



Dis/Organizing fascism

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review of

Bolaño, R. (2010) *Nazi literature in the Americas*. London: Picador. (PB, pp. 259, £9.99, ISBN 978-0-330-51050-9; published in Spanish in 1996 by Anagrama)

In December 2019 the internet giant Amazon got into a spot of bother when it was found to be selling T-shirts depicting a body plummeting from a helicopter beneath the caption, *Wanna take a ride?* (Goñi, 2019). The reference here was to the ‘death flights’ of Pinochet’s military dictatorship, which involved throwing left wing opponents of the regime from helicopters in lakes or the sea in an attempt to hide their murders. This kind of apparel – other T-shirts have featured Pinochet’s portrait accompanied by the slogan ‘free helicopter flights’ or ‘Pinochet’s helicopter tours’ – has become popular among the far right these days. Beyond adumbrating the entanglement of the capitalist mode of organization and fascist horror, something we will return to later in this review, it brings to mind Roberto Bolaño’s prophetic words, which he wrote after one of his first trips back to Chile after the end of the dictatorship:

Everything would suggest that we’re entering the new millennium under the glowering word *abject*... September 11, 1973, glides over us like the penultimate Chilean condor... Sometimes I get the feeling that September 11

wants to break us. Sometimes I get the feeling that September 11 has already irrevocably broken us. (Bolaño, 2011: 87-88)¹

But who is this author who so accurately described the abject start of the third millennium? Roberto Bolaño was born in Chile in 1953 and moved to Mexico when he was fifteen years old. He returned to Chile during Allende's brief presidency, was detained for eight days by the military in 1973, and then allowed to escape. He was thus saved from possible execution by two guards who had gone to high school with him. Shortly afterwards he emigrated from Chile to Spain where he lived and worked, first in Barcelona, and finally in the seaside resort of Blanes. He died in 2003, leaving behind the almost-finished colossal novel *2666* (Bolaño, 2009) for which he received worldwide posthumous acclaim, and which spurred a widespread academic interest in his work that now even extends to the discipline of organization studies (e.g. O'Doherty et al., 2020).

'Ce mélange indécent de banalité et d'apocalypse'²

Nazi literature in the Americas, first published in 1996, was Bolaño's second novel, and the one that put his name on the literary map. It is a peculiar work: in turn witty, tongue in cheek, darkly humorous, and deadly serious, with a tragic mood pervading Bolaño's apparent attempt at revealing the true face of a political and aesthetic enemy. As Williams (2009: 130) put it, 'Bolaño's fake anthology sets itself up... as an exploration of the fictional procedures and aesthetic forms that suture reactionary fraternization to a symbolic bond forged through the production of literary lineage, inheritance, and genesis'. The book is a mock anthology of fictive Latin American and North American authors, publishing houses, and literary groups of radical right-wing orientation. From Bolaño's depiction we learn that they are self-absorbed

¹ September 11, 1973 was the day Chile's three armed forces launched a concerted attack against Salvador Allende's democratically elected government and the Pinochet dictatorship began.

² 'This indecent mixture of banality and apocalypse' (Cioran, 1949: 11). Cioran was a Romanian-French philosopher whose work expressed a kind of joyful nihilism. In his youth, he maintained close relations with far-right movements and held Hitler and the Italian fascists in high esteem. He later abandoned and regretted these views

megalomaniacs, hooligans, brutes, mad, petty, delusional, and unsympathetic, and that in general their literary products are of poor quality. They are interesting not because of content or the merits of their artistic outputs, but for their political outlook.

The book lists 30 authors and 205 books. It organizes them under 13 seemingly random headers such as family, geography, affiliation, nationality, gender, genre, proper names, and other referents: ‘The Aryan Brotherhood’, ‘Magicians, Mercenaries and Miserable Creatures’, ‘Poètes Maudits’. Bolaño describes the authors’ careers, life spans, events, and circumstances surrounding their literary works, but we never get to read more than miniscule excerpts of the selected Nazi literature. A tiny sample from the final poem of John Lee Brook, a poet and executed murderer, about natural born killers reads [167]:

Ignoble beings

Children possessed by will

In an iron labyrinth or desert

Vulnerable as pigs in a cage full of lionesses

Other works are paraphrased, like Franz Zwickau’s poem [96]:

‘Heimat’ (350 lines), written in an odd blend of Spanish and German – with occasional expressions in Russian, English, French and Yiddish – describes the private parts of his body with the detachment of a pathologist working in a morgue the night after a multiple murder.

But most of the literature is listed, ordered, and described in an incoherent pattern as if mocking the very organizing force of the encyclopedic form. Interestingly, given the title of the book, very few of the headers allude to or indicate any affiliation with Nazi or fascist ideology. Relabeling the book ‘Fantastic literature in the Americas’ would not seem at odds with the order of the book’s thirteen parts. It is as if the very title infuses the literature with meaning; as if the encyclopedic juxtaposition of elements that have little, if anything, in common ascribes a significance that unites them.

But what, then, is Nazi literature? There are two commonsensical answers: (a) Literature written by professed Nazi authors, and (b) Literature espousing Nazi ideas and political commitments. One does not necessarily entail the other. Based on these criteria, the authors listed are supposedly leaning to the right, but in most instances the nature of the convictions is not spelled out. The fascist ideology of some is presented, but the right-wing convictions of most are merely implied or to be read between the lines. Examined with regards to themes and motifs across the literary body, an uneven pattern emerges. There are few overlaps. Though the usual suspects of nationalism, the great leader, Fatherland, racism, the idealization of power, the romanticisation of heroic death, vengeance, the repudiation of the intellect, and the idealization of a glorious past do occur; they do not provide the soldering that sutures together the body. Nazi literature does not seem to be coherent and consistent, nor a well-established phenomenon in terms of the literary content. Bolaño's list implies that it is an easy to ignore and easy to forget niche and petty hodgepodge of works by mediocre authors with somewhat differing degrees and types of right-wing leanings and sympathies. His organizing effort reminds us of Borges's (1970: 223) account of the aesthetic act as 'the imminence of a revelation which does not occur'.

However, perhaps there is a third answer. Nazi literature is a literature that *aesthetizes the political*. The phrase is Walter Benjamin's and occurs at the end of the seminal essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, which he wrote in the 1930s. Here, Benjamin (1999: 234) stated that:

Fascism sees its salvation in giving the masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. (our emphasis)

Susan Sontag (1975) in *Fascinating fascism*, an essay that deals with the relation between politics and art under National Socialism, suggested that rather than merely subordinating art to political purposes, the Nazi regime appropriated the very rhetoric of art. She quotes Goebbels in this context who proclaimed in 1933: 'we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists... the task of art and the artist [being] to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy' [12]. In our present

time, someone like Donald Trump intuitively understands the ideological power and manipulative magic in politics as aesthetics as he constantly talks about his ‘beautiful wall’, ‘beautiful confederate statues’, and even of his vision of America’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic as a ‘beautiful puzzle’ (Pilkington and Rushe, 2020; De Cock et al., 2018)³. But perhaps the archetypal example of the aestheticization of politics is the work of the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, which is the main focus of Sontag’s essay. When asked by an interviewer whether there was anything particularly ‘German’ (meant as a code word for ‘National Socialist’ here) about her concern for form in her film *Triumph of the will*⁴, she replied:

I can simply say that I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful. Yes: beauty, harmony. And perhaps this care for composition, this aspiration to form is in effect something very German... I seek harmony. When harmony is produced I am happy. I believe, with this, that I have answered you. (quoted in Sontag, 1975: 8)

Art that resists such ideological appropriation – and we believe Bolaño’s fictional anthology of Nazi literature to be a prime example of this⁵ – works in the opposite way, ‘testing political mythology against its precise contexts,

³ The most egregious recent example (1st of June 2020) concerns Trump having protesters cleared from Lafayette Park, a public area in front of the White House, so that he could be photographed holding a bible outside a church that had been partially burned the previous day, thus demonstrating to his supporters he ‘wears the armor of God’ (Teague, 2020). Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had a somewhat different reaction, saying he was ‘sickened’ by this staging, and Trump’s first defense secretary, James Mattis, drew explicit attention to the Nazi slogan ‘Divide and Conquer’ in his condemnation of the spectacle (Borger, 2020).

⁴ *Triumph of the will* (Riefenstahl, 1935) chronicles the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, which was attended by more than 700,000 Nazi supporters. The film contains excerpts from speeches given by prominent Nazi leaders interspersed with footage of massed troops and public reaction. Sontag (1975: 5) described it as, ‘the most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made, whose very conception negates the possibility of the film maker’s having an aesthetic or visual conception independent of propaganda’.

⁵ In contrast to the beautiful, well ordered and highly polished, Bolaño offers the rather ugly, fragmentary and random whilst always locating this in precise historical contexts and/or personal circumstances and never shirking from consequences (De Cock et al., 2020).

times, and consequences' (Manderson, 2018: 2), and thus evoking a critique of the mutual complicity of aesthetics and politics. It returns the 'beautiful image' to its temporal and spatial specificities, and reminds us of 'the physical brutality hidden underneath the skirts of fascism's transcendental aesthetics' (*ibid*: 11). It is therefore not sufficient to understand Nazi literature as a form of literature that makes the political appear in an aesthetized form. We also need to understand what that aesthetization does. In the entry on Max Mirebalais, a 'peaceable and timorous man... appalled by the mere sight of blood', Bolaño offers what could be read as the book's key sentence and master claim on Nazi literature: 'literature ... is a *surreptitious* form of violence' [138, our emphasis]. But if Nazi literature is a form of violence, then what kind of violence is it?

‘¡Abajo la inteligencia! ¡Viva la muerte!’⁶

To answer this question, we need to ask another question: why was Carlos Ramírez Hoffmann, the infamous poet of the Pinochet regime with a fondness for skywriting, and heroic officer of the air force, ostracized by the Chilean military? The entry on Ramírez Hoffmann concludes the list of 30 authors and it is different than the other parts: it reads like a detective story, with Bolaño as an in-story character researching the identity and whereabouts of his political and poetic nemesis, while in the process accounting for Ramírez Hoffmann's literary agency during the fascist dictatorship in Chile. The entry can be read as a way of exploring the critical aporia of the aesthetization of politics, the point at which aesthetization ceases to work. The central event of Hoffmann's story is a photo exhibition he stages in his apartment. The reception of the exhibition features drinks and a range of specially invited guests: friends, military officials, and celebrities. Each audience member enters Hoffmann's bedroom to peruse, on their own, a collection of pictures he has mounted on the walls and ceiling. They all take their turn, returning from the chamber in various forms of shock, repulsion, disbelief. An army officer throws up in the living room, while Hoffmann stands calm, 'with a glass

⁶ 'Down with intelligence! Long live death!' This slogan was part of a speech by the fascist General Millán delivered at the University of Salamanca in 1936 celebrating the insurrection against the democratically elected Spanish Republic, foreshadowing the abject decades Spain was to experience (Dorfman, 2020).

of whiskey in his perfectly steady hand' [213], enjoying the reception of his work. The photographs are studies of the bodies of murdered women: tortured, mutilated, defiled bodies of enemies of the state and political prisoners. Yet, at no point are we, the readers, exposed to the images: the actual horror just stays beyond the edge of the narrative frame. We only learn about the images from the way those present engage with them. The army officers react to the images with repulsion, the kind of autonomous affect that is a natural reaction to the act of killing. Nausea, vomiting, and turning away from a murdered body are commonplace reactions, almost as if the act of killing is a taboo inscribed in our collective gene pool. One can, of course, adapt to it, cope, and relate differently. One can adopt an attitude, a stance. Hoffmann's staging of the bodies indicates his stance, one that is neither horrified nor appalled. The vomiting officers are at the mercy of their autonomous nervous system, but as members of the fascist regime they know all about the torture, mutilation, and murder of the enemies of the state: the regime is conditioned by violence.

The event begs the question why the military officers did not find in Hoffmann's works a celebration and a presentation of an object to which they are committed by virtue of wearing the uniform of the regime? They should know that violence intimately. Perhaps it is because the event makes an aesthetic distinction: on the one hand there are the dead who are tortured, and disposed of, buried in so many mass graves, or dumped in the sea. On the other hand, there are the tortured dead displayed as tokens, signs, even a representation of a power to take life. The first group of dead is associated with the idea of necessity; the dead had to die for the cause of the regime, which is to say for the sake of the country, the Fatherland. One takes no pleasure in necessary killing – or rather, the category of necessary killing grants the privilege of not taking pleasure in the killing, but it does not foreclose its possibility. Kill and hide the bodies; faceless to, and forgotten by, the regime. The second group is associated with the idea of expression; to the display of skill, craft, creativity, vision, art. These photographs of horrific violence express not the necessity of killing, but the virtuosity and talent of the torturers and executioners. Hoffmann's photographic gaze sees the dead bodies as raw material for his artistic vision; a gaze that does not see any transgressions of ethical boundaries in the detailed portrayal of mutilated

women but sees only aesthetic objects. Following the scandalous exhibition, Hoffmann is ostracized, and disappears from view.

This is inevitable as his photographs exhibit what the regime, any fascist regime, will never admit: that the mass violence it performs is not a necessity but a choice. The denial of the contingency of violence hides the question of the attitude to violence; it hides the expressive character of violence because for power to function this attitude to violence must take the form of a public secret – that which everybody knows but about which all remain silent (Otto et al., 2017). The ethical boundary that Hoffmann actually breaks is that of the ethics of silence: by decoupling the women he murdered on behalf of the regime from the semantics of political necessity, and placing them firmly in the field of aesthetic experience and expression, they come to speak not about their reality as much as their function. As aesthetic objects they produce affect; they are to be enjoyed with an attitude of aesthetic appreciation, thus completely surpassing the question of legitimating violence as political necessity and replacing it with horror as meaningful in and by itself.

Benjamin's notion of the aesthetization of politics, fascism's gift of expression to the people, is thus brought to a disturbing exposé: the politically motivated acts of murdering and brutalizing those parts of the people that oppose the regime are not to be displayed as aesthetic, expressive events, but to be treated with silence and secrecy; that which we do not talk about, but which is unavoidable. The aesthetization of politics obeys a strange kind of law: the enamourment with power must not turn into the expression of violence for its own sake. Whatever means are employed must be insulated from their own excess, the point at which violence becomes, as Bolaño (2011: 16) himself suggested when reflecting on this story, an 'approximation of absolute evil'.

Arendt argued that in the wake of totalitarianism the turn to history as a process for producing meaning had collapsed. Fascism fabricates reality in accordance with its own premises, and this making up of facts has rendered obsolete 'the whole modern notion that meaning is contained in the process as a whole' (Arendt, 1993: 89). Yet, does not Hoffman precisely hold on to an absolute idea of meaning; an aesthetic order and necessity that is not simply whatever the regime decides it must be at any particular moment. And what

he reveals in being faithful to the idea of meaning that is contained in the process of history as a whole is of course the dark heart of fascism: pure horror that cannot be allowed to be exposed if the narratives of fascism are to do their work effectively.

For Arendt what was frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is, 'not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thoughts and standards of judgement' (Arendt, 1994: 318), so that we find it almost impossible to get a handle on the very phenomenon that is destroying our rational ordering capacity in the first place. And is this not what Bolaño indirectly alludes to in the slightly unhinged, almost comical miscellany he offers in *Nazi literature in the Americas*? Comical with one proviso of course: that it culminates in a scene of devastating horror. Indeed, as he wrote elsewhere, 'Everything that begins as comedy ends as a horror movie' (Bolaño, 2007: 462). The book's encyclopedic (dis)ordering of Nazi literature deploys arbitrary organizing principles that do not amount to making any substantial statements about the nature of Nazi literature. Perhaps this is the book's main mocking claim, and why Hoffmann's entry is key: the grandeur of fascist aesthetics is regulated by a sensibility that draws a distinction between the explicit sublime of power with the great leader full of strength and authority, and the ugly nauseating horror of violence. Confronted with its own brutality the regime disavows its own perverted expression as 'poor taste', while confirming the necessity of its function.

In one of those curious twists of fate, which Bolaño surely would have appreciated, as we were about to start revising this review essay, we stumbled across a newly published anthology of... Fascist literature in America (Mullen and Vials, 2020). A rather astonishing case of life suddenly imitating art! The editors' aim in assembling the anthology was, they claim, to 'build a textual consensus about the meaning of fascism, especially in the US context' [17], and they felt the need to do so 'because of fascism's loud return to the world stage as an animating political idea and an aspirant mode of political rule' [14]. The pieces they included in the anthology do not resemble Bolaño's wild miscellany though, as they fall into three neat main categories: (a) analyses of fascist currents and their political potential; (b) tactics and strategies for fighting fascism and their moral justification; and (c) writings from American fascists and proto-fascists.

In the first part of the book, carrying the title 'Can it happen here?', the editors reproduce an article from 1932 published in the *Wall Street Journal*, which explicitly praises Mussolini's fascist regime for turning a 'basket case nation' into an exemplary economy and society by establishing law and order, disciplining labor and restoring efficient management. The final words of the article are chilling in their dispassionate appreciation, and should serve as a reminder that fascism has historically always relied on the implicit cooperation and sometimes explicit support of big business to achieve state power:

The fact that its tenth anniversary finds fascism in Italy apparently firmly established among an apparently more tranquil people than Italy has contained for more than a decade speaks a great deal for the reorganization of the state that has taken place since 1922... All of which perhaps sums up in the recognition that fascism has since 1922 undergone an evolution, as all successful institutions must. It is but reasonable to suppose that the process will be still more characteristic of fascism's second decade. [36]

Fascism 'has a chance' again, in Benjamin's words, because of the unprecedented insecurity many decades of an unchained neoliberal capitalism have created for large parts of the population, leaving behind shattered communities. Back in the 1990s, Luttwak (1994: 5) already pointed to 'a space that remains wide open for a product-improved fascist party, dedicated to the enhancement of the personal economic security of the broad

masses of (mainly) white-collar working people'. This political 'third space' beyond conservatism and social democracy is very much a reality now (Mullen and Vials, 2020), even if it only offers a sort of 'low-tar fascism' as Mount (2020) wryly suggested. But surely it is in these times, in this moment, that we have to think about how we can prevent this 'low-tar' version from becoming the full-blown toxic version. If we should take away one thing from the progression of the stories in Bolaño's book, it surely must be how farcically disturbed individuals and seemingly marginalized tendencies can suddenly congeal into a moment of devastating horror.

Bolaño's *Nazi literature in the Americas* demonstrates the impossibility of getting a handle on fascism with the traditional tools of classification, analysis, logic, and argument; the 'textual consensus about the meaning of fascism' that Mullen and Vials hoped to obtain will remain forever out of reach. Arendt (1994) already suggested that the very phenomenon we are trying to understand here destroys categories of thought and standards of judgement in the first place. In any case, as Sontag (1975) pointed out, fascism has contempt for all that is reflective, critical, and pluralistic and repudiates the beliefs that underpin civil society. It observes only power and domination; the unified masses under one strong (preferably male) leader: one people, one way of life. Fascism has a reasoning of its own and it cannot be reasoned with. It can only be countered; using liberal means of argumentative discourse and empathetic understanding will not counter fascism. In fact, these means might make it easier for fascists to work their way into political, economic, and cultural positions of power and dominance. As Sonabend (2019: 324) bluntly puts it: 'Just as you could not appease Hitler, fascism cannot be reasoned with, and anyone who thinks you can debate someone who will happily watch you choke to death breathing Zyklon B is a fool'.

How, then, does one confront fascism? The first method is fundamentally reactionary self-defense: forms of reaction directed against fascist action. Sonabend (2019), for example, provides an in-depth history of the '43 group', founded in 1946 by forty-three Jewish ex-servicemen and women who were horrified to see home-grown fascists creeping back on the streets of Britain immediately after the war. They quickly grew into a force of hundreds of fighters who turned fascist street meetings into street brawls. For example, one chapter in the book is entirely devoted to the 1947 'Battle of Ridley Road'

involving thousands of participants. Lennard (2019) cites more recent examples such as the Standing Rock resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, The Charlottesville protests, the direct actions against the inauguration of president Trump, and the Black Lives Matter actions to show specific disruptive acts of resistance in action. Self-defense is actively saying and doing 'no', whether that be using one's body to block traffic and prevent fascists from using their liberal right to assemble and to free speech, using one's fist to punch a fascist, or using one's time, skills and profession to support people who risk their lives and livelihood through their acts of defiance. The massive legal cases ensuing the Standing Rock resistance, or the cases of mass arrest of protesters, and the legal complexities it causes, are examples of the consequence of the politics of self-defense: legal trouble, costly in time and money.

Another method is neither less political nor less demanding. It is the conduct of life without actively amassing and using power to dominate and violate others; that is ethical non-fascism as a mode of life. The interesting point about non-fascist life is to articulate it in positive terms; to explore how it affirms certain practices in contrast to a way of life defined by what it is not. *Being numerous* (Lennard, 2019) and *We fight fascists* (Sonabend, 2019) describe the commitment to self-defense and the engagement to direct action, but they tell us very little about the affirmative life practices of non-fascist life. But that is the point perhaps? What to do with one's own life is a private matter, but how that affects others is an ethical and political matter. Hence, how one lives becomes subject to ethical scrutiny.

If fascism aestheticizes the political, thus disempowering 'the people' by allowing them to express themselves while simultaneously preventing them from acting transformatively on their own material and economic circumstances, does that mean that anti-fascism allows people to act on the conditions of their own lives? And can it do so in a way that does not aestheticize the political? The answer to the first question is a straightforward 'yes': anti-fascism implies both autonomous and collective self-defense and direct action. The answer to the second question is more difficult. There is an aesthetic of anti-fascism, but it is not just the stylized Blac Bloc uniform. Surely, the Blac Bloc is iconic and part of the aesthetico-cultural history of anti-fascism. But if there is an aesthetics of non-fascism, it is an aesthetics of

multiplicity, of the multiple, of the numerous, the diverse, and the different. It cannot be subsumed under one form of expression, but it is characterized by expressing the multiple, disorganized as such expression may seem⁸.

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⁸ When, in the week that saw a mass uprising across America against police racism and violence, Donald Trump lashed out on Twitter that 'the United States of America will be designating ANTIFA as a Terrorist Organization', it quickly became evident that this was a legal impossibility because there is no actual Antifa, no anti-fascist organization for Trump to define in this way. Antifa does not really exist as a distinct entity precisely because it is disorganized and multiple (Wilson, 2020).

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