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Research Master in Literary Studies

The Poetics of *Juego*. Literature and Politics in Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star*

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1. **Introduction**

The contemporary critical literature dedicated to the works of Roberto Bolaño (Santiago de Chile, 1953 – Barcelona, 2003) constitutes a vast and ever-growing corpus of diverse and divergent perspectives, approaches, theorizations, methods of analysis and articulation of data and, inevitably, conclusions. This is true to such an extent that this kind of preliminary acknowledgement is already a cliché, present in virtually every new research project that approaches Bolaño's literary production. He seems to be in a similar trajectory to that of his admired Jorge Luis Borges—undertaking any kind of research on their texts results sometimes intimidating not only because of their multi-layered complexity, but also as a consequence of the sheer amount and quality of previous studies that have them as object of study. Such a pre-existing platform makes it difficult to achieve results that are meritorious in terms of originality or path-breaking potential. And, nevertheless, it also provides possibilities both for an intense focalization on key details and for transversal readings that refuse to give up a thorough account of subtleties.

In this context, my intention with the present paper is to recover, rearticulate and expand an aspect of Bolaño's work that has been partially noted by previous critics.[1] My main motivation to do so stems from a realization that the topic has not yet received the kind of systematic analytical exposition and exclusive attention that it deserves and that I intend to offer in the following pages. In order to carry out this project, I will focus mainly on the novel *Distant Star* (1996). This choice owes to the fact that, among all of Bolaño's works, *Distant Star* is the place where the set of phenomena that I intend to explore are most strongly dominant and closest to the text's core structures and ideas. A successful investigation would thus inevitably demand, as next steps in a broader research project, a similar approach towards other works like *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996), *Amulet* (1999) and *By Night in Chile* (2000). Here, however, due to the constraints in space and scope of an academic essay of these characteristics and for the sake of depth and concision, I will limit myself to the consideration of *Distant Star*. The aspect referenced above consists in the constitution of the narrative text as something else than a self-

[1] The papers centred on Bolaño's works that I will reference in this essay never confront this aspect directly, but they often provide some remarks and reflections on it in their way to building arguments related to other elements of the novels or stories in question.

contained exercise of fictional storytelling. Namely, in its configuration as an explorative articulation of a possible relationship between art (and more specifically, poetics) and politics. This relationship, I claim, can be and is indeed established on the basis of a fundamental shared characteristic between these fields—their dual nature as (1) organised sets of practices and protocols of intervention in the world and as (2) frameworks for the production of ideas about and visions of the world.

With my investigation I intend to bring to the fore evidence for the viability and the relevance of affirming the existence of this exploratory facet of Bolaño's narrative. And, apart from this expositive and analytical task, I also wish to follow the novel's reflection on those topics about which it *thinks*.[2] To accomplish the first of these two goals, in the first chapter I will develop a methodology and a set of concepts aimed at isolating from the narrative flow some key instances where the relationship between arts and politics is sensibly being explored and defined. I believe that an image could clarify my intentions with regard to the conceptual constellation that I will develop in these coming pages. When confronted with the task of identifying correctly a polyhedron, there are certain perspectives and angles and certain combinations of illumination and shadowing that make our judgments more grounded and certain. For any such figure, there is surely a minimum number of positions from where one can already formulate a hypothesis with marginal chances of blundering. The concepts that I will develop in the first chapter can be correlated to such individual positions. Only the cross-checking of the images of the text that these concepts/perspectives provide makes possible to identify the figure in question—the explorative articulation of the fictional text. For example, only if the figure has already been observed from point A it is possible to conclude, from point B, that it is an icosahedron and not a hexagonal prism.

The goal of following the reflection regarding the topics about which the novel thinks probably deserves already a more detailed exposition. The use of the verb *to think* that I am alluding to is proposed by Ernst van Alphen in *Art in Mind* (2005). Its theoretical origins are the works of French art historian and philosopher Hubert Damisch: "A painting is […] for Damisch a reflection […] in the sense of the active definition [of the word], as an act of thought" (van Alphen 2005, 2). Along these lines, the work of Mieke Bal in *Of What One Cannot Speak* (2010) should also be mentioned, since she takes

[2] *Vid. infra* for an explanation of this wording.

recourse to van Alphen's expression and places Damisch as an important influence on her approach (7). These three authors have in common the deployment of this same fundamental idea, through their particular conceptualizations, in the context of investigations on visual arts.[3] Through the present essay I would like to extend its range of application to the field of literary studies, by claiming that a novel or a short story can also be considered as an act of thought. I consider that the following lines of an interview with Damisch (quoted by van Alphen in *Art in Mind* and Bal in *Of What One Cannot Speak*, too) are a major aid to this disciplinary transference:

> […] I always denounced various of [the] metaphors [of semiotic jargon] such as "reading," "text," and above all the idea that one could simply speak of painting as a "language." I am less interested in having painting "speak," using different historical tools, than in reflecting on what makes us speak in it. Music, beginning with the seventeenth century, constitutes itself as a quasi-language (as Adorno says). It has no need for analysis in order to constitute itself. But painting only constitutes itself as a language through our acts of describing it, or the linguistic appropriation of painting (Bois *et al*. 1998, 12)

In the light of this excerpt, it could seem that the essentially linguistic composition of literature would make pointless the adoption of a conception of literature-that-thinks based on Damisch's thought. But still, there is a crucial differentiation already sensible in his exposition between material constitution (language, sounds, lines and colour, etc.) and *constitution as a language*. A novel like *Distant Star* certainly does not need an analysis in order to be constituted as an instance of fictional storytelling; but it does require one to display its constitution as a reflection on arts and politics. Analysis in this context—surely in my wording, but I believe that this is the case for Damisch's assertion too (*cf.* with his expression "what makes us speak in [art]")—should be defined as the response to the invitation to think posited by the work of art.

Thus, Damisch's "impulse to speak" is an expression of one specific theoretical movement—the effort to derive from a painting the ideas and thoughts that it harbours,

[3] I take the following excerpt of *A Theory of /Cloud/* to be an excellent illustration of Damisch's own use of these ideas: "Throughout its entire history—a history that a pictorial text *describes* within its own order and its own specific level—Western thought, from Aristotle down to Leonardo da Vinci and to Descartes, has stubbornly rejected the idea of *emptiness*. […] [M]aterialism turns out to be what that though has *supressed*. In the pictorial field such a rejection or suppression finds expression in the 'annihilation' of the material and technical substratum o the painted image. And that neutralization or annihilation was accomplished by the institution of the perspective space in the guise of an objective setting […]. To take but one particularly revealing example, let us consider *The Dog in the Arena* [by Goya] […]. The impression of "emptiness" obtained in this way [through the painting's technique] is reduced to the effect of a 'lack' that simply emphasizes the fullness of the 'background' against which the figures stand out" (225-6).

but which are not immediately displayed or articulated through its mere presence. I claim that this operation can also legitimately be appropriated by the field of literary studies. Take for example Mieke Bal's statement in *Narratology* (2018) that in some fragments of narrative texts, it is "possible to consider what is said as narrative, descriptive, or argumentative" and that "Such an analysis helps us assess the ideological or aesthetic thrust of a narrative" (8). Ideology and aesthetics are being dealt with as something that a narrative text *has*. But unlike the fragments of narration, which immediately present themselves as such and can be read directly, those two aspects of the text must be *assessed* through a succession of considerations. Within Damisch's terminology, it could be said that an analysis is required in order to articulate aesthetics and ideology into the language of the narrative text. The latter surely harbours ideas regarding these two fields of thought, but it must be questioned in certain ways in order to convey them in its language.

In sum, the contribution that serves as the cornerstone of my analysis of *Distant Star* consists of Damisch's consideration of artistic works as acts of thought. Departing from this idea, common to the three authors mentioned above, this essay will additionally adopt a contribution by Bal and another one by van Alphen. The former consists in a model for developing concepts that are successful in their aim of isolating from the narrative flow some key instances where the relationship between literature and politics is sensibly being explored and defined. Such a model is provided by Bal's own analysis of the works of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo in *Of What One Cannot Speak*, and it will be introduced at the beginning of the first chapter. Van Alphen's contribution stems from his concise articulation of the two fundamental components of Damisch's methodology—the theoretical and the historical one. For Damisch, "if theory is produced within history, history can never completely cover theory. […] The two terms go together but in the sense in which each escapes the other" (Bois *et al*., 8). Through his exposition of the way in which these two different approaches to a work of art are related to each other in Damisch's work, van Alphen is able to provide a clear-cut methodological path:

> First, as a beholder, one is invited to think "with" the work of art, which means that one is compelled to start a dialogue with it by articulating questions of a more general—for instance, philosophical, political, or social—nature. Only when the beholder of art poses these kinds of questions will the work of art release its ideas. Second, that which is historical about the work of art can only truly be understood when one allows the work to be a historical articulation of a general, more fundamental problem. (4)

In its sequencing and general aims, the general structure of this paper follows closely this exposition of Damisch's methodology by van Alphen. Thus, the first chapter has been developed as an effort to think with *Distant Star*. Specifically, by questioning it in order to reveal the engraving of a set of crucial political ideas in its literary articulation as a narrative fictional text. The second chapter, on the other hand, answers to the goal of settling that which is historical about the novel. In particular, by setting forth the linkage between the literary formulation of the novel's political ideas and a sociocultural and political problem. Namely, the issue of the commitment of the Latin American intellectual of the 20th century.

At this point I will conclude this introduction, considering that the previous exposition includes all the information required to understand the direction and goals of my research. If, as a presentation, this section may perhaps result blunt or still slightly blurry in its conceptualization and methodological underpinnings, I will make sure to nuance and complement it through further developments in the coming chapters. The reasoning behind this decision is that I am certain that such theoretical considerations will surely appear clearer to the reader in the immediacy of their practical application regarding the analysis of *Distant Star*.

2. **Literature (Poetics) and Politics in *Distant Star*. A Theoretical Approach**

Before initiating my analysis, as announced in the introduction, I will develop an exposition of my model for the development of the concepts by means of which I intend to analyse *Distant Star*. This model is provided by Mieke Bal in *Of What One Cannot Speak* (2011).[4] This work constitutes an effort to build a theoretical framework from where it becomes possible to "say why, under which conditions, and in what ways [Colombian artist Doris] Salcedo's art shows us how its political potential is deployed and performed in the singular" (6). This declaration of intentions puts forward two aspects of Bal's research which make it, in the context of Damisch's and van Alphen's similar methods, especially suitable as a reference for this essay. Firstly, like these authors, she

[4] Another important work of Bal that will sometimes serve as a tacit influence in my outlook and sometimes as an explicit source of citations and concepts is her *Narratology* (2018). For my interests in this essay, it mainly provides aid by facilitating the adaptation of methodological approaches developed for the visual arts to the context of literary studies.

is interested in ideas harboured or proposed by the artwork, but the focus is on those of a political nature. Secondly, the scope is restricted to the works of only one creator—the visual artist Doris Salcedo (b. 1958). Since these two statements also hold true for this paper, it is difficult not to agree that the shared grounds should allow for a swifter transference of ideas and solutions between Bal's investigation and mine.

As mentioned before, Bal's methods in the book are openly influenced by Damisch; and, in particular, through van Alphen's reading of his works (Bal 2011, 7). The agency that the sentence quoted above ascribes to the artworks ("art *shows* us") is, for example, not an empty rhetorical gesture. For Bal "The artworks […] are able to offer thoughts that [she], as a critic, aim[s] to articulate. […] [T]he artwork *in situ*, in process, inspires thoughts that pertain to the social collective that in turn inspired it" (6-7). The proximity to the reflections of van Alphen and Damisch quoted in the introduction is patent. The search for answers in Bal regarding the better way to develop a theoretical conceptualization finds, in consequence, the same problem that has been already commented in the introduction. Like Damisch and van Alphen, Bal applies her own concepts exclusively to the field of visual arts; while the subject matter of this paper is a novel.

By no means do I contest that some of these authors' ideas can result troubling when transplanted into an unavoidably linguistic and narrative context. For instance, when Bal approaches Doris Salcedo's production, at many points the choice between narrativizing or not to do it and the negotiations between both options are crucial in Bal's attribution of the term 'political' to Salcedo's art: "There is one fine line, one that Salcedo is committed to exploring […], between creating narrativity, making it flow, and refusing to flesh it out with particularity" (80). Similarly, about the piece *Untitled* (1989-90) it is said that "Both narrativity and figuration are implicated and resisted at the same time" (91). However, against this kind of hesitations, and having already exposed in the introduction my main argument for the viability of my project, I wish to present here two further reflections to bolster it. Firstly, the reader of this essay will soon realize that Bal's influence in the development of my concepts affects more than anything else the goals that I set for them. In this sense, this paper does not follow Bal's methodology as a whole set of analytical resources and decisions. Instead, I acknowledge my indebtedness to her work fundamentally with regard to the criteria by which I assess if my concepts are being successful or not. Thus, my interest on *Of What One Cannot Speak* is mainly motivated

by what I judge to be a satisfactory way of developing concepts that favour the theoretical aspects of a research project which, in its interest for the interaction of arts and politics, is analogous to mine.

Secondly, taking into consideration the results of my research, I would argue that the vast majority of the modifications that need to be made to Damisch's, van Alphen's and Bal's perspectives for their application to literary texts are of a contingent nature. I am using this word in opposition to *structural*. I will explain this point through Bal's recognition of the importance of Salcedo's choice between whether to narrativize or not through an artwork. Even though this criterion as such is hardly applicable to a novel, I believe that that which provides its fundamental characteristics as part of a methodological organon is not necessarily related to the operation of narrativization. Much more important than that, it seems to me, is the underlying scheme that organizes the consideration of the artist/writer, her poetics, and the aims of her decisions in the context of the production of her craft. In this case, that fundamental scheme proposes the artist being confronted with a decision to be made (creating narrativity or undermining it); a dilemma posed by the nature and history of her artistic medium and the social framework of her practice as an artist. Instead of producing a clear decision for one solution over the other, this confrontation favours—in Bal's own words—the commitment to explore the line between the two possible options. This exploration takes place *in* and *through* the work and it mobilizes a set of particular technical resources and ideas about art and the world. The scheme conveyed by this latter sentence is the *structural* aspect shared by this essay and the three author's conceptualizations that serve in a higher or lesser degree as direct references for it. On the other hand, the nature of those resources and ideas is *contingent* or *derivative*; *i.e.* dependant on the medium (painting, literature, cinema, dance, etc.) and its history.

The first thing to be noted about Bal's methods to develop her concepts is the fact that the organizational principle of *Of What One Cannot Speak* as a text are the ideas or thoughts offered by the artworks that the critic must aim to articulate (Bal 2010, 6-7). This articulation is conducted by means of individual chapters directed at exploring, each from a different angle, the conditions of possibility of the performative effects of Salcedo's works—*i.e.*, as stated before, in which context they are able to deploy their political potential. For each chapter, Bal begins by establishing a referential and pervasive concept as cornerstone for her analysis. The first of them, which can be presented as a

paradigm for the rest, gives this role to the concept of metaphor. Then, she struggles to define the term through references to and negotiations with previous usages of it by other authors and critical traditions (*cf.* Bal 2010, 31-4).

Metaphor, like the main concepts of following chapters, must and does hold a triple function in order to deserve its role as a sectional analytical lens. This triple requirement constitutes the most tangible and important aspect of my research's indebtedness to Bal's approach. Firstly, each concept alludes to an integral aspect of the aesthetic configuration and performative potential of the artwork in question. They function as joints between the two tendencies of Bal's exploration of the resources of Salcedo's artistic production—an extreme keenness on details and a determination to reach overarching conclusions. For instance, the handling of the concept of metaphor is on the one hand demanded by very particular material features of the artworks (45-47); and, on the other, a condition for their contextualization in a field of intermixing spatiotemporal, political, social and aesthetical flows (50-54). Secondly, each concept constitutes a reflexive channel for thinking about theory itself, because they respond to the demands of the artwork in such a way that it reveals itself to be a *theoretical object*. This term, borrowed from Damisch, alludes to an object that "is posed in theoretical terms; […] produces theory; and […] necessitates a reflection on theory" (Bois *et al*., 8). Thirdly, while being solicited by the singularities of the artwork, each concept allows at the same time to connect Salcedo's oeuvre historically to previous artistic and/or critical traditions. In chapter 1, the concept of metaphor enables Bal to link Salcedo's output with Theodor Adorno's reflections on political art; and in chapter 3, her work is considered from the standpoint offered by the Baroque tradition through the concept of foreshortening. This is the model that I have identified as ideal in order to develop productive theoretical concepts in the context of an investigation on the relations between literature and politics. In consequence, my own terminology in the coming subchapters should be expected to answer to these three requirements.

Before concluding these introductory remarks, I wish to expose the two most substantial divergences between Bal's procedures and mine. One of them is simply the stronger hierarchy that holds between my concepts. The first of them to be introduced (*juego*; Spanish for "game" or "interplay") is a condition of possibility for the second

(*doubling*); and the same relation holds between the second and the third (*menardism*).[5] Thus, each term could be understood to delimit a key subset of phenomena inside a category defined in turn by the term that precedes it. Menardism is the most significant kind of doubling for the articulation of the novel with politics; and the same is true for doubling with regard to *juego*. The other difference is more complex and stems from a divergence of choices in Bal's efforts to define the political and its relation to art and mine.

In the first section of *Of What One Cannot Speak*, the basic reference with regard to this topic is established to be Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe (10). Bal, however, also devotes a few lines to French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Immediately afterwards, she clarifies that she chooses the former thinker over the latter because "Rancière's terminology [is] confusing and even a bit manipulative"; although she also concedes that "his analysis is farther-going and more profound than Mouffe's" (*ibid*.). Unlike Bal, I have chosen Rancière as my theoretical reference concerning the delimitation of the field of politics. For Rancière, politics is defined as "the activity that breaks with the order of the police by inventing new subjects. Politics invents new forms of collective enunciation it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible" (2010, 139).[6] He further condenses this definition by stating that politics "creates a new form, as it were, of dissensual common sense" (*ibid*.).

I believe that a sufficient reason to account for my choice is simply the fact that Rancière has for years focused his work not only on political thought, but precisely on the same juncture that this essay aims to explore—the connection of literature and politics. In fact, apart from a philosopher and a political theorist, Rancière can also be considered a literary theorist. Accordingly, many of his most important political concepts

[5] These concepts will be presented extensively in the coming subchapters. For the moment, I will provide their most basic definitions as a brief clarification. *Juego* means "game" or "interplay" in Spanish and alludes to a particular poetics or a set of practices that guide the development and construction of a narrative text; their goal being the multiplication of meanings and ambiguities. *Doubling* refers to a particular way of developing equivalences and identities between the characters of a narrative text. Lastly, *menardism* (in reference to the character of Borges's story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*) is a concept that I have coined to account for an explorative association of characters and actions in a narrative text, aimed at reflecting on the differences in the meaning of those actions depending on who has performed them.

[6] In *La Mésentente* (1995) Rancière opposes the police to true politics: "[the police is] the set of processes by which the aggregation and consent of collectivities are operated; the organization of powers, the distribution of places and functions, and the systems of legitimization of this distribution" (1995 47). In the same work he defines politics (*la politique*) as the activity which "breaks the sensible configuration through which the sides and parts—or their absence, by way of the presupposition that by definition there is no place for a part of those without-part [*une part des sans-part*]—are defined" (1995 53).

have been developed with an eye to the interactions between the political field and the one conformed by literature and art. Nevertheless, after subscribing Bal's judgment about the farther-going and more profound character of Rancière's system in comparison to Mouffe's one, I wish to expose here two further arguments to back my selection of him as a reference.

Firstly, unlike Bal, I do not believe that it makes sense to ask which art is political and what is it that makes it be so. Instead, I agree with Rancière when he states, for example, that "The politics of literature […] means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world" (2010, 152). Thus, from Rancière's point of view, it makes no sense to try to define which kinds of art are political and which are not. All art and literature are by definition inevitably political.[7] Instead, a more relevant critical task would be the analysis of individual works that are able to generate an effect that stands alone as my second additional reason to favour Rancière. That effect/concept is named *dissensus*[8] and its operative and enlightening force in the context of a study interested in the articulations between politics and literature signifies an asset too valuable to be renounced simply for its complexity.

2.1. Poetics of *Juego*

In the second chapter of *La alegría de las influencias* (2017), José Javier Fernández Díaz remarks the fact that "Bolaño insinuates interferences of his memories or his biography in a substantial part of his works" (86).[9] Subsequently, he introduces the concept of autofiction to deal with some of Bolaño's novels and short stories; a term by which he understands "'an art of ambiguity' whose purpose is to explore the diffuse frontier between autobiography and novel," in a way that "investigates the complex relations between fiction and reality" (87). The assignment of voices, opinions and events to agents

[7] A development and analysis of this disagreement between Rancière and Bal can be found in this paper's last chapter.

[8] In the coming pages, several paragraphs will be devoted to the exploration of this notion. For the moment, suffice it to say that the most basic definition of *dissensus* is a conflict between senses; an unresolved incompatibility between two different meanings for the same thing (Rancière 2010 139).

[9] All the quotations from works not written in English have been translated by myself. The bibliographical references at the end of this paper can be consulted to identify the instances in which that has been the case. This includes literary sources, like Bolaño's *Distant Star*, which I have translated from its first edition in Spanish, published by the editorial house Anagrama in 1996.

is thus blurred, owing to the apparent validity of two models for their distribution: "In fictive literature […] [among the voice of the narrator and the voice of the author] the voice of the narrator is the only one that appears in the text and author and narrator never coincide (A ≠ N)" (88); while "in autobiography, author, narrator and [protagonist] are identified (A = N = P)" (*ibid.*). The resulting modality of reading that the text seems to demand is one where the reader adopts an active attitude towards the deciphering of the elements of the narration that are autobiographical and the ones that are fictive (94).

From these observations, it would be easy to jump to conclusions regarding Bolaño's favouring of a critical and proactive attitude in his readers, which could be extended to the field of political activism. This latter idea is not present in Fernández Díaz's essay, but I believe that his text provides a valuable platform for criticizing this most naïve linking between literature and politics. Such conceptualization relies on two assumptions that should be problematized; the first of them being also applicable to Fernández Díaz's own developments. Namely, he tacitly proposes a vision of authority and intentionality best conveyed by the conceptual pair *implied author* and *implied reader*. In *Narratology*, Bal lists three critiques to these concepts, coined by Wayne C. Booth, among which the most relevant are here the first two. On the one hand, "[the concept of implied author] denotes the totality of meanings that can be inferred from a text," thus being in fact "the result of the investigation of the meaning of a text" while being presented as "the source of that meaning" (61). On the other, "the term is too easily harnessed to grant one person […] the authority of knowing 'what the author meant to say'; in this way, it consigns other readers to the margins" (*ibid.*). The problem with Fernández Díaz's argumentation is that he privileges a vision according to which the author unproblematically transforms his intentions (regarding an active attitude in his readers) into a text dominated by his ideations and authority. The second assumption has to do with a hypothetical will of extending this already questionable understanding of the interrelations between author, narration and reader to the field of political activism. The best phrasing for the corresponding critique is probably the one provided by Jacques Rancière in "The Paradoxes of Political Art" apropos the mimetic paradigm of art:

> Underlying these forms of [supposed political and artistic subversion, which follow the mimetic paradigm of art,] is the assumption that art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes when it itself is taken outside of the workshop or museum and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by denouncing its own participation in that system. (135)

If one were to produce a claim on Bolaño's writing being political that was based on Fernández Díaz's analysis, the element akin to those "revolting things" would be what he calls "ambiguity": "When confronted with an autofiction, the reader is forced to take the author into consideration and to make an image more or less fictional of him, in order to confront the ambiguity of the text" (88). Thus, noticing the ambiguity and contradictoriness of a literary text which demands a critical and unravelling attitude in order to be read univocally, the reader would be compelled to confront the ubiquitous ambiguity and contradictoriness that characterize the political arena with the same attitude. In dialogue with this problematical reading, however, it is possible to develop a different account for some of those crucial aspects of Bolaño's fiction that Fernández Díaz correctly identifies as relevant.

In order to do so, I will introduce the concept that will work as a theoretical cornerstone for this chapter and my standpoint as a whole. Its ideal rendition in terms of connotations would be the Spanish expression "el juego". Although this noun can be straightforwardly translated into English as "the game," a better option would be "the interplay." The problem with this latter term is that it demands an object more strongly than the Spanish one.[10] "El juego" in Spanish conveys the idea of dynamic interrelations between different elements, like "interplay" does. However, it also crucially brings to the forefront the superior relevance and hierarchy of that action and its dynamism over the elements among which it is developed. It favours an attention placed on the variable over one focused on static identities.

I have extracted the concept from Bolaño's own words in an interview with Cristian Warnken in 1999, three years after *Distant Star* was first published. The conversation in which it is deployed certainly deserves an overview. Bolaño uses it as an answer to Warnken's question "Which is the novel that's finished [the one it makes no sense to write anymore] and which is the novel […] that you foresee that's to come?" (Warnken). Bolaño replies: "a novel that's only held together owing to its story and to the linear way of telling a story. […] One cannot write such a novel […] in which there isn't a structure, in which there isn't *juego* [interplay], in which there's no crossing of voices" (*ibid.*). Later, he further expands his answer:

[10] For example, in Spanish one can say "Me gusta el juego de esta película," while in English it seems that something is missing if one states the equivalent "I like the interplay of this film." The immediate reply would be: the interplay between what and what?

> I think about [my short story] "Sensini" and "Sensini" is more of an installation than a proper short story. I mean, if "Sensini" doesn't win the prize that it won it was unpublishable. The literary bet of "Sensini" was not a hundred per cent fulfilled with its writing. The literary bet was fulfilled by winning a prize, which meant encircling completely [*darle la vuelta total*] that about which the novel was telling a story. (*ibid.*)[11]

Warnken immediately asks if Bolaño's intention is "to take the short story out of the fiction and take a step immediately [towards life], a direct bridge with life." Bolaño concludes what I consider to be his exposition of the concept of *juego* by answering "No, it's an attempt to play [*jugar*], to give to a single thing which apparently has one single meaning many different meanings. […] [Literary] texts have to have mirrors where to look at themselves; where the text sees itself and also what's behind it" (*ibid.*).

Warnken's last interrogation and Bolaño's reply represent the juxtaposition of two choices regarding paradigms of the relationship between art and life. Warnken's question talks about art stepping into life directly and can be linked with Rancière's previously mentioned critique of the mimetic paradigm of art. Bolaño's answer, however, refers to a more dynamic circuiting. His words are vague if one looks for a clear model of how he conceives the relationship of fictional texts to reality, but this vagueness offers important clues. For example, Bolaño refers to the mechanisms of the literary text (*juego*/interplay, mirroring, polysemy, etc.); but he does not mention the reader. I understand this silence as stemming from a perspective similar to that of Bal when in *Narratology* she states that "reading is a fundamentally subjective activity" (4). Warnken's hypothesis regarding the relations of fictional literature with reality ossifies and proposes as predictable the linking between these spheres. A writer produces a text that only needs a reader to activate it, as an outcome-determined mechanism which responds to the author's will; the outcome being the infiltration of life from the field of fiction (for example, generating political

[11] Included in *Phone Calls* (1997), "Sensini" tells the story of the friendship between the narrator (who shares many biographical situations with Bolaño himself) and the writer Luis Antonio Sensini (based in Argentinian writer Antonio Di Benedetto). It could be interpreted as a reflection on the life of the Latin American exiled writer and the *ethos* of the profession of writer in general. They begin writing letters to each other after the narrator sees the name of Sensini among the participants in a small literary prize and—surprised by the fact that a relevant name in Latin American literature is interested in such a humble prize—decides to communicate with him. In the letters, the narrator gets to know more and more about the old writer; while, in the meantime, they both keep competing for small literary prizes—especially Sensini, who is a professional in the matter. It is mostly him who encourages the narrator to keep trying. The story is closed with the narrator hearing about Sensini's death and receiving a visit of his daughter. It ends with a small note which states "This short story won the City of San Sebastián Narrative Prize, sponsored by the Fundación Kutxa" (the real prize to which Bolaño is referring in the quotation above).

activism). This possibility is challenged by Bolaño's silence regarding the agent on whom the effects of the text are exerted (the reader) and by the concept of *juego*, with its dynamic and changeable connotations. In my view, *juego*/interplay is the most suitable master-concept to direct an approach to Bolaño's narrative; somewhat analogous to that of metaphor for Salcedo's case in Bal's investigation. Similarly, *Distant Star* is probably the work where these procedures, which I group together under the name of *poetics of juego*, are stripped down to their barest core and appear closer to the text's surface.

Along similar lines, the demand for literary texts to "have mirrors where to look at themselves; where the text sees itself and also what's behind it" (*ibid.*) can be productively linked to Damisch's ideas. In his discourse, this image could be expressed as the appropriateness of including, *qua* constituents of the literary text, cues that lead to ask questions that in turn allow for a constitution of the text into something else other than *only* a literary text. These processes of questioning would be both *a priori* undefined and hardly avoidable if one followed the development of the narrative. The obvious difference between Damisch and Bolaño is that the latter does not state anything about the reader, while for the former the critic has the crucial role of questioning. However, Bolaño's phrasing establishes the same key fundamental distinction between text-as-itself in its material presence (narrative account of fictive events) and what's-behind-it (ideological and social underpinnings) deployed by Damisch, van Alphen and Bal. Similarly, he also recognizes the structure of a prime nature of the text as a closed sphere of literary, fictional, and narrative meaning that is questioned (van Alphen) or assessed (Bal); to then reveal how non-literary ideas are in fact ingrained in its literary composition. The main difference to be noted here is then Bolaño's radical refusal of prescribing anything about the reader. The implied reflection behind this seems to be that the writer cannot direct the reading process; but he can build the text in such a way that the process of reading it as a literary text makes it difficult not to dialogue with it through questions that are not only of a literary kind.

While the networks of *juego* in the novel will be analysed in the following subchapters, a reflection on the already observable political character of Bolaño's work is nevertheless both already possible and desirable. In parallel to my close reading of *Distant Star*, offered below, I will explore the options that Bolaño's narrative provides to back an assertion of its political nature. Here, coupled with the establishment of the most important concept for such close reading, I aim only at defining the fundamental meaning

of that assertion. Taking recourse to Rancière's thought, I believe that while Warnken's proposal follows closely what the French philosopher calls "mimetic paradigm of art," Bolaño's one could be equated with his "aesthetic paradigm":

> 'Aesthetic' designates the suspension of every determinate relation correlating the production of art forms and a specific social function […]. This means that the aesthetic rupture arranges a paradoxical form of efficacy, one that relates to a disconnection between the production of artistic *savoir-faire* and social destination, between sensory forms, the significations that can be read on them and their possible effects. (Rancière 2010, 138-9)

Immediately following this excerpt, Rancière gives a name to the "paradoxical form of efficacy" about which he talks: "Let us call it the efficacy of *dissensus*, which is not a designation of conflict as such, but is a specific type thereof, a conflict between sense and sense" (2010, 139). That same fragment in its original French in *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008) is rendered differently: "[Dissensus] C'est le conflit de plusieurs régimes de sensorialité" (2008, 66). Here, a polysemy exists which is common to English, French and Spanish—the one between sense as "A faculty by which the body perceives an external stimulus" (Oxford dictionary) and as "A way in which an expression or a situation can be interpreted; a meaning" (*ibid.*). The French version of the text seems to point undoubtedly towards the sensory interpretation; nevertheless, there are some reasons to regard the English translation as more capable of expressing the richness of Rancière's idea. The expression develops a clear parallelism with a key sentence in what is probably the author's most popular political work: *La Mésentente* (1995); where the eponymous concept is defined as "a conflict between he who says 'white' and he who says 'white' but does not understand at all the same thing by it, or does not understand that the other says the same thing under the name of whiteness'" (1995, 12).[12] Moreover, in the original chapter of *Le spectateur émancipé*, Rancière does use the expression "entre sens et sens" in a number of occasions. In a particularly representative case of the polysemic meaning of "sense" that I am trying to favour here, he writes that "Consensus means the agreement between sense and sense [*l'accord entre sens et sens*]; *i.e.* between a mode of sensible presentation and a regime of interpretation of its data" (75). Both

[12] This is the full original context of the sentence, in its original French: "Par mésentente on entendra un type déterminé de situation de parole : celle où l'un des interlocuteurs à la fois entend et n'entend pas ce que dit l'autre. La mésentente n'est pas le conflit entre celui qui dit blanc et celui qui dit noir. Elle est le conflit entre celui qui dit blanc et celui qui dit blanc mais n'entend point la même chose ou n'entend point que l'autre dit la même chose sous le nom de la blancheur" (12).

fragments, when brought together, reveal that the rupture of the immediate, mechanistic linkage between sense and sense that Rancière explores has two levels. On one of them, the break is produced between sensory perception (through the *senses*) and its interpretation, in the form of assignation of meaning (of *sense*) to it. On the other, the disidentification affects two apparently equivalent senses (*qua* meaning), which two individuals ascribe to the same sensory stimulus (white ≠ white). The resonances of this exposition of Rancière's ideas with Bolaño's notion of *juego* as "to give to a single thing which apparently has one single meaning many different meanings" should be probably already sensible.

2.2. The Double. Mirroring, Doubling, Repetition

Bolaño opens *Distant Star* with a brief paragraph, placed before the first chapter of the novel. The voice that narrates in it refers to *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996), another work by Bolaño, as "my novel" (11).[13] It also states that the story that worked as the closure to that book was "recounted to me by my fellow countryman Arturo B […] who was not satisfied with the end result" (*ibid*.). The reason for this dissatisfaction is that "The last chapter of *Nazi Literature* served as a counterpoint, perhaps as an anti-climax to the literary grotesque which preceded it, and Arturo wished a longer story, not a mirror or an explosion of other stories, but a mirror and explosion in itself" (*ibid*.). The same Arturo is revealed a few lines below to be the identity of the voice that narrates *Distant Star*; whose story is, indeed, a revision and modification of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*' last chapter. Despite saying at first that they composed together the text that the reader has before her, the voice in first person clarifies that "my tasks were limited to prepare drinks, consult some books and argue, with him [Arturo B] and with the ever-livelier [*cada día más vivo*] ghost of Pierre Menard, the validity of many repeated paragraphs" (*ibid*.). The weightier asseverations among these lines are the reasons given for Arturo B's disappointment with the original story as it appeared in *Nazi Literature in the Americas* and the reference to Pierre Menard. For reasons that will be made clear in

[13] *Nazi Literature in the Americas* has the structure of a biobibliographical anthology of North and South American literary writers with far-right political leanings; all of them being fictional characters invented by Bolaño. The story of the poet and pilot Carlos Ramírez-Hoffman is the last one in order of appearance. It constitutes a change in the general tone and style of the preceding entries about other authors—rather than as a simply and anonymous collector of information, here the narrator identifies himself as being Bolaño himself and gets dragged into Ramírez-Hoffman's hunt by Chilean detective Abel Romero.

the following paragraphs, I take both to provide crucial resources for an articulation of a close-reading of the novel with a demonstration of its political character. They will be respectively the focus of the present subchapter and the following one.

To approach the first of them, I will begin by borrowing the concept of *isotopy*, developed by structuralist semiotician A. J. Greimas. According Greimas, an isotopy is "a redundant set of semantic categories that makes possible a uniform reading of the narrative, as the latter is issued from the partial readings of statements and from the resolution of their ambiguities, in turn guided by the search for the unique reading" (1975, 174). The short paragraph which precedes the narration of Arturo B can be considered as the first step in the building of a "set of semantic categories" that dominates the whole novel. I have introduced the content of this category (some of its possible names) in the title for this subchapter—it is the isotopy of mirroring, of doubling, of repeating. The relevance of this semantic axis has been already noted by critics as Celina Manzoni in "Biografías mínimas/ínfimas y el equívoco del mal" (2002, 23). I consider, notwithstanding, that its richness has not been yet fully realized in any of the critical texts that use the notion of the double to approach *Distant Star*. There are, however, many reasons for its already extensive popularity. To begin with, the narration of *Distant Star* is presented as a repetition, a duplication, with regard to the last chapter of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. That last chapter itself is called a "mirror or an explosion" of the previous sections of the book. Moreover, this establishment of both stories as developments of the same fabula turns their key characters into doubles of each other. The narrator of the last chapter of *Nazi Literature in the Americas* is named Bolaño (1996a, 199), the central character is Emilio Stevens, then renamed Carlos Ramírez-Hoffman, his first victims are the twins María and Magdalena Venegas, their poetry instructor is Juan Chernyakhovsky, etc. The narrator of *Distant Star* is Arturo B, its central character is Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, who is afterwards known by the name of Carlos Wieder, his first victims are the twins Angélica and Verónica Garmendia, and their poetry instructor is Juan Stein. Lastly, without needing to know Bolaño's biography, in the opening for this novel one can begin to—at least—suspect that Arturo B is himself merely a double, a fictional alter ego, of Bolaño himself.

Beginning from this introduction of the isotopy, the novel progressively twists and develops around the semantic block of mirroring-doubling-repetition. The mirroring between the story of *Distant Star* and the story of the last chapter of *Nazi Literature in*

the Americas is certainly interesting in itself. Notwithstanding, I consider that with regard to the political character of the novel, the two most important developments within the isotopic axis of doubling are related to its characters. One, the focus for this chapter, takes place between characters; the other, between characters and "real" individuals. It is worth noting that at the same time that these relationships between narrative actors are part of the isotopy of doubling, they are also an expression of the poetics of *juego*. They aim at a proliferation of meanings and bring to the forefront the relationship between actors at the expense of a clear definition of the actors as such—*i.e.* as individual and individualized active agencies. I have decided to name those relationships with rhetorical terms. The reasoning behind this choice is that all the terms in question have in common a will to describe specific connections between two or more linguistic expressions in terms of sense *qua* meaning. Thus, they are labels in coherence with the greater hierarchy that I attribute to *juego* as the master concept that directs my approach to *Distant Star*.[14]

Relation	**Conditions for identification**	**Example(s)**
Homonyms	α splits into two doubles, α' and α'' with simultaneous and exclusive existence	Juan Stein (Juan Stein & Jacobo Sabotinsky)
Heteronyms	α goes under multiple names, associated with different personas	Carlos Wieder (Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, Carlos Wieder, Octavio Pacheco, R. P. English, etc.)
Parallelism	α and β resemble each other, but remain distinct	Juan Stein, Diego Soto & Lorenzo/Petra
Antonyms	α and β are opposed to each other through some traits, situations, etc.	Arturo B & Carlos Wieder
Paronomasia[15]	β, a character removed from the story as such, has as her main role to relate to α in such a way that their juxtaposition reinforces or weakens	Ivan Chernyakhovsky & Juan Stein

[14] The table of contents links (1) a denomination for a particular relation between characters, (2) the structure that any given relation between characters must display in order to be identified with that denomination, and (3) one example of such a relation taken from *Distant Star*. The "conditions for identification" apply only to the relations between characters, not to the literary tropes after which I have named those relations. In other words, my goal is to provide a definition for what I identify as a metaphoric (homonymic, heteronymic, antonymic, etc.) relationship between the novel's characters, and not for the literary trope known as metaphor.

[15] I deploy a strong definition of paronomasia because with a weaker one (for example, without the exigence for the minor relevance of character β for the story when taken as a whole in comparison with α) every single one of these relations could be said to be paronomasias. All of them charge, discharge or overload semantical components in the characters with whom they are related.

	certain aspects or actualizations of the character of α	Jacques Delorme & Carlos Wieder
Metaphor	β directs the readers gaze to an α apparently disconnected from β's plane of fiction/reality (*mise en abyme*) in such a way that both seem to be equated through certain similarities, despite some manifestly contrasting traits.	Carlos Wieder & Raúl Zurita Arturo B & Roberto Bolaño Carlos Wieder & Roberto Bolaño

The listing of examples from the novel is not exhaustive; nor are the categories exclusive with regard to each other, as evidenced by Wieder's ubiquity in them. For both these reasons, exploring every single case where these relations are active would imply exceeding this paper's required extension. Instead of doing so, and with the aim of presenting the political potential of this expansive network of connections among narrative actors, I will analyse the case of the third character (after Wieder and Arturo B; since the two are the focus of the next subchapter) in number of links with other characters—Juan Stein.

Stein is the instructor at one of the poetry workshops where Arturo B and his friend Bibiano O'Ryan meet Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. The first and clearest relation that is established between him and other character is the *parallelism* with Diego Soto, the instructor at the other poetry workshop in the city of Concepción and the second space where the narrator encounters Ruiz-Tagle on a weekly basis. The first sentence that mentions Soto also establishes the relationship between him and Stein—they shared both a rivalry and a deep friendship (20). The narrator presents the opinion that they were the two best Chilean poets of their generation (58), to then contravene the resemblances by characterizing them through opposite physical and intellectual attributes: "Stein was tall and blond, Soto was short and dark-haired, Stein was athletic and strong, Soto had delicate bones […], Stein was in the orbit of the Latin American poetry and Diego Soto translated French poets that nobody knew in Chile" (74). Thus, Stein and Soto are neither completely equated nor totally opposed to each other; they simply share traits and trajectories that resemble or function as a counterpoint for the other's traits and trajectories. Despite the apparently aleatory meandering of their parallelism, there is a clear teleology which directs it towards a dramatic conclusion. But in order to properly

grasp it, it is first necessary to review the two key relations of paronomasia maintained by Stein, as well as his homonymic process of doubling.

Juan Stein, named Juan Chernyakhovsky in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, happens to be the nephew of historical figure Ivan Chernyakhovsky, "the only relevant Jewish general during the Second World War" (62-3). Besides his obvious relation of *paronomasia* with Stein, Chernyakhovsky's influence is crucial in the evolution of his nephew's process of homonymic doubling. Stein recalls that his mother gave to him a portrait of the general "when I left home, as some kind of enigma: my mother didn't tell me anything, she just gave me the portrait, what did she mean with that gesture? Was the present a declaration or the beginning of a dialogue? Etcetera, etcetera" (63). Stein knows well the life and achievements of his uncle; Arturo B recounts the information that the poetry instructor gave to him and to Bibiano after a visit to his apartment: "during the offensive of 1944, it was thanks to [Chernyakhovsky] that the Army Group Centre, formed by four German armies, was destroyed; probably the biggest of all the blows received by the Nazis during the Second World War" (61). During his infancy, after losing his parents, the general "suffered the scorn and the humiliations that Jews suffered, [but] he proved to those who despised him that he was not only equal, but much better than them" (*ibid.*). And, of particular relevance for some modulations in Stein's and Soto's parallelism (*vid. infra*), after a long listing of Chernyakhovsky's decorations and merits—including the double awarding of the highest Soviet Union distinction, the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, and the renaming of the East Prussian city of Insterburg after him—Arturo B concludes:

> [I]n the village of Oksanyno of the district of Umansky in the [Ukrainian] region of Cherkasy, a bronze bust was erected celebrating the general (I would bet my monthly pay check that the bronze bust has been replaced; today the hero is [Simon] Petrliura; tomorrow who knows). As Bibiano would say, quoting Parra: Thus passes the glory of the world; without glory, without world, without a meagre salami sandwich. (62)

The paronomasia begins to become more obvious at the same time that Stein's *homonymic* doubling begins. After the coup, he "disappeared and for a long time Bibiano and [Arturo] thought he was dead. In fact, everyone thought he was dead, it seemed natural to everyone that they had killed the Bolshevik Jew bastard" (65). Arturo B emigrates to Mexico, France and lastly Catalonia; while, Bibiano stays in Chile. Within a few years, Bibiano begins sending to his friend news about a reappeared Juan Stein.

The quiet poet is presented now as having metamorphosed into a freedom fighter with the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, with Angolan forces against South Africa, in Paraguay, in Mozambique and in Namibia (66-7). He "appeared and disappeared like a ghost in every place where there was conflict, in every place where the desperate, generous, crazed, brave, abhorrent Latin-Americans destroyed and rebuilt reality in a last effort, doomed to failure" (66). Then, Stein returns to El Salvador and seemingly falls in battle while fighting with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMNL), as one among a group of officials who "bore the names of Greek heroes and demigods" (70). Arturo wonders "Which would be the name of Stein—commander Patroclus, commander Hector, commander Paris? I don't know. It certainly wasn't Aeneas or Ulises" (*ibid.*). With this remark, he clearly hints at the purity of Stein's classical heroism; that of the hero who dies in battle, not the one who returns home or finds a new one. But then, no body identifiable with Juan Stein is found among those recovered after the FMNL offensive; only the corpse of a look alike—Argentinian Jacobo Sabotinsky, "an old member of the ERP [Argentinian's People's Revolutionary Army]" (*ibid.*). Consequently, Bibiano decides to find Stein's family to know about his true fate. In the Chilean village of Llanquihue he finds a woman that had known him, who recalls that Stein had died from cancer at a hospital in Valdivia. The following exchange takes place:

> [H]e was a left-winger, wasn't he?, said Bibiano almost whispering. It may very well be, said the woman, suddenly cheerful again […]. What was his name? Juan Stein. Juanito Stein. And what did he do for a living? He was a teacher, although his hobby was fixing engines, of tractors, harvesters, wells, whatever, he was a real genius with engines. And he earned an extra salary with that. […] Is he buried in Valdivia? I think so, said the woman and she turned gloomy again. […] So Bibiano went to Valdivia's cemetery and during a whole day, accompanied by one of the caretakers (to whom he gave a good tip for the services), he searched for the tomb of that tall, blond Juan Stein who never left Chile; but even though he looked for it thoroughly, he couldn't find it. (72-3)

These lines make possible to perceive a certain effort to keep Stein's fate somewhat open. A few pages later, Arturo B refers to Sabotinsky as "the double of Juan Stein," distinguishing him from "our Juan Stein" (81). But the use of the term "double" and of the name Juan Stein to refer also to Sabotinsky, together with Bibiano's incapacity to find Stein's tomb—even when aided by one of the caretakers of the graveyard for a whole day—preserve a certain degree of ambiguity. For Bibiano and Arturo, both Sabotinsky

and "their" Stein are in fact two identities of an ambiguous entity called Juan Stein; this is the kind of relationship that I define as *homonymy* in the context of the novel.

Returning to paronomasia, the determination of Stein's fate by the weight of the memory of his uncle, the Soviet hero fallen in combat, produces two outcomes: the even brighter Latin American hero of the 1970s, part of a new generation that keeps battling against imperialism around the world; and the even dimmer anonymous nobody, part of a May '68 generation that has lost all hope of achieving the utopic future through a truly revolutionary ethos, who fixes engines to earn a bit more of money and dies in bed. Chernyakhovsky is, notwithstanding, only one of the two paronomasias sustained by Stein. Arturo B also offers the following recollection of Stein's complex relationship with the portrait of his uncle: "Sometimes he said he was going to use the frame [in which he kept the general's picture] for a photograph of William Carlos Williams, dressed as a village doctor" (63). This second photograph is "one of his most precious belongings" and what he likes about it is "the tranquillity in the picture, the certainty of knowing that Williams is doing his job, that he is headed towards his job, walking along a peaceful sidewalk, without running" (64). Thus, Stein doubts between *framing* a war hero or a poet who, after a very conventional life (at least when compared to those of fellow artists and writers of his generation like Ezra Pound), died bedridden at his home in the same New Jersey borough where he was born.[16] Clearly, Williams can also then be said to form a relation of paronomasia with Stein.

The four of them—Stein, Sabotinsky, Chernyakhovsky and Williams—reflect each other and produce a kind of story that perhaps does merit the title of "a mirror and an explosion in itself" (1996b, 11); an effort "to play [*jugar*], to give to a single thing which apparently has one single meaning many different meanings" (Warnken). Soto's own story should also be added to this already complex constellation of identities. After the coup, he goes into exile and establishes his life in France (76). He is able to get a position as a university lecturer, gets married and fathers a son. He merits the following reflection from Arturo B:

[16] Some connotations of an election of the path identified with Williams are reinforced by the fact that, although he and the narrator refer to the portrait as depicting Williams, Stein has strong reservations about the identity of the model: "About the authenticity of the latter [picture, that of Williams], some members of the workshop and sometimes Stein himself had doubts" (64). For instance, this could be read as even stronger occasion where Stein suffers under his familiar and historical determinations and is tempted to reject them; lying to himself to see in a photomontage an excuse to choose the life he truly desires (being unable to admit to himself this wish without feeling ashamed).

> He was, I guessed, a happy man […]. It wasn't difficult for me to imagine him in a comfortable flat in Paris, or maybe with a house in the surrounding villages, reading amid the silence of his soundproofed studio while the kids watched TV and his wife cooked or ironed clothes, because someone had to cook, right? Or maybe, better, it was a maid who ironed the clothes, a Portuguese or African servant […]. (77)

The comfortable economic position of Soto, his embourgeoisement and his peaceful life contrast strongly with the two trajectories defined for Stein a few pages before. But an initial semantic charging of a character is again contravened by subsequent developments of the story. When returning from a colloquium in Alicante (Spain), Soto stops at Perpignan to change trains and witnesses a group of neo-Nazis thrashing a homeless woman. Arturo B retells his old instructor's violent death as follows:

> Maybe Soto's eyes are beginning to tear up, with tears of self-pity, because he has the intuition that he is about to meet his fate. Between *Tel Quel* and the *OULIPO*, life has decided and chosen the tabloids. Anyhow, he drops his travel bag, the books, and he advances towards the [neo-Nazis]. Before beginning the fight, he insults them in Spanish. In the adverse Spanish of southern Chile. The [neo-Nazis] stab Soto and flee. (80)

The development of this life-story for Soto reinforces certain aspects of Stein's life and builds a bridge between his two otherwise opposed paths. Both are strongly influenced by images from the past and from familiar stories; Stein will find his end either bearing the name of a Greek hero fallen in battle or from a cancer that confines him to a hospital bed. Against the constant overbearing determination of his friend's life, Soto is presented as someone who suddenly breaks with a comfortable and well-defined trajectory ("Between *Tel Quel* and the *OULIPO*," "he drops his travel bag, the books") to freely choose a duty and sacrifice himself to its cause. The process of assimilation and dissimilation, however, is never completely univocal—both Sabotinsky and Soto meet their end fighting against what they consider to be unjust acts of violence; but Soto is also opposed to both Steins through a semantic charge of freedom that contrasts with the burden of their determinations.

Before analysing the political significance of this manifestation of the poetics of *juego* in *Distant Star*, one last name should be added to this network of relationships—that of Lorenzo/Petra. He is introduced as follows: "Years later I heard a story that I would have liked to tell to Bibiano […]. It's the story of Petra, and in some way, it is to Soto what the story of the double of Juan Stein [Sabotinsky] is to our Juan Stein" (81). Lorenzo

is a Chilean boy who loses his arms in an accident. Arturo B reckons his infancy in Chile under these constraints as "a disadvantageous situation," to which then he adds that "it was Pinochet's Chile, so the disadvantageous situation turned into a hopeless one; but this wasn't all, since he soon discovered that he was a homosexual, which turned the hopeless situation into an unconceivable and inenarrable one" (81). Lorenzo flees Chile to live in Europe as a street artist and entertainer, and starts writing poems. During a visit to Barcelona, artist and designer Javier Mariscal sees him perform and decides that Lorenzo should wear the costume for his character Petra during the '92 Paralympics (*vid. infra* Figure 1). Three years later, Lorenzo dies from AIDS, although Arturo B does not know exactly if it happened "in Germany or in South America" (85). After recounting these events, Arturo B produces the following reflection: "Sometimes when I think of Stein and Soto I can't avoid thinking also of Lorenzo. […] Although the only thing that unites them is to have been born in Chile. And a book [which they all read] […] entitled *Ma gestalt thérapie* by Frederick Perls" (*ibid*.).

Figure 1. Design for Petra by Javier Mariscal

With the addition of Lorenzo to the network of relations, the semantic connections between the characters involved is multiplicated. The same is true for the instances of *juego*. Like Stein and Soto, Lorenzo is a poet. He is even more determined than Stein by circumstances that scape his control (his lack of arms and his homosexuality in the context of an extreme-right regime). However, he seemingly manages to overcome them in a manner that mixes the exultation of freedom with certain tragicomic undertones. The best example of this double colouring of Lorenzo's story is a subtle contraposition between his highest and lowest point. The former coincides with his performance as Petra during the Paralympics, finding economic stability and public recognition and affection (85). The latter is his attempt to kill himself by jumping into the sea during his adolescence in

Chile, when he said to "sink as a stone" (82) in the water. The absence of arms, which makes it more difficult for him to stay afloat, is the same trait that allows him to participate in the celebration and assertion of the capacities of physically challenged individuals. The word "stone" ("Petra" has this meaning in Greek) constitutes a connection that could be deemed as dissensual (*vid. infra*) between two possible outcomes, death and life, stemming from a number of external conditionings. Along the same lines, Lorenzo's ability to choose his own path and to sustain himself in Europe as an émigré replicates that of Soto, but with the addition of enormous handicaps in comparison with a translator of French poetry that settles in Paris. Additionally, like Stein—whose surname also means "Stone," in German—he dies from an incurable disease. Lastly, although he is introduced as a double to Diego Soto, the straightforwardness of this relation is then contradicted by the statement that both of them and Stein had only in common their Chilean origins and having read the same book. The exclusivity of these two similarities is of course disproved by the set of parallelisms that I have exposed in this paragraph. Instead, this gesture rather constitutes another effort to keep open and dynamic (and not completely settled) the relationships between the characters, their lives and the meaning to be extracted from the narration of some of their key events.[17]

The previous exposition allows to initiate now an approach to Bolaño's methods to build and assemble stories together from a perspective focused on their political relevance. My fundamental claim in this respect is that in the poetics of *juego* the goal is not to represent actions to foster their imitation in the real world; but to build dynamic networks for the grounding of meanings emerging from the reading process. The constant rearrangement of semantic charges related to events or characters allows for multiple cohesive understandings of the story to arise, so that various conflicting pictures of the fabula can be simultaneously sustained, each directing a particular distribution of meaning and value. None, however, seem cohesive enough to be placed on a higher level of hierarchy with regard to the rest. For example, for the case of Soto and Lorenzo, no

[17] The reference to Fritz Perls, who developed the form of psychotherapy known as Gestalt therapy together with his wife Laura Perls, could be in fact an instance of tongue-in-cheek affirmation of this search for suggestive openness. Perls is the author of what has come to be known as the "Gestalt Prayer," which aims at summing up the way of life that results from following the fundamental principles of the therapy and resonates somewhat ironically with the set of complex relations developed between Bolaño's characters: "I do my thing and you do your thing. / I am not in this world to live up to your expectations, / And you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you, and I am I, / and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful. / If not, it can't be helped" (Perls 4).

single understanding of the story can articulate their branding as doubles with the asseveration that they had only in common to be Chilean and having read Perls's book; and each of these judgments reinforces or hinders the recognition of a set of similarities and differences between them. For the case of Sabotinsky and Stein, Bibiano's fruitless search for the tomb of the latter precludes a complete closure of their relationship, which remains undecidable between that of simply sharing some physical traits, being doubles or being the same individual.

In this context, critical efforts directed towards the search for clues that allow for the exclusion of one option over the other—like in Fernández Díaz's model of the reader of autofiction (*vid.* subchapter 2.1.)—break the ambiguity on which the logic of the poetics of *juego* and the isotopy of doubling are built. This isotopy—and this in turn is one of the instances of *juego* in *Distant Star*—does indeed allow for "a uniform reading of the narrative" (Greimas 1975, 174), since the reader must for example have active some meaning for the category of "double" in order to understand some arcs of the story. But in spite of this requirement, the kind of uniform reading that is being fostered is paradoxically based on the notion of ambiguity, since the latter is part of the semantic charge of the notion of the double. The consequence is that the "unique reading" (*ibid.*) can never be fully fixated. This kind of undecidability signifies, in my reading, a welcoming into narrative-building of dissensus—a conflict between sense and sense—as a permeating guideline for the development and intertwining of stories. This constitutive role of dissensus is the main medium through which I identify and establish a link between the poetics of *juego* and politics. *Distant Star* is not political because it *exposes* its readers to an unfolding of various dissensual processes. It is political as a literary work because, as a literary narrative fictional text, it *works* through dissensus:[18]

> [D]issensus can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined. Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific 'bodies', that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. (Rancière 2010, 139).

[18] To avoid unnecessary undefinitions, the adjective "political" in these sentences can be read with the following meaning: something is political if it meddles with the forces, entities and agencies that constitute the linkage between our personal and social worlds; and if it interconnects those elements according to procedures for the distribution and negotiation of meaning that characterize the field of politics.

From the perspective provided by the previous quotation, the pictures of Chernyakhovsky and Williams (*vid.* footnote 19) can be read as symbols of the determination of life, of the fixation of possibilities and the delimitation of the spaces that one individual is supposed to occupy and the actions that she is supposed to undertake.[19] Framing one of the pictures implies not framing the other and the same is true for their associated life-options. But preserving the ambiguity regarding Stein's path allows for both life-options to be simultaneously chosen and rejected, and for the prophetic determination by the pictures to be simultaneously confirmed and contravened. In a tangential development, Soto's liberation from his life's trajectory and thresholds debilitates retrospectively the significance of the semantic axis surrounding the possible permutations between opposed determinations of life, to inaugurate a new one which contraposes determination to radical agency. Lastly, Lorenzo's story is presented as doubling Soto's one, in what could be read as a shifting of the attention towards a newer axis established around the image of a life that makes an enormous effort to go against the grain; which seemingly puts forward both the ridiculous futility and the humble greatness of this resisting gesture.

Two interrelated literary-political procedures thus emerge as effects of these dissensual configurations to direct and permeate the constitution of *Distant Star*'s narrative. Firstly, the sustenance of agonistic meanings or senses—the preservation of a state of conflicting possibilities in their irresoluteness and dialectical exchange. For example, the picture of Chernyakhovsky has two opposed relations of paronomasia with Stein/Sabotisnky's story (debilitation and reinforcement, respectively), which are simultaneously favoured and contravened and thus sustained in a relation of agonistic struggle. The same holds true for the exact nature of the relationship between Soto and Lorenzo—they are implied to be both doubles and simply fellow Chileans, who have more or less the same in common that each of them has in common with Stein. Secondly, the encouragement of polysemy—the ascription of multiple meanings to something which, before the proliferation of its attributes, had only one. For example, Juan Stein is originally a poetry instructor and then, through the process of doubling him into the

[19] Although the portraits certainly constitute the clearest example of the constellation of objects, fates and choice of action that influences semantically the process and factuality of Stein's doubling, they are not the only one. In the segment of the narration when Bibiano tries to find Stein's tomb, the latter is referred to as "that tall, blond Juan Stein who never left Chile" (73), in contraposition to a Stein-Sabotinsky who has fought in Africa and Central America. The first thing that Arturo had previously narrated about their visit to Stein's house is that "The house was filled with maps, more than books. That was the first thing that drew Bibiano's attention and mine—to find so few books […] and so many maps […]. He had a lot of maps, like those who wish fervently to travel abroad and have not yet left their countries" (58).

engine mechanic Stein and the revolutionary Sabotinsky, he gains new attributes without losing the previous ones. Along the same lines, the word "stone" gets progressively charged with new undertones through the trajectories of the Stein and Lorenzo/Petra.

To close this subchapter, I will render explicit the relation of the previous developments with van Alphen's theoretical framework of reference. The two procedures mentioned above, within this author's terminology, constitute political ideas which the text, when questioned in a certain way, articulates in its own language and is revealed to be harbouring. Following van Alphen's proposal, this subchapter consists of an effort to answer to the invitation to think with the work of art. In particular, through posing political questions related to the isotopy of doubling. Now, according to him (van Alphen, 4), it should be possible to ask what is historical about *Distant Star*. In the following chapter, by means of an exploration of what I propose to call menardism (another instance of the poetics of *juego* and a subtype of doubling), I will present the novel as a development in a tradition originating in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*." From among the conceptual trio of *juego*, doubling and menardism (which could be understood to relate to each other as a set of matryoshkas would), the latter is the notion that responds to Bal's exigence for her concepts to relate the works of the artist in question with to previous theoretical and artistic traditions. Menardism is then the fundamental singular dissensual effect that "allows [to consider] the work [*Distant Star*] to be a historical articulation of a general, more fundamental problem" (van Alphen, 4). That problem, I claim, is related to the notion of artistic commitment.

3. **Menardism and Commitment. A Historical Contextualization**

3.1. Menardism. Conceptual Definition

Pierre Menard, referenced in the short paragraph that precedes the bulk of the narration in *Distant Star*, is a character of Jorge Luis Borges's well-known short story "Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote" included in *Fictions* (1944). Menard is a French symbolist author at the turn of the century who decides to undertake the literary quest of writing (not copying) the *Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes's novel from 1605: "[Menard] did not

face at any point a mechanical transcription of the original; it could not be copied. His admirable ambition was to produce pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (Borges 1974, 446). In the short story, a monographic on Menard's work presented as an essay on a recently deceased (little-known, but seemingly real) author, Borges reflects on the different readings that Menard's and Cervantes's *Quixote* solicit. For example, "The contrast in styles is […] vivid. Menard's archaic style […] suffers from some excessive affectation. This is not true for [Cervantes], who uses nonchalantly the everyday Spanish of his times" (449). Borges concludes the narration by summing up Menard's most relevant literary contribution: "Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched the slow-paced and rudimentary art of reading with a new technique: the technique of the deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions" (450).

For my understanding of *Distant Star*, the relevance of Menard and his story goes far beyond that of a simple humorous reference confined to a preliminary paragraph. In the analysis that follows in this subchapter, I will focus on studying a particular technique for the development of dissensual networks of meaning that plays a key role in the poetics of *juego*. For reasons that I will explore below, I consider that *menardism* is the best possible name for it. In the limited context of Bolaño's novel, which I oppose to a consideration of *Distant Star* against its historical background, menardism consists in an exploration of the fluctuations of meaning regarding an act when it is attributed to different agents. Its fundamental structure is then that of a questioning without an obvious answer, whose goal is to make possible new channels for the perception, structuring and assignation of meaning to sensible data. It is probably the element of the poetics of *juego* most explicitly directed towards fulfilling the task that Rancière calls "the labour of fiction":

> 'Fiction', as re-framed by the aesthetic regime of art, […] involves the re-framing of the 'real', or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective. This intertwining frames a new fabric of common experience, a new scenery of the visible and a new dramaturgy of the intelligible. It creates new modes of individuality and new connections between those modes, new forms of perception of the given and new plots of temporality. (2010, 141)

The ensuing kind of relationship between the agents to whom an action is contrastively attributed is yet another instance of doubling or mirroring, and it has been named metaphoric in the previous subchapter. My choice of the term "metaphor" to refer to this phenomenon, which may seem problematical, owes partly to the fact that metaphor is in itself a problematical concept. In *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler begins his conclusions regarding a search for a clear definition of this trope by stating the following:

> [T]he domain of metaphor is constituted by these problems: the unstable distinction between the literal and the figurative, the crucial yet unmasterable distinction between essential and accidental resemblances, the tension between thought and linguistic processes within the linguistic system and language use. The pressure of these various concepts and forces creates a space, articulated by unmasterable distinctions, that we call metaphor. (207)

These uncertainties and undefinitions are akin to the fundamentals of the poetics of *juego* and the general ambiguity surrounding the processes of doubling. In addition to this fluid basis, my deployment of the term in this paper is structured around the reflections of Donald Davidson in "What Metaphors Mean?". In his essay, Davidson proposes that in common understandings of the concept of metaphor there is a confusion between "what [a metaphor] makes us see" and its literal content (45). For him, metaphors as such do not have meanings apart from the literal, propositional one. In consequence, paraphrasing a metaphor is not "to give its meaning […]; rather we attempt to evoke what the metaphor brings to our attention" (46); and with regard to these evocations "there is no limit" to their nature, content and number (*ibid*.). Richard Moran summarizes Davidson's position by stating that "the essence of metaphor" consists in "the (successful) effect of framing one thing in terms of another" (18) and speaks of "framing-effect" to refer to this ability of metaphorical utterances.

The key aspect of Davidson's definition for my goals here consists of two movements. First, there is an acknowledgement of the obvious relevance of meaning regarding the operative range of metaphors—they are figures of speech concerned mainly with meaning, as opposed to an alliteration's focus on sounds. Subsequently, this realization is combined with a redirection of the attention from that static and stated meaning towards the framing-effect. After its identification as such, this double movement results clearly familiar in the context of my exploration of the poetics of *juego*. The common grounds are the epistemological privileging of dynamic linkages over static

identities, together with the encouragement of a proliferations of polysemy. Moreover, both aspects are also shared by Rancière's definition of the effect of dissensus (Rancière 2010, 138-9). Perhaps the most succinct statement that can allow to capture accurately this triple connection is David Hills' definition of framing effect as follows:

> [A] state of mind in which we are encouraged and enabled to make comparisons, encouraged and enabled to notice similarities and dissimilarities, analogies and disanalogies, between primary and secondary subjects. *Metaphor is concerned with likenesses or analogies although it doesn't state them*. (Without pagination; my emphasis).

To conclude these remarks, I wish to offer a brief reflection on my motivations for selecting the term "menardism" for the phenomenon in question and on the implications of this choice. To begin with, it should be noted that the label itself constitutes a first step towards the previously announced effort to articulate a theoretical and a historical approach to the novel. In this regard, the choice is influenced by Bal's methodological criteria to develop her own concepts in *Of What One Cannot Speak* and by van Alphen's two phases—again, a theoretical and a historical one—for the analysis of a work of art. The filiation of Bolaño's work with regard to that of Borges is one of the two most obvious consequences of this labelling; the other being a general contextualization in the framework of 20th century Latin American literature. Nevertheless, I believe that the designation of "menardism" for the literary procedure in question is not so much subject to an open, free alternative offered to the critic. I claim that it is strongly demanded both by the opening allusion to Menard and simply by the nature of the procedure itself, since it favours dissensual attributions of meaning to narrated events through exactly the same fundamental protocol of action at play in Borges's story—the contrastive imputation of very similar or identical deeds to two different agents.

In any case, it is true that *Distant Star* does not replicate the exact same situation found in "Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*." Instead of naming the two metaphorical agents and exposing their relation through a Borgesian feat of encyclopedism and critical thought, the narrative limits itself to the attribution of actions that are closely associated with a (real) agent to another (fictional) agent. This is precisely the aspect of Bolañian menardism that makes the term "metaphor," in Davidson's definition of the trope, especially appropriate to account for the ensuing relation between both agents—the "concern with likeness or analogies" is obvious, but the text "does not state them" (Davidson; without pagination). And, nevertheless, the tools deployed to achieve the

ensuing dissensual effect, the effect in itself and the fundamental narrative structure that supports it are clearly inherited from Borges's story.

Two last comments should be made here with regard to this variation. Firstly, because of what has been stated above, my criteria for identifying a network of similarities and differences as constituting a case of menardism cannot be the rigorous imitation of Borgesian models. Instead, it should be limited to the discernment of what I take to be that fundamental structure that allows Borges's story to develop what could be very well called its *juego*—similar or identical actions being attributed to two different agents. Secondly, I deem this weaker criterion of identification to be the only possible way of upholding a historical focus on the development of literary ideas and techniques. This preference is backed by its tangible benefits. One of them is the possibility of studying the historical trajectory of menardism from Borges to Bolaño; linking the oeuvre of both authors and recognizing the resulting variations as such and not as deviations. Another one is an amplification of the range of applicability of the notion of menardism to other works by other writers that does not entail a blurring of its (otherwise too strict) conceptual definition.

3.2. Menardism in *Distant Star*. Commitment, Poetics, Politics

There are three examples of menardism in *Distant Star*. Namely, between Carlos Wieder and Raúl Zurita, between Arturo B and Roberto Bolaño, and between Carlos Wieder and Roberto Bolaño. In my reading, these three instances of menardism in the novel provide the loci of *Distant Star* where the literary-political ideas that most strongly direct its constitution as a literary text are revealed to be connected with a particular Latin American sociocultural issue.[20] For this reason, they are also the aspects of the text which allow to articulate an understanding of *Distant Star* as a historical contribution to the debate that surrounds that issue. The problematic in question revolves around the relationship between literature and politics in their conjunction in the figure of the Latin American intellectual of the 20th century. Bolaño's deployment of menardism in *Distant Star* would accordingly imply two parallel declarations: (1) the acknowledgment of an aesthetic-poetic dimension of this problem and the need to articulate it *in* and *through*

[20] Those literary-political ideas, as identified in the previous chapter of this essay, are the sustenance of agonistic meanings or senses and the encouragement of polysemy.

literary forms; (2) the statement that the best possible resource for that articulation and for literature's claim of responsibility is provided by Borges's story. A possible definition of the debate in question can be found in the chapter "El intelectual como problema" of Claudia Gilman's *Entre la pluma y el fusil*:

> Until the middle of the [decade of 1960], the intellectuals' politicization was expressed through the notion of "commitment." […] The biggest problem that the notion presented was the slippage between two poles: the commitment of the works and the commitment of the author. The commitment of the works involved a specific practice in the cultural field and the aesthetic programmes, although the basis regarding the transference of a supposed "aesthetics of commitment" to the works were not unanimous. […] Regarding the commitment of the author […] it implied always some kind of intellectual intervention that *exceeded* the literary or artistic production [of the author] in question. (144)

In addition to her own reflections, Gilman quotes a letter written by Argentinian author Julio Cortázar and published in the influential review of *Casa de las Américas* in 1967. In it, he issues the following petition to every writer of his generation: "I do demand from him to be a witness of his times, like Martínez Estrada and Camus wanted, and that his works or his life (but how to separate them?) provide testimony in a way that is proper to them" (Cortázar 1987, 279). Gilman identifies the fragment between parenthesis in Cortázar's fragment with "the true disjuncture: the one that separates the works from the life" (147). She concludes that the problem between the commitment of the works and the commitment of the author produced "a permanent tension, and implied a constant feedback between both poles, whose stability appeared to be impossible. The symbolic transactions only managed to work when one of the poles could be left aside momentarily, to insist on the other side of the opposition" (147-8).

Bolaño himself proved to be personally interested in this problematic and had strong opinions on the topic. In an interview with Uwe Stolzmann from 2001, included in *Roberto Bolaño. Estrella cercana*, he defines himself politically through the statement "I am still a left-winger," to then clarify: "And when I say left-winger I am not referring to an ideological label, but to a moral, ethical attitude; sometimes even aesthetical" (López Bernasocchi *et al*., 365). Such a transversal use of the term "left-winger" clearly points to an agglutinating understanding of the mentioned spheres of production of meaning (moral, ethical, aesthetical, ideological), which could probably be best explained through the notion of commitment. Likewise, in an interview from the same year for the Argentinian newspaper *La Voz*, he offers the following reflection:

> I always wanted to be a political writer, a left-wing political writer, obviously, but the left-wing political writers seemed to me despicable. If I had been Robespierre or even better Danton, I would have probably sent them to the guillotine. Latin America, among its multiple misfortunes, had a cadre of truly vile left-wing writers. I mean, vile as writers. And now I tend to believe that they were also vile as men. And probably vile as lovers and husbands and fathers. A disgrace. Pieces of shit scattered by fate to test our fortitude, I guess. Because if we could live and resist those books we were probably able to resist anything. Anyhow, let's not exaggerate—the 20th century was bountiful in perverse left-wing writers. (Demian Orosz; without pagination)

Here I consider crucial to stress which is the common denominator between (a) the concept of commitment in relation to the Latin American intellectual of the 20th century; (b) the relationship established between the real and fictional agents that sustain a rapport of menardism in the novel; and (c) the constellation of narratological elements that allows to identify in the text of *Distant Star* ideas related to 'a' and situations which define 'b.' What all these phenomena have in common is that they operate through the articulation of two spheres of production of meaning that can be most accurately named *poetics* and *politics*. For the case of 'a,' commitment is a notion developed to bridge "the true disjuncture: the one that separates the works from the life" (Gilman, 147). In other words, the role of commitment as a concept is to formulate which relationship should hold between a certain political stance and the poetics through which the works of an author are being configured. The relevance of poetics and politics for 'b' is be the topic of the following subsections of this chapter and will be accordingly approached later in this paper. Lastly, regarding 'c,' I believe that some considerations should be developed already at this point. With this aim, I will recover Donald Davidson's distinction between what a metaphor makes one see and its literal content.

I would argue that within the framework offered by a stance focused on the text and not so much on its reception, it should simply be stated that the framing-effects produced by a relationship of menardism simply encourage a ceaseless comparison between the agents in question. And, indeed, the novel itself could never be able to *state* anything about the nature of this relationship, since Bolaño's preferred articulation of menardism implies avoiding the direct mention of the real agent. The literal content of a relationship of menardism is then simply a juxtaposition between agents with the potential to conduct Rancière's labour of fiction. On the other hand, the consideration of that which a case of menardism makes one see should be equated with a phenomenological position. This is true in the sense that the focus should include and even stress the position of the

reader; understanding that her intervention is fundamental to fully constitute some aspects of the literary text. From this point of view, it is possible to identify along which baselines the framing-effect is being sustained. In other words, now one can recognize which dimensions of the agents to which the same actions are being attributed are destabilized or underlined in a richer way by the framing-effect. The analogous critical exercise in the analysis of a conventional metaphor, for example in a Petrarchist verse about the golden head of the beloved one, would be a comparative delimitation of the framing-effects that ensue between the elements "gold" and "hair." In this case, the identification the resulting framing-effects should allow for the identification of the categories of "colouring" and "light refraction."

Borges himself gave the structure of a reading of Menard's *Quixote* to "Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*." His narrator, through his own interpretations, is the one who defines those baselines. One of them, as exemplified by the fragments of the story that have been previously quoted in this essay, is the affectation of the discourse in terms of its closeness to its everyday use. Thus, the same text (the *Quixote*) appears alternatively as a feat of philological and historicist efforts (Menard) and as a statement against grammatical and lexical convolutedness (Cervantes). Bolaño, however, restricts himself to offering the equivalent to a *Quixote* written by Menard without mentioning either Cervantes or his own *Quixote*. Inevitably, Bolaño's narration simply cannot take the form of a comparative analysis of both texts. The consequence is that, given a narration without the structure of a comparative reading, the identification of the baselines rests on the reader.[21] In order to explore menardism from this perspective, I will resort to a concept of Bal, presented in *Narratology*—the semantic axis:

> [S]emantic axes are pairs of contrary meanings. […] Selecting relevant semantic axes involves focusing, out of all the characteristics mentioned—usually an unmanageably large number—only on those axes that determine the image of the largest possible number of characters, positively or negatively. Of the axes that involve only a few characters or even just one, only those are analysed that are "strong" (striking or exceptional) or that are related to an important event. Such a selection involves the ideological position of the analyst and also points at ideological stances represented in the story, and can therefore be a powerful tool for critique. (114)

[21] Menardism is a kind of doubling and as such it is also a second-degree manifestation of the poetics of *juego*, but from the perspective provided by the paragraphs above it is possible to perceive its direct articulation with the poetics of *juego* as analysed in 1.1.

Bal herself points at some caveats regarding this criterion. If one applies it to *Distant Star*, braveness should be an evidently relevant semantic axis throughout the novel. Chernyakhovsky, Sabotinsky, Soto or Lorenzo are clearly depicted as being braver than a Stein who spends his life in hiding; the same is true with regard to the calm and collected Abel Romero (150-5) in comparison with the shaky Arturo B (*ibid.*) during their manhunt of Wieder. There are, however, only four instances of the word "brave" (*valiente*) and none of the word "braveness" (*valentía*) in the novel. The critic must then constantly evaluate acts and events to decide if they are significant in relation to a particular axis. And since novels do not usually systematically predicate attributes about every single character, she must mobilize her own system of values in order to make decisions. This means that any selection of this kind constitutes an ideological gesture, even when the semantic axis can be argued to be significant for every character in the novel. Another clear instance of this problem is raised by Carlos Wieder—should he be considered brave, or do his cruelty and recklessness hinder this attribution? The answer to this question cannot be provided by the novel itself, and it must be the critic who decides, based on her system of values.

In spite of these problems, nevertheless, Bal surely provides a very valuable critical tool. If the critic conducts the analysis without claiming for it a pre-phenomenological and unideological perspective, she will be able to notice and give an account of relevant constellations of objects, acts, events and traits that will almost unavoidably conduct any reading of the literary text in question. My claim in this regard is that in *Distant Star*, the two most relevant semantic axes are in fact related to poetics and politics. An exploration of these procedures would then allow for a deeper theoretical understanding of the novel's dissensual attributions of meaning that characterize the poetics of *juego*; especially of the one that I have named menardism. Simultaneously, the ensuing analysis should substantiate a historical consideration of *Distant Star* in the framework of the debate around the commitment of the Latin American intellectual.

The first thing to notice towards the identification of the importance of both axes is that practically every character in the novel is a poet or a writer—Arturo B, Bibiano, the Garmendia twins, Wieder, Stein, Soto, Lorenzo, Marta Posadas, Carmen Villagrán, etc. For this reason, Ruiz-Tagle's characterization and transformation into Wieder—a process whose trajectory directs the general structure of the narration—inevitably takes place against the background offered by these characters. Regarding the possibility of the

semantic axis of politics being a relevant one, it is crucial to note that, among all the poets whose actions constitute the main lines of narrative in the novel (leaving the likes of Jacques Delorme aside), only Wieder is a right-winger. In this case, the relevance of the axis in question can be justified simply through purely quantitative and contrastive reasons. There are, for example, very obvious statements to sustain this proposal:

> The differences between Ruiz-Tagle and the rest were considerable. We spoke in argot or in a Marxist-Mandrakist jargon (most of us were members or sympathizers of the Revolutionary Left Movement or Trotskyist parties; although some participated in the Socialist Youth or in the Communist Party or in one of the Catholic-Left parties). Ruiz-Tagle spoke in Spanish. In that Spanish of some parts of Chile […] where time doesn't seem to pass. (16)

And even apart from Wieder, politics proves to be systematically used to single out certain characters from a group that contains them. Thus, being an active right-winger/pinochetist and being an active left-winger/communist are a ubiquitous pair of active poles throughout the novel. In the following fragment, the enthusiastic revolutionary teenagers at Stein's workshop are confronted with their melancholic instructor, who daydreams with a quiet, disengaged life. All of them are communists, but the passage is one of the hints related to the choices of that Stein who will stay in Chile, forgetting his political ideology and thus neutering/centring his position in the axis:

> Once […] Verónica Garmendia asked [Stein] what he saw in the photo of [William Carlos] Williams […]. I like the picture […]. But specially, he added after a while, when we were already absorbed with [a conversation about] Gramsci, I like the calmness of the picture […]. And even later, when we were talking about poets and the Paris Commune, he almost whispered: *I don't know*, and I believe that nobody heard him. (64-5)

The other semantic axis, that of poetics, is also strongly suggested as being relevant; but its identification as such must follow different criteria. For instance, it is instead necessary to pay close attention to two further facts that distinguish Wieder from his fellow poet characters. Firstly, Wieder is the only one among them who includes in his output other artistic forms and performative actions apart from writing poems in their traditional format. Secondly, only for the case of Wieder these poems and other works, together with their processes of production, are rendered visible through the narration.[22] This double

[22] The problematic case of Arturo B's authorship of the text that constitutes *Distant Star*, indicated in the preliminary note that opens the novel, will be analyzed and discarded as a case of literary writing in 3.2.2.

opposition is revealed to be of obvious importance after one simple realization—what defines a poet is precisely that she writes poems; but this activity is only shown directly for the case of Wieder. Thus, the individualizing trait is only explicitly presented and positively defined for Wieder, while for the other characters we must assume it without any specification regarding their poetic particularities and idiosyncrasies. It is as though even if all those other characters are also defined by being poets, *something* in Wieder demanded stronger proof that he is in fact a real poet and an artist. I would be inclined to assume that this something is in fact his political ideology. The effect on the reader could probably be accurately captured through a twist of Groucho Marx's famous pun: "Wieder may look like a poet and talk like a poet but don't let that fool you—he really is a poet."

Having identified a basis regarding the status in the novel of the categories of poetics and politics, it is now possible to delve deeper into *Distant Star*'s positioning with regard to the problematic of commitment. My main claim regarding this topic is that the novel's historical relevance must be considered and formulated in terms of its constitution as a literary exploration of this issue. Menardism is the channel for this exploration. Simultaneously, in the particular context of the novel, this phenomenon constitutes the last element in the particularizing conceptual succession initiated with the poetics of *juego* and continued through the isotopy of doubling/mirroring. In sum, as an aesthetic-political idea, observable once the text has been confronted with the proper questions, menardism is then the articulation of the theoretical and historical aspects of this paper's analysis of *Distant Star*. To follow this exploration, I will approach the instances of menardism in the novel, aiming to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the text and, in Bolaño's own words, "what's behind it" (Warnken).

3.2.1. Carlos Wieder and Raúl Zurita

In order to explore the case of Wieder and Zurita, I will partly conduct my reasoning with reference to Luis Bagué Quílez's chapter "Performing Disappearance: Heaven and Sky in Roberto Bolaño and Raúl Zurita" in *Less Distant Star* (2015). In the context of an investigation of *Distant Star*, the briefest possible profile of Raúl Zurita (b. 1950) should include the following information: he is a Chilean poet of a neo-avant-garde aesthetics, engaged also with photography and sky-writing performances, and a communist. Wieder is then, in these aspects, some sort of right-wing double of Zurita. The latter's works

involve influences of the Futurists' concept of *aeropoesia* (Bagué Quílez 2015, 177), emancipatory exhortations towards a Chilean reawakening (with socialist overtones sometimes mixed with mystic references to the divine), and exercises of memory and contestation with regard to Pinochet's dictatorship.[23] The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about Wieder—Zurita's mysticism of salvation is reflected as a providentialist understanding of the rebirth of the nation (34-39); the memory of the victims of the regime is turned into Wieder's sublimation of his own victims by way of photographing them (97) or mentioning them in his aerial performances (42); while contestation to the regime is transformed into complicity. From the interplay between these basic isomorphisms and their variations, Zurita's and Wieder's artistic actions develop rhizomatic patterns of mutual connection and disconnection. Thus, some of the reflections of Bagué Quílez on Zurita are perfectly true also for Wieder: "Vision is a key category in Zurita's creative universe, in which the recurrence of certain obsessive images alternates with the exuberance of an iterative rhythm" (172; *cf.* with Wieder's aerial poem in chapter 6). While others function as equally perfect inversions of Wieder's poetics: "the visibility of the literary action [in sky-writing poetry performances] is an answer to the 'aesthetics of disappearance' practiced by Latin America's Southern Cone dictatorships" (*ibid.*). Instead of confronting the death flights, Wieder's performance redoubles them and affirms their ethical and cultural appropriateness.

These instances of identification and differentiation and the resulting ambiguity in relation to the meaning of this juxtaposition of Zurita and Wieder is resolved by Bagué Quílez with the following interpretation of Bolaño's intentions: "Bolaño does not mean to mock [Zurita's] either artistic or ideological project, but rather the type of author he represents" (180). Namely, as defined a few lines above the previous quotation, the author with "the ambition to produce a total work that turns the author into a small demiurge" (*ibid.*); in the sense of an interventionist creator of (political, poetic, national) worlds. This decision of Bagué Quílez constitutes another instance of a critical gesture aimed at doing away with an aspect of the text that is as essential as its characters or its temporality. The framing-effects of Wieder with regard to Zurita and of Zurita with regard to Wieder

[23] For instance, in *Anteparaíso* (1982) one can read the following verses: "I. All Chile waved like a flag on the beaches / of Chile / II. That's why the sky was never the sky but / only the blue waving in its flags / III. That's why the beaches were not Chile's / red beaches but only a rip in the wind / shreds waving throughout those skies / Because all Chile's flags waved like tatters above the colours / they contemplated until torn there were no colours in its flags but / only a rip covering their bodies still alive benumbed turning / pale on the beach" (Zurita 1986 25).

are sensible in the text but they are never transformed into an explicative discourse. Certainly, Bolaño could have very well chosen that path. Comparing Wieder with Zurita in what would have constituted a purer inheritance of Borges's menardism in "Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote," where both Menard and Cervantes are mentioned and integrated into the story. This option, however, could at most amount to a restatement of what Borges had already proposed—that the attribution of the same discourse or practice to two different individuals induces, to use Rancière's terminology, dissensual procedures for the attribution of meaning, according to which white and white no longer mean the same thing. Instead of stating menardism, *Distant Star* works through it. Trying to resolve *the* meaning of the mutual framing of Wieder and Zurita amounts to the establishment of a singular stroke of the phenomenological effects of this relation as the relation itself.

Despite the crucial distinction between the relation in itself and its framing-effect, the phenomenological aspects of the reception of a case menardism in *Distant Star* must not necessarily be rejected as irrelevant. Notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that the best way to state them discursively is not in the form of assertions, but in the form of questions. After this realization, one can note that Zurita and Wieder mobilize identical means of artistic production (poetry, photography, sky-writing), but articulating them tightly with two opposed political projects (communism and pinochetism). The most fundamental doubt which arises from this situation is: what relationship is being proposed between these set of artistic practices and these ideologies? When formulated as such, this question demands the deployment of the concept of menardism at the same time that it unavoidably integrates any possible answers with the historical problem of the commitment of Latin American intellectuals.

Here it is worth noting the nature of the relationship that holds between the case of menardism constituted by Zurita and Wieder and Wieder's isolation by the semantic axes of poetics and politics. On one hand, the set of similar actions attributed to Wieder and Zurita is put forward precisely through the exposition of Wieder's poetics and works. On the other, the political stances of Wieder and Zurita should be placed as close as possible to each of the two poles of the axis of politics; respectively, pinochetism/right-wing ideology and communism/left-wing ideology. This means that one of the two main traits that make Wieder stand out among the group of poet characters, his poetics and works, links him strongly with Zurita; while the other completely opposes them. Thus, the most powerful framing-effects will take the form of vectors of destabilization of

meaning that go from one character's poetics to the other character's politics, and vice versa.

Of course, the underlying assumption that gives sense to this structure is a shared assumption by Zurita and Wieder that there is some connection between their respective poetics and politics. In other words, both of them must be committed artists and intellectuals, at least according to the traditional definition of the term as conveyed for example if the quotations of Gilman and Cortázar. Stating this is equivalent to affirming that for Borges's short story to be coherent, one must assume that Menard is trying to write not only the *Quixote*, but an entity that could be named "the-*Quixote*-of-Pierre-Menard." By this I mean that if one imagines that Menard is simply trying to impersonate Cervantes, the fundamental structure of the attribution of the same actions to different agents together with the ensuing framing-effects are totally undermined. Menard must write his *Quixote* from his position as Pierre Menard, the French writer from the 20th century. Both examples prove that for a process of menardism to be successfully developed, a set of actions has to *identify* two agents that are decisively *distinguished* from one another by a set of opposed traits. In Borges's story, the latter set is mainly composed by a cultural-geographical trait (being French vs. being Castilian) and a temporal trait (living in the 17th century vs. living in the 20th century). In Bolaño's story, that distinguishing set is composed by a unique trait—the political ideology of the agents.

In this case of menardism in *Distant Star*, the strongest consequence of the resulting framing-effects is a questioning about or a problematization of the linkage between art and life and between their corresponding procedures of intervention and agency—poetics and politics. One could certainly affirm that Bolaño's novel is signalling that there is something intrinsically perverse, dangerous or wrong about Zurita's poetics; namely, latent violent and right-wing extremist politics. However, it would be hypocritical not to add that that signalling movement simultaneously points towards the fact that Wieder's poetics are not intrinsically (necessarily) perverse, dangerous or wrong; since they can be adopted by a pacifist like Zurita. Consequently, I am more inclined to understand that their case of menardism questions and confronts the idea that the fundamental structure of the problem of commitment should be formulated as a quest for sets of poetic practices that are coherent with sets of political ideas. In other words, commitment as deployed in *Distant Star* does not and cannot have the form of the measuring of the suitability of groups of poetic ideas with regard to groups of political

ideas. Thus, the sharing of poetics by Wieder and Zurita would imply the fact that the political import of a particular poetic idea is not a given, unchangeable value. Despite this negation of a possible understanding of the notion of commitment, however, it remains unclear which is the positive definition that *Distant Star* has to offer. I believe that the fundamentally critical value of the menardism between Wieder and Zurita is reinforced and completed with the affirmation of a programme through another case of menardism—the one maintained between Wieder and Roberto Bolaño himself. I will devote the next subchapter to its analysis.

3.2.2. Arturo B and Roberto Bolaño. Carlos Wieder and Roberto Bolaño

The reason for my grouping together of these two cases of menardism is that I understand that, in the order in which they appear in the title of this subsection, the former is mostly relevant as a means towards the development of the latter. In the menardism between Carlos Wieder and Roberto Bolaño I see the strongest contribution of *Distant Star* to the problematic of commitment. However, in order to be fully comprehended, first it is necessary to grasp the exact nature of the relationship that holds between Bolaño and Arturo B. Given what has been established for the previous cases, this goal can be achieved through the identification of an identifying and a distinguishing set of attributes or actions between the agents in question.

The identifying elements are the writing of an identical text—the one that forms *Distant Star*—and a number of similar biographical circumstances. The most fundamental among the latter are their Chilean origins and an exile in the vicinity of Barcelona induced by political reasons. Regarding the novel, it is obvious that its real writer is Bolaño and Arturo B is just a fictional character. But in spite of this, its opening paragraph proposes that Arturo B is in fact the author of the text. Hence, this case of menardism follows closely Borges's model, since the identifying element between the involved agents is having written the same text. Notwithstanding, Bolaño still refrains from initiating a Borgesian comparative process between his own text and Arturo B's. In relation with this, the narrative voice from the introductory remark, identifiable as Bolaño's voice through the fact that he refers to *Nazi Literature in the Americas* as "my novel," states that "my tasks were limited to prepare drinks, consult some books and argue, with him [Arturo B] and with the ever-livelier ghost of Pierre Menard, the validity

of many repeated paragraphs" (11). Instantly after the recognition of this identifying factor as such, the doubt about the nature of the necessary distinguishing element comes to the forefront. My claim here is that two interconnected factors distinguish Bolaño from Arturo B. Firstly, despite a similar biographical background, they live through different experiences; the most important among them being precisely the ones narrated in the novel and related to Carlos Wieder. Secondly, in relation to those biographical differences, Bolaño is writing the text of *Distant Star* as a novel, while Arturo B is writing it as a historical and testimonial text. Arturo B cannot write the text of *Distant Star* as a novel simply because from his standpoint there is no fictional element in the ensuing discourse that could turn it into something else than an autobiographical account.

At this point, the two main reasons that compel me to subordinate this menardism to the one between Bolaño and Wieder can already be grasped: (1) there is no possibility to judge the relationship to the problematic of commitment that Arturo B has, since the reader is lacking a direct access to his literary works; (2) as a consequence, the menardism between Arturo B and Bolaño by itself does not provide any contribution to that debate whatsoever. Menardism has been previously defined as a theoretical tool demanded by the constitution of *Distant Star* as a literary text and as the shape of the answer that the text provides to the historical problem of commitment. Since the menardism of Arturo B and Bolaño does not meet the second condition, I am more inclined to consider it as a supportive structure whose aim is to allow for another relationship to be established. This supportive task is related to a fundamental negotiation that serves as the background for Bolaño's decision to use a character like Arturo B as his narrator. Namely, the definition of the linkage between life and literature. Bolaño and Arturo B have written an identical text, but the raison d'être of Bolaño's text should be mainly linked to the sphere of literature, while for Arturo B's text the same is true with regard to the sphere of life. In other words, the most powerful among the ensuing reflections and problematics articulated by the texts are related respectively to the sphere of literature and to the sphere of life.

Turning now to the menardism between Wieder and Bolaño, I claim that the identifying factor is the open—epistemologically accessible for the reader—development of an author's poetics, illustrated by particular works of art or texts. Before becoming Wieder, Alberto Ruiz-Tagle is portrayed as searching for his literary voice or, in the terms of this investigation, for his poetics. About his initial poems, his friend Marta Posadas

states: “It is as though the poems [that Ruiz-Tagle writes] weren’t his poems; truly his […]. Alberto is a good poet, but he hasn’t burst [*i.e.* developed] yet” (24). It is in fact when that aspect of Ruiz-Tagle ripens that Arturo B begins to call him Wieder, with the phrase: “A few hours later Alberto Ruiz-Tagle stands up, although I should already start calling him Carlos Wieder” (31). This moment coincides with the undertaking of the first of his works of art that the narrator judges as being fully mature. Such a work has as its initial phase the murder of the Garmendia sisters (30-3) and it will be completed through a poetic sky-writing performance whose verses mention them as “the twins” (42). Thus, the narrative’s tracking of Wieder’s personal story necessarily includes—and arguably consists fundamentally of—his search and his finding of suitable poetics through the description or quoting of his performances and poems.

Regarding Bolaño, it is evident that *Distant Star* itself is a work that, as such, constitutes a manifestation of a particular poetics. These grounds could perhaps seem insufficient to state that very similar or common actions are being attributed to Bolaño and Wieder. To eliminate this hesitation, I will first expose the programme of Wieder’s poetics to then reveal their connection to Bolaño’s literary proposal. Wieder’s artistic production could be divided into two kinds of output—poetry, usually written in sky-writing performances, and photography. The three most important ideas for his poems and works of art are death, purification, and repetition. The event that conveys most clearly their centrality is probably the sky-writing performance narrated in chapter 6, where Wieder composes the verses: “Death is friendship / Death is Chile / Death is responsibility / Death is love / Death is growing / Death is communion / Death is cleansing / Death is my heart / Take my heart / Carlos Wieder” (89-91). Their relevance is also reinforced by a conversation between Bibiano, Arturo B and Marta Posadas regarding Ruiz-Tagle’s newly revealed pseudonym—Carlos Wieder:

> *Wieder*, as Bibiano told us, meant “again,” “once more,” “for the second time,” “[in] return.” In some contexts, “again and again,” “the next time,” in phrases which point to the future. And according to what his friend Anselmo Sanjuán had shared with him […] *Wider*, in Old High German *Widar* or *Widari*, meant “against,” “opposite to,” sometimes “towards.” And he enumerated examples: […] *Widerraten*, “dissuasion”; *Widerlegung*, “apology,” “refutation” […]. [Bibiano] said that […] *Weïden* meant “to graze,” “to take care of grazing animals” […]. *Weiden* even meant “to gloat morbidly in the contemplation of an object that excites our sexuality and/or our sadistic tendencies. (50-1)

As components of his poetics, these ideas are structured around connections and interactions between the spheres of life, politics and art/literature. Wieder constantly assassinates women of left-wing leanings to then mention them in his poems or to take pictures of their bodies, with which he will organize a macabre exhibition also in chapter 6. Some examples are the Garmendia twins, Carmen Villagrán or Patricia Méndez (42). I understand the suppression of the life of his victims as an act directed towards the purification of a national-social body, Chile, that is perceived as being contaminated. Along these lines, in a conversation with Marta Posadas that takes place right after Pinochet's coup, he comments about the flight of his old left-winger companions in the literary workshops of Stein and Soto that "rats always flee" (49). In the light of his verses quoted above ("Death is cleansing / Death is my heart / Take my heart"), it is relevant to note that the murdered women that he integrates in his artworks are often his lovers. Wieder seems to desire to preserve them once they are purified or cleansed of their (political) contamination. The medium to do so is their artistic sublimation, by means of a photograph that captures their dead and tortured bodies or a piece of literature which names them.

This picturing/naming has both religious overtones related to the Christian idea of redemption and political ones in reference to an articulation of the identity of the victims in a cultural project that strives towards the optimization of the social body. The verse "Death is communion" uses the Spanish word *comunión*, pointing to the Eucharist or the Holy Communion. This ritual commemorates the sacrifice of Christ in his role of *agnus dei*, atoning the sins of humanity. Wieder probably sees his artistic and literary performances in a similar way. The sacrifice of his victims would atone a national sin probably identifiable with the left-wing or directly communist leanings of a part of the population. Similarly, the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the Roman Catholic Church poses that during the Eucharist, consecrated wine and bread change their essence to become the blood and body of Christ. The spiritual communion between God and mankind is established and renewed through their ingestion by the parochial congregation. In the case of Wieder, the bodies and names of the women he murders for the atonement of the national sin are being integrated in ritualistic sky-writing performances or photographical exhibitions. The equivalence to the ingest of wine and bread would be the beholding of those bodies and names in his pictures and aerial poems, instituting a communion between the cleansed fatherland and the spectators.

Albeit paradoxically, the best way to ground the identification of these set of poetics with those that Bolaño materializes in *Distant Star* is through the distinguishing factor between them.[24] The latter consists in a particular inflexion of the relationship between poetics and politics, and art/literature and life. For Wieder, both pairs are homogenously fused; while Bolaño contrastively proposes their radical separation. In this sense, Wieder's commitment as an artist and intellectual is absolute and Bolaño would seem to renounce the articulation of works and life through cohesive poetics and politics. Nevertheless, I do not believe that through this opposition Bolaño is aiming at showing that the project of commitment should be abandoned. Instead, I am more inclined to understand that he is contrasting two paradigms for the project with their corresponding procedures (poetics and politics) for the intervention in the world. The key concepts that direct these paradigms are absolutization/irreversibility/dissensus for Wieder and relativization/reversibility/dissensus for Bolaño. The criticism regarding Wieder's project would be directed against his mistaking of commitment for the project of developing a particular linkage between poetics and politics. The same aspect that is questioned by the framing-effects of the menardism between Wieder and Zurita. In opposition to this, my claim is that Bolaño sees commitment as the sustainable use of an already existing space of agency created by the shared dual nature of poetics and politics as (1) organised sets of practices and protocols of intervention in the world, and as (2) frameworks for the production of ideas about and visions of the world.

Any kind of commitment worthy of that name should involve the preservation of that connecting openness between the spheres of life and literature. This protection should be carried out through actions that perform and display such a connecting openness between the spheres of life and art/literature. Crucially, the definition that I offer for Bolaño's ideal of commitment forbids the notion that one single protocol of intervention and one single vision of the world are established as the only valid ones. The preservation of the space of agency necessitates active agents with opposed ideas in order to produce a process of constant transformation; opposed to the static closure of such a space through

[24] With the reasoning that ensues in the following pages I am following a similar trajectory to that of Jacques Rancière in the chapter "La mise à mort d'Emma Bovary" of *Politique de la literature* (2007). Towards the end of this section I will deal directly with this text and expose its contents. I wish to state here, however, that the parallelism between his arguments and mine are not caused by some kind of enforcing effort for my part in order to meet Rancière's theoretical schemes. Instead, I would argue that the analogy of this essay with the chapter in question owes fundamentally to the fact that both *Emma Bovary* and *Distant Star* constitute literary explorations of a set of very similar problematics regarding the articulation and relations between art and life.

the soliloquy of a unique ideological project. Bolaño himself, in his interview with Uwe Stolzmann, portraits Wieder as a character opposed to this project of dissensual openness:

> U. Stolzmann: Which is truly the relationship between literature and terror, art and violence, that you have described so often?
> R. Bolaño: Wieder is the incarnation of the absolute evil […]. And he is also an artist. Thus, he is absolute evil and he is absolute art, where many things can exist but not the presence of the 'other.' The absolute monologues, it doesn't dialogue. The discourse of the absolute is a monologue, not a dialogue. Every moral measure, every reason, every ethical consideration is set aside. The Enlightenment ceases to exist and terror is established. (375)

This need for dissenting agencies and constant transformation can be linked to the two literary-political ideas that have been identified in 1.3. as stemming from the dissensual procedures of the novel organized around the idea of the poetics of *juego*. Namely, the sustenance of agonistic meanings in dialectical strife and the encouragement of polysemy, which secures the possibility of new emerging meanings for particular configurations of sensible data. Bolaño, through the novel, presents simultaneously two opposed meanings for the word "commitment"—his own and that of Wieder. However, in coherence with the poetics of *juego* and his own understanding of commitment, at no point does he establish a resolution of the dialectical tension. This would amount, against the dissensual tendencies of the novel, to a defence of consensus:

> Consensus, as a mode of government, says: it is perfectly fine for people to have different interests, values and aspirations, nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification. (2010, 144)

From this standpoint, I consider that the relevance of the secondary menardism between Arturo B and Bolaño should be measured through the two benefits that Bolaño's project extracts from its establishment. The first one is a basis for effectuating, through his own actualization of a literary and novelistic resource or tradition (menardism), a staging of the preservation of the independence of the spheres of life and literature. The framing-effect for the case of Arturo B and Bolaño stresses the fact that different lives (their distinguishing factor) can turn the same text (their identifying factor) into two very different texts—an autobiographical account and a novel. Thus, the connecting openness mentioned before cannot amount to a confusion or an identification. It is Wieder's ideal and not Bolaño's one that could be assimilated to what Rancière proposes as the goals of the historical avant-garde: "to transform the forms of art, and to make them identical with

the forms for constructing a new world in which art would no longer exist as a separate reality" (2010, 199).

The second benefit would be the possibility of including in the literary text not only a contrasting opposition with regard to choices related to art and literature (through *Distant Star* as a manifestation of poetics), but also with regard to choices related to life. Arturo B is a means to fully establish a dialectical tension with Wieder's project, which does not involve only poetic but also political actions in the broadest sense of the word. To explore this aspect of the novel, I will introduce the reflections of Jacques Rancière in the chapter "La mise à mort d'Emma Bovary" of *Politique de la literature*. Rancière departs from the question "Why was it necessary to kill Emma Bovary?" (2007, 59); pointing towards the meaning of Emma's suicide in Gustave Flaubert's novel. Rancière's answer is that Flaubert is contraposing two models to establish the relationship between art and life through his own novel and the life of the character Emma Bovary:

> [T]he temptation to introduce art into real life must be singularized into one character and condemned to death in the figure of the bad or false artist. Emma's crime is a crime against literature. It is to have misused the equivalence between art and life. Literature must kill her to preserve art from its evil double, the aesthetization of life. (69)

One could then ask: why was it necessary to kill Carlos Wieder? My initial answer would be that the text hinders the interpretation that Wieder is being killed because of his bad poetics or his idea of commitment. Instead, his death is an instance of retaliatory justice regarding his brutal political crimes, which involve precisely the death of his antagonistic opponent. Wieder is being chased by the detective Abel Romero, who in turn is working for a mysterious individual about whom the reader only knows that he or she is Chilean and wealthy (145). Thus, the wish to end Wieder's life is displaced from Arturo B or Romero towards someone else, who has only two identifying traits: nationality and class or economic power. For this reason, it becomes difficult to understand that the death of Wieder responds more to Arturo B's or Romero's actions and wishes than to anonymous and global historical dynamics. The limitation of their powers as purely autonomous agents is backed by a dialogue that takes place when Romero finally locates Wieder and the narrator makes the following demand:

> It's better if you don't kill him [Wieder], I said. Something like that can disgrace us, you and me, and it's also unnecessary. This guy is not going to hurt anyone anymore. It's not going to disgrace me, said Romero, on the contrary, it's going to make me rich. And about him not being able

> to hurt anyone anymore, what can I say. The truth is that we don't know, we can't know, neither you or me are God, we only do what we can do. Nothing but that. […] It's not worth it, I insisted, everything is over. He won't hurt anyone. Romero tapped me on the shoulder. It's better if you don't interfere with this, he said. (154-5)

This fragment is also of a key importance also with regard to the development of life/political options contraposed to Wieder. In order to analyse it in in this light, it should be supplemented by another key segment of the novel. Namely, the narration of the moment when Romero explains his need for the narrator's involvement in Wieder's manhunt. The dialogue develops as follows:

> I can offer two hundred thousand pesetas [1200€], he said. I accept, but with what can I help you? With poetry matters, he said. Wieder was a poet, I was a poet, he [Romero] was not a poet, *ergo* to find a poet he needed the help of another poet. I told him that for me Carlos Wieder was a criminal, not a poet. Well, well, said Romero, don't be intolerant, maybe for Wieder or for someone else you are not a poet or you are a bad poet and he is or they are, it all depends on how one looks at it, as Lope de Vega said, don't you think so? Two hundred thousand in cash, right now? I said. Two hundred thousand immediately, he said with enthusiasm. (126)

The relativization of Arturo B's position by Romero ("it all depends on how one looks at it") frustrates readings that try to find ideological univocity or a closure of the struggle between Bolaño's and Wieder's poetics as deployed in *Distant Star*; as well as the one between their respective meanings for the notion of commitment. Bolaño's poetics of *juego* are strongly opposed by principle to Wieder's vision, but Bolaño does not *state* the victory and resulting sole existence of his own ideas. The equivalence in the field of life and politics to this antagonistic preservation of two ideals for the poetics of commitment, expressed in terms of literary reflection (is Wieder a poet or not?), is Arturo B's opposition to the idea of killing Wieder. It should be noted that not only does Arturo B wish to avoid Wieder's death while he openly defines him as a criminal. He also, in a certain way, continues to see himself as irremediably connected and not autonomous with regard to a man that represents his opposite in terms of life choices. In other words, Arturo B's position in the field of life and politics is not absolute, but structurally dependant on other agonistic agencies; while Wieder sees himself as a ragingly autonomous actor who must eliminate the agencies of his antagonists. This idea is conveyed through the following image: "Then, Carlos Wieder arrived and sat next to the window, three tables away from me. For a second (in which I faltered) I saw myself almost glued to him [in

the reflection in the window], looking over his shoulder, horrific Siamese twin […], Wieder didn't recognize me" (152).

This contraposition in the sphere of life, in order to take place truly in the field of life, has the need for a character like Arturo B. If Bolaño narrated the death of Wieder or his salvation through an heterodiegetic narrator, their sole connection through the sphere of poetics (since Bolaño is a real individual and Wieder is a fictional character) would favour an allegorical interpretation that identified Wieder's life with his poetic ideas. This would imply that (1) both of Wieder's stances in the spheres of life and art/literature are being negated in favour of those of Bolaño, and (2) those spheres are being fused through a Flaubert-like allegorical equivalence between them. Only with a narrator like Arturo B, who shares the sphere of life with Wieder, this effect can be avoided. What his inclusion in the novel enables is (1) the sustenance in a state of dialectical agonistic struggle of Bolaño's and Wieder's stances regarding the spheres of politics and poetics and their relation through the concept of commitment,[25] and (2) the avoidance of a total identification between of the spheres of life/politics and literature/poetics. Thus, Arturo B as a narrator of the story is, in fact, a necessary element in the particular configuration of Bolaño's poetics of *juego*.

4. **Conclusions**

The previous pages consist primarily in an effort to provide a combined contribution to a set of theoretical and critical approaches and to the theoretical and historical analysis of a work that I consider to be representative of the poetics of its author. If my reasoning has resulted convincing, it should be possible by now to understand how those contributions rest on each other. Despite the importance of the arguments offered in previous pages, the best possible proof of the applicability in literary studies of the ideas of Damisch, van Alphen and Bal used in this essay is my reading of *Distant Star* through them. Similarly, this reading can only be persuasive if its methodology and the concepts involved in its development adjust fittingly to a literary work. In other ways, if this essay has achieved

[25] Since, as stated before, the death of Wieder could be otherwise be interpreted allegorically as the death of his ideas; in such a way that the negation of his literary/artistic stance is carried out through the negation of his life. In this way, the dialectical struggle would be resolved.

its goals, it should be clear by now why the manifestations of the poetics of *juego* in *Distant Star* can be considered as theoretical objects in Damisch's definition of them:

> [I]t's not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it's an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself. […] Third, it's a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory. But I never pronounce the word *theory* without also saying the word *history*. Which is to say that for me such an object is always a theoretico-historical object. (Bois *et al*., 8)

Another major goal, derived from the two commented above, consisted in the completion of a two-phased analysis of *Distant Star*, mirroring the two axes that van Alphen identifies as characteristic of Damisch's methodology—the theoretical and the historical one. The theoretical analysis has allowed to identify the two main literary-political effects that emanate from the dissensual procedures characteristic of the poetics of *juego*. Namely, the sustenance of agonistic meanings in dialectical strife and the encouragement of polysemy or the emergence of new meanings. The historical analysis has revealed that these effects and the poetics of *juego*, especially through the procedure of menardism, can be considered as a literary contribution to the problem of the commitment of the Latin American intellectual of the 20th century. Thus, *Distant Star* both provides its own solution to this issue by its display of the poetics of *juego* and criticises certain understandings of how the articulation of politics and poetics through the notion of commitment should be conceived of.

A logical next step in the line of research opened by this essay would be to conduct analogous explorations of the other works by Bolaño that I identify as sharing strong similarities with *Distant Star*'s display of the poetics of *juego*—*Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996), *Amulet* (1999), and *By Night in Chile* (2000). All of them, including *Distant Star*, were published in the span of four years and show an almost obsessive fascination with the interactions between poetics and politics in the *ethos* of the Latin American writer, artist or intellectual of the 20th century. Such an investigation could perhaps contribute, among other things, to the clarification of Bolaño's positioning with regard to the writers conventionally grouped together under the label of the Latin American Boom.

To close this paper, I would like to offer a last reflection on the link between literature/art and politics departing from an already quoted statement by Rancière and making it dialogue with Bal's methods in *Of What One Cannot Speak.* The statement is the following one: "The politics of literature […] means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world" (2010, 152). In Chapter 2 this asseveration was instrumental in the opposition of a Rancièrean vision of the constitutive political character of all literature with Bal's quest for a better understanding of what exactly is political art (implying that apolitical art also exists). I believe that this opposition should be more accurately qualified through a reflection on what it would mean to state that a literary or artistic work is political for each of these authors. For Rancière, politics is an activity that "breaks the sensible configuration through which the sides and parts are defined" (1995, 53). Through a reference to the sensible in his definition, Rancière is already linking politics and aesthetics. Along these lines, he claims that "if there is a politics of aesthetics, it lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience" (2010, 140). For her part, Bal follows Mouffe and quotes her essay *On the Political*: "By 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political" (Mouffe 2005, 9)

I wish to stress two aspects of Rancière's dealing with the interaction between art/literature and politics, as expressed in his two previous quotations. Firstly, he considers that there is an overlap between two sets of organized practices directed to the rearrangement of sensible data—aesthetics and politics. Secondly, if an activity or its material results can be understood as ensuing from the deployment of one of those sets of practices, they will automatically have some effects which are akin to those that result from the deployment of the other set of practices. In other words, both a political effect and an aesthetical effect can be defined as a reconfiguration of sensible data; and thus, every political effect has aesthetical implications and vice versa. In consequence, in Rancière's terminology, to state that literary works are political is a tautology. For Bal, on the other hand, stating that a literary work is political would mean that it is connected

or that it interacts with that "dimension of antagonism which [Mouffe] take[s] to be constitutive of human societies" (Mouffe 2005, 9).

Hence, the adjective "political" not only has different meanings for Rancière and Bal; it also figures in different levels of their conceptual apparatuses. To state in Rancière's terminology that any work of art is political is not equivalent to affirming the same thing through Bal's terminology. Rancière defines politics ("the political" being simply its corresponding adjective) as a break which introduces a new order. Politics *happen*. The channels and effects of their occurrence, belonging to the dimension of the sensible, are that which imposes an inevitable communication and interaction between artistic practices and the field of politics. Mouffe, on the other hand, defines the political (strongly opposed to her concept of politics) as a foundation for society, in an almost architectural sense of the term. The political *sustains*. In consequence, something (an artwork, a novel) can only be political if it refers to or connects with that antagonistic societal bedrock. Thus, the statement that an artwork is political in Bal's Mouffean vocabulary should be modified if one wished to translate it into Rancièrean terminology. The best possible equivalent that I can think of is, in fact, to affirm that a given artwork breaks with consensus through its dissensual sensible elements.

Certainly, the opposition between the positions of Bal and Rancière cannot be reduced to a terminological misunderstanding. Notwithstanding, I am more inclined to focus on their affinities and on defining a productive articulation of the two theoretical and methodological trajectories that they represent. Along these lines, I believe that the greatest asset of Rancière's thought for an essay like the present one is the dialectical definition of politics and poetics, and of life and art.[26] The price to pay for the conceptual pervasiveness and the swift transition or exchange between these spheres of experience is the confusion that may arise in the confrontation with occasional conundrums. For instance, consider a statement like "There is no 'real world' that functions as the outside of art. Instead, there is a multiplicity of folds in the sensory fabric of the common" (2010, 148). The difficulties that this asseveration poses towards its rigorous application in the

[26] A great example of this aspect of Rancière's theoretical endeavour is the following one: "Aesthetic free play and the universality of the judgement of taste define a new kind of liberty and of equality, different from those that the revolutionary government had tried to impose under the form of the law: a kind of liberty and equality that was no longer abstract but sensible. Aesthetic experience is that of an unprecedented sensorium in which the hierarchies are abolished that structured sensory experience. This is why it bears within it the promise of a 'new art of living' of individuals and the community, the promise of a new humanity" (2010, 176).

analysis of a literary work are obvious. And still, in my view, they are compensated by the wideness of the analytical framework that it configures. For example, the confused literary scholar who runs into the previous quote will probably feel the emergence of new ideas and perspectives for research when she reads, a few lines below in the original source, that "There is no 'real world'. Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. The real always is a matter of construction, a matter of 'fiction'" (*ibid.*).

In short, perhaps following Rancière closely would demand from one to state tout court that art and literature are political, and this could deprive the label "political art/literature" of the habitual and possibly useful meaning that both common sense and academic consensus usually assign to it. Instead, the stance that I have adopted with this essay is a middle ground between the influence of Damisch's notion of a work that harbours certain ideas and Rancière's materialist understanding of the peculiarities of the interaction between the sense-configurating activities of art/literature and politics. I have considered that what rather exists, instead of political literature as such, is a gradient of the centrality of political ideas and schemes in the constitution of a literary work as a literary work. These ideas might be overlooked given their critical dullness or, on the contrary, they might deserve detailed attention if they are able to break the consensus of the cultural and societal complex in which they are produced or received. I am certain that this is the case of *Distant Star* with regard to the 20th century in Latin America.

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