The lumpen biopolitics of *Vanoli's Mellizas del bardo* (2012)

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The scholarly model by which social theory and historiographical stakes are "applied to" literature, as if literature were the unwitting and accidental proving grounds for ideologies and speculations, can project onto literature a polite muteness or a deference to the social sciences presumed to be somehow beyond or inaccessible to them. Nowhere is this model less appropriate than to those recent strains of unruly science fiction that have been loosely grouped together under the headers of cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk, taking their name from a subgenre pioneered, stabilized, and popularized by SF veterans of variously institutional and academic formations who crafted a socially critical and often ideologically heavy-handed forum not just anticipating but precipitating and demanding interpretation in socially critical terms. Indeed, amongst all the definitions one could propose of the specific cyberpunk "movement" or "moment" and its broad constellations of influence in contemporary literary fiction and/or SF, I would align myself with those that define it less by static formal traits or narrative tendencies than by its aspirations to intervene in public discourses about technology, politics, and ethics which motivate them.[1] Like its predecessors on the more socially-critical end of the crime fiction spectrum and the more overtly and primarily sociological strains of classical SF (sometimes called "soft" or "speculative" SF), cyberpunk tends (in all but the most diluted and caricatured of its forms) to produce narratives around (and as corroboration of) theses about what worlds can and might be built by the social forms and ideologies we're evolving today as a society. The sensitive critic of this tradition can hardly attempt to "apply" theory to these texts, but must instead try to as unwrap and decode the theories at their core, or at most, to translate them or position them in a broader context.

The contemporary author whose campy take on the cyberpunk novel I'd like to unpack here, Hernán Vanoli, writes fictions that might not fit squarely in the cyberpunk tradition according to a more formal or narratological criteria, but is entirely typical of this interventionist and socially-critical conception of speculative

[1] See, for instance, Brian McHale's adaptation to these ends of the soft/hard SF distinction in the anthology Beyond Cyberpunk ("Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk").

fiction. Vanoli is a brainy and literary author, active in the somewhat insular and incestuous small-press scene of Buenos Aires, who is more circumspect about the social and ideological purchase available to fiction than one might assume of an author his age. He also holds a doctorate in sociology from the Universidad de Buenos Aires, whose field work was on exactly that: the Buenos Aires literary scene and its relations to the publishing industry, journalism, and politics. Given his sociological writings, and the faculty and the intellectual culture of U.B.A., it would make sense to assume Vanoli is not only familiar but engaged with the concepts and discourses of biopower, a kind of metaphilosophical discourse that has, in recent years, shifted the focus in many social sciences such as urban studies and sociology towards the ethics of medicine and technology. In fact, Vanoli's familiarity with the biopolitical as a theoretical construct and as a historical heuristic might well be stronger than his familiarity with the cyberpunk tradition; my basic interpretation of the novel is that the concepts and thought-experiments of biopolitical theory led Vanoli to the cyberpunk and dystopian traditions within science fiction, not the other way around. In fact, I'd classify his novel as an experimental one that pastiches crime pulp, urban ethnography, and cyberpunk loosely, less concerned with recognizably (and respectfully) occupying any of the three generic positions than with exploiting the resources of all three. My premise is that this novel is a sociological and biopolitical thought-experiment that co-opts cyberpunk commonplaces to signal to the reader both its speculative stakes and the mode of interpretation most appropriate to it. It would border on critical tautology to "apply" biopolitical concepts to the novel (or worse, to use the novel as a case study to proselytize about the pertinence of those concepts to contemporary or speculative politics), since they are implicitly structural to its narrative stakes.

As for the discursive context in which the novel formulates its propositions, I'd say the novel does signal cyberpunk as its basic generic frame, even if its narrative voice is marked by *sprezzatura* and a digressive absence of context that leaves the novel feeling sketchy in narrative terms and campy in generic ones. My best guess as to the literary genealogy of Vanoli's genre-bending approach to science fiction would be that he incorporates other genres and intellectual inquiries, particularly crime writing and urban geography, in ways that follow directly from the golden age of cyberpunk, as theorized[2] and practiced by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, both of whom have had loyal, almost cultish readers in Buenos Aires since at least the late 90's. I also see a strong resemblance in Vanoli's novel to the works of another

[2] See, for instance, Sherryl Vint's take in the anthology Beyond Cyberpunk ("Introduction" and "The Mainstream Finds its Own Uses for Things").

academic and philosophical Anglophone cyberpunk, China Mieville, and perhaps even overt linguistic and visual nods to his trademark verbal style, neologisms, and offhand allusions to visual art and film. Mieville, most famous for his steampunk aesthetics and the presence in his fiction of urban-studies heuristics and Marxist historiographical tropes, also holds a doctorate in political thought, which leads some of his works (particularly The City & The City and Perdido Street Station) to be guided and structured by questions of sovereignty, the common, and the limits of the State. Vanoli's intervention follows in this line, using the generic framework evolved over the decades by these writers to interrogate Latin American's specific geography of marginality, and the forms of agency available to fiction vis-à-vis that geography.

Specifically, I want to read the novel in light of a recent roundtable on the contemporary literary scene in which Vanoli expresses clearly this agency he wishes for the writers of his generation to exert.[3] Early on in the discussion, he accuses his contemporaries of uncritically staying within the generic ghetto of psychological realism and stylized interiority when their cultural moment presents them with such interesting and productive genres to dabble in and to pastiche. Indeed, Vanoli's novel was published in a series by literary small-press Clase Turista titled "Sieges on Castle Grayskull," which bills itself as a "collection of horror, science fiction, western, fantasy, and other pulp genres," but which might more accurately be described as a series of cheeky pastiches of pulp commonplaces and formulae. Vanoli describes a political toothlessness in literature's analysis of politics today, and describes the biggest shift in today's Argentine culture not as one from visual media back to the printed and blogged word—a shift he (and many other critics) analyzes elsewhere—but rather as one of rapidly accelerating consumerism and the monetizing of culture which severs ever-more definitively the salaried from the popular classes. He states baldly:

> *No leí una sola novela que dijera nada interesante sobre lo político en los últimos ocho años. Además de que más allá hay otro discurso que en cierta medida se toca y se contamina con el discurso literario que es el discurso de las ciencias sociales, que está muy expandido y tiene muchas llegadas a los medios y etcétera, hay otras miradas interesantes que tienen que ver con las transformaciones urbanas y con la relación que se establece con el consumo.*

[3] At a Buenos Aires roundtable organized by Fundación TyPA with Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Eugenia Zicavo, and Damián Tabarovsky, April 23, 2013; src: http://blog.eternacadencia.com.ar/archives/2013/28520

> *[…] Esas cuestiones, esos cambios en los modos de vida, esas percepciones de la felicidad social son temas que la literatura puede abordar de una manera interesante y problematizadora que están absolutamente subrepresentados.* (n.p.) [4]

I would like to read his campy lumpen crime novel in light of this interventionist intention and of this concept of "felicidad social," which we might conceive of as a social and public form of the credit-addled middle-class good life, to be analyzed negatively from the point of view of the vast margins it occludes and negates. Summarizing broadly, Vanoli's novel is set an indeterminate number of decades in the future (I'd guess around 20 or 30), but in this future very little has changed for the hypermarginalized urban poor, a source of recurring comic relief in the gritty, slang-heavy and flippantly-narrated novel. The novel is set in outer Buenos Aires, a capital-free zone that Vanoli sketches as an endless series of favela-like shanties self-organized outside of the city and outside of the State. In this prediction, Vanoli's pessimism does not differ very greatly from the mainstream of Latin American urban studies or economics, which is increasingly attentive to the precarity and disposability of vast swaths of the population and vast sectors of the urban landscape.

Vanoli's speculations are more liberal and macabre when he imagines the future of Argentina's real-life "Barrabravas," organized and fanatical clubs of soccer hooligans that have been responsible for almost 300 real-life fatalities in the last century by some estimates. Soccer-related riots, revenge-murders on players and coaches, internecine feuds, and other acts of violence both organized and spontaneous occur more frequently in Argentina than anywhere else in the world, and that frequency has been increasing steadily for the last two decades. There were at least 12 publically-identified cases in 2012, the year this novel was released,[5] and have continued at a steady clip since, including the media scandal around the mysterious death of soccer journalist Nicolás Pacheco Gómez, which in some ways focalized mounting anxieties about soccer culture in Argentina and remains a site of outrage

[4] "I haven't read a single [Argentine] novel that said anything interest about politics in the last eight years. What's more, there is, beyond the political, another discourse that in certain measure overlaps with and contaminates literary discourse, namely that of the social sciences, which have been very widely influential and which has many points of contact with the media, etc etc. There are other interesting ways of looking at the world that have to do with transformations in urban life and with the relationships we're evolving with consumption. […] These questions, these shifts in our ways of life, these perceptions of [consumption as] a kind of social happiness [felicidad social] are themes that literature could approach in an interesting and problematizing way, and that are absolutely underrepresented at present."

[5] See, for instance, http://infosurhoy.com/en_GB/articles/saii/features/main/2012/10/25/feature-01 and http://www.theguardian.com/football/2011/aug/21/argentina-football-gangs-barra-bravas.

and polemic.[6] The way these incidents are discussed and narrated in the press presumes and reinforces a certain understanding of *barras bravas* as something like a non-monetary gang and/or a secular cult, as something mysterious and unruly, not just uncontrollable but fundamentally unknowable, unpredictable, more senseless than the sum or average of its members.

The *barras bravas* represents in the imagination of the Argentine middle-class a looming boogeyman and an index of the lawless and uncontrollable multitude kept at the margins of the State project in largely racialized, pathologized, and classist ways.[7] Vanoli's entire novel is told from within one of these violent and insular gangs as he imagines them to have evolved over the next few decades: having been completely excluded from the social order, they have devolved into essentially feral and malignant armies of unchecked violence. The highest ranking members get the coat of arms of their team tattooed on their face, while the novel's shootouts (in the street and on crowded urban buses) are presented as an unremarked daily occurrences in the future Buenos Aires. In classic cyberpunk fashion, this violence and the social forms imagined are presented *in medias res* and in unmarked, initially opaque ways by a desensitized and familiar narrator, creating a readerly experience centered as much on shock as on deduction and exploration.

Perhaps this deductive and almost anthropological mode of reading "foreign" culture directly necessitates a bit of an excursus about the structure and sociology of the crime genres from which both classic and newer cyberpunk writing draws. In particular, I would point to the tradition of representing gang violence as a kind of "outside" of civil society homologized to historical frontiers and barbarities as something of a commonplace in Argentina fiction, where there's long been a tradition of crime writing that comingles for political or historiographical reasons

[6] There was, for instance, a banner demanding justice for the as-yet unprosecuted crime hung prominently in the audience during Argentina's first World Cup match: the popular crusade to challenge official legal proceedings and decisions about the case dovetail tellingly with populist conspiracies theories and broader debates around Argentina's rapidly-corporatizing news media and its journalistic ethics.

[7] It would, of course, be foolish to downplay the pertinence of populism post-Perón and the Partido Justicialista in this, but I would also like to avoid overstating it and making Perón's transformative first term the key and cipher to all Argentine sociology, a move that would rob Vanoli's text of any relevance beyond Argentina in addition to impoverishing its allegorical horizons. Indeed, Vanoli has already written an entire novel specifically about Peronist populism and its effects on the Argentine political imaginary (Pinamar); Las mellizas, by comparison, seems deliberately void of keywords and codewords that would prompt the reader to interpret is as being "about" Peronism in any central way. For a quick introduction to the various "pueblos" of Argentina's many Lefts, see Altamirano; for a more trans-Latin Americanist framework for understanding letrado-class anxieties about unruly mobs and shadowy non-State instutions, see Dabove.

the imaginaries of urban crime and that of gaucho and/or indigenous "savagery."[8] The centrality of politicized crime fiction in Argentine literary history is attested to by how present this tradition is in Vanoli's novel without any salient nods or explicit allusions; its subtextual presence is largely a matter of thematic and affective inheritance.

Vanoli's true-crime-style title, "The ruckus twins," refers to the two twenty-something female protagonists, the narrator and her sidekick, who are introduced on the first page of the novel getting on a bus and getting embroiled in the "bardo"[9] for which they will soon be notorious. Curiously, and for reasons never even hinted at in the novel, gender roles have been switched dramatically and the drug-running soccer-gangs are entirely female, with male gun molls and sex objects being subjected to unmarked misandry throughout the novel. In general, the novel operates to a muted comic effect a kind of exploitation-movie imagery of variously-attractive female bodies and various forms of sexual tension within the gang, which have the effect of heightening the true-crime sensationalism and campy dissonance, yet without adding much to the novel's biopolitical speculations.

More pertinent is the setting of that opening scene: a crowded urban people-mover driven by a mysterious and surly cyborg, which positions the reader immediately as a kind of anthropologist of the invisible urban lumpenproletariat of the present-day. Aside from the unexplained designation of the driver as a cyborg, there is essentially no reference to time or technology that would hint at how far in the future (if at all) the scene is set. As a result of the protagonists' spontaneous and brazen gunfight with a rival *barra* in the opening scene, the twins get in trouble with their superiors, one of whom initially entered the lifestyle as an undercover anthropologist hoping to write an ethnography of their mysterious social world, before being caught, brutalized, sequestered, and finally inducted by being "jumped in." This minor character with academic credentials, something of a recurring trope in contemporary Argentine fiction[10], personifies a kind of sociological function implicit in the novel's frame story, in which the protagonist is narrating to us her adventures

[8] See for instance Ricardo Piglia's Plata quemada or its film adaptation, César Aira's The Hare, German Maggiori's recently-resurrected 2001 bestseller Entre hombres, or to go one generation further back, any of the novels studied in my dissertation (Saer's Cicatrices, Puig's Buenos Aires Affair and Boquitas pintadas, Piglia's Invasión), or back through Walsh and Borges.

[9] The contemporary slang usage of "bardo" could be translated, in American dialects at least, as 'ruckus', 'shitshow', or 'blow-out'.

[10] Fans of what critic Carla Cortes-Rocca has dubbed "literatura villera" might recognize the nod to Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, whose novel, La virgen cabeza, also features deploys a fallen anthropologist to position its reader and its social critique vis-à-vis academic discourses of the social.

and misadventures in the *barra brava* from some unspecified retrospective safety posterior to it. To redeem themselves in the eyes of their ex-anthropologist gang boss for their bus mishap, they are assigned a particularly onerous job: they must drive to the countryside to pick up from a dangerous Brazilian drug cartel an unnamed piece of very expensive and dangerous contraband and bring it back to the city.

As one might expect or deduce from this kind of B-movie frame story, the roadtrip out into the desolate countryside is where the novel's surprises (and biopolitical set-pieces) begin piling up for the reader. First off, the roadtrip offers the novel's only glimpse outside of the claustrophobic and familiar world of senseless urban violence, different from contemporary Buenos Aires more in quantity than in quality. This glimpse comprises the only paragraph where the countryside is described in the whole novel, and it does so in apocalyptic terms, no less:

> *"…La ruta 63…está tan hecho mierda que ni siquiera parece una ruta. Esto ya lo viví cada vez que nos subíamos a un bondi para ver a Boca en el interior del país, a medida que te alejás de Buenos Aires las rutas están peores y el olor a podrido de las minas abandonadas te revienta la nariz y te hace picar los ojos como si la yuta te hubiera bañado en gases lacrimógenos. A los diez o quince kilómetros nos cruzamos con una de esas salidas asfaltadas que llevaban a las ciudades subterráneas. Nadie sabe cómo vivían ahí adentro, ni quienes viven ahora. Pero dicen que es mejor no ir, que si entrás te volvés loco con el sonido, que te lima la cabeza. No sé, mejor no saber."* (49)[11]

Here the novel's pastiche gets more generically promiscuous as well: suddenly, the errant criminals cross paths with leather-clad bike gangs straight out of a Roger Corman film (except female of course), whose lives revolve around camping, cocaine, and stolen paperbacks. These biker–amazons intervene to prepare the hapless urban protagonists for their encounter with the daunting Brazilians. The amazons lead the characters across a landscape of industrial wreckage and windblown desert, complete with the overt echoes of 19th century Romantic depictions of Argentina's vast, inhabitable but uninhabited *pampas* reminiscent of

[11] "Route 63 was so fucked up it wasn't even a highway. I had experienced this before every time we got on a jalopy-bus to see Boca Juniors play out in the country: the further you get from Buenos Aires the worse the routes got, plus the small of the abandoned mines rips up your nose and makes your eyes itch as if the pigs were hosing your down with tear gas. About 10 or 15 kilometers out of the city we cross those paved exits that lead down to the subterranean cities. Nobody knows how they lived in there, much less who lives there now. But they say it's better not to know, that if you go in there the sound drives you notes, scrapes out the insides of your skull. I have no idea, better not to know." (49)

the historicist kitsch of César Aira. The tone of the novel, in a maneuver we could perhaps credit to the influence of Aira, dissipates into a more airy and poetic roadtrip phase complete with drug trips and sexcapades.

Then there's the other bizarre and biopolitical payoff to all this rambling and genre-bending sociology of lumpen criminal violence. The contraband that the twins eventually steal from the Brazilians and for themselves is none other than a cyborg Lionel Messi, who is, in 2014, Argentina's (and debatably the world's) top soccer star, freighted with all kinds of populist and political meanings. Indeed, more so than any other soccer celebrity, Messi is a kind of cyborg already in the imaginary of sports journalists, between his "superhuman" precision and control of the ball, his highly-publicized hormone therapy, his frequent injuries, and the recurring narrative of his relative physical fragility or susceptibility. In the novel, his profaned (and tellingly, assassinated) corpse has been reanimated as a cyborg, and that cyborg stolen by the Brazilian drug cartel and rented out for astronomical sums for exhibition games, prostitution, birthday parties, and an entire season of the Brazilian national leagues. Cyborg technology is first mentioned but not explained on the bus of the fateful *bardo*, where a typical, unremarkable driver with a vacant stare and a prosthetic arm coolly reacts to the bullets whizzing past him as if they pose no real threat to him, stopping and emptying the bus as if the whole process were routine. Pages later, as the gang decides what to do with its misbehaved ruckus twins, the narrator offhandedly remarks that someone has left a television tuned to the surgery channel, and doctors are treating someone who's shot himself in the head playing Russian roulette. (Chekhov's axiom about a loaded gun appearing in Act One applies just as well, it would appear, to cyborg reanimation technology).

When the reader finally encounters cyber-Messi near the end of the novel, a little more backstory has been leaked about cyborg technology: cyborgs are kept alive and awake by an incredibly expensive liquid referred to as "human gasoline" which, when drunk by a natural human, produces euphoria beyond any drug predating it. Here's where the novel's title starts to seem like a pun on the dictionary denotation of *bardo*, meaning bard or folk-poet, as all the descriptions of the gasoline euphoria, Lionel Messi's body, his speech, and his hyperbolic sexual desirability are communicated with discordant imagery seemingly plucked from high-modernist poetry:

> *"Lionel parece un santo o un loco, alguien con una veta rara y reversible de maldad encrustada en el alma. Me dan ternura las arrugas de su cara, el*

> *bigotito sin afeitar, la colita esa tan retro. Me hace pensar en cuando festejaba los goles con esa alegría de un mago que no entiende del todo sus poderes, pero también parece un cacique viejo y cansado que resucitó hace poco tiempo, al que resucitar le costó mucho trabajo y por eso prefiere dormir, porque dormir es olvidarse de que el cuerpo está ahí, de que su cuerpo de cacique mago ya no le pertenece, de que su memoria no le pertenece y es el sonido eterno de un disparo que cruza el cielo azul bajo el quejido de las turbinas en el aeropuerto de San Pablo."* (50)

The narrator, whose entire cosmology is soccer, sees in Messi a manifold figure of sainthood, religiosity, purity, and martyrdom, but she also glimpses (and this is foreshadowed by commentary throughout the novel leading up to this passage) something of the disorienting and brutalizing experience of being alive by a force other than nature or spirit, a medicalized form of "making-live" imagined in an almost comically literal sense.

The roadtrip plot culminates, as any campy crime narrative must, with a shootout and the narrator's death, in a setting itself loaded with biopolitical subtexts, a local branch of the international theme park chain, Marine World. Her body, she finds out later, was preserved in the formaldehyde tank where an Orca whale named "Doris" has been preserved since the heyday of Marine Worlds in the 20th century, in an obvious genealogical nod to medical history as well to the hobbyhorses and imaginaries of prior generations of SF. In the final chapter, the reanimated narrator explains the retrospective enunciatory position of the previous eight chapters and talks about leaving behind the world of the *barras bravas* to branch out as a free agent in the intervening months, offering a satirical and anti-social version of the middle-class happy ending of fiscal independence and "felicidad social" Vanoli mentions in his interview above.

This happiness, however, is crucially inscribed in another literary and philosophical tradition: it is crucially an example of better living (re-living?) through chemistry. She is not in the natural sense alive, and the price of this second life is that she is impelled to rob cyborg-fuel to keep herself alive, or to be more precise, to keep herself animated, since the retrospective narrator seems to carefully observe a taboo on the word 'alive'. She laments indirectly the capacity for independence which she lost upon inscription into that medical and economic order to which she had eluded throughout the novel. Here again, metaphors of possession and control that recur in the biopolitical philosophical tradition are literalized to comic effect. Trying to convey to a natural reader the affect of being reanimated, she succinctly

appropriates a trope from drug-writing: "ahora ya no puedo decir más I am mine, como en una de las canciones favorites de mi vieja. / Ya no soy mía. / Soy de la nafta." (75).[12] The novel's whole tone here shifts to one of dispossession: now neither Lionel nor the narrator belong to themselves, and as the novel ends they are making plans to team up for revenge on the Brazilian cartel, as well as to rob shipments of human-gasoline, the lifeblood of the new Empire as well as the lifeblood needed to prolong their artificial second lives.

In a conflation of the rhetoric of drug dependency and the mysticism of currency and geopolitics, they need what the empire needs: gasoline. In fact, it's never exactly clear if their shared enemy is the Brazilian cartel itself or the police and the more official channels through which power and capital pass, amorphously defined as an amorphous conjunction of institutions from which the narrator's social class is too far to even name. At one point, Messi is naked and the narrator realizes he's been branded or tattooed with a giant Nike logo across his back: upon seeing it, she curses the bloodsucking corporation that, a halfcentury or so in the future, will still be charging more for one pair of shoes than it pays "a whole family to sew shoes for a month" (62). The characters cannot return to a natural state, but the novel ends with their imminent reunion optimistic about their plan to lay siege to the squats and "edificios tomados" of Puerto Madero, a fortress-like neighborhood of shiny new-money high-rises that represents transnational capital about as straightforwardly and self-consciously as any built environment ever could. It is a cheerful and anarchic image, which I think corroborates in some way Bruno Bosteels' hypothesis as to the popularity among Latin American intellectuals of Hardt and Negri's theorization of a reversible and hijackable biopower in the hands of an always-unpredictable multitude, which might already be a fair match for the weak and incomplete State projects of the post-colony.[13]

I would like to apply more critical pressure to the polysemic body of Messi at the center of this novel, and particularly on its "spectacular suffering," if I may borrow a phrase from Linda Williams' broadest conception of the sociability at the heart of melodrama and pulp fiction. Messi's adored and manipulated body is not only the occasion for crime-novel economics and dime-novel erotics, but also of an

[12] The song in question is "I am Mine," from Pearl Jam's Riot Act (Epic Records, 2002), whose lyrics are particularly ironic given the context: "The selfish, they're all standing in line / Faithing and hoping to buy themselves time // Me, I figure as each breath goes by / I only own my mind // The North is to South what the clock is to time / There's east and there's west and there's everywhere life / I know I was born and I know that I'll die / The in between is mine / I am mine".

[13] See Marx and Freud, ch. X.

exploration of the politics of, and the limits of, death itself, a central concern of most cyberpunk fiction, and by some account its defining concern.[14] The passages describing his body and its liminal states make me wonder if the novel's title could be a triple-pun, because "bardo," this time in Sanskrit rather than Spanish, has a third meaning that might be relevant here: in Buddhism, "Bardo" refers to the state between life and death, or rather, between incarnations, that occupies much of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and other mystical traditions in Buddhism. Near the end of the novel, as the Brazilians close in on Lionel and his kidnappers, they run out of human gasoline and for a while cyber-Messi falls unconscious and powers down. When he's reanimated with a ration of cyborg-fuel, he regains consciousness gradually and recognizes the narrator with another strangely poetic image: he looks at her "como si fuese un volquete lleno de escombros que habla" (64).[15] When his memory is fully restored to him a minute later, he pulls his hair out and screams, his metal lungs letting loose "una mezcla entre el sonido de un tren al descarrillarse y los quejidos de un perro que le pisó un tractor" (64).[16] The technological mediation of the life-death boundary is here depicted in fairly gothic terms as a contingent, violent, and haphazard bridge between radically different orders of meaning (the animal, the mechanical, the human) that come disjointed every time the cyborg "powers up" and "powers down".

He tells the protagonists, in another of the novel's rare glimpses of a recognizable present, about his period of captivity and his blackmarket resurrection: "Lio se pone a contarnos que donde los guardan no los dejan escuchar música. No los dejan hacer nada, solamente un poco de sexo súper controlado para que no se ceben en los partidos" (64).[17] The subtext of this detention, for a Latin American readership, isn't much different from the Guantánamo discussions to which so much biopolitical theory has been applied[18] — we are meant to shiver a little at this fleeting mention of medicalized forced life under carceral and dehumanizing circumstances that are unspeakable even to these characters inhabiting a future far more brutal than (the worst of) our present social world. Lio's discomforting tremor on re-crossing the life/death boundary seems to trigger an involuntary memory of those other, more

[14] See McHale's "Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk," 23, in Murphy et al.

[15] "as if at a dumptruck, full of rubble, that somehow speaks".

[16] "a cross between the sound of a train derailing and the yelp of a dog being run over by a tractor".

[17] "Lio starts to tell us that where they keep him they don't let him listen to music. They don't let them do anything, only a bit of very strictly-controlled sex to keep them from jacking off during the games."

[18] See Tagma

obviously and painfully forceful manipulations of that boundary which he mentions to the protagonists as if to exorcise them.

As his other memories proceed to power up incrementally, and a cigarette succeeds only in irritating his metal lungs, there is only one thing that can calm him and to restore him to a sense of self-possession. Indeed, it is noteworthy how the novel subtly shifts the reader's focus from the axis of life/death to that of possession/dispossession, a shift that is hard to formulate in entirely secular terms. Indeed, any allegorical or otherwise political reading of the novel would have to proceed from and stabilize a reading of Messi as hero, avatar, and saint of a kind of religiosity little studied in the academy and even less so outside of Latin American social sciences. Indeed, cyberpunk writing has all too rarely been interpreted in spiritual frameworks despite its many spiritual fixations, and I would like to gesture towards that kind of reading by recapitulating what is for me the novel's punchline and the darkest moment of its biopolitical black humor. Lionel asks the bike gang to find him a Virtual Reality headset to play a video game from before his death to help him regain his self-possession. He wants to play a game called "Zombie Soccer"—he wants to play himself, or at least, he wants to control and inhabit a pre-cyborg image of himself, a playfully gothic image of himself as a mindless zombie, no less. They find the game a few hours later, and when the news is announced: "For the first time in a long time, he looked happy." This image of the digital self as somehow more lively, more vital, more possessable than the easily overridden, controlled, outsourced and forced organism of the human body seems, despite the negative aesthetics of its context, a fairly optimistic image, perhaps even a kitschy nod to an earlier and more optimistic moment in the history of theories of digital and post-human culture.

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