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## Keep writing: the critique of the university in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

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### ABSTRACT

Roberto Bolaño's *2666* is a novel that can be situated, aesthetically, within the traditions of utopian fiction and the North American encyclopaedic, postmodern novel. It is also, however, a text that is exemplary of a type of didacticism that cloaks its mechanism behind an overloaded structure. One of the explicit targets of this didacticism is the neo-liberal university that, in *2666*, is structurally twinned with the police department and is thus complicit in the novel's femicides. This article suggests the ways in which Bolaño's novel attempts to discipline the academy while also outlining its mode of crypto-didacticism. Taking theoretical cues from Theodor W. Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu, this article reads *2666* as a metafictional work that signals its own desire to teach, thereby representing a fresh approach for ethics in the postmodern novel and beyond.

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**KEYWORDS** Roberto Bolaño; *2666*; didacticism; university; neoliberalism

### Introduction

There seems a duty incumbent upon those studying the field of contemporary fiction to acknowledge the problematic nature of national boundaries. Indeed, many theoretical models have proposed that the nation state should no longer remain the privileged entity for contemporary study, seen perhaps most prominently in the work of Hardt and Negri. In an era of continued globalisation, however, self-determination still seems to be locked within its paradoxical formations as firmly as ever, even as discourses on the demise of nationalism proliferate. Regardless of the degree to which one acknowledges the validity and necessity of a transnational theoretical framework (sometimes schematised as 'TransLit' in the recent terminology of literary studies), though, language still remains an issue that firmly divides, even on the American continent. With the continued decline of comparative literature programmes, the

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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 problems are intractable, but for meditations upon the academy, its interrelation with neo-liberalism and the dangers of national literatures, alongside the problems of didacticism and the ‘bad translation’ of a ‘message’ one could do worse than to look, as will this piece, at Roberto Bolaño’s astonishing novel, *2666*, even if it is in translation.<sup>1</sup>

*2666* has been heralded as phenomenal. Impossible to do justice here to its size and scope, Bolaño’s novel interweaves five narratives concerning a set of self-absorbed literary critics, the university professor Oscar Amalfitano, a journalist called Oscar Fate, Bolaño’s fictional reclusive author Archibald and a central section on ‘the crimes’, all spread across a 900-page epic. These ‘crimes’ form the dystopian centrepiece with which the novel batters its reader: the sequential, gruelling description of the bodies of the female victims of sexual homicides around the fictional town of Santa Teresa, a thinly veiled rendition of the ongoing, horrendous reality in Ciudad Juárez. In terms of its literary aesthetic, *2666* is at times an explicitly metatextual work that situates itself within two traditions: the utopian work and the encyclopaedic novel, in the latter case particularly of the North American variety, despite arguments to the contrary.<sup>2</sup> This can be seen twofold in the text itself. First, in response to its own representations of violence, the work overtly queries utopian premises when it asks ‘why Thomas More [ ... ]?’<sup>3</sup> Second, 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 within a vast structure; the link between aesthetics and politics.<sup>4</sup>

An aspect of this work that is worth considering, however, is the extent to which Bolaño’s novel could fall under the remit of a category that I term ‘crypto-didacticism’, a phrase denoting fictions that appear vast and chaotic but that nonetheless aim to school their readership in ethics. In this light, 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 broadest signal given by *2666* that it should be considered under such a mode, but also the key signal of the target audience that the text seeks to educate, is that the university is awarded a central place in the novel, which is certainly a dubious honour. It is the contention of this article that *2666* is a text that trains its didactic strains back upon the academy in a utopian mode that, while intensely critical, still sees a limited potential for redemption. In other words, this article proposes that *2666* is a novel that attempts to teach, and perhaps redeem, the academy, a reading for which Sharae Deckard has already paved the way in

her assertion that the first two portions of the text can be defined as ‘didactic “set pieces”’.<sup>5</sup>

Linked to this pedagogical mission, it is also worth considering the aesthetics of *2666* within a tradition of what could be termed ‘fictions of process’, a brand of metafiction that asks the reader to value the journey, rather than the arrival, the reading, rather than the having-read. As I will go on to show and to explain, *2666* exhibits these characteristics (being composed of several, anachronistic, practically autonomous sub-books and without a clear arc of narrative progress) and can be seen as a novel that instead seeks to effect change through subjectification processes whereby the aim is to encounter an anticipated reader who can then be hailed and altered: an ‘experience book’ as Timothy O’Leary might term it.<sup>6</sup> Such a conjunction of process and subjectification has an internalising pedagogical function in which the reader believes himself or herself to be an autodidact, even though, in fact, the text presupposed its particular teachings in advance.

This article seeks, therefore, to twofold interrogate the didacticism of Bolaño’s novel while also exposing the role that is assigned to the university in this text, with particular emphasis upon its structural affiliation to the police and their facilitation of mass murder. In short, fore-framing the issues that will be discussed here in sociological terms for both the academy and twenty-first-century didactic fiction, as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron put it: ‘[s]urely we need to question the underlying social and political functions of a teaching relationship which so often fails, yet has not provoked a revolt, and which is so often attacked, but only ritualistically or ideologically’.<sup>7</sup>

In order to effect this argument, this article will now be structured into two distinct parts. The first (‘Crypto-Didacticism, Utopia and *2666*’) presents a background to ideas of pedagogy and didacticism within the novel. It begins by exploring the fact that interpretations of Bolaño’s text are frequently premised on the same, perhaps reductive, ethical narrative, which begs the question of why such a lengthy text is necessary if *2666* really is a novel with a core ‘message’. Noting, however, that Bolaño takes explicit measures to avoid conflating empathy and pornography (thus demonstrating a nuanced approach to its depiction of horror), this section then moves to examine both the political ‘commitment’ of the novel and the particular implications of the fact that Bolaño’s world is not its real-world correlative; the impact of distancing seen in utopian fictions.

The second part (‘*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Critiquing the critics and the university in *2666*’) examines Bolaño’s explicit representation of the university in the novel. Noting that the university in *2666* is structurally twinned with the police force and also that the text ridicules purely aesthetic interpretations of the literature, I argue that Bolaño depicts the university as deploying ‘strategies of condescension’ in its ethical readings of the literature that sit in

conflict with the academy's own societal position. This leads to a double-bind within the text calling almost for a silence of exegesis from the academy. Finally, however, in conclusion, I note, through a reading of the conflicting temporalities of the novel's title, that Bolaño's critique is not designed to silence, but rather to raise reflexive awareness and to alter critical subjectivity; there is a redemptive potential. In the novel's ultimate demand that people 'keep writing', despite a flawed subject position and despite the distance from reality that is integral to writing, a more self-conscious conjunction of pre-compromised ethics and aesthetics seems to emerge.

### Crypto-didacticism, Utopia and 2666

As I will go on to show, *2666* is a novel that lends itself to a range of ethical readings that, interestingly, all share a common narrative core. This is, I contend, a result of the fact that Bolaño's novel anticipates the reading methods of the academy and plays a complex game of schooling in which it attempts to foresee and guide the academic response, a mode that I term 'crypto-didacticism'. At the risk of introducing another jargon-term into an overly populated field, but one that serves well to delineate a large strand of fiction from the American postmodern literature to the present, 'crypto-didacticism' denotes a subform of the encyclopaedic novel that hides an essential moralising purpose amid a lengthy, overloaded structure. The *modus operandi* of a crypto-didactic novel is to cloak its purpose within 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. This function is, to slightly twist Adorno's words on the inadequacy of the concept in *Negative Dialectics*, at once 'both striking and secret'.<sup>8</sup> It is also, as Bourdieu might note, an aspect that most readers of such hyper-dense works would wish to deny. This seems to be bound to a false collective renunciation of the fact that the cultural expertise necessary for the comprehension of such works can also be seen as interchangeable with other forms of power and material capital, derived from educational prestige: 'fundamentally the work of denial which is the source of social alchemy is, like magic, a collective undertaking'.<sup>9</sup>

This aspect of Bolaño's work can be seen by sketching a primitive and crude generic history (or at least a conferring example) from the trail that the author deliberately lays. Bolaño's novel both overtly and implicitly encourages comparisons to the works of Thomas Pynchon. Indeed, at the content level, one of *2666*'s central figures is a much-lauded reclusive novelist (like Pynchon) while, formally, the trajectory of this didacticism can be traced back to works such as *Gravity's Rainbow*. To expand upon this, consider that, although it has taken critics a long time to realise it, with some notable

exceptions,<sup>10</sup> the ethical core of Pynchon's work can be easily summarised: contemporary America's power is predicated upon instruments of death, developed by the Nazis, built by slave labour and exemplified by the V-2 rocket.<sup>11</sup> Of course, there is much else of interest in Pynchon's and Bolaño's respective fictions, ethics and aesthetics, but, at a reductive level, 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 marginalised working class women and, to quote Bolaño directly, 'nobody noticed'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, amid rampant 'gynophobia' and omnipresent misogyny: 'the women here aren't worth shit'.<sup>13</sup>

A brief literature review of work upon *2666* reveals that these basic propositions are the foundation for the majority of critical writing on the novel's ethics, even when such readings are executed with specifically nuanced angles. It is also clear that in drawing an ethical perspective from the novel, critics usually posit a balancing act between an implicit 'teaching' function of such literature and a critical skill in the perception, extraction and explication of such teachings (a balance between an intent of the author and a poststructuralist aversion to such thinking). For instance, although very different from the reading advanced here but also premised upon a fundamental 'teaching' within the text, Grant Farred has argued that Bolaño's true focus in this ethical setup is upon a critique of postcolonialism's entanglement with neoliberalism (focusing upon the marginalisation of the labouring victims), a critique that, nonetheless, further strengthens the notion of a crypto-didactic text.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Peter Boxall notes that 'Bolaño's fictions contain a kind of darkened image of a common world that is the closest the novel today can approach to imagining democracy', thereby situating *2666* within an ethical framework of globalisation that teaches us of the ills that it darkly reflects.<sup>15</sup> To put it concisely: readings of the ethics within complex, lengthy fictions such as *2666* 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. 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'.<sup>16</sup>

Like many other encyclopaedic, or even simply vast, fictions, however, Bolaño sets about opening his readers' eyes through a structure of length and overloading; to leap straightforwardly to the endpoint is to miss the subject-forming aspect of these texts and would negate the internalisation of such teachings. Hence, the didacticism is encoded in such a way that the reader must invest intellectual energy, or capital, in the interpretation and comprehension of the text in order to purchase the ethical payoff. Conversely, however, Sharae Deckard has already noted how Bolaño adeptly connects his intellectuals' complicity with the contemporary environment to the historical

situation of the Holocaust.<sup>17</sup> In the structural obscurantism of this torrential, imperfect work, 2666 also implicates the reader who misinterprets. In fact, the mis-readings of the academy add a layer of fog that would only become complicit with the Eichmann-esque figure, Sammer, who reminds his gravediggers that ‘the idea isn’t to find things, it’s to not find them’.<sup>18</sup> Even putting mis-readings aside, this, of course, presents a problem for theoretical literary research upon and readings of such work. To jump to the pre-formulated end result degrades the utopic, critical 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.<sup>19</sup>

Exegesis through criticism is thereby placed in its first double-bind in Bolaño’s novel: pedagogy against comprehension; utopia against misreading.

In this problem of explication against utopian (and pedagogical) function, it is profitable to consider the theoretical paradigms within which Bolaño’s work can be situated. 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 given 2666’s ambivalent relation to theological modes. 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 that would undoubtedly yield interesting approaches, it is worth examining the way that 2666 stages Theodor Adorno’s 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 useful when thinking about didacticism but are nonetheless 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”’.<sup>20</sup> This consideration should help to explain the crypto-didactic movement of the text because it also exposes the way that the novel works through theoretical models of pornography and violence.

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 – a point he outlines in *The Jargon of Authenticity*<sup>21</sup> – in the essay piece ‘Commitment’ Adorno posits two polarities of literature: committed art that has a specific political aim, but that ‘strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish’ and autonomous art, or ‘art for art’s sake’, that falsely denounces its own ‘ineradicable connection with reality’.<sup>22</sup> These positions, in which each dialectically ‘negates itself with the other’, constitute the space in which all art, Adorno claims, has lived; a space located somewhere between the utopian/aesthetic and the political/mimetic.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly for an analysis of *2666*, Adorno stresses that Brecht’s original intention, in which Adorno believes he failed, was to practice an art that ‘both presents itself as didactic, and claims aesthetic dispensation from responsibility for the accuracy of what it teaches’.<sup>24</sup> 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’.<sup>25</sup> 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’.<sup>26</sup> As Adorno puts it in this piece: ‘[f]or the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized’ and in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, “[c]ommitment” is the current word for the unreasonable demand of discipline’.<sup>27</sup>

*2666* is, in many ways, analogous. A work of epic theatre that nonetheless ‘has no epic pretensions’, the novel seeks to ‘make men think,’ in Adorno’s phrase, but it does not rely upon a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>28</sup> 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. 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’.<sup>29</sup> 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, 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.<sup>30</sup> 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'.<sup>31</sup> 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', but is aware of this link and warns the reader of their potential complicity.<sup>32</sup>

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 and also how it resonates with other twenty-first-century novels. It turns out this is in fact linked, in several ways, to the mode of didacticism that the novel employs and the idea of 'process'. In the study of literary utopia, 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 generalisable qualities of dislocation and reformulation; a literary distancing from the real-world analogies to which mimesis aspires. 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 be seen in other works of twenty-first century fiction. Consider, as an example, 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. Murakami's novel has no such pretensions and, 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.

This makes sense as an extrapolation from Marin's formulation of literary utopia. Indeed, Marin's 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, of working towards, of travelling without arriving.<sup>33</sup> 2666 is a text that deliberately signals itself in this mode. Its city is not the real-world Ciudad Juárez but an emphatically insisted-upon intra-textual reality: ‘Santa Teresa. I’m talking about Santa Teresa’.<sup>34</sup> The potentially dangerous essentialism that is engendered by this dislocation and abstraction – the creation of a ‘floating signifier’, as Sarah Pollack has put it<sup>35</sup> – conversely lends itself to a pedagogical function, at the expense of specificity; a ‘teachable moment’ as the present lingo might perversely have it. Indeed, 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’ 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.<sup>36</sup> To evoke Borges, as does Marin, and following Boxall’s reading: 2666 is a one-to-one map of the abstracted necropolis narrated with the body-as-text, rather than a particular, specific space of lived horror. Yet, just at the moment when Bolaño’s abstraction seems to go too far, the transnational features of the text, with clear representations of global economy and travel, return to lend a specificity to the location. Santa Teresa is also Ciudad Juárez but in its fictional abstraction, Bolaño is saved from the purely political/mimetic and allowed to play with the utopian/aesthetic.

This questioning of societal independence in art, in conjunction with the idea of the utopian tradition in 2666, prompts a return to Louis Marin and his reading of May 1968. 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 high-literary writing of his fictional author, with a cult academic following, who trails sentences thus: ‘then, too, then, too, then, too’.<sup>37</sup> As Farred puts it: ‘2666 satirizes the cult status that the Archimboldians of all theoretical stripes have assigned the elusive, Pynchonesque author’.<sup>38</sup> Although it is worth noting the greater menippean, or abstract, 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 neo-liberal university as a site of revolution, teaching 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?’<sup>39</sup>

The University was proposed, in 1968’s grim optimism, as a “‘properly’ utopic space,’ but how much we had to learn of utopia in order to see the ‘proof of the project’s failure’, writes Marin. Most are, by now, more aware of the university’s social, as opposed to cultural, function than they might

like. Indeed, it now seems barely conceivable to imagine an academy independent from the dominant ideology, be that in its mirroring of the ‘capitalist industrial system’ or of the labour practices ‘linked to the most insidious forms of cultural exploitation’.<sup>40</sup> Bolaño’s critique of the institutional structure is, however, more complicated than this straightforward, plaintive protesting would suggest.

### **Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Critiquing the critics and the university in 2666**

As has already been mentioned, but will now be explored in more detail, the dystopia of 2666 brings a specific focus to the structure of the university and the text appears to mount several critiques of this institution. The entanglement of the university in the dystopic critique of 2666 is furthered through the 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 in the text, is the ‘twin brother of the university rector’.<sup>41</sup> The scorn poured on the university here is not a simple case of an anti-academic authorial jibe (although such institutions are also depicted as ‘breeding grounds for the shameless’<sup>42</sup>), but an insinuation that the entire mechanism of the university is twinned with the corruption of the police force that permits mass rape and slaughter; twinned representations of Althusser’s state apparatuses. Bolaño shows that the idea of the university as a site of detached, utopian purity is deeply flawed through an almost idealist mode that separates appearance from essence. This is achieved through the fact that the surface appearance, or depiction, of the critics in the first part of the novel is as eccentric and pedantic individuals obsessed with their texts, merely isolated, but harmless. Their essence, however, is one of violence. 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.<sup>43</sup>

The invocation of feminism as justification for racial 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, through the critics, 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 neo-liberalism and the academy's complicity in the paradoxes of exclusion within globalisation. This is seen in the function of exclusivity and marginalisation 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'.<sup>44</sup> 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'.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the other critics, Norton sees the human being rather than the competitive academic and the association of individuals with national placement: her 'impression was of sad man whose life was ebbing slowly away'.<sup>46</sup> 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'.<sup>47</sup> The structures of value and worth that the academy co-opts, in keeping with all neo-liberal, late-capitalist vocational careers, is one of 'excellence' amid competition, but also one that privileges the preoccupations of the occidental university. When Amalfitano shares the interests of the Anglo-American critics, his worth is increased. To distinguish oneself from the mediocre mass is the aim, but the 'mediocre' mass, in 2666, are being sequentially murdered.

The fundamental critique of the university's entanglement with neo-liberalism is now well known and rehearsed, particularly in humanities departments. As far as the term 'neo-liberal' is useful to denote free-market-based systems operated on a nominal insistence on transparency and underwritten by fixations on quantification and measurement, this 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.<sup>48</sup>

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'.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

2666 presents, from this, an academy divided against itself. As revolutionary praxis, it is failure: there has only been a further entrenchment of the academy in neo-liberal models of commodified education and societal discipline. 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 through inaction with the exploitation (and in Bolaño's text, murder) of working-class women. 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', 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.<sup>51</sup> It is the eponymous critics' anarchic aesthetic and formal approaches that prevail in the text's narrative and, in their isolated obsession with aesthetics, rather than an integration with the social, the suffering of individuals is erased.

When viewed in this light, the role of the university as represented in 2666 brings Bolaño's project back full-circle to notions of commitment and didacticism. Indeed, the text begins to signal the acceptable interpretations through which it can be read by university professors and the degree to which their position is pre-compromised. In other words, 2666 demonstrates a reflexive knowledge of the ways in which it will itself be read by academics and meta-fictionally steers the reader; a crypto-didactic function. First, it seems clear that the novel ridicules purely aesthetic interpretations divorced from social reality as affordable only to an a-political, privileged class group (the 'Dionysian vision of ultimate carnival'). For a literary-critical reading of Bolaño's work to adopt this stance, therefore, would place its findings in logical contradiction with the text. Second, though, the text also pre-invalidates sociological approaches of the academy towards the literature on the basis of the social position that the university occupies; twinned with the police. To speak on behalf of the subaltern through institutional practices that the text depicts as married to violence suggests that literary criticism, in Bolaño's take, would do better to remain silent than to adopt a self-profiting strategy of condescension.

'Strategies of condescension', in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, are 'those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist'. From such a situation, the dominant party in a power relationship 'can use objective distances in such a way as to cumulate the advantages of propinquity and the advantages of distance, that is, distance and the recognition of distance warranted by its symbolic denegation'.<sup>52</sup> Bolaño demonstrates that his literary critics are deploying such a strategy in their 'defence' of Liz Norton. At once, most of the critics espouse feminist values (while not truly valuing Norton's intellectual contributions and instead wanting to sleep with her), while concurrently shunning notions of equality as it applies in other spheres of liberal tolerance. In this way, Bolaño makes his critics benefit from an ethical payoff in outwardly supporting feminist equality from their privileged position of patriarchal authority while also showing that their underlying racism is intensely problematic for any kind of inclusivity or intersectionality. In other words, the benefit to the critics themselves in outwardly collapsing the distance between their patriarchal position and supporting Norton is transparent. The same is true, however, of their critical reading practices. While benefiting from a supposed history of liberal humanism and civic purpose, the critics choose to explore aesthetics over ethics. Conversely, however, it is also true that the rival critics, who do enact ethical readings, do so from a socially elevated position, and so themselves benefit from their critical, ethical reading.

This double-problem, in which criticism is scarcely possible, is reflected in another didactic contradiction of the text: the temporal disjunction of its name. As with most utopian fictions that have to dislocate their settings, Bolaño certainly re-spatialises his work to a fictional Santa Teresa. However, the novel's temporality is debatably located amid a fluctuation between the past, the contemporary and the future. This is especially clear when the novel's title is read through the well-known reference in Bolaño's previous novel, *Amulet*, to

a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else.<sup>53</sup>

Treating the title as a year, based on the *Amulet* reference, Henry Hitchens pointed out that this could correspond to certain datings of the Exodus myth occurring 2666 years after the *creation*, thus placing the novel's key reference point in our now-distant past.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, as a year based on the Christian calendar, the text implies a dystopian future; a direction in which humanity is headed as the bodies of the present pile up and are forgotten. Amid these temporal poles lies the novel's present, which has to try not to 'forget' moral lessons, learned either from the text's future projection of a dystopian cemetery or from its redemptive past reference point. In either case, the conception

of time and forgetting is curious but can be linked back to a schooling purpose within the novel.

Interestingly, what seems to emerge from this setup is that the issues of commitment that 2666 frames do not appear to be concerned solely with artistic practice; Bolaño does not seek to teach art how to represent. Instead, broadly speaking, the text's teachings 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 while concurrently negating the validity of those readings as strategies of condescension and encouraging reflexive thought on the societal position of the university. That this metafictional signalling is designed to teach and to alter critical subjectivity is made clear through a conversation between two of Bolaño's characters:

That's a pretty story. [ ... ] A pity I'm too old and have seen too much to believe it has nothing to do with belief [ ... ] it has to do with understanding, and then changing.<sup>55</sup>

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 neo-liberal web of 'use' and 'utility' of art as the objects of its own critique.

In this environment, it might be concluded that Bolaño's critique of the university is one designed to shut down literary criticism. As either a hypocritically positioned critical entity, or an ineffectually aesthetically obsessed body, what hope does the university offer in a space where 'the victims of sex crimes in this city' number '[m]ore that 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?'<sup>56</sup> Yet, 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'.<sup>57</sup> Bolaño also tells us, through the previous Biblical reference in the novel's title, that all is not lost; it is not too late to begin a journey to a promised land and redemption might still be possible. 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, an 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'.<sup>58</sup> Despite the criticism of the critics, however, 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. [ ... ] I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unsailable flesh, not shadows'.<sup>59</sup> To keep writing amid the seeming impossibility of writing seems to be the challenge that 2666 poses to the academy.

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