

## **Text of a paper given at a research seminar in 2012**

One should never apologize before giving a conference paper, so let me merely preface what I'm going to say today with some warnings, for which I am not apologizing. Firstly, some of you may have heard some of the material in this piece at other events; it's a thought-in-process work that has seen previous incarnations. Secondly, because of the breadth of literary material that I intend to cover here, I will sometimes have to deal with this in less detail than is ideal, which seems to be a necessary trade-off. Finally, I'd like to issue a trigger warning: I will be talking about depictions of sexual violence today and I need to ensure that everybody present, and particularly anybody for whom that might induce trauma, is aware of that. Let me begin. **[SLIDE]**

There seems a duty incumbent upon those studying the field of contemporary fiction to acknowledge the problematic nature of national boundaries. In an era of continued globalization and apparently unstoppable neoliberal models, self-determination seems to be locked in its paradoxical formations more firmly than ever. If we acknowledge the validity and necessity of a transnational formation, however, language still remains an issue that firmly divides, even on the American continent. The occidental academy remains focused upon English-language works and the translation is left in a problematic space that seems still to grapple with the dilemmas posed by Walter Benjamin in his 1923 "The Translator's Task". It may be that these dilemmas are intractable, but for meditations upon the academy, its interrelation with neoliberalism and the dangers of national literatures, alongside the problems of didacticism and the "bad translation" of a "message" (Benjamin 2012, 75) one could do worse than to look, as this paper will, at Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, even if it is in translation. Before I move to Bolaño, though, I want to think about the traditions in which his fiction sits and the ways in which this literary mapping might re-enable us to think of "American Literature" as "American Continent Literature". The primary tradition against which I want to juxtapose Bolaño is the North American postmodern encyclopaedic tradition as represented by Thomas Pynchon. **[SLIDE]**

Since the publication of Thomas Pynchon's third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, in 1973, it has been clear to most that his works have engaged with specific ethico-political ideologies. That Pynchon is “a step leftward of registering to vote as a Democrat,” as one character puts it in *Vineland*, seems clear. Where exactly within his texts, especially the earlier works, this sentiment comes from is, however, a very different matter. Furthermore, if we're not willing to drill down and find these moments, we need to be careful for, as Adorno has cautioned us, in his Hegelian riff: the Whole is merely the false. To kick off this authorial juxtaposition, I want to take a touring career-wide sweep of Pynchon's ethics and politics, but I also want to begin to ask questions about a practice that I see in his work, that carries over into Bolaño's *2666*, that I've called “crypto-didacticism”. How do Pynchon's novels get us onside for their ethics; what are their didactic, moralising techniques and practices (for surely, when we say ethics, what we usually mean are the morals we like, as opposed to a discourse on the nature of moral thinking); and how might this relate to Pynchon's aesthetics? **[SLIDE]**

To begin with some taxonomical observations, Pynchon's works fall, broadly speaking, into two distinct categories: the California cycle of *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* can be contrasted with the epic historical or historiographic works, *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*. Pynchon has also written three essay pieces: “Is it OK to be a Luddite?”, “Nearer my Couch to Thee” and “Into the Mind of Watts” (there are further paratexts of note to the field, which consist mostly of introductions to works such as *1984*, CD liner notes and Pynchon's personal editorial correspondence). This primary taxonomy of Californian vs. epic novels is important for thinking about Pynchon's ethics because it puts two specific historical moments under the spotlight: 1.) the failure of the Leftist project in the 1960s and 2.) the enduring repercussions felt under the Reagan administration and aggressive neoliberal modes since the 1980s. The California cycle novels are set distinctly in these frames, while the epics bring us a history of the present which, to my eyes, and also to David Cowart's, look distinctly like Foucauldian genealogies: critical histories of the Rocket and NASA in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the

Enlightenment in *Mason & Dixon* and twenty-first-century capitalism in *Against the Day* (OK, you might dispute that *Against the Day* is focused on this aspect, but then a text with over 700 characters is bound to bring some level of diversity).

The primary point of my focus on Pynchon's works today will be the epic historical cycle as these are his lengthy, encyclopaedic novels that mirror the function of 2666.

Ethical approaches to Pynchon's earliest novel, *V.*, [SLIDE] have been twofold in form, that I believe can be said to contribute to a normative ethics and a meta-ethics. The normative ethical proclamations in *V.* seem to be concerned with Nazism and are most prominently brought to the fore through the novel's focus upon the Herero genocide, an otherwise broadly neglected episode in early twentieth-century history, when history is given a capital "H". During Foppl's siege party, a crucial episode in that first text, Pynchon writes of an association with Nazism that is hard to shake. Indeed, the sinister Weissman, who will later re-appear in *Gravity's Rainbow*, manifests his tendencies towards extreme, right-wing politics through his interrogation of Mondaugen's knowledge of "D'Annunzio", "Mussolini", "Fascisti" and the "National Socialist German Workers' Party". Finally, he is disappointed: SLIDE "[f]rom Munich and never heard of Hitler,' said Weissmann, as if 'Hitler' were the name of an avant-garde play". Perhaps the most notorious line for ethical thinking in *V.*, however, is the infamous statement of the narrator on the number of murders committed in the Herero genocide that SLIDE "[t]his is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good", which obviously brings in problematic notions of Holocaust absolutism against relativity and a whole series of debates with Eli Wiesel's stance that have yet to be fully played out in the field. This relativising strain spills over into the meta-ethical stance in *V.*, which can now be properly historicized as a product of its time: there is a clear focus on narratives of alterity. From our perspective, as Shawn Smith puts it, it is "no longer new or revolutionary" to state that "history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies". Pynchon, in 1963, however, seems to take exactly that stance.

*Gravity's Rainbow*, [SLIDE] the next of Pynchon's epics and still his most celebrated work, takes a different tack. The most prominent theme in this novel seems to be the genesis of contemporary America's technological and economic supremacy in the slave labour camps that built the V2. Although *Gravity's Rainbow* forks and branches and scorns the heresy of reductive interpretation as privileging some nebulous platonic "Real Text" (with capitalised casing), the primacy placed on the epigraph attributed to Wernher von Braun, the head of NASA who also worked on the V2 programme in World War II, seems also to privilege this particular historical strand. Alongside this, of course, lies an abundance of other areas to explore, but the strand that takes the silver medal in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for me, is the surfacing of Pynchon's enduring interest in ecology, particularly in the scene where Slothrop receives Luddite suggestions from a pine tree, suggesting he sabotage the local farm equipment. Pynchon's techniques for staging the genealogy of the Rocket, as we might call it, though, are interesting. Less blunt than *V.*, Pynchon moves the Holocaust to the periphery of his novel. We never receive the metonymic "Auschwitz", but instead are given "camp Dora". Approach and avoid is the highlighting technique. It seems also that Pynchon has, by this stage, begun to consider the advice of Corlies Smith, his friend and editor. Smith told Pynchon, in their editorial correspondence for *V.*, SLIDE that he thought Pynchon should avoid trying to write a protest novel. It seems to me that, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon attempts to write a cloaked protest novel that buries its target amid its overloaded, encyclopaedic form.

After a long break of 20 years, Pynchon's readers were confronted with *Vineland*, Pynchon's most disparaged novel. SLIDE What they were expecting, however, was *Mason & Dixon* which was instead released in 1997. Another of Pynchon's epics, this novel charts the surveying escapades of the eponymous protagonists, with great potential for the ironic historiographic metafiction for which Pynchon is famed, in relation to the American Civil War. Full of metafictional play, including a narrative that metaleptically folds across its enclosed diegetic layers, the normative ethics in this novel seem, straightforwardly, to centre on slavery, its link to Enlightenment and capitalism. Dixon,

in Pynchon's version, snatches a whip from a slave driver in a central episode. The future-orientated twist that Pynchon introduces is to tie this to a critique of instrumental rationality and twentieth-century contexts, tying in precarity and indentured wage labour: “slavery leading the charge to Enlightenment” as Brian Thill puts it – while Pynchon puts it another: “Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable”, a slavery which depends upon the “gallows”. *Mason & Dixon* is also a highly interesting text on the aesthetic level, not only for its playful narrative interweaving, but also for its use of 18th-century grammatical and typographical conventions, adding an extra layer of reader involvement in the process.

The final of Pynchon's epics, so far, is **SLIDE** *Against the Day*, his 2006 genre-bending behemoth that charts the period between the 1893 Chicago World's Fair to just before World War II with a cast comprised of airships, anarchists and shamans. Although this work is extreme, even by standards of the encyclopaedic novel, there seems to be a particular focus given, as is the case across many of Pynchon's works, to anarchism. At a basic level, *Against the Day* makes direct reference to a large number of prominent historical anarchists, not all of whose names I can pronounce; Benjamin Tucker, Leon Czolgosz, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Jean-Baptiste Sipido, Gaetano Bresci and Luigi Lucheni among others. Anarchism, in Pynchon's text, is presented as a dualism; on the positive side, the product of a liberating socialism, but also, in its terroristic capacity, an affirmation of Reaganomics, the outcome of devolved autonomy – the well-known libertarian problem of freedom to, vs. freedom from. Of course, it's Pynchon, so we get a double-edged presentation. On the one hand, there seems to be a critique of anarchism via the idea of a narrowed temporal bandwidth that Pynchon had earlier used in *Gravity's Rainbow* when he writes: “[t]hese people [...] they're all so unanchored, no history, no responsibility, one day they just appear, don't they, each with his own secret designs”. Conversely, though, Lew Basnight finds himself unable to reconcile the “bearded, wild-eyed, bomb-Rolling” description furnished by his agency with the people he meets in the company of Moss Gatlin, the travelling anarchist preacher. The injustice of the social stereotype is finally driven home when Pynchon writes of the betrayal

felt on account of the mainstream representation: “[t]he Anarchists and Socialists on the shift had their own mixed feelings about history”.

From this brief overview, which is complemented by an iceberg-like reading in which the California cycle must remain submerged, a crude but useful, ethical schema can be drawn from Pynchon's novels:

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- 1.) The genesis of instrumental rationality in the Enlightenment
- 2.) The interlinking of slavery with a rational capitalism, in which Pynchon retains a Puritan inflection, and which leads to ecological destruction
- 3.) The Frankfurt-School-esque terminus of this mode of rationality in the death and labor camps
- 4.) the interlinking of such genocide with specifically right-wing politics and economic practices
- 5.) the predication of contemporary America's technological and economic supremacy upon histories of such politics and practices

**SLIDE** In addition to these precepts, which could have been deduced by just sitting down and reading a lot of Marcuse and Adorno, it also seems fairly clear that agency in Pynchon's texts is constrained by a form of social subjectification. Although others have contested a Foucauldian parallel on the grounds of differing power models, I think there's a good case to be made to see alignment between Pynchon and late-Foucault (say, in the College de France lecture series published under the title *The Hermeneutics of the Self*) here because it marks a continual tension between a self that can act upon others and itself (consider GR's “we do know what's going on and we let it go on”) and a self that is wholly constructed by forces beyond the power and knowledge of the actor (“the cosmic fascist in our DNA” of Frenesi in *Vineland*). As Judith Butler puts it in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: “[t]his ethical agency is neither fully determined nor radically free”.

This brings me, after this survey, back to thinking about Pynchon's didacticism and morality,

as opposed to that we call ethics in literature. Derek Attridge proposes that the study of literary ethics must remain sensitive to “to the work's distinct utterance”, or to rephrase, that it should avoid Adorno's criticism of applied philosophy which only reads out of works airs of its own concretion. It seems to me, however, that an ethical consideration of literature must consider not only the normative doctrines that are communicated, with all the dangers of literary instrumentalism and confirmation bias that must carry, but the formal and aesthetic means by which such doctrines are conveyed and the way in which they are interlinked. What specific didactic techniques inhere within the aesthetic of an encyclopaedic work? Is there, potentially, a technique here through which Pynchon enlists our support through our own, complicit investment of intellectual capital into decoding and understanding his works? Pynchon's works are ideological worlds, full of false representation and it seems unfair to have spent such effort decoding them if not to critically question the subjects that Pynchon attempts to interpellate through his hailing devices: “ha, reader! Caught you with your pants down!”

With this mode of didacticism and ethics in mind, let me now turn to Roberto Bolaño. **[SLIDE]**

*2666* has been heralded as phenomenal. Impossible to do justice to its size and scope, by way of synopsis, Bolaño's novel interweaves five narratives concerning: a set of self-absorbed literary critics, Oscar Amalfitano, Oscar Fate, Bolaño's fictional reclusive author Archimbaldi and a central section on “the crimes” across a 900 page epic. These “crimes” form the dystopian, or form of utopian, centrepiece with which the novel batters its reader: the sequential, gruelling description of the bodies of the female sexual homicides around the fictional town of Santa Teresa, a thinly veiled rendition of the ongoing, horrendous reality in Ciudad Juárez. In literary terms, *2666* is an explicitly metatextual work that, as I've suggested, situates itself within two traditions: the utopian work and the encyclopaedic novel, in the latter case particularly of the North American variety. This can be seen twofold in the text itself. Firstly, in response to its own representations of violence, the work overtly queries utopian premises when it asks “why Thomas More [...]?” (Bolaño 2009, 193).

Secondly, Bolaño aims for his novel to be the “great, imperfect, torrential [work]” that struggles “against something, that something that terrifies us all, that something that [...] spurs us on, amid blood and mortal wounds and stench,” thus invoking debates about autonomous and committed art forms (Bolaño 2009, 227). **[SLIDE]**

An aspect of this work that is worth considering, however, is the extent to which Bolaño's novel could fall under the remit of this same category of “crypto-didacticism” and the degree to which those in the academy given the task of “teaching post-millennial fiction” should be aware that they might also read such a statement in its adjectival form: post-millennial fiction that teaches. The university is awarded a central place in *2666*, which is certainly a dubious honour, but it is the contention of the second part of this paper that the novel trains its didactic strains back upon the academy in a utopian mode that still sees a limited potential for redemption. Furthermore, in the realm of aesthetics, it is also worth considering *2666* in a tradition of, and alongside, postmodern American encyclopaedic fiction; after all, Archimbaldi, Bolaño's secretive, protagonist, author character is a recluse, like Pynchon, famed within the academy for his literary fiction (in fact, Grant Farred has called this character “Pynchonesque”).

If the crypto-didactic mode is one which cloaks its purpose in a super-dense structure so that, by the necessary intellectual capital that the reader is forced to expend in comprehension, its fundamental normative ethical propositions are all the harder for the reader to reject, how do we enter Bolaño in this way? Well, one way of rethinking Bolaño in the crypto-didactic mode is to realise that if we think back to the deliberately reductive ethical propositions that I drew from Pynchon's work, it seems that, again reductively, a similar ethical formula can be deduced from *2666*: four hundred women have been tortured, raped and murdered, the police do nothing about it because the victims are working class women and, to quote Bolaño directly, “nobody noticed” (Bolaño 2009, 372). In other words, amid rampant “gynophobia” (Bolaño 2009, 382) and omnipresent misogyny: “the women here aren't worth shit” (Bolaño 2009, 318).

Although very different from the reading advanced here, Grant Farred has argued that



Bolaño's true focus in this ethical setup is upon a critique of postcolonialism's entanglement with neoliberalism, a critique that, nonetheless, further strengthens the notion of a crypto-didactic text. To put it concisely: twenty-first-century readings of complex, lengthy fictions tend, in the academy's model of an ethical turn, towards a specific didactic hermeneutic in which the novel is seen as a disciplinary text that attempts to interpellate subjects within its own moral framework. **[SLIDE]** Indeed it could be, for these novels, as 2666's Florita Almada puts it, that “teaching children might be the best job in the world, gently opening children's eyes, even the tiniest bit” (Bolaño 2009, 456). Bolaño sets about opening our eyes, though, through the process of interpretation; to leap straightforwardly to the endpoint is to miss the subject-forming aspect of these texts. Hence, the didacticism is encoded in such a way that the reader must invest intellectual energy, or capital, in the text in order to purchase the ethical payoff. This, of course, presents a problem for theoretical literary research upon such work. To jump to the pre-formulated end result degrades the utopic power of such fiction. This is, though, the same problem that explication creates in any form, for as Louis Marin writes in his study of Utopics: “[t]he benefits of pleasure the textual word play triggered were capitalized into analyses and theses. An authoritative power settled at the very spot of what is not capable of interpretation [...] It may simply be impossible to write and speak about utopia” (Marin 1990, xx).

In this problem of explication against utopian function, it is profitable to consider the theoretical paradigms within which Bolaño's work places itself. **[SLIDE]** Although it is often thought within theoretico-literary practice that new fictions require new ways of reading, this may not straightforwardly be true, especially across such constructed bounds as “post-millennial literature”; after all, this is based on a Christian calendar, a particularly problematic construction, as shall be seen, for 2666. What seems clear is that it is possible to identify certain emergent trends of practice, some of which seem totally new and could require new modes of reading, while others have a clear trajectory from well before the century's break. With this in mind, refraining from the nonetheless interesting (and certainly more fashionable) approaches through Hardt, Negri or

Agamben, it is worth examining the way that 2666 stages Theodor Adorno's formulation on ideas of autonomous and committed art while considering Bolaño's last novel within two opposed critical frameworks: as political and as utopian. These frameworks are opposed because, in the instance of political success, the critical utopian function of the artwork is destroyed: as Marin puts it, this is when utopic practice comes “to the awareness of its own process” as “revolutionary *praxis*” (Marin 1990, 279). This consideration should help to explain the crypto-didactic movement because it exposes the way that the novel works through theoretical models of pornography and violence.

[SLIDE] Adorno's essay “Commitment” presents a specific response to Sartre's notion of committed literature that is relevant to the discussion at hand. Although Adorno is also highly critical of the term “commitment” for its coercive mode of non-freedom in existentialist philosophy in the essay piece “Commitment” Adorno posits two polarities of literature: committed art that has a specific political aim, but [SLIDE] “strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish” (Adorno 2007, 175) and autonomous art, or “art for art's sake” that falsely denounces its own “ineradicable connection with reality” (Adorno 2007, 176). These positions, in which each dialectically “negates itself with the other” (Adorno 2007, 176), constitute the space in which all art, Adorno claims, has lived. Interestingly for the discussion at hand, Adorno stresses that Brecht's original intention, in which Adorno believes he failed, was to practice an art that [SLIDE] “both presents itself as didactic, and claims aesthetic dispensation from responsibility for the accuracy of what it teaches” (Adorno 2007, 183). The first problem for Brecht, as Adorno sees it, is that “the more preoccupied [he] becomes with information, and the less he looks for images, the more he misses the essence of capitalism which the parable is supposed to present” (Adorno 2007, 183). The second is that, in Brecht's downgraded metaphors, in this case the substitution of a “trivial gangster organization” for “a conspiracy of the wealthy and powerful” in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, “the true horror of fascism is conjured away” (Adorno 2007, 184). As Adorno puts it in this piece: [SLIDE] “[f]or the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized” (Adorno 2007, 184–185) and in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, “[c]ommitment' is the current word for the

unreasonable demand of discipline” (Adorno 1986, 69).

2666 is, in many ways, analogous. A work of epic theatre that nonetheless “has no epic pretensions”, as Farred puts it, the novel seeks to “make men think,” in Adorno's phrase, but it does not rely upon a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*. Instead, it cloaks any metafictional estrangement in the mechanism of its action. It is an overloading, not distancing, effect. Furthermore, Bolaño's novel goes a long way towards a negation of Adorno's warning of committed literature's affiliation to pornography. [SLIDE] This is not the more recent idea of “empathy fatigue” espoused in the wake of mass media culture, but rather that, for Adorno, “[t]he so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people [...] contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment” (Adorno 2007, 189). While Carolyn J. Dean points out, in her critique of this argument, that this strain of thought has a heritage as far back as Diderot in the eighteenth century (Dean 2003, 89), but substantially increased in usage around the 1960s in reference to the Holocaust, Bolaño recognises this conflation of sexuality and power that can occur in artistic representation and so constantly reminds the reader that this pornographic mode is also one of sexual violence. Every time the potential to forget the affinity between the modes surfaces, the text reminds us that many, if not all, of the victims piled up in 2666 have been both vaginally and anally raped. Furthermore, in 2666's discussion of snuff films, Bolaño gives the reader a strong metatextual clue as to where the novel sits, reminding us of both the mimetic fallacy, but also the pornographic potential that, it seems, the novel wishes to avoid: “the snuff industry, in this context, was just a symptom” (Bolaño 2009, 536). To rephrase this: Bolaño appreciates the fine line between empathy and pornography and metafictionally signposts this so that, each time the trap is open, the reader is pointed around the pitfall. Bolaño, like Dean, wants to express “something quite a bit more complicated than the conventional notion that pornography represents an unspeakable association between sexuality and murder” (Dean 2003, 106), but is aware of this link and warns the reader of their potential complicity.

As a text that seeks, then, to ethically explore the power of fiction in the wake of mass

murder, it is worth considering how 2666 fits within a utopian tradition. It turns out that this is in fact linked, in several ways, to the mode of didacticism that the novel employs, in the idea of “process”. In the study of literary aesthetics, fictions such as 2666 are usually not deemed important so much for the specific *topoi* they present, although these are undoubtedly of enormous real-world significance and there is the ever-present danger of disserving that suffering in critique and analysis, but rather for their more generalizable qualities of dislocation and reformulation. This idea of dislocation and reformulation, a subjunctive thinking-otherwise, is, of course, a key concept in utopian fiction. The notion of 2666 as a fiction of process also encroaches on this realm however and can also, perhaps albeit unintentionally, be seen in other works of twenty-first century fiction. Consider, as an example, [SLIDE] Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* with its abandonment of resolution. This work enacts a very different mode of indeterminate conclusion to Pynchon's novels, which frequently end in the apocalyptic sublime, or ironic nostalgia, or even to David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*, wherein the refusal to close the temporal loop is itself a signifying practice.

Instead, *1Q84* presents a thrust at utopic dislocation through its twin-mooned world, but in terms of narrative builds and builds until the repetition causes a realisation that resolution is too late. It is utopian in the “no place” homophonic prefix through the too late; the time that remains is too little. This encoded, again crypto-didactic, metafictional practice is a refinement of its crude precursor in Barth's 1960s metafiction and points to the pedagogical mode; rather than metafictionally *stating* its utopian nature, the text *shows* this, which may sound like a creative writing class cliché, but is probably more akin to an inversion of Frank Ramsey's statement on Wittgenstein: perhaps rather than outright saying it, the text structurally whistles it.

[SLIDE] This makes sense as an extrapolation from Marin's formulation of literary utopia. Indeed, his table of contents splits fiction into simulacrum and signification, a schema of codes and play that correspond to enunciation and the enunciated expression, thus implying a dialogic structure. In short, between practice and discourse, fiction sits as the “stage,” the utopian operation

of process (Marin 1990, 27). *2666* is a text that deliberately signals itself in this mode. Its city is not Ciudad Juárez but an emphatically insisted-upon intra-textual reality: “Santa Teresa. I'm talking about Santa Teresa” (Bolaño 2009, 459). Bolaño even announces that we should read *2666* in a critical dystopic mode through his mapping of the city space. In this aspect of the text, Bolaño reworks Marin's formulation that the utopian city “gives not a possible route, or even a system of possible routes, but articulations signaled by closed and open surface spaces” (Marin 1990, 208) in the fact that his city is mapped by the female body, navigated by the male police officials, and mediated through the intersubjective shifts of narration in the novel. To evoke Borges, as does Marin, this is a one-to-one map of the necropolis narrated with the body-as-text.

This questioning of societal independence in art, in conjunction with the idea of the utopian in *2666*, prompts a return to Louis Marin and his reading of May '68. Bolaño clearly signals that the function of the university, or rather its breakdown, is crucial to his investigation through the satirical portrayal of the literature professors and the pretentious writing of his fictional author, who trails sentences thus: “then, too, then, too, then, too” (Bolaño 2009, 661). As Farred puts it: “*2666* satirizes the cult status that the Archimboldians of all theoretical stripes have assigned the elusive, Pynchonesque author” (Farred 2010, 699). Although it is worth noting the greater menippean nature of this satire in opposition to, say, “An Orison of Sonmi~451” in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, which swipes specifically at the Golden Arches of the capitalist diner, one of the key didactic purposes of Bolaño's novel is an attempt to critically evaluate the academy: the neoliberal university as a site of revolution and resistance. Examining these sites in his theoretical work, Marin asks: “[w]asn't this the place where the relationship between teacher and student, authorized and institutionalized, could be deconstructed through this relationship's very content?” (Marin 1990, 4).

As has already been mentioned, but will be explored in much more detail now, the dystopia of *2666* brings a specific focus to the structure of the university and it makes several critiques upon this institution. Foremost among these appears to be the failure of '68 that the text historically cross-links to a critique of theology. As shall be seen, this is a strange critique that fluctuates between

modes, but that seems to be bridged by liberation theology, particularly given the novel's South America setting: the home of Gustavo Gutierrez and liberation theology. [SLIDE]

To begin, it is worthwhile noting the critique that *2666* levels at theology and the associated mechanisms of its organized forms. At its content level, Bolaño's text enacts a straightforward critique of a wholly theocentric, as opposed to anthropocentric, model. This is because, amid the truly criminal femicide taking place at the outskirts of Santa Teresa, in the dumps of the dispossessed, the police choose to divert much of their labour to solving the isolated case of a church-defiler, the so-called Demon Penitent, who urinates in churches, albeit also stabbing a priest. Furthermore, this diversion serves to bring focus to a waste of resources in attacking those who attack the church, when, for Bolaño, it seems that real social change will not come through any theological component.

There is, however, one caveat to this rejection. In one of the novel's many metatextual moments, Bolaño writes: “[n]ot reading, it might be said, was the highest expression of atheism [...] If you don't believe in God, how do you believe in a fucking book?” (Bolaño 2009, 550). This appears to suggest, in an always-theological model of fiction, that Bolaño does temper his anti-clerical sentiments. However, perhaps the key here lies in the phrase “highest expression” and can be profitably addressed, once more, with recourse to Adorno. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* frames rationality in terms of a paradoxical dialectic where, at a certain point, the aim of liberating humans from fear turns against itself and resolves back into a process of alienation. This seems to be the same implication here. If rationality is allowed unchecked to disregard everything that sits outside of its bounds, fiction too will be thrown to the wolves. That said, the severe check on theology – even if its flipside, atheism, is also reprimanded – constitutes a rejection of post-secular thinking, from a major figure in the first decade of twenty-first-century literature and this certainly merits consideration, particularly at a time when notions of re-enchantment are appearing in the debate with ever-growing frequency.

The specific brand of theology that comes under fire in *2666*, however, is liberation

theology. While the murders are ongoing and the police are diverting much attention to tracking down the Demon Penitent, rather than solving the murders, Sergio González (modelled on Sergio González Rodríguez) speaks with a priest and only then learns “that crimes other than the Penitent's were being committed in Santa Teresa” (Bolaño 2009, 378). When asked what he reads, the priest responds “[l]iberation theology, especially” (Bolaño 2009, 379). By way of brief introduction, liberation theology is a strand of Christianity that interprets the teachings of Christ in terms of freedom from injustice, be that social, economic or political. It is, however, in Jay Winter's assessment in his *Dreams of Peace and Freedom*, a movement that is crucial to the 1960s and it is here that the interconnected nodal network of the university, a critique of theology, the police and the Holocaust can begin to come into focus.

Part of this link to the '60s comes from a trans-Atlantic, European context, which 2666 specifically sets to re-introduce and relativize. Here, a different brand of liberation theology is crucial to '68, as Winter notes, because, through the radical self-sacrifice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer “in the early part of the decade [the 1960s], the subject of the Nazi extermination of the Jews was beginning to escape from the veil which had obscured it over the previous decade. This was now a subject of direct moral and political relevance, and contributed much to the background of the 1968 revolt” (Winter 2006, 142). This link between South American liberation theology and its European counterpart is mirrored in the murders in 2666. Charting a worldwide course, Bolaño's author character Archimboldi is revealed, in the final part, to have killed a German bureaucrat who was responsible for ordering the deaths of his Jewish prisoners. Although this is revealed obliquely through the phrase “[s]omeone had strangled him,” it is clear that the killer is indeed Hans Reiter (Archimbaldi's real name), who has just heard Sammer's horrific tale (Bolaño 2009, 767). Thus, the murders in Santa Teresa are linked, by Bolaño to the Holocaust, in the same way that Winter links liberation theology, which Bolaño explicitly mentions, to this terrible chapter in European history and in the same way that Pynchon's epic texts trans-historicize.

**[SLIDE]** The common point of locus, then, for Jay Winter's appraisal of liberation theology

and for Bolaño's utopianism combined with the explicit critique of the university, via the Holocaust, is 1968. Indeed, in thinking through the didacticism of twenty-first-century utopianism, '68 is key. While there were jokes – “je suis Marxiste, tendance Groucho” (Winter 2006, 152) – the core utopic thrust is better shown in the '68 graffiti: “sous le pavé, la plage” – “under the paving stones, the beach”. This utopian sentiment, which forms the epigraph to Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, is a heritage to which *2666* is sensitive, albeit in a dialectical fashion. The beach beneath the contemporary concrete here is the retribution that Archimbaldi enacts, albeit a justice that required the most heinous crime of the twentieth century for its existence and that is subsequently paralleled in the paranoid connections that the reader makes to the murders in Santa Teresa. While other fictions may be more cynical – Pynchon presents a genealogy of racist property appropriation in the creation of beaches in *Inherent Vice* – Bolaño's focus on globalization, utopia and the revolutionary project of the late '60s is clear, even if not clear-cut.

The entanglement of the university, however, in the dystopic critique of *2666* is furthered through the clear statements that show, not a site of pure learning divorced from the horrendous events that are charted throughout the novel, or even one on the correct side of the failed revolution of 1968, but instead, an institution connected by blood. In fact, the most transparent of these signposts is the family bloodline: Don Pedro Negrete, head of the ineffectual and corrupt city police, is the “twin brother of the university rector” (Bolaño 2009, 606). The scorn poured on the university here is not a simple case of an anti-academic authorial jibe, but an insinuation that the entire mechanism of the university is twinned with corruption that permits mass rape and slaughter. Bolaño shows that the idea of the university as a site of detached, utopian purity is deeply flawed through an almost idealist mode. The surface appearance of the critics is of eccentric and pedantic individuals obsessed with their texts, merely isolated, but harmless. Their essence, however, is one of violence. [SLIDE] This is most clearly revealed when they savagely beat the taxi driver who objects to their polyamorous interest in Liz Norton. At this point the text suddenly veers into discourses of national and religious hatred. Bolaño's text is instantly peppered with “English” vs.



“Pakistani” and the violence is purported to embody the insults:

shove Islam up your ass [...] this one is for Salman Rushdie [...] this one is for the feminists of Paris [...] this one is for the feminists of New York [...] this one is for the ghost of Valerie Solanas, you son of a bitch, and on and on, until he was unconscious and bleeding from every orifice in the head, except the eyes (Bolaño 2009, 74)

The invocation of feminism as justification for violence is particularly pertinent not only to the femicides in Mexico, but also, of course, in a wider discussion regarding occidental neo-colonialism and Islamophobia. In this instance, it is the university that appears central to this violence.

As Bolaño gives no straight out-and-out reasoning for why the university can be seen as totally complicit with this violence, it seems obvious to link it with Grant Farred's assertion of a critique of neoliberalism and the academy's growing entanglement with big business. This is seen in the function of exclusivity in the university structure. When the critics first meet Amalfitano “the first impression” they had “was mostly negative, in keeping with the mediocrity of the place” (Bolaño 2009, 114). The exception to the group here is Liz Norton, an educated and intelligent character, but one who is less tightly bound to the academic institution: “[a]ll they knew about Liz Norton was that she taught German literature at a university in London. And that, unlike them, she wasn't a full professor” (Bolaño 2009, 12). Unlike the other critics, Norton sees the human being rather than the competitive academic: her “impression was of sad man whose life was ebbing slowly away” (Bolaño 2009, 114). Indeed, though, “[w]hen Amalfitano told them he had translated *The Endless Rose*,” one of the fictional author, Archimbaldi's, novels, “the critics' opinion of him changed” (Bolaño 2009, 116). The structures of value and worth that the academy co-opts, in keeping with all neoliberal, late-capitalist vocational careers, is one of excellence amid competition. To distinguish oneself from the mediocre mass is the aim, but the “mediocre” mass, in 2666 are being sequentially murdered.

**[SLIDE]** The fundamental critique of the university's entanglement with neoliberalism is now well known and rehearsed, particularly in humanities departments, but is well summarised by Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades:

Public colleges and universities are exemplars of neoliberalism. As with neoliberal regimes worldwide, U.S. public higher education assigns markets central social value. Public colleges and universities emphasize that they support corporate competitiveness through their major role in the global, knowledge-based economy. They stress their role in training advanced students for professional positions close to the technoscience core of knowledge economies (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000, 73).

Clearly, from such critiques, the direct threat to the liberal Enlightenment humanist educational project through entanglement with the market is the main objection. This prompts two responses that are pertinent to *2666*. The first is a counter-objection that, as Stephen Billet puts it, “the provision of vocational education through universities has long existed, and has always been largely directed towards occupational purposes, despite the contrary often being claimed” (Billett 2011, 8). The fact that these vocations are well-paid and in intellectually demanding areas is often overlooked in the denunciation of the university's claimed secession to the needs of society. The second is that, if we are to see the university and the police as twinned, as Bolaño's novel implies, then the function of the university that is under critique shifts slightly: the university must work, as with late-Foucault's reading of the police, to create a “live, active, productive man” but also to totalise and discipline (Foucault 1999, 149).

*2666* presents, from this, an academy divided against itself. As revolutionary praxis, it is failure: the legacy of '68 has only been a further entrenchment of the academy in neoliberal models of commodified education. As utopian project, to follow Marin's schema, the university also falls down: the supposition of the university's function as pure and discrete from commerce or the aims of society leads to segregation and implicit complicity with the polishing off of the lower class. This is clearly seen in the fact that the bumbling literature professors, alongside the rector who looked “as if every day he took long meditative walks in the country” (Bolaño 2009, 111), form a group whose exegesis of Archimbaldi's texts as a “Dionysian vision of ultimate carnival” sits in opposition to another group's readings of “suffering” and “civic duty” in the writer's works (Bolaño 2009, 12). It is the eponymous critics whose reading prevails in the text's narrative and, in their critique and

obsession with aesthetics, rather than the social, the suffering is erased.

When viewed in this light, the role of the university in 2666 brings Bolaño's project back full-circle to notions of commitment and didacticism. Interestingly, what seems to emerge from this treatment is that the issues of commitment that 2666 frames do not appear to be concerned with artistic practice. Instead, they are turned upon the academy. Bolaño's novel, in its treatment of the critics seems designed to discipline, train and encourage critics and the academy to write sociologically engaged criticism. Indeed, this fiction of process, a brand of metafiction that calls attention to affect and mechanism through its overloading, is designed to alter critical subjectivity; perhaps, dare I say it, a reflexive transformed subjectivity through reading – a very late-Foucauldian ethics. Consider the conversation between two of Bolaño's characters: **[SLIDE]**

'That's a pretty story. [...] A pity I'm too old and have seen too much to believe it'

'It has nothing to do with belief [...] it has to do with understanding, and then changing' (716).

This does, of course, have ironic consequences because, under such a mode, Bolaño's novel takes on utilitarian characteristics: it is itself as entangled in the neoliberal web as the objects of its own critique and the investment of intellectual capital is economically analogous, in part, to the capitalist mode of reproduction.

If this poses a problem for the novel, however, 2666 manages to avoid other dangerous modes through the temporality within which its critique is framed. Most utopian fictions have to dislocate their spatial and temporal setting. Here Bolaño certainly re-spatializes his setting, but its temporality is debatably located amid a fluctuation of the contemporary and the future, especially so when the novel's title is read through the reference in *Amulet* to “a cemetery in the year 2666” (Bolaño 2008, 86). The interesting point here is that Bolaño's novel specifically avoids the conservative nostalgia, the looking back, of many texts through its future-orientation, even if dystopic. Again, think of Pynchon's wistful forks in the road that America never took in *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day*, or even *Inherent Vice*'s elegy for the fog of the sixties.

Bolaño's fiction of process teaches us that we do not need new theories to understand its crypto-didactic message, but that we do need new theories to effectively resist domination and injustice in the twenty-first-century, in a space where “the victims of sex crimes in this city” number “[m]ore than two thousand a year. And almost half of them are underage. And probably at least that many don't report being attacked. [...] every day more than ten women are raped here” (Bolaño 2009, 563).

What I've tried to suggest today, thinking through the utopic practice of 2666 after a reading of Pynchon's ethical strains, is that it provides a valuable model for examining the aesthetics of a new breed of autocritical didactic work, no matter how embedded that didacticism might be. In this instance, the utopic future-orientation of this novel can be used profitably to reconsider the neo-liberal co-option of the university and to attempt to posit new forks in the road at our present juncture, rather than nostalgically lamenting already-faded moments and cynically decrying new proposals for change.

Finally, I'd like to suggest that through the retro-theoretical return enacted in this piece, an Adorno for texts, provides us an anti-Adorno for praxis; reading texts to reveal their political process to posit utopia once more may be a way out of the stasis of pure theoria. As Catherine Belsey puts it: “[a]ssumptions about literature involve assumptions about language and about meaning, and these in turn involve assumptions about human society. The independent universe of literature and autonomy of criticism are false” (Belsey 2002, 27). Although this doesn't get us out of Adorno's theoretical problem that, in the false world all praxis is false, Roberto Bolaño espouses, in 2666, a newly naïve ethics that asks us to believe once more in the political, utopian and didactic function of writing, both critical and creative. Critics must not, though, be didactic. Bolaño makes it clear enough that this task is to be left to fiction, for otherwise the critics become “like missionaries ready to instill faith in God [...] less interested in literature than in literary criticism, the one field, according to them – some of them, anyway – where revolution was still possible” (Bolaño 2009, 72). We may be in the too late phase now where, despite the interconnectedness of criticism and

praxis, revolution is no longer possible. To conclude, though, allow me to give the last word to Roberto Bolaño with one final quotation from 2666 that sums up this retreat back to theory, to fiction abstaining from the creation of a just life but didactically howling through its process for a praxis nonetheless, for despite the criticism of the critics, Bolaño also makes it clear that he does not want a vacuum: “[w]hat is it I want you to do? asked the congresswoman. I want you to write about this, keep writing about this. **[SLIDE]** [...] I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh, not shadows” (Bolaño 2009, 631).