

# In orbit: Roberto Bolaño

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***Abstract:** Chilean author Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) has achieved considerable critical and commercial success among a global English readership. Breaking into the US market, which has an important mediating role for the international circulation of texts, is a rare feat for a non-Anglophone author and requires some explanation. This paper looks at the rise of Bolaño in terms of major theories on world literature. We find that his success fits into a combination of explanatory models (Casanova, Moretti, Thomsen), but it also reveals interesting mismatches and problematic aspects that show a need to update existing theories. Our analysis, which focuses on the treatment of Bolaño in the American market, shows a great need for transnational forms of analysis across linguistic barriers.*

***Keywords:** World literature, Roberto Bolaño, Latin America, The Boom, Seattle, Amazon*

The balance between the specificity of the instance  
and the applicability of the general is a problem for all thought.  
- Eric Hayot

Translated books released in the US each year make for a small fraction of all publishing. For any such work to become a critical and commercial success, “in particular a challenging and ambitious writer from a small South American nation [Roberto Bolaño], is improbable and requires some explanation” (Esposito 2013). Taking our cues from Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen’s work on world literature, we find that Bolaño’s rise to fame—from Chile via Spain to the US and from there into world literature—is made possible by the cultural hegemony of English speaking centers such as Seattle and New York, which increasingly influence what travels and what does not. Thomsen has argued that

in principle, “everyone has a chance to make a name for themselves on the contemporary scene, and thus define tomorrow’s literature,” but “[i]n the literary system as it is construed at the moment, the English language is so dominant ... that the condition of global success is success in either Great Britain or the USA” (29).

In the past few years, Bolaño’s position in the world of letters has become a research subject in its own right, especially in the context of world literature. As a clear sign of growing interest among scholars, in 2013 the University of Warwick held a symposium solely on the subject “Bolaño and World Literature”. Bolaño’s career, as a product of international publishing industries, is one example of the inequalities of the literary world. His writings have become the object of the dynamics of consecration and prestige, even though he often satirized such dynamics (Kurnick; Deckard). Looking at his *oeuvre* and career, we can note that *The Savage Detectives* put him on the world stage while *2666*, written after his regional success, became the culmination of his posthumous critical and commercial success in the US. Although we are in favor of Casanova’s approach, which combines “internal criticism, which looks no further than the texts themselves in searching for their meaning” with “external criticism, which describes the historical conditions under which the texts are produced” (Casanova 2004, 4-5), due to space constraints we will prioritize the external approach and look at Bolaño’s trajectory from periphery to center and only sporadically comment on the novels’ content when relevant for our discussion.

In a nutshell, the theories of Moretti, Casanova, and Thomsen are developed through analyses of multiple authors, works, and literary traditions. We sought to examine their theories by inverting this process and measuring a single, but carefully chosen, author, against them. We find that Bolaño’s rise to success largely conforms to the models of centers and peripheries discussed in Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* (2004), Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000) and “More Conjectures” (2003), and Thomsen’s *Mapping World Literature* (2008). While Moretti’s model is really about the form (the novel) rather than individual authors, it can be argued that Bolaño’s author-image, or what we will call the myth of Bolaño, allows us to see him as a metonym for Latin-American writing, which is then used to sell his work and the work of new Latin American writers.

Bolaño’s introduction to the US market not just as Chilean but more importantly as a Latin American author needs to be read in the context of the cultural and political relationship between Latin America and the US,

which since WWII has often been antagonistic. We will look at his reception in the US, and at plausible explanations of why his work was able to break into the US market, which is a notoriously rare and difficult feat for translated texts of any origin.<sup>1</sup>

The case of Bolaño's reception in the US might serve to supplement our understanding of how and why some texts travel whereas others do not and is not meant to either establish or undermine his literary merits. The *World of Letters*, according to Casanova, "functions invisibly for the most part, save to those most distant from its great centers or most deprived of its resources, who can see more clearly than others the forms of violence and domination that operate within it" (Casanova 2012, 276-7). Due his travel from periphery to American cultural centers, Bolaño's success helps make visible some of those functions.

We identify two key extra-textual elements and cultural contexts which we believe are essential to understanding Bolaño's success. First, Bolaño's image as someone with first-hand experience of living and writing about Latin American traumas played an important role. Second, Bolaño appeared at a time when immigration, the war on drugs, and the killings of women in Ciudad Juárez kept Mexico continually in the news in the US. And, as Esposito states, "when Americans were looking for a Latino author who might explain this country [Mexico] to them" (2013). Largely following Casanova's model for world literature, in relation to Moretti and Thomsen, we want to show the effects of centers and peripheries, from Spain to the US, and the way new emerging centers are shaping both the American market and world literary space.

The case of Bolaño's demonstrates how the works of the three theorists serve to compliment one another in providing a more comprehensive view of the dynamics of the world literary markets. Bolaño's rise to prominence also reveals a certain need to update the theories of Casanova, Moretti and Thomsen to accommodate changes in the literary landscape in recent years. Moreover, Bolaño's success in the US suggests that the author's (exportable) image—in this case a hybrid of the author's biography and a romantic artist archetype—can be utilized in the US market to boost literary works. On this premise it is valuable to expand the scope of inquiry to include the figure of the author to a greater extent in the study of transnational and world literatures.

1 See Stephen Kinzer's "America Yawns at Foreign Fiction."

### **Bolaño's rise in the US**

A recently published compendium, *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel*, subtitled *Bolaño and after*, attests that Bolaño's place in the world of letters is secure and indicates how his life and works have come to be seen as a watershed in contemporary South American literature. The attention devoted to Bolaño is observable in various media as well as in academia across regional and linguistic borders. Carlos Burgos writes: "No other Latin American author after the Boom of the 1960s has received so much praise and international attention" (301).<sup>2</sup> Bolaño's success in the literary world-systemic sense, from regional to global, or from Hispanosphere to Anglosphere, involves a) movement from core to core and from periphery to core via the semi-periphery (Moretti), b) the transfer of literary prestige and involvement of the centers of each linguistic-cultural area through publishing houses, awards and various literary institutions (Casanova), and c) in the most general terms, an affiliation with the Western literary tradition and culture, and/or an association with a temporal sub-center<sup>3</sup> (Thomsen).

Sarah Pollack's description of Bolaño's rise from obscurity to international recognition in the Spanish-speaking world before a similar process could take place in the English language is in keeping with Casanova's and Moretti's theories (Pollack 2009, 355). His rise to prominence in the Hispanosphere reflects familiar characteristics of the literary world market: from small presses that tested the waters to bigger publishers with greater reach to regional canonization assisted by literary awards and finally translation into English (also see Medina 553). Indeed, Casanova designates Barcelona as one of the centers of the World Republic of Letters, albeit with lesser international influence than Paris, London and New York (2004, 25). The fact that the success of Latin American authors is mediated by a city on a different continent shows the system's overall inequality, which assumes "the form of linguistic domination and economic domination (notably in the form of foreign control over publishing)" (2004, 81). This state of affairs seems more in line with colonial relations and, as Christian Thorne

- 2 For an analysis of the macro context of the Boom, and the way it created a so-called horizon of expectations among readers all over the world, and in particular the US, see Jeremy Munday's *Style and Ideology in Translation*.
- 3 Thomsen's notion of temporal sub-centers describes how regions far from established centers gain temporary momentum and take on the role of centers for a limited time. Examples are Russia from 1860-1880, Scandinavia from 1880-1900 and Latin America from 1960-1980 (The Boom). See Thomsen 33-40.

argued, the term “Republic” often seems like a misnomer for Casanova’s conception.

This movement displays how Barcelona has a dual position with regards to Moretti’s model. As the Spanish regional center, Barcelona serves in the capacity of an Anglophone semi-periphery, allowing peripheral works to move in and out of the Anglophone core. Pollack has shown how Bolaño’s international recognition resulted from the success of *Los detectives salvajes* (1998), which earned him the sixteenth Herralde prize and the Rómulo Gallegos prize, which are two of the most important prizes for Spanish-language fiction. This success led to translation in ten countries, excluding the United States (Pollack 2009, 355-6). Shortly after Bolaño’s death, a near finished manuscript of *2666* was published in Spain, cementing “Bolaño’s celebrity status in the Spanish speaking world” (356). The regional accumulation of literary capital, in Casanova’s terms, does not necessarily amount to much in the US. However, in Bolaño’s case, there was some “transfer of prestige” (Casanova 2012, 283), in particular though the endorsements from established American authors such as Susan Sontag and Jonathan Lethem.

At the time of Bolaño’s death, he was virtually unknown in the US and only a small number of his works were available in English, mostly short stories that had appeared in high-end magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Bomb*, *Grand Street*, and *Tin House* (Pollack 2009, 356). The initial lukewarm reception changed in between the publication of *Amulet* and the release of *The Savage Detectives*, when Farrar, Straus and Giroux acquired the publishing rights from New Directions, and the “buzz about him had grown in the national media” (Pollack 2009, 355). While this “prestigious independent publisher with a modest distribution” (Volpi 1) tested the literary market and created interest, Farrar, Straus and Giroux had strong financial backing for the extensive promotion and distribution of Natasha Wimmer’s translation (2007), almost a decade after its Spanish publication (Pollack 2009, 355-6). Hallberg has described how in anticipation of the publishing of *The Savage Detectives* (and later *2666*), Farrar, Straus and Giroux prepared “unusually attractive galley editions” and “carpet-bombed reviewers, writers, and even editors at other houses” to show that this was their “‘important’ book of the year” (2). *The Savage Detectives*, as Esposito notes, became “the subject of high-profile raves in *The New York Review of Books* ..., *The New York Times Book Review* ..., *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Harper’s*, and a lengthy profile/review in *The New*

Yorker” (2013, 1). The New Directions publisher Barbara Epler even likened the media storm surrounding *2666* to a tsunami, while “the literary journal *n + 1* dedicated an editorial to the question of why Bolaño had become canonized.”

The placement of *The Savage Detectives* on *The New York Times* The 10 Best Books of 2007 list, which is “perhaps the most reliable gauge of the approbation of an author by the U.S. literary establishment” (Pollack “Latin America” 346), is perhaps best understood in the context of the overall interest (or lack thereof) in translated works in the United States. Accurate numbers are hard to establish in this respect but studies place the portion of all translated works at less than 3% in the US and in the case of translated fiction the number of titles is more likely to be somewhere between 0.7% and 2%, which is abysmally low when compared to for instance Spain (25%) and Italy (22%) (Pollack “Latin America” 346). These numbers confirm Moretti’s description of a world literary system skewed by “an inequality which does not coincide with economic inequality ... and allows some mobility—but a mobility *internal* to the unequal system, not alternative to it” (172).

Spain is a good example of how cultural influences do not necessarily mirror political or economic influences since Barcelona as a literary center greatly affects circulation and consecration in Latin America while Spain holds little political or economic sway in the region. Casanova argues that historically, cultural hegemony has indeed been organized around different centers than political or economic hegemony and therefore the structure of the world of letters does not correlate with the power structures of the more tangible “world.” Moretti’s argument that “material and intellectual hegemony are indeed very close, but not quite identical” (171) better fits the case of Bolaño since there are important historico-political factors to consider. As for the translation deficit, it is indicative of an asymmetrical relationship in terms of literary influence, where the US is able to interfere with a target culture while simultaneously ignoring it (Moretti, 162). On a practical level, we find these numbers are a cause for concern when the important role of New York (and its greater US readership) in ratifying and mediating the works of international authors is considered. Pollack writes: “The magnitude of the *Times*’s endorsement of Bolaño’s novel with respect to Latin American literature in translation is proportionally much greater,” because only two other authors were included among the 100 Notable Books since 1997: Jorge Luis Borges in 1998 and Mario Vargas Llosa in 1998 and 2003” (“Latin America” 347).

By cataloguing Bolaño's rise to prominence in the US we hoped to show that the process involved typical types of institutions, movement from periphery to core and between different cores, and, as will be discussed later, some interesting romanticizing of author-image. Our analysis confirms Casanova's notion that major literary centers are necessary for staging such success, but what is interesting is that this success was largely organized in Seattle, a center that has hitherto not been examined by Casanova and others.

### **The role of Seattle and Amazon**

Although Casanova deems that the legitimacy of New York cannot be "universally recognized," she acknowledges that it is currently the "unchallenged publishing capital of the world in financial terms" (2004, 119). New York has still not fully replaced Paris as an arbiter of taste or a center that is able to dish out *littérarité*, and today we find ourselves in a polycentric, transitional phase (2004, 164). An inquiry into Bolaño's success reveals that Seattle is arguably an overlooked literary center that is growing in influence (Pollack, 2009), based on the fact that the headquarters of the successful non-traditional book outlets Amazon, Starbucks, and Costco are all located there. These companies have mostly risen to prominence in the years after Casanova constructed her literary world model and "increasingly influence what America reads" (Bick 1). The rise of Seattle, given that the process of canonization is expressive of "the harsh realities of unequal opportunities" (Thomssen 55), involves centralization and commercialization of a new order of magnitude, in which small groups of culturally and demographically identical editors wield enormous power. Yet, simultaneously, there is a marked development towards added democratization. This contradictory coexistence of power concentration and democratization needs a closer look.

Amazon, Starbucks, and Costco all have the power to place books instantly on bestseller lists. Starbucks, for instance, sells one title at a time in all of its 7000 outlets with the result that each book it stocks sells more than 100,000 copies (Bick 1). Bick claims that Amazon's decision to place Bolaño's *Savage Detectives* on its monthly Significant Seven list in May 2007 accounted for half of its sales in the US. What is ultimately extraordinary about Bolaño's rise in the US is not the fact alone that his works were translated, published and met with critical acclaim, but that he achieved mainstream success. If a small group of people within a single company

was responsible for giving Bolaño this extra push, it certainly throws new light on Thomsen's idea that consecration is a decentralized process, based on an "immense number of individual selections, by critics, literary historians, writers, teachers and general readers" (55).

According to Bick, Amazon's editorial selections are made by "a group of four men and three women, mostly in their 30s" with "typically North-western passions (like a fondness for recycling, fleece and outdoor activities)" (1). In this case, it is not the "typical Northwestern passions" per se that cause alarm but rather that people with uniform backgrounds, values, morals, and/or political beliefs, are entrusted to be "universally perceptive in their recommendations so they appeal to every consumer demographic" (Bick 1). What can easily happen is that certain aesthetic preferences become essentialized, which then prevents new perspectives from being taken as equally legitimate, or authentic.

Following Thomsen, we could argue that the process of the making of an author is not as decentralized and democratized as we would wish, despite the growing sense of democratization, for instance through Goodreads. The ability of such a group to be "universally perceptive" is highly suspicious, as Fredric Jameson notes, because

... there is a kind of blindness at the centre, which reflection on globalization may help us partly correct. American blindness can be registered, for example, as our tendency to confuse the universal and the cultural, as well as to assume that in any given geopolitical conflict all elements and values are somehow equal and equivalent. (59)

With the enormous influence and reach of a company like Amazon, however, the confounding of the culturally specific and the universal can become a self-fulfilling prophesy with the universal gradually becoming identical to the American, proliferating tastes in literature as well as values and beliefs. To clarify, our concern is that Amazon's selection is governed more strongly by economic concerns than was previously the case (in an old economy). At the same time, we do not want to push it as far as to claim that previous selections were solely governed by literary quality because this would essentialize literary quality (especially without giving a more precise definition of what this literary quality may be). We would risk obscuring the earlier classed, raced, gendered, and localized selection criteria, which we address elsewhere in the paper.

Developments towards centralization are happening at a time when publishing houses are also consolidating into huge conglomerates. Simulta-



neously the role of professional critics is gradually diminishing and book reviews have to a substantial extent been crowdsourced (Goodreads etc.), or replaced by algorithms that map readers' tastes and make recommendations, and, more ominously, predictions regarding future purchases. Amazon's growing presence on the book market could be described as a democratization of sorts, a process pitted "against elitist institutions" (Packer 1), but it is also an unparalleled consolidation of power, which ultimately poses the question as to what degree the literary market can be manipulated, especially now that Amazon has begun publishing its own titles. Following Casanova, we may find such exercise of control negative if the process of centralization is accompanied by new levels of commercialization in the form of promotional fees for added visibility. As Packer puts it, "the prospect of a single owner of both the means of production and the modes of distribution ... would give Amazon more control over the exchange of ideas than any company in US history" (Packer 1). From around 2000, decisions on "which books should be featured on the site ... were increasingly driven by promotional fees" (Packer 1). In a market where simply getting within range of prospective readers poses a significant challenge, these promotional fees go way beyond mere advertising.

For Casanova, the Americanization<sup>4</sup> of the literary sphere, "having effortlessly succeeded in making articles of domestic consumption pass for 'international' literature, poses a grave threat to the independence of the world of letters as a whole" (169). Casanova's qualms seem somewhat hypocritical given that she lauded a similar scenario when Paris was synonymous with the cultural-cum-universal. In this context, it is interesting to measure Casanova's statements against Brouillette's work, *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*, which describes "fragmentation" as a prominent feature of the literary market today. Brouillette claims that corporatization has not come at the cost of the number or diversity of titles published. Neither has it lead to the dumbing down or flattening out of literature in terms of content. Huge conglomerates are becoming more prominent but alongside that development the number of educated readers is growing. It is entirely in the interest of the former to identify and cater to the tastes of the latter.

To be sure, as Brouillette has argued, critique of commercialization is accurate in that it traces ways in which serious literature, diversity, inno-

4 In 1998, Jameson described globalization as "what used to be called—when it was a far more limited phenomenon—Americanisation" (59).

vation and critical ideas may suffer from mass marketing, but “corporatization has often gone hand in hand with a trend toward greater diversity, as concentration has been significantly offset by a parallel formation of new companies,” and together with this development, we are witnessing increased levels of education and affluence and overall more diverse and sophisticated reading publics (52).

One of Brouillette’s main arguments in the context of what Casanova calls “American (or Americanized) large-scale literary production” is that in the literary market this is rather a “parallel process of concentration and diversification” (54). The avant-garde is no less commercial than the blockbuster since it too is affected by market demands (the only non-commercial position would be non-participation), and “high culture” is just one of the many fragmentary niches.

For Casanova, “America’s economic dominance, notably in the fields of cinema and literature, has created a global market for its popular national novels” (170), and Bolaño’s work fits the profile to the right extent. We disagree with Kurnick’s statement that Bolaño’s work “does not in particular solicit an American readership” (2015, 110). Bolaño’s *2666* for instance utilizes *familiar strangeness*, which is known to carry a certain appeal to American readers. Here, we are talking about everything from the form, the styles of different sections, the setting, and its focalization technique. It confirms Thomsen’s claim that in order to facilitate travel, or reach a global English readership, the foreign author would do well to Westernize in some recognizable way (100). It may appear unremarkable that the works of a Chilean author appear “Western” in some capacity since a great deal of Latin American literature has worked with, and within, Western traditions.

However, without implying that this affects literary merit, the fact that the foreign setting is often mediated through US and European protagonists attests to the fact that *2666* is explicitly addressed to an international readership partly shaped by these cultures through globalization. Besides containing familiar styles and genres mimicked or pastiched in its individual sections,<sup>5</sup> *2666* conforms to the genre of “maximalist fiction” in the vein of

5 Deckard has catalogued them thusly: “The Part about the Critics (academic satire/campus novel), The Part about Amalfitano (philosophical thriller), The Part about Fate (Beat road novel), The Part about Crimes (crime/detective fiction), and The Part about Archimboldi (Künstlerroman/historical fiction)” (356). Also, quite problematically, Mexico itself has been described as “a kind of literary public domain” (Veitch 4) due to its familiarity to the American reader. Bolaño’s *2666* seems informed by this familiarity: “almost

Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. Stefano Ercolino claims that this form of novel was developed in the US in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but emigrated from there to Europe and Latin America. In a sense, *the form* (Moretti) returns with somewhat strange but manageable content. Following Esposito's argument about the "American obsession with large novels," this 900-page, overtly challenging novel already represented a distinct type of postmodern novel that carries prestige in the US market. In many respects, *2666* solicits a Western audience formally, generically, stylistically, thematically and by focalizing its "foreign" setting through Westerners "as someone akin to the reader" (Thomsen 44).

The emergence of Seattle and its colossal outlets in the years since Moretti, Casanova and Thomsen put forth their theories calls for certain a re-evaluation or update of the notions of a literary world system or a world republic of letters, both in terms of consecration, literary influence and distribution. For instance, we have to ask ourselves what remains of Casanova's Greenwich meridian of literature<sup>6</sup> today, as internet outlets have all but eradicated the time lag between center and periphery, and Amazon, despite its geographic and economic boundaries, is trying to live up to the popularized idea that globalization portals are open to all locations. This element alone would suggest that on a global scale, the playfield is becoming significantly more level and simultaneously more culturally uniform.

Moreover, with regard to Thomsen's argument that "[t]he problem with canons is only a problem if there is no culture of criticism that is perpetually seeking, reading and criticizing alternatives" (31), the question is how decentralized is the process of selection now that we are seeing the role of professional critics diminishing? On the one hand, there is a consolidation of power of a new magnitude with small, culturally and demographically similar editing boards that have the power to make authors, at least in terms of sales.

On the other hand, new lines of communication ensure that Anglophone readers, wherever their location, have unprecedented access to books, re-

every European writer had been there at some time or other" (104), and elsewhere assumes familiarity by describing a group of men as "Mexican types straight out of a black-and-white movie" (129).

6 Casanova's "Greenwich meridian of literature" mirrors the logic of the prime meridian, which constitutes a fictive line "arbitrarily chosen for the determination of longitude" (2004, 88). The Greenwich meridian of literature thus both provides a zero point for the aesthetic distance of various positions in relation to the centers but also the "temporal remove from the canons that, at the precise moment of estimation, define the literary present" (2004, 88).

views, literary and scholarly criticism, literary journals, book circles etc. The main concern is that commercialism might be trumping artistic considerations by, in part, creating the saleable *myth/figure* of an author whose work is characterized by potentially repeatable tropes while fostering a simplistic, generalizing view of peripheral locations. Still, given Bolaño's high literary merit, his success demonstrates that the literary market is more open, dynamic, and in the most positive sense unpredictable, than the rise of commercialism within it would suggest.

### **The Bolaño myth**

When Bolaño's successful reception is considered with reference to various reviews and articles, there is a noticeable tendency towards the creation of an image, or even a myth, which shapes how his work is consumed. This inclination, Volpi observes, "possesses greater enchantment in the United States than in any other part of the world" (1). Bolaño's image in the Hispanosphere as a middle aged, middle class family man did not travel to the English audiences. Instead, an Americanized version of Bolaño's persona contained various clichés and tropes familiar to a North American audience and mixed romantic representations of Latin America with Western stereotypes of the artist as self-destructive iconoclast, a trend, which was "a sign of celebrity mongering [sic] and US cultural domination" (Kurnick 2012, 1). It has been a matter of dispute whether this "was part of a finely tuned strategy," as Bolaño's friend and fellow author Castellanos Moya argued (3).

The "Bolaño myth" has since become a debate in its own right and one that provides valuable insights into the workings of American literary establishment. The questions raised by this issue concern cultural imperialism and whether other foreign authors find success by conforming to preconceptions and cultural stereotypes, or else becomes culturally standardized to meet these expectations. If Moya is correct that there exist "landlords of the market," who are able to prop up Bolaño as the next Márquez and use him to sell a reductive, condescending image of Latin America in order to confirm the superiority of North Americans (Hallberg 1), what do we make of the numerous authors with contracts at large publishing houses with extensive marketing that were nevertheless unsuccessful? As Hallberg observes,

Moya and Pollack seem to want simultaneously to treat readers as powerless before the whims of publishers and to indict them for their colonialist fantasies. (This is the same “public” that in other quarters gets dunned for its disinterest in literature in translation, and in literature more broadly) (2).

Bolaño’s biography, which “is certainly ripe for distortions of myth” (Kurnick 2012, 2), holds both a certain fascination and conveys an idea of authenticity. After spending his childhood in Chile, he emigrated to Mexico at the age of 15, but returned briefly to Chile during the coup of 1973, where he was arrested by Pinochet’s troops only to be released after a few days (Burgos 302). He escaped from Chile to El Salvador where he fraternized with the poet Roque Dalton and left wing guerillas. Upon his return in Mexico he co-founded the “Infrarealist literary movement” with the poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, “devoted [...] to questioning the hierarchy of the Mexican literary field and its dominant figures.” They frequently sabotaged readings, conferences and other public events by the most visible figures of the literary establishment such as Octavio Paz (Burgos 302). Bolaño then moved to Barcelona in 1977, where he struggled as a writer alongside diverse menial jobs until eventually finding success in 1996. He was diagnosed with a liver disease in 1993 and his final years were “miraculously productive” (Kurnick 2012, 1), yielding fourteen books in a decade before he succumbed to his illness. Bolaño’s illness was widely associated with his alleged heroin addiction, which has since been revealed as false, but the climax of the story has “Bolaño dying on the operating table, just short of finishing his magnum opus” (Esposito 1).

Bolaño’s biography contains several important motifs which would lend him a certain flair of authenticity, while also catering to the romantic image of the artist: the first-hand experience of Latin America’s volatile political history, a marked nonconformist/anti-establishment stance, productivity despite illness and (falsely reported) drug use. Thomsen has shown how “[t]he aura of being a pure and radical artist is important to the idea of [Western] antiquity” (Thomsen 51), which would explain why these aspects of Bolaño’s persona seem to be especially prominent in his Anglophone marketing.<sup>7</sup> Esposito describes how “a literary marketplace driven by person-

7 In Anglophone literary contexts, frequently, political commitment is seen as opposed to artistic authenticity. This seems to be much less the case in literatures in other languages where writers are practically expected to be political. We could argue that Bolaño’s radicalism is a good example of catering to Western

alities and photogenic authors ... could slot him into well-worn cognitive spaces, yet he was foreign enough that he satisfied the desire for novelty and exoticism .... Notably, he was neither too foreign to be off-putting, nor too familiar to be banal." Arguably, it is that balancing of familiarity and foreignness that is at the heart of the reception of any foreign author. For Volpi, "[t]he American literary world has been obliged to construct a radical rebel from a simple misunderstanding: confusing a first person narrator [of *The Savage Detectives*] with its author." The reinvention of Bolaño's biography was partly enabled by the fact that while Bolaño's texts traveled, the accompanying literary criticism did not. Indeed, "none of his panegyrists took the trouble of reading what the Spanish speaking critics had been saying about him" (1). If literary criticism has an even lesser chance of traveling than the works themselves, Anglophone literature is insulated from foreign influence both at the level of critical reception and foreign-language literary production.

While Bolaño's acclaim in the Hispanosphere helped him travel to the Anglosphere, his success traveled in abstraction. This indicates how an "aspect of American cultural imperialism is our general arrogance that an author doesn't exist until he/she is discovered by the American public" (Volpi 1). Or, more precisely, American/Western literary reception accords to itself the right to construct from scratch an entirely new author-image even though a fully fledged image existed previously in the Hispanosphere. Volpi recounts how reviewers in the US bandied about labels such as "rebel, exile, addict" and cast Bolaño as a writer spurred on by "the urgency of poverty and his failing health," when the fact is that Bolaño spent the last decade of his life living "the modest life of the suburban middle class, a life infinitely more placid than the other Latin American immigrants in Cataluña." These elements were then tied to US household names, placing him squarely in an American cultural context. In other words, following Moretti's model, one might argue that Bolaño traveled from Hispanophonic core to Anglophone core not just as a single author with high-literary works, but almost as if he were a (familiar) form, the way it is the novelistic form that travels in

norms because Anglophone audiences are not only more forgiving of foreign authors being political, but they may expect them to be. All this was underlying in the debate between Jameson and Ahmed. Casanova too has discussed this topic a great deal, speaking about two poles, on the one hand realist, political, national writing, and on the other modernist, abstract, international (non-political) writing. Thorne dismantled these divisions in "The Sea is not a Place."

Moretti's argument. This form would here not mean a particular genre of writing, but sets of expected tropes.

We do not suggest that the interest garnered by a foreign author's profile is automatically suspect. As Hallberg has pointed out, while failing to highlight potentially marketable parts of Bolaño's biography would have amounted to "publishing malpractice" (1), it is not a given that a top-down reinvention of this kind could be pulled off. Regardless how an author and his work are sold, diverse readerships may have (variegated) varying reasons for investing in Bolaño. Some might be buying his work due to the myth and some despite it, recognizing certain types of marketing as the necessity of modern publishing. Modern fans of artistic expression or commercial output have proven to have far more agency in the way they consume (see for instance Macherey and Brouillette). At the same time, the hegemony of cultural imperialism, which takes on someone like Bolaño (for better or for worse), is a negotiation between the top and the bottom. Post has argued that the mainstream media is more to blame for the creation of the author myth than Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1). If nothing else, the fact that criticism is not traveling well means that it is difficult to monitor and thus check cultural imperialism, standardization and/or fabrication of this sort. Comparative multilingual research and cooperation will be essential in exposing the myopia of Anglophone literature.

Broadly speaking, the opportunities and challenges posed by the current state of the literary world mirror the two antithetic faces of globalization. It is, as described by Jameson, Hardt & Negri and others, simultaneously a process of standardization and a celebration of differences. Moreover, the categories of highbrows, lowbrows, or middlebrows of literature are becoming increasingly intertwined and the success of Bolaño exemplifies just how flimsy these divisions have become. While Bolaño's *2666* appears as emblematic of the postmodern dismantling of divisions between high and low cultures, containing both high cultural and pop cultural tropes, it is not easy to grasp how a challenging 900-page literary novel becomes a "global bestseller, one of the heftiest 'airport novels' ever" (Deckard 372). While Bolaño may be a continuation of the trend where foreign authors are translated and read as representatives of their respective cultures, his success also signals the disruption of these same trends.

### **Bolaño as a face, mirror, or mask for Latin America**

There exists both an idealist and realist picture of world literature. The idealist picture portrays a meritocratic international canon, a “symphony of masterpieces” (Thomsen 13), with emancipatory goals (Siskind 344). In contrast, the realist picture reveals a field fraught with “the more cynical vision of global distribution of books as commodities” (Thomsen 13), stereotyping, and cultural imperialism. Furthermore, according to the realist view, the potential of world literature to expand cultural horizons is compromised by an inclination of publishers to sustain, rather than challenge, preconceptions regarding other cultures: “European and North American publishing presses translate, more often than not, works that tend to respond to the expectations of northern reading publics about what, for instance, Latin American or African literature is and should be” (Siskind 349). Thus Bolaño’s success cannot be divorced from Márquez’s success. David Damrosch explains this phenomenon:

In world literature, as in some literary Miss Universe competition, an entire nation may be represented by a single author: Indonesia, the world’s fifth-largest country and home of ancient and ongoing cultural traditions, is usually seen, if at all, in the person of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar divide the honors for Argentina (Damrosch 48).

Bolaño has arguably replaced Márquez as a single monolithic author capable of representing and meeting expectations about Latin American literature and culture in the US and beyond (Esposito). Bolaño’s continental image was established by the notion, however justified, that his writing about various Latin American locations and their traumas is rooted in personal experience. Representational quality is, as Miuri has argued, more likely to occur when national canonization precedes international canonization. It is true that the acclaim Bolaño garnered in the Hispanosphere contributed to his image as representative of Latin American literature and culture, but it cannot be viewed in the context of the Latin American Boom, which according to Thomsen constituted a temporal sub-center in years between 1960-1980, even though Bolaño belonged to a generation of Latin American authors who were actively trying to distance themselves from it. What Thomsen helps establish is that not only are the temporal sub-centers tied to a certain period of time and a geographical location, but also to a certain image of that location constructed by the center with which the authors themselves are entangled.



Moreover, Thomsen's notion of "Southern authenticity" has been conceptualized by Sylvia Molloy as a Latin American "South," similar to Edward Said's idea of the Orient (371). Pollack has shown how

The Savage Detectives plays on a series of opposing characteristics that the United States has historically employed in defining itself vis-à-vis its neighbors to the south: hardworking vs. lazy, mature vs. adolescent, responsible vs. reckless, upstanding vs. delinquent. In a nutshell, Sarmiento's dichotomy, as old as Latin America itself: civilization vs. barbarism. (Pollack 2009, 362)

Pollack describes how Márquez and Bolaño both provide readers with a fictional space that is read as an allegory of Latin America (Macondo in Márquez's *Cien años*, and Santa Teresa in *2666*). Still, the post-national character of *2666* may be in the process of disrupting this trend. Its many settings across Europe and the Americas have been read as an attempt to create a shared cultural horizon between Europe and Latin America (Villalobos-Ruminott).<sup>8</sup> Thus, Bolaño may well prove to be the next but also the last Márquez opening up Latin America to being perceived not as a "cultural gardens" collection of rare and fascinating local cultures, but as itself a transnational space shaped by globalization.<sup>9</sup> And yet, Bolaño's success has influenced the expectations of the US market to the effect that contemporary Latin American authors are favored for using Bolaño-esque tropes, such as "the extreme romantic ethos of the Latin American poet and the violent, apocalyptic representation of the region," and shunned when found lacking (Pollack 2013, 663). Bolaño has thus managed, to an extent, to recalibrate US expectations towards Latin American authors, but the fact that a fixed set of expectations still affects their ability to travel shows the restrictions still placed on authors outside Anglophone literature in the global world of letters.

The reason we argue that Thomsen's temporal sub-center is a good way of describing the literary momentum of a given region at a given time is

8 The book has been read as a critique of neoliberalism and global capitalism (Deckard), but also as an attempt to create a shared cultural horizon between Europe and Latin America (Villalobos-Ruminott 202).

9 Alexander Beecroft has recently argued that globalization is in integral part of Bolaño's *2666* at the level of form, by employing "entrelacement or multi-strand narration, as a means of narrating the experience of globalization" (766.0). This device offers "a networked model of social and economic interaction, one in which globalization, for good and for ill, is no longer simply equivalent to Americanization (or even Westernization)" (767.5). In our view, while the portrayal of US and European hegemony within cultural, political and economic spheres is quite nuanced in *2666*, there are significant examples of the US's authority in diverse matters in Mexico, most notably in "The part about the crimes."

because his idea can be read to involve cultural and historic factors at the center that would aid understanding of why a given location gains impetus at a given time. A scrutiny of Casanova's attempt to establish the independence of phenomena such as the Boom reveals problems that can be projected onto the reception of Bolaño or any Latin American author: "To understand the conditions for the emergence of Latin America's literary 'Boom', for example, we need to postulate the relative independence of literary phenomena" (2012, 283-4). There is plenty of evidence that casts doubt on the relative independence of literary phenomena, especially where the cultural relationship of the US and Latin America is concerned (Pollack, Molloy, Siskind, Jameson, Green et al.). For example, translations and the introduction of Latin American authors and works to the US market have historically often been instigated by political programs (Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy etc.) or in response to political developments.

### **Conclusion**

In the field of world literature, as a paradigm of study for which the texts of Moretti, Casanova, and Thomsen are foundational, there is an inclination towards separating the literary from the national, political and economic. In most general terms, the case of Bolaño warns against the separation of the literary as an independent sphere in and of itself, from the material. In cases where political or economic agendas, incentives, and imperatives seem lacking, it is more likely that they are obscure than non-existent.

While Moretti, Casanova, and Thomsen's theories are constructed from many different authors, works, genres, etc., our approach was to invert this process and have a singular focus on one author pulled through the lens of the three theories. We have argued that the case of Bolaño confirms many points that Moretti, Thomsen, and in particular Casanova, make, but that it also reveals certain problems. To begin with, Casanova underestimates the centrality of the US in the process of globalization as well as the role of globalization itself in the circulation of literary texts, a problem which Ganguly points out as well. Seattle seems to be an overlooked center that has potentially great influence on which texts are read around the world and is emblematic of an overall changed playfield. Seattle's concentration of power concomitant with an overall diminishing role of professional critics spells centralization, partly enabled by the internet, but these processes are already being compensated for via the same modes of connectivity as ac-

cess to books as well as reviews, criticism, editorials and debates has never been easier. Not only is the field arguably becoming more level, with the same material being more or less available to all English speakers across the globe, but the effect of time lag between centers and peripheries, described by Casanova as the Greenwich meridian of literary present, is likely diminishing as well. While Casanova is careful to speak of “relative” autonomy or independence of literary phenomena, the case of Bolaño makes it clear that literary phenomena do not occur in a vacuum and extra-textual factors need to be taken into account. Casanova’s postulation of the independence of literary phenomena risks overlooking the political and ideological underpinnings of literary phenomena in any location, but this is especially striking in the case of Latin American literature and its reception in the US.

Thinking of the Latin American Boom as an independent, autonomous, or even an author driven phenomenon, ignores important factors such as the shared history as well as the ongoing relationship between the source and target regions. We have argued that Thomsen’s notion of temporal subsystems better explains the momentum of peripheral regions, such as during the Boom, since it is slightly more receptive to important extra-literary factors. Thomsen acknowledges that the presence of a romantic regional image can factor into the reception of peripheral texts. Furthermore, the frequent mention across US media of Márquez and the Boom as precursors to Bolaño can be read as evidence of the Boom’s residual effect reaching far beyond the initial period of its momentum between 1960–1980.

Casanova’s positing of the commercial and the artistic as opposite poles is misleading, even in the context of Bourdieu’s concept of fields. Bolaño’s commercial success, in spite of the challenging nature of his work, demonstrates that the two categories are both highly problematic and not mutually exclusive. Casanova claims that the system is favoring the US blockbuster, which may largely be true, but the fragmented nature of the market (Brouillette) explains how even avant-garde works must abide by similar supply-and-demand dynamics. Bolaño’s success in the US and beyond suggests a greater degree of elasticity within mainstream publishing than one would have thought possible, especially when it comes to such uncompromising works as his *2666*.

Bolaño’s case also conforms to Moretti’s model in that Bolaño partly traveled as a signifier without the critical basis that was responsible for his success in the Hispanosphere. This shows that, to use Moretti’s words, “material and intellectual hegemony are indeed very close, but not quite

identical” (171). Within this understanding, instances of deviation of intellectual from material hegemony are the exception rather than the rule. More than Casanova’s, this position is responsive to the material influencing the intellectual.

In terms of Thomsen’s “canonization,” Bolaño’s case demonstrates that even though his rise to prominence was greatly assisted by the endorsement of Amazon, this was just one component in Bolaño’s success. Moreover, given the severely limited success of Amazon’s own titles since its foray into publishing, one may conclude that making titles or authors, at least in terms of critical acclaim, is still well beyond their reach, even if they can add significantly to the mass distribution of works that have already garnered acclaim. The biggest problem facing any such considerations is the combination of quantifiable and non-quantifiable factors involved. Hallberg touches upon the crux of the matter as “the maddening impossibility of pinning down exactly what’s attributable to genius and what’s attributable to marketing” (3). Following Miuri’s logic—that nationally canonized authors are more likely to be seen as representative of their respective cultures—we have shown that Bolaño’s success in Hispanosphere was read in the abstract in the international arena. Given that the Hispanophone criticism garnered by his works did not travel with him, that which was considered genius in his treatment of Latin America stayed within the Hispanosphere. The existence of a linguistic barrier at the level of criticism might then explain why Casanova’s theories are not sufficiently in tune with theories on globalization and postmodernity, and more importantly suggests that important local critical input is often unable to affect or factor into Anglophone debates.<sup>10</sup>

The enormity of world literature as a subject matter calls for increased collaboration between disciplines and departments, and stresses the importance of bilingual or polyglot critics and scholars whose role becomes more important with every passing instant as the study of literature outgrows traditional national and linguistic borders. The present role of bilinguals not only involves translating texts as well as monitoring consecration and canon formation by “perpetually seeking, reading and criticizing alterna-

10 An example of this is the compendium *América Latina en la “literatura mundial”* in which Hispanophone scholars discuss Latin American literature in relation to prominent world literature theories. See especially Sánchez-Prado, who describes Latin America as an uneasy fit into Casanova’s conception of a World Republic of Letters. Many of these viewpoints are only available to Anglophone readers, second-hand, as it were, or through mention in works of bilingual critics.

tives” (Thomsen 31), but also looking for discrepancies in the criticism that accompanies works across linguistic barriers and search for signs of cultural imperialism. As a solution to the “blind spots” on both sides of the debate, Stefan Helgesson suggests “there may be good reason ... to attempt a combination of postcolonial and world literary methodologies that may account for literature both as grounded in local, conflictual histories and as a circulatory phenomenon that moves across languages and literary fields” (484).<sup>11</sup>

The case of Bolaño makes abundantly clear that it is potentially misleading to look at his reception in the US market, or that of any other Latin American author for that matter, without considering the complicated political history between the two regions, a political history that has at crucial moments transmuted into cultural programs.<sup>12</sup> This issue draws attention to the fact that categories of core and periphery, or well-endowed and impoverished (either in terms of literary or actual capital), are overly generalizing and run the risk of obscuring important components, such as the shared history of the US and Latin America, in cultural exchange in general and international circulation and reception of novels in particular. Bolaño’s case makes these points clear by showing how his authorial image, however loosely based on Bolaño’s life, is seen as fit to represent or explain Latin America. When one considers the role of the US and various US institutions in mediating which texts are able to come within range of a global English-speaking readership, one has to appreciate the “fundamental dissymmetry” between the US and the rest of the world (Jameson). Just as English is hypercentral among the world’s literary languages (Heilbron), the rootedness of globalization in US cultural norms needs to be appreciated. Thinking in abstract dichotomies of core and periphery may in some cases serve to obscure this fact. The figure of the author holds special interest in the US market—not the least in connection to works that are read as post-colonial, Third World or peripheral—where the author’s connection with a given region becomes a marker of the works’ authenticity. Bolaño’s

11 At a glance, an investigation into the relationship between Latin American literature and the publishing centers that mediate the international circulation (or even, in the case of Barcelona, circulation within Latin America itself) of its texts could benefit greatly from the post-colonial perspective. That said, the topic of Latin America and its general exclusion from significant texts in post-colonial studies is a research question all in itself (Coronil).

12 This is an enormous topic in its own right but for the sake of space constraints it is only given cursory mention here. Readers of Spanish may refer to Ángel Rama’s article on the subject.

case suggests that it is timely to return the image of the author to the fold as a significant element in the circulation of texts, and that criticism that involves the author figure can provide a more comprehensive view of how and why texts travel.

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