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## **Text of a paper given at Brighton University in 2012**

Bob Eaglestone recently pointed out in his keynote at the Twenty-First-Century British Fiction conference, among many controversial statements on “value”, that we need to read and comment upon more contemporary fiction in translation. It is with this in mind, following Liz's excellent theoretical exposition, that I wish to turn to Roberto Bolaño's *2666*.

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*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-obsessed 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 [See-you-dad hwAR-eth]. In fact, in response to such violence, the novel explicitly queries utopian premises when it asks “why Thomas More [...]?” (193) and posits itself as a “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” (227). The aspects of this work that I want to think about today, however, on our theme of the pedagogy and teaching of twenty-first-century texts, are the extent to which Bolaño's novel could fall under the remit of a category I term “crypto-didacticism” and the extent to which teaching post-millennial fiction could be read in its adjectival form as post-millennial fiction that teaches. Furthermore, I want to think about fictions of process, by which I mean a strand of metafiction that asks us to value the journey, rather than the arrival, the reading, rather than the having-read. I want to relate this to Adorno's twentieth-century formulations on autonomy and commitment, asking whether a mode of new didacticism is entering the twenty-first-century novel. Re-thinking Adornian paralysis in this context, I will then move to examine teaching

practice as it pertains to large novels and politically engaged literature, alongside the ways in which we read the sociological history of the academy itself, following the literary critics in Bolaño's novel, arguing for a fusion of historicist and critical approaches that remains, nonetheless, anti-utilitarian. As Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron put it, in senses that I want to read in both sociological terms for the university and in literary terms for didactic fiction:

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“[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” (3).

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So, what do I mean by “crypto-didacticism”? Bolaño's novel explicitly encourages comparisons to Thomas Pynchon, as one of its central figures is a much-lauded reclusive novelist and the trajectory of this didacticism can be traced back to works such as *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although it has taken critics a long time to realise it, 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. Of course, there is much else of interest in Pynchon's and Bolaño's respective fictions and aesthetics, but I think 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” (372). In other words, amid rampant “gynophobia” (382) and rampant misogyny (552): “the women here aren't worth shit” (318).

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Now, Grant Farred has argued, somewhat differently, that Bolaño's true focus is upon a critique of postcolonialism's entanglement with neoliberalism, a critique that I find lacking, but nonetheless further strengthens the point that I'm attempting to make here. To put it concisely: ethical readings of complex, lengthy fictions tend 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. 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” (456). Bolaño does so through the process of interpretation, though; to leap straightforwardly to the endpoint is to miss the subject-forming aspect of these texts, which means that the novelistic form here is pedagogical in Bourdieu's terms of efficiency (5). 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 pedagogical problem for teaching such work at Higher Education level: the course of a seminar cannot be pre-dictated and it is likely that a lecture component, often coming before the seminar, will already touch upon the pre-formulated end result, thus degrading the utopic power of such fiction. This is, though, the same problem that explication creates in any form, be that research or teaching, for as Louis Marin puts it in his study of Utopics, in a formulation with which I'm sure we're all familiar: “The 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” (xx).

Although we often like to think, then, that new fictions require new ways of reading, I'm not so convinced that this is straightforwardly true, especially across such constructed bounds as “post-millennial literature”; after all, this is based on a Christian calendar. [SLIDE] What I think is clear is that we can 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, sparing you from the more fashionable approaches through Hardt, Negri or Agamben, I'd like to turn to Theodor Adorno's formulation on ideas of autonomous and committed art, before coming back to Marin. I'm going to consider 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*” (279).

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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* (34, 69-70) – in the essay piece “Commitment” Adorno posits two polarities of literature: [SLIDE] committed art that has a specific political aim, but “strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish” (175) and autonomous art, or “art for art's sake” which falsely denounces its own “ineradicable connection with reality” (176). These positions, in which each dialectically “negates itself with the other” (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” (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” (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” (184). As Adorno puts it in “Commitment”, [SLIDE] “For the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized” (184-185) and in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, “‘Commitment’ is the current word for the unreasonable demand of discipline” (69).

2666 is, in many ways, a work of epic theatre, for it seeks to “make men think”, as Adorno puts it, 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. [SLIDE] Furthermore, I think that 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" (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 (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. 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" (106), but is aware of this link and warns the reader of their potential complicity.

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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 pretentious writing (661), although it is worth noting the greater menipppean nature of this satire in opposition to, say, "An Orison of Sonmi~451" in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* which swipes at the Golden Arches of the capitalist diner. Taking a more serious look at the university in relation to revolution and resistance, though, Marin asks: "Wasn't this the place where the relationship between teacher and student, authorized and institutionalized, could be deconstructed through this relationship's very content?" The University was proposed, at this time of optimism, as a "'properly' utopic space" (4). But, how much we had to learn of utopia in

order to see the “proof of the project's failure”, writes Marin. We are, by now, more aware of the university's social, as opposed to cultural, function than we would like. We are now beyond the age of innocence when we could imagine an academy free from interdependence with 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”, to cite Marin again (5).

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In our field of study, fictions such as *2666* are not important so much for the specific *topoi* they present, although these are undoubtedly of enormous significance, but rather for their more generalizable quality as the process of dislocation and reformulation. This notion of fiction as process can be, perhaps albeit unintentionally, seen in other works of twenty-first century fiction. Consider Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* with its similar abandonment of resolution. This is a very different mode of indeterminate conclusion to Pynchon's novels, which frequently end on 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. Murukami's novel has no such pretensions even to dialectical fictions such as China Mieville's *King Rat*. 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, metafictive 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 I appreciate sounds 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.

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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 (27). *2666* is a text that deliberately signals itself in this mode. Its city is not Ciudad Juárez [See-you-dad hwAR-eth] but an emphatically insisted-upon intra-textual reality: “Santa Teresa. I'm talking about Santa Teresa” (459). Bolaño even signals that we should read *2666* in a critical dystopic mode through his mapping of the city space. Indeed, 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” (208) in the fact that his city is mapped by the female body, navigated by the male police officials, 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.

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The dystopia of *2666* is also useful to focus upon the failure of '68 in its critique of liberation theology (or perhaps of the failure of the mainstream Catholic church to integrate its message), a movement that Jay Winter deems important for this time in *Dreams of Peace and Freedom*. As a 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. At the lower level, Bolaño's text enacts a critique of a theocentric, as opposed to anthropocentric, model, for 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, real social change will not come through any theological component. This seeming rejection of post-secular thinking, from a major figure in the first decade of twenty-first-century literature merits consideration, particularly at a time when notions of re-enchantment are appearing in the debate with ever-growing frequency, but also in any consideration

of a utopic fictional practice on injustice, set in South America: the home of Gustavo Gutierrez and liberation theology.

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In a European context, a different brand of liberation theology is crucial to '68 though, 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” (142). Indeed, in thinking through the pedagogy of twenty-first-century utopianism, '68 is key. While there were jokes: “Je suis Marxiste, tendance Groucho” (152), the core utopic thrust is better shown in “sous le pavé, la plage” – “Under the paving stones, the beach”. *2666* is a novel that is sensitive to this heritage. Charting a worldwide course, Archimboldi is revealed, in the final part, to have killed a German bureaucrat, responsible for the deaths of his Jewish prisoners. While other fictions may be more cynical – Thomas Pynchon presents a genealogy of racist property appropriation in the creation of beaches in his 2009 novel, *Inherent Vice*, that takes “Under the paving stones, the beach” as its epigraph – Bolaño's focus on globalization and utopia is clear.

Furthermore, *2666* is interesting for 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, when the novel's title is read through the reference in *Amulet* to “a cemetery in the year 2666”. The interesting point here is that Bolaño's novel specifically avoids the conservative nostalgia of many texts. 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. This 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” (563).

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What I’ve tried to suggest here, thinking through the utopic practice of *2666* is that it provides a valuable model for teaching the aesthetics of a didactic work, no matter how embedded that didacticism might be. Indeed, I’m arguing, the more embedded the work of teaching is within the novel itself, the more it becomes a fiction of process, a brand of metafiction that calls attention to affect and mechanism; perhaps, dare I say it, a reflexive transformed subjectivity through reading – a very late-Foucauldian ethics. As Bolaño’s characters converse: “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). 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. Those who think this may be pushing a step too far in sociological readings of the academy beside literature should consider the importance of the moment: current students have little knowledge of any system other than one in which they buy education as a commodity. This neo-liberal paradigm is omnipresent and must be resisted for it is becoming extremely difficult to think otherwise than the merely extant.

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Finally, then, I’d like to suggest that 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”. 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 fiction. I'll leave you with one final quotation from *2666* that I think sums up this retreat back to theory, to fiction abstaining from the creation of a just life but didactically howling through its process nonetheless: "What is it I want you to do? asked the congresswoman. **[SLIDE]** I want you to write about this, keep writing about this. [...] I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh, not shadows" (631).