” (79-80). He is living the fantasy that he can be a disengaged observer of the society he inhabits. This fantasy is terminated when he is murdered in the process of defending a homeless person from neo-nazi skinheads. Soto is the translator of a story by Pedro Pereda, a fictional writer who, according to the narrator, writes a story about a woman who becomes a sexual organ:

termina recluida en un burdel . . . encerrada en su habitación sin ventanas, hasta que al final se convierte en una gran *entrada-salida* disforme y salvaje y acaba con el viejo macró que regenta el burdel y con las demás putas y con los horrorizados clientes y luego sale al patio y se interna en el desierto (. . .) hasta que el aire se la traga. (76)

The neurotically repressed subject externalizes the symptom of the unrepresentable kernel of enjoyment in the Real as a devouring-castrating vagina. The proliferation of characters in chapters 4 and 5 of *Estrella distante* poses the question of *who* this subject is. As will be demonstrated, there is good reason to believe that it is the narrator (Arturo B). This passage confirms the centrality of the role of fantasy as a structural component in chapters 4 and 5 of Bolaño’s text.

Finally, there is the story of Petra, who “de alguna manera es a Soto lo que la historia del doble de Juan Stein es a nuestro Juan Stein” (81). Petra’s original name is Lorenzo. He is a young, impoverished homosexual who had to have both arms amputated after being accidentally electrocuted. The removal of the arms makes explicit what is suggested by Juan Stein’s double: the theme of castration. After leaving Chile, Lorenzo leads a picaresque existence in Europe as an aspiring artist. He changes his name when he finds employment impersonating Petra, the mascot of the 1992 Paralympics in Barcelona. When the artist Javier Mariscal (the creator of

Petra) offers him a chance to use his studio, he declines, as he is perfectly happy impersonating Petra. In terms of artistic ambition, the trajectory leading from aspiring artist to dancing mascot is a descending one. As the narrator sees Petra on television from his vantage point in a hospital bed “con el hígado hecho polvo,” he finds something to laugh and cry about. But the narrative tone is detached, as it was with Stein and Soto: “A veces creo que Lorenzo fue mejor poeta que Stein y Soto. Pero usualmente cuando pienso en ellos *los veo juntos* [emphasis added]” (85).

This detachment is ironically subverted by the narrator’s health, which is at its low point relative to the beginning and conclusion of the novel. His physical prostration suggests that although he never explicitly identifies himself with these characters, he has something in common with them. The narrator “sees them together” (in the same place) as different imaginary identities. This episode in a hospital does not appear in “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame.” Neither does the character of Lorenzo/Petra. The journeys that occupy the middle of Bolaño’s text are essentially defenses against castration anxiety, closely linked to the failure of the revolutionary project of the 60s and 70s and the failure to identify with the master-signifier of Stalinism. The primary importance of this identification is not in the positive content it would add to the subject’s field of symbolic sense, but rather, that it would fulfill his need to reorient himself with respect to other signifiers that structure his sense of himself as psychologically immobilized. These successive identification acts—Stein as revolutionary activist, Soto as permanent tourist and Petra as marginalized artist—can be read as variations in the narrator’s imaginary identity as he unsuccessfully attempts to “traverse the fantasy” in order to reach an identification that includes the Real of his symptom (castration). Fantasy is the medium used by the subject in an attempt to cover over the lack created by the loss of *jouissance*.

The character most reminiscent of Chernyakhovski in *Estrella distante* is Abel Romero. Before leaving Chile he was a talented detective who became famous after solving several sensational crimes and participating in a daring police raid. He is hired to kill Carlos Wieder by an unidentified person. Like Chernyakhovski, he is represented as a man of action who was successful in his field and was honored by the government of his country for this success. In Barcelona, Romero offers the narrator a considerable amount of money for his help in finding Wieder, but it is evident that the narrator admires Romero and wants to help him. From this point onward the narrator becomes an active participant in the pursuit of Wieder. Previously, Bibiano had been the principal investigator of Wieder's literary activity. The narrator becomes a literary detective. He reads various right-wing literary magazines provided by Romero and informs him that he is certain that Wieder, writing under the pseudonym of Jules Defoe, is the author of an essay and a poem in two of these magazines. In terms of identification, the difference between Romero and Chernyakhovski is equivalent to the difference between symbolic and imaginary identification. Here the distinction Žižek makes between "imaginary identification [as] identification . . . with the image representing 'what we would like to be,' and symbolic identification, [as] identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love" is useful (*Sublime Object* 105). It is identification with the symbolic vantage point of the man of action who was rewarded by Allende's government that terminates the narrator's passivity and determines his imaginary identification with Chernyakhovski as a communist who defeats the fascists.

Romero informs the narrator that he is employed by an individual who became rich in the neoliberal social order of post-Allende Chile (145). Nevertheless within Chile and in exile, there

were many, like the narrator and Romero, who had not benefited nearly as much as the upper class from this social order. During the 90s, the meager rise in wages of the Chilean proletariat was outpaced by an increase in income inequality with the dominant classes, converting Chile into the country with the second most unequal distribution of income in Latin America (Winn, "Pinochet Era" 56). At the same time, as a result of neoliberal adjustment, "public sector employment, which constituted the backbone of the middle class, declined significantly. . . . This loss was not compensated by growth in formal private employment, forcing displaced former employees to create their own economic solutions through petty enterprise." (Portes and Hoffman 48). Romero, who plans to return to Chile and become a funeral director, would join the ranks of these displaced workers who swelled the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie not only in Chile, but throughout Latin America. When, several months after meeting the narrator, he informs him about his plans, the narrator thinks that he is joking and responds "No me joda" (146). The humiliating contrast between Romero as a public servant of heroic stature during Allende's government and the pettiness of his anticipated return to Chile as an exemplar of forced entrepreneurship is funny: "ahí está el secreto de todo, no sólo de las empresas de pompas fúnebres, ¡de la vida en general! Tratar bien a los deudos . . . hacerles notar la cordialidad, la clase, la superioridad moral de cualquier fiambre [corpse]" (146). Romero's assurance that his business will be successful is ironic, given that the intertextual antecedent to his projected *funeraria* is "Ataúdes Limbo," a collaborative venture between Ambrosio and Hilario Morales in Mario Vargas Llosas's *Conversación en la catedral* that ends with the liquidation of the business (680). This intertext functions like a textual unconscious that undermines Romero's belief in his get rich quick scheme. Thus, when the narrator asks him if he was hired by Bibiano, Romero responds as follows: "Mi cliente, bajó la voz hasta darle un tono confidencial que sin embargo

sonaba a *falso* [emphasis added], tiene dinero de *verdad*, ¿entiende?” (148). At first sight, the negation of “verdad” by “falso” would seem to imply that Romero’s client is not so rich, but what also takes place here is the negation of *confidencia* in “tono *confidencia* (l)” [emphasis added] by “falso.” In a deeper sense what is false about “the tone” of Romero’s response is that voice does not function as the *objet petit a*. The suggestion of the boundless wealth of the other is disconnected from desire because, unconsciously, Romero is consumed by anxiety and does not believe he can be a successful entrepreneur. He is a candidate for left-wing ideological interpellation. In *Estrella distante*, Chernyakhovski (in contrast to Allende) is the embodiment of a trait that would have been attractive to the Chilean proletariat and former members of the middle class displaced by neoliberal adjustment, as well as other Latin Americans disheartened by the defeats of the Left in the 70s and 80s: winning for the Left. The narrator’s imaginary identification with Chernyakhovski is on behalf of the gaze in the other that would be attracted to this trait.

Romero’s class position only serves to reinforce his role within the political allegory of left-right conflict in *Estrella distante*. This role comes more sharply into focus when the narrator remarks, shortly after Romero emerges from Wieder’s building, presumably after having killed him, that Romero “me pareció idéntico a Edward G. Robinson” (156). Joaquín Manzi has noted the resemblance between Romero and Wilson, a detective played by Robinson, who finds the nazi war-criminal Franz Kindler living in a New England town under a false identity in Orson Welles’s film *The Stranger* (1946) (138). Even more significant, in terms of establishing Romero’s left-wing significance within the political allegory of *Estrella distante* and his connection with Chernyakhovski, is Robinson’s role as the narrator of the English-language version of Ilya Kopalin’s and Leonid Varlamov’s documentary *Moscow Strikes Back* (1942), that

tells the story of the Soviet counteroffensive against the Germans that began at the gates of Moscow in December 1941. Robinson “would eventually suffer for [his] efforts during the HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] inspired ‘Red Scare’ of the postwar era” (Erickson).

During his investigation Romero comes across some pornographic films in which he suspects that the cameraman, “one R.P. English,” is actually Wieder, a suspicion motivated by his disappearance after the cast of the films is found murdered in a villa. Subsequently Romero interviews Joanna Silvestri, a porn actress who worked with English before the murders. The interview takes place in a clinic in Nîmes, where the bedridden and terminally-ill actress resides. Romero describes her to the narrator as “la mujer más bonita . . . que he visto en mi vida” (134). This is reminiscent of an earlier interview, on the subject of Juan Stein, between Bibiano and a woman—described by the narrator as “una de las mujeres más guapas que Bibiano había visto nunca” (71). The most interesting parallel is between the couples Juan Stein–earlier woman (woman A) and Abel Romero–Joanna Silvestri. Stein is castrated, has no sexual relationship with woman A and dies. Romero has no sexual relationship with Silvestri, but she is the one who dies. No specific information is given as to the nature of her illness, but if her disease were to be diagnosed based on the “symptoms” she displays during her interview, the conclusion would have to be that the cause of death is insertion into the symbolic order: “Le gustaba hablar . . . siempre estaba leyendo o escribiendo cartas o viendo la televisión” (136). Which implies that Romero, who wants to have sex with Silvestri, but is also inserted into the symbolic order, is, as he informs the narrator, castrated: “yo me sentí el hombre más impotente o jodido o desgraciado del mundo” (135). In formulating a demand, the subject itself becomes a signifier representative of a desire that always means something beyond what can be articulated through the signifier.

Entry into the symbolic order is the “trespassing of death on life” (Lacan, *Ethics* 294). Given that Romero represents the narrator’s ego-ideal in the symbolic order, his symbolic castration vis-à-vis Silvestri subverts the binary opposition between the narrator’s ideal ego in the imaginary order—Chernyakhovski as the subject presumed to know—and Stein as castrated. The implication is that, as with Stein, there is also something missing in the imaginary identification with Chernyakhovski: he is as separated from the Real of *jouissance* as Romero. Imaginary identification is no less alienating than symbolic identification. The subject and the other are both constructed around the void of the Real and separated from *jouissance*. Nothing can fill this void in the symbolic order. In the analogical relationship formed by the minor terms Stein–woman A and Romero–Silvestri, the rule that can be abstracted from the second term (Romero–Silvestri) is that all subjects are castrated in the symbolic order. This rule can be applied retroactively to woman A in the first term. Which is why when she reappears in the text transformed into Joanna Silvestri, it is not as the bearer of plenitude but as the representative of death. Romero and Silvestri exemplify the Lacanian idea that “There is no sexual relationship”: they are essentially talking signifiers who can never become one within a sexual relationship (Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality* 9, 33).

Romero and the narrator find Wieder living in Lloret, a small town on the outskirts of Barcelona. They approach the building where he lives: “El edificio, el barrio entero estaba vacío, a la espera del comienzo de la próxima temporada turística” (150). Nevertheless, the narrator thinks Wieder is looking at him:

El edificio semejaba un pájaro fosolizado. Por un momento tuve la sensación que desde todas las ventanas me miraban los ojos de Carlos Wieder. Estoy cada vez

más nervioso, le dije a Romero, ¿se me nota mucho? No, mi amigo, dijo Romero, está usted portándose muy bien. Romero estaba tranquilo y eso contribuyó a serenarme (150).

The void of the Real is represented by a vacant apartment building that is likened to a fossilized bird: as Hegel wrote, “the *being of Spirit is a bone.*” (208). Death (the signifier) is the being of Spirit (the self) in that it must be superseded, but always already lives on in the movement of becoming of Spirit. The subject is visually dominated by the gaze of the Real (a sensation that he is being looked at), but in contrast to Bibiano in an earlier episode that took place in Wieder’s house, does not conceive of this emptiness as a projection of his desire. Now the Real is simultaneously identified with nothingness and Wieder, indicating the narrator’s realization that it is inaccessible to Wieder as well as himself, and signifying his identification with the symptom of castration as an intrinsic aspect of the relationship of self to the Real.

The narrator, who has not seen Wieder in 20 years, is given the task of visually identifying him in a bar where he is a regular customer. He does so without Wieder recognizing him. The nauseating feeling the narrator experiences when he imagines himself “casi pegado a él . . . horrendo hermano siamés,” is an indication that he acknowledges Wieder—or what he represents—the Real of *jouissance* and the death drive—as part of himself, in this way becoming conscious of himself as a subject who is essentially split and alienated (152). Given this acknowledgement, the use of Bolaño’s alter ego Arturo B as the implied narrator of *Estrella distante* is understandable as a literary device used by the author to maintain his distance from uncomfortable psychological material. Nevertheless, as Manzi has observed, indirect references to the author’s name occur throughout the text, most sensationally in the initials of the original name of *El bebé de Rosemary*: RB.<sup>4</sup>

To pass the time and avoid attracting Wieder's attention, the narrator reads from the complete works of Bruno Schulz, a talented Polish-Jewish writer killed by an SS officer in 1942: "Leía pero las palabras pasaban como escarabajos incomprensibles, atareados en un mundo enigmático" (151).

Las palabras de Bruno Schulz adquirieron por un instante una dimensión monstruosa, casi insoportable. Sentí que los apagados ojos de Wieder me estaban escrutando y al mismo tiempo, en las páginas que daba vueltas (. . .) los escarabajos que antes eran las letras se convertían en ojos, en los ojos de Bruno Schulz, y se abrían y se cerraban una y otra vez, unos ojos claros como el cielo, brillantes como el lomo del mar, que se abrían y parpadeaban, una y otra vez, en medio de la oscuridad total. No, total no, en medio de una oscuridad lechosa, como en el interior de una nube negra. (152)

The narrator's identification with the symptom of castration and his acknowledgement of the death drive as part of himself creates a psychological space for an idealization of his motives for participating in killing of Wieder, in this way ameliorating feelings of guilt (154, 155) that are tinged with hysteria, as when he tells Romero "No quiero que haya sangre" (149). "Los ojos apagados de Wieder" are supplemented by "los ojos de Bruno Schulz . . . brillantes como el lomo del mar": the Real of the death drive is sublimated by displacing it with the memory of a victim of Fascism. For Freud sublimation implies a change in the direction of the drive towards an aim other than sexual satisfaction. According to Stavrakakis,

Sublimation raises an object to the dignity of the Thing, it is thus directly related to the real. This is because here the Thing is the lost/impossible real whose place is reoccupied by imaginary or symbolic objects—the ethical ideal being just one

of them—without, however, any of them being able to compensate us or cover over this loss which is a product of this same symbolization. (131).

Stavrakakis is interested in the function of sublimation on a collective/societal level. He considers sublimation within the context of a Lacanian analysis of the political as a construction that involves the “subjective registration of normative symbolic structures” (51). Within this process, fantasy, as an attempt to cover over the lack in the big Other (the symbolic order), belongs initially to a social reality that is lacking and in which enjoyment is only partial. Politics, which like social reality is constituted at the symbolic level and supported by fantasy, represents an attempt to restore plenitude to the social order conceived of as a well-functioning totality. In a way that is analogous to the excess of the Real over reality, the Real associated with political reality is “one of the modalities in which we experience an encounter with the real; it is the dominant shape this encounter takes within the socio-objective level of experience” (75). In Stavrakakis’s account of the relationship between the political and the Real, the articulation of a new political discourse takes place in the context of the dislocation of the preceding sociopolitical order or ideological space by the structural effect of the Real. The lack revealed by this dislocation causes the desire for a new discursive articulation (75). To paraphrase Stavrakakis, in the transition from Wieder’s eyes to those of Bruno Schulz, it is the traumatic moment of the political as encounter with the Real that initiates the “ever-present hegemonic play between different symbolizations of this real” (73-74).

The political significance of Bruno Schulz is connected to the narrator’s imaginary identification with another Jew, Chernyakhovski. The distance between Schulz and Chernyakhovski, that is to say, between a victim of the Nazis who was a writer and a military officer who was instrumental in defeating them, is reminiscent of the relationship between

alternate realities in Schulz's short story "The Cinnamon Shops": at first sight Schulz and Chernyakhovski would seem to represent two realities that are closely linked but incompatible. "They are *two sides* of the same phenomenon which, precisely as two sides, can never meet" (Parallax View 4). This is Žižek's preliminary description of his concept of the "parallax gap," based on his interpretation of the Kantian antinomy as an alternation between different perspectives on the same phenomenon "which can never be dialectically 'mediated/ sublated' into a higher synthesis, since there is no common language, no shared ground, between the two levels" (4). The experience of being Jewish would seem to provide such a common ground, but for Žižek, the possibility of this higher synthesis taking place depends on the dialectically materialist process of displacing a difference between the higher level ("the universal") and the lower one ("the particular") into the lower one, in this way making it possible to establish a "speculative identity" between the levels (5). "Here, 'speculative' means 'what tends to reconstitute identity,' in sum, to return to unity through surpassing dichotomy" (Rockmore 71). Being Jewish does not represent a difference between these individuals used by the narrator to establish a dichotomy (i.e., the division into mutually exclusive halves) within one of them. That Chernyakhovski represents a "higher level" than Schulz is a statement reminiscent of the argument Cervantes makes in the discourse on arms and letters in *Don Quijote*, in which he considers the profession of the soldier to be superior to that of the man of letters (418-24). In the "Discurso de Caracas," Bolaño refers to the discourse on arms and letters, presents himself as a former leftist militant, and as such, identifies with Cervantes, who was a soldier in his youth (39-41). For Bolaño, literature, like war, "es un peligro": great writers must be willing to take creative risks that do not always succeed. Like soldiers, they have a dangerous profession, although the degree of danger is greater with soldiers (39). Danger would seem to provide a

“shared ground” between the two realities represented by Schulz and Chernyakhovski, but in *Estrella distante*, this function is fulfilled in a more dialectical manner by the death drive. More dialectical because, in contrast to external danger, the death drive is internal to the subject as a motive force for change, and in materialist dialectics, “the fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal” (Mao 26).

For example, the difference between the eyes of Wieder and the eyes of Schulz can be conceptualized as internal to Schulz by juxtaposing the death drive with literary creativity—much in the same way the narrator does when he imagines these individuals looking at him at the same time—in a process in which “the opposites are not reconciled in ‘higher synthesis’ — rather, their difference is posited ‘as such’” (Žižek, *Parallax View* 310): in a first approximation, the aim is not to reconcile the death drive with other aspects of the self, but to describe how in *Estrella distante*—by means of symbolism involving eyes—it is differentiated from those aspects. Thus, in a poet who is not a serial killer, the death drive exists independently of its sublimation by means of literary creativity. The same thing could be said of a serial killer who is a poet. In this case, however, the death drive results in murder. Assuming that all that is known about these individuals is that they are excellent poets and that one of them is a serial killer, to the extent that the serial killer-poet chooses to commit murder, he expresses the death drive in a way the non-homicidal poet does not, that is to say he engages in an unsublimated expression of the death drive. In the first case this drive is sublimated by means of literary creativity and is not expressed directly. In the second case it is expressed directly, but is also sublimated by means of literary creativity. In both cases inner difference is reflected in the interaction of opposites corresponding to the death drive and literary creativity. To be sure, in this opposition the death

drive is to be understood as an excess that is not sublimated: given that both poets also sublimate the drive, this cancels out as a difference between them.

The interaction of opposites that differentiates the aforementioned poets is a moment of thought (a notion) that is part of a larger whole corresponding to the narrator's imaginary identity. To put it in Hegelian terms, as the imaginary other of the narrator, Chernyakhovski is posited as being but lacks self: "therefore, lacking inwardness is *passive* or a *being-for-another*" (Hegel 467). He is negated and reflects the development of the notion, as such representing the consciousness of the narrator of this development as consisting of particular instances that are moments of a larger whole: "Thoughts become fluid when pure thinking . . . recognizes itself as a moment . . . by giving up . . . the fixity of the differentiated moments which, posited in the element of pure thinking, share the unconditioned nature of the 'I'" (Hegel 20). The relationship of this larger whole to the *constituted I*, i.e., the narrator's imaginary identity, is determined by a development of the notion that proceeds in stages, first, by "giving up the fixity" that differentiates Wieder from Schulz by juxtaposing the unsublimated death drive with literary creativity, and then by conceptualizing this juxtaposition as a particular instance of the interaction of the drive with a series of attributes. For example, the combination of the unsublimated death drive with military training has the potential to result in a military officer or a military officer who is a war criminal; with medical knowledge it could result in a doctor or a serial killer who is a doctor; with agricultural knowledge, a farmer or an arsonist who is a farmer; with technical skill, a factory worker or a rapist who is a factory worker, etc. In other words, it is possible to resolve the negation of Chernyakhovski by Schulz/Wieder by means of a dialectical "explosión" of the imaginary other, i.e., by converting Chernyakhovski into a metonym for the Red Army as representative of a collective praxis (including writers as agents of this praxis) that

contains a core of the inhuman within the human: as well as defeating the nazis, many soldiers in the Red Army raped and committed other crimes. This praxis is collective in the sense that its collective achievement was the defeat of Nazi Germany. It is universal in the sense that it is a totality that is realized in its particulars, consisting of individual soldiers and officers who may also have been writers, doctors, factory workers, etc. Given that the realization of this notion is a “not all” exceeded by the Real as expressed through the symptom of the death drive, in the development of the notion, the Red Army is not reduced to an ideological master-signifier representing the collective praxis of humanity. It functions as a signifier for the truth in the concrete situation of the war against Nazi Germany. In Bolaño’s text, the death drive is the common denominator between the levels represented by Chernyakhovski and Schulz. The unsublimated expression of the death drive resulting in evil is the difference between the universal and the particular, whose displacement into the particular is the prerequisite for the reconstitution of the universal by means of the development of the notion.

As the particular of a universal that signifies the defeat of Fascism, the eyes of Bruno Schulz symbolize the political Real that is repressed in the post-Allende neoliberal social order. Compared to their brilliance, the lack of this social order, symbolized by the deadness of Wieder’s eyes, becomes evident. This lack stimulates the desire for a new political order. What is new is implied in the transition from Schulz to the narrator’s imaginary identity, that leads by historical reference from a military officer to the liberation of Europe from the nazis, from the defeat of Fascism to a vindication of Marxism-Leninism as a liberatory political force by means of a commemoration of “the greatest military victory in history” (Roberts 374); opening and closing in a creative sublimation of the death drive, as in a repetition compulsion whose underlying motivation is the “will to begin again,” to *renew* reality by destroying what exists

(Lacan, *Ethics* 212); “brilliant like the back of the sea” that in a “parallax shift” become the Red Army, Schulz’s eyes produce flashes of light like bursts of artillery fire that illuminate the “milky darkness” of the fog of war. At the conclusion of *Estrella distante*, published a few years after the “death of Communism,” and not inconsistent with Latin America’s emergence from political and economic subservience to the United States since then, it is Marxism-Leninism that is most alive as an emerging political force.

The political and ethical dimensions of *Estrella distante* are best understood as a sublimation of the death drive into the equivalent of what was dislocated by the fantasy of the end of history: the renewal of the Marxist project. The subject’s hard-earned identification with the symptom provides him with the psychological freedom to make his social practice correspond with the necessity of recreating a Latin American political identity. That this particular subject is a Chilean exile with no intention of returning to Latin America is an example of a tendency towards *heterotopia*, considered by Patricia Espinosa to be characteristic of Bolaño’s fiction: “Aquí lo local se perfila como un sitio móvil e imposible. México, España, Santiago, África. Sitios donde siempre es posible encontrar a un particular tipo de individuo” (30). Considered in terms of ethical necessity, the killing of Wieder represents the bringing of justice to a fascist whose crimes were facilitated by the defeat of the Left in Chile. This act is the result of a process that begins as a search for personal identity in a time of political instability. *Estrella distante* is thus an ironical title. Like Espinosa’s conception of the local that exceeds national boundaries, the wellsprings of personal identity are in the final analysis closer to home: within the subject by means of the imaginary other. The void of the Real is their common denominator.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In a *New York Times* article Larry Rohter casts doubt on whether Bolaño was in Chile during the coup that brought Pinochet to power: “several of Mr. Bolaño’s Mexican friends, some of whom were in Chile themselves during the Allende years, say that the writer was in Mexico during the time he claimed to have been in Chile” (2). Rohter compares Bolaño to recurring types of characters in his novels: “writers who have vanished from history or who cloaked themselves behind murky versions of their pasts” (1). Whether or not Bolaño was in Chile during the coup, his intention in *Estrella distante* was not to vanish from history (like Carlos Wieder), but to create a fictional version of himself (the narrator) as a witness to history.

<sup>2</sup>According to Muñoz Cano, the photographs are arranged in order to produce an aesthetic effect: “siguen una línea, una argumentación, una historia (cronológica, espiritual . . .), un plan” (97). This is the most extreme example of a basic theme in *Estrella distante*: the morally ambiguous nature of art. Art is capable of transforming evil into an aesthetically pleasing form, as in Leni Riefenthal’s documentary on the 1934 Nazi Party Congress, *The Triumph of the Will*.

<sup>3</sup>Chernyakhovski was killed in action in 1945. He died from wounds received outside of Königsberg at the age of 39. Bolaño describes his death as follows: “murió sólo en medio de una carretera” (62). His destiny is similar to Wieder’s, who also dies violently in isolated circumstances. This leads to the conclusion that either Wieder’s or Cheryakhovsky’s star (their destinies) provides an answer to the question posed by the novel’s epigraph, extracted from a text by Faulkner: “¿Qué estrella cae sin que nadie la mire?”

<sup>4</sup>Manzi opines that in *Estrella distante*, the Rs in the names of Ruiz-Tagle, Rosemary, Romero, R.P. English and Edward G. Robinson all refer to Roberto Bolaño’s first name (137).

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