In orbit: Roberto Bolaño and world literature

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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. In the spirit of Pascale Casanova’s international criticism, this paper looks at Bolaño’s work as world literature and his persona as a world-literature figure against which theories on the subject can be measured. Furthermore, I will partly use his posthumous novel, *2666*, as an example of a work that arises out of this process of becoming-world-literature. The success of Bolaño more or less conforms to the main theories of world literature (Casanova, Moretti, Thomsen), but it also reveals interesting mismatches and problematic aspects that show a need to update existing theories.

**Keywords:** World literature; Roberto Bolaño; *2666*; *The Savage Detectives*; Latin America; Márquez; The Boom; Pascale Casanova; Franco Moretti; Mads Rosendahl Thomsen; Seattle; Amazon;
The balance between the specificity of the instance and the applicability of the general is a problem for all thought.
- Eric Hayot

Roberto Bolaño’s posthumously published novel *2666* has traveled well, even though it is an enigmatic work in many respects. The enigma extends beyond the fact that it consists of five loosely connected sections and that it features other peculiar structural and aesthetic elements, which make the reading of it quite challenging.¹ Most perplexing of all is that among the limited number of translated books released in the US each year this one became a critical and commercial success and the culmination of Bolaño’s posthumous rise in the US and consequently throughout the world, affirming Bolaño’s status as a major figure of world literature. As Scott Esposito argues, “the fact is that the broad success of any literary author in the U.S., in particular a challenging and ambitious writer from a small South American nation, is improbable and requires some explanation” (2013). In order to explain this, we need to look at Bolaño’s work as world literature and his persona as a world-literature figure. What is essentially at stake is that the cultural hegemony of certain selected English speaking centers is so great that their literary tastes govern what travels and what does not. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen for one has argued

> Although everyone has a chance to make a name for themselves on the contemporary scene, and thus define tomorrow’s literature, this is true only in principle. In 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)

¹ 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).
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 refurbished paradigm of study, as championed by Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti and others. As a clear sign of growing interest among scholars, the University of Warwick staged a symposium solely on the subject “Bolaño and World Literature” in 2013. Bolaño, though a major literary genius, is also an example of the inequalities of the literary world. His writings are simultaneously the object of and the satire of the dynamics of consecration and prestige (Kurnick, Deckard). It is partly this dual position of Bolaño—as simultaneously an example of, and someone whose work may be a comment on, the workings of the world literary market—that I wish to scrutinize in this paper. Several critics have discussed Bolaño and his works in relation to the world of letters and the literary world market (Esposito, Deckard, Kurnick, etc.). An exploration of Bolaño’s trajectory from national to international success is expedient, as well as at the ways in which his work can be read to address issues that pertain to the literary world market. Here I will mainly refer to 2666 because it was written after Bolaño found regional success and later, after he died, became the culmination of his critical and commercial success in the US. In terms of approach, I take as a point of departure Casanova’s proposal for an international literary criticism with the ambition “to overcome the supposedly insuperable antinomy between internal criticism, which looks no further than the texts themselves in searching for their meaning, and external criticism, which describes the historical conditions under which the texts are produced” (Casanova 2004, 4-5). While I value the internal approach, and will use some of it in this paper, I want to focus on the external approach in this case.

Bolaño’s rise to success more or less conforms to literary world models of centers and peripheries developed by Casanova and Moretti. However, treating Bolaño as an author whose trajectory runs from just any location on the periphery to some nondescript core region would obscure significant cultural factors. Bolaño’s introduction to the US market as Chilean and more importantly as a Latin American author (a number of factors gave rise to this continental image) needs to be read in the context of the cultural and political relationship between Latin America and the US, which since WWII has been problematic to say the least. This essay will look at his reception in the US, and at plausible explanations of why his work able to break into
the US market, which is a notoriously rare and difficult feat for translated texts. I will discuss and measure Bolaño’s success against influential theories of world literature presented 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). I will outline these in the “Theoretical underpinnings” section following this introduction. Then, I will examine several aspects of Bolaño’s reception with regard to these theories. After a brief outline of the theoretic framework, I will discuss Bolaño’s rise in the US, the role of Seattle and Amazon in the creation of world literature, the “Bolaño myth,” then Bolaño as a face, mirror, or mask for Latin America, and finally the story of Edwin Johns as a discourse on autonomy in relation to Casanova’s treatment of the subject.

To begin with, I will argue that the success of Bolaño can be mapped by, and thus in broad lines confirms, the existing models provided by Casanova, Moretti and Thomsen. The case of Bolaño’s reception in the US might serve to supplement our understanding of how and why some texts are apt to travel whereas others are not. The choice of investigating a work by a peripheral author who wrote in Spanish and entered the English literary centers from the outside, through translation, was suggested by Casanova, who notes that “[t]his World of Letters 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). As I will demonstrate, the success of Bolaño can only be properly understood by considering a number of extra-textual elements and cultural contexts. Firstly, Bolaño’s author image, drawn from his general biography and first hand experience of living and writing about Latin American traumas, played an important role. Secondly, 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 puts it, “when Americans were looking for a Latino author who might explain this country to them, along came Bolano, pedigreed by his shorter works dealing with episodes in Chilean and Mexican history” (2013). This statement alone encourages us to consider that literary fiction has the extra-literary function of providing knowledge about its perceived region of origin.

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2 See Stephen Kinzer’s “America Yawns at Foreign Fiction.”
In the theories I employ, Casanova’s in particular, there is a marked tendency towards separating the literary sphere and studying it as a more or less independent world-system, which largely answers to its own logic. Casanova posits that the centers are more endowed in literary resources and are therefore at liberty to pursue “literature for literature’s sake” and the creation of “autonomous” literature that does not serve national, political or commercial ends. This calls attention to a tricky aspect of autonomy, that the presence or absence of national, political or economic pressures, incentives and imperatives are often not readily detectable, and until they are, the work appears, and is treated as, autonomous. Furthermore, an example from 2666 can also be read as a statement regarding the separation of literary or cultural inequality and then material inequality.

Theoretical underpinnings

Before looking at Bolaño’s case it is expedient to briefly outline the theories that my paper will draw on, and indicate how they relate to Bolaño.

Casanova describes literature as a world in and of itself and combines Ferdinand Braudel’s concept of an economy world with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of a field (2004, xii). This literature-world is thus organized around a) centers that are well endowed with literary capital and their “impoverished” peripheries, and b) a spectrum between two poles, with autonomous, international literary production at one pole and a heteronomous pole, where literary production dominated by political, national and commercial criteria as well as, in some cases, foreign control over publication. An important part of Casanova’s conceptualization is the notion of a literary present or “a point in relation to which all other points can be measured” (2004, 88). This “Greenwich meridian of literature”, mirrors the logic of the prime meridian, which constitutes a fictive line “arbitrarily chosen for the determination of longitude” (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” (88). Moreover, Casanova cites the Greenwich meridian of literature as the reason writers far from the centers of the literary world would feel like latecomers to the
table; “intruders” as Octavio Paz observed, arriving “at the feast of modernity as the lights are about to be put out” (92).

Casanova describes how authors on the periphery are able stage revolutions that are heard at the center. She cites the example of the Latin American Boom as an upheaval of this sort and takes it as proof of the relative independence of literary phenomena. Casanova goes to great lengths to assert the importance of Paris as an international center for literature through the ages but she concedes that London and New York have taken over, albeit at the cost of “the literature of the few”, because, she claims, these centers are more governed by commercial rather than artistic sensibilities at the expense of innovative, avant-garde literary production.

When Casanova’s ideas are applied to Bolaño’s case, a number of discrepancies come up. First, Bolaño’s case reveals a hitherto overlooked literary center, Seattle, which both had a significant effect on Bolaño’s success in the US and is emblematic of the changed nature of the global literary market in the years since World Republic of Letters was written. On the premise that the global circulation of works in English is mediated through English centers, Seattle and its non-traditional outlets, such as Amazon, Costco and Starbucks, play a substantial part in determining which titles come within range of a global English readership. Moreover, Seattle’s small but influential groups of culturally and demographically uniform editors bring the problems of autonomy and universality to the forefront. I will argue that 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. In this respect, New York and Seattle wield unprecedented global influence as centers and their standing is in many ways better understood through Jameson’s notion of the cultural and economic spheres as intermingled than Casanova’s postulation of an autonomous literary world. Moreover, her insistence on “relative independence of literary phenomena” arguably serves to obscure important elements in the reception of a foreign author with regards to the common histories of source and target cultures, and the political and ideological underpinnings of literary phenomena in any location, which is especially striking in the case of Latin American literature and its reception in the US.

3 The Latin American Boom was “a phenomenon of publishing, consumption and reception” and “marks the period when Latin American, or more particularly Spanish American, fiction became internationally visible on some scale for the first time” (Swanson, 60). The most prominent authors associated with the Boom were Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa. The Boom is typically dated from late 50s/early 60s and until the late 70s.
Moretti broke new ground by using Wallerstein’s socio-economic world-systems theory to describe the literary world-system. In contrast to Casanova, Moretti is not concerned with canonization per se but with the diffusion of novelistic form and unlike Casanova, he acknowledges that “material and intellectual hegemony are indeed very close, but not quite identical” (171). Moretti approaches world literature not as body of works but rather as a research agenda and a methodological problem to which he offers as solution a stratified approach: a division of labor between local and international scholars. “Without collective work,” Moretti claims, “world literature will always remain a mirage” (171). As I will demonstrate, Bolaño’s success more or less conforms to Moretti’s world-systemic model since he moved from the periphery to the core within one language and then between regional cores. However, Bolaño’s case reveals a significant problem with Moretti’s stratified approach since Bolaño’s reception in the US shows that what was written about Bolaño in Spanish, did not travel with him. This fact exposes a significant challenge to the study of literature on an international level and stresses the importance of bilingual or polyglot critics, translations of literary criticism and collaboration between scholars and institutions across linguistic barriers.

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen more or less subscribes to the world-systemic approaches of Moretti and Casanova. However, he has several ideas that serve to complement or add nuance to the idea of a global unified system. Thomsen argues that the formation of literary canons is ultimately a decentralized process even though they are formed under unequal circumstances: “Canons are thus both the expression of some sort of realism in a manifold and decentralised process of selection, and they express the harsh realities of unequal opportunities of even being in range of a wide and differentiated audience” (55). Moreover, Thomsen observes that the “Western canon is relatively closed, and it is characteristic that its openness to literature from other continents and cultures seems to continue to be dominated by writing that has some affiliation with the Western tradition, both when it comes to critical appreciation and to market-wise success” (100). Finally, Thomsen formulates that when areas on the periphery obtain temporary momentum they constitute “temporal sub-centres” (35), which helps explain why Russia, Scandinavia and Latin America managed to gain temporary prominence in a literary world that’s usually organized around fixed or slowly forming centers.
In relation to Thomsen’s ideas, Bolaño’s case raises the question: just how decentralized are the processes of critical and commercial success now that the global English market has been experiencing a condensation of power of an unprecedented magnitude? Publishing houses have been merging in step with the emergence of giants such as Amazon. Professional criticism has been dwindling in mainstream media and is instead being “crowdsourced” to the readers themselves, for instance via goodreads.com (owned by Amazon). Some see these processes as democratization pitted against elitist institutions, while others fear that the result will be a handful of global, celebrity authors and blockbusters amidst a sea of “dreck” (Packer, 1). For instance, Bolaño’s 2666 is arguably very much influenced by Western traditions. It pastiches Western classics and involves Western history and culture to a great extent. By Westernizing to such a degree it could be said to have denationalized and thus facilitated its own international circulation. These efforts can thus be read as a stratagem to solicit a global English readership, especially the way the Mexican parts of 2666 are as a rule focalized through visiting Americans or Europeans. Finally, temporary sub-centers are arguably a better way of explaining why Latin America’s literary relationship with the US, both as a market and a mediator for the larger international market. It is already established that the Latin American Boom is a clear example of a temporal sub-center, but I argue that even though Bolaño belonged to a generation of writers that were actively distancing themselves from the clichéd labels of magic realism and the Boom, his success might still be explained in the context of the Boom, either as an author suitable to replace Gabriel García Márquez as a monolithic representative of Latin American letters and an author with the authority to explain Latin America, or as it happens, update existing preconceptions without entirely subverting them. Either way, the fact that Bolaño was frequently placed in the context of the Boom implies that the reach of Thomsen’s temporal sub-systems extends, at least in this case, far beyond its initial period of momentum.

A certain hallmark of all three theorists discussed above is how their models are structured and their different features supported by certain authors, works or bodies of works as examples. In the most general terms this approach has some potential limitations. In Moretti’s case this process takes the form of meta-analysis where he places local work by other scholars in a trans- or international perspective, which renders his findings a) reliant upon potentially non-critical use of second-hand research, and b) mostly limited to criticism in English. In a similar vein, Casanova’s
World Republic is created by her “almost always identifying plausible candidates” (Thorne, 61) for whichever function under scrutiny at a given time. The sheer enormity of her project poses the question whether some of her examples might not have counter-examples that could alter, nullify or add nuance to some of her results.

In that spirit, my aim is to demonstrate that the theories under consideration are more or less valid, but the case of Bolaño reveals certain mismatches and calls for revisions in the light of contemporary development of the literary market.

Bolaño’s rise in the US

Today, it is safe to say that Bolaño’s place in the world of letters is secure. A recently published compendium on *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel*, subtitled *Bolaño and after*, attests to this fact and indicates how Bolaño’s life and works have come to be seen as a watershed in the literatures of the South American continent. Carlos Burgos summarizes Bolaño’s lionized status: “Mainstream media […] throughout the world place[s] him as the most visible figure in contemporary Latin American literature” (301). The attention devoted to Bolaño is observable in various media as well as in academia—across regional and linguistic borders. In a sentence, “[n]o other Latin American author after the Boom of the 1960s has received so much praise and international attention” (301). But, before measuring Bolaño’s trajectory from regional to global—or, more accurately, from Hispanospheric to Anglospheric—success, it is expedient to take another look at the way the international success of a non-Western, peripheral author (in the literary world-systemic sense) would typically involve the following elements: 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 (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-system (Thomsen), a topic which will be addressed in the next section.

Bolaño’s rise to prominence in the Hispanosphere followed familiar lines in terms of the literary world market: from small presses that test the waters with lesser known works to bigger publishers with greater reach to regional canonization assisted by literary awards and finally translation into English. Sarah Pollack has charted the
course of Bolaño’s work from obscurity to international recognition in the Spanish-speaking world before a similar process could take place in the English language. Her description is entirely in keeping with Casanova’s and Moretti’s theories: “Before reaching the United States his trajectory runs through regional centers of literary value, the first being Barcelona. Bolaño was virtually unknown, like most Latin American authors, until his novels were accepted by a prominent publisher in Spain” (2009, 355). Hispanic scholar Alberto Medina stresses that Bolaño “was lucky enough to end up in Spain, the editorial center of Hispanic letters” since “only from there does Latin American and Worldwide distribution become possible” (553). Indeed, Casanova designates Barcelona as one of the centers of the World Republic of Letters, albeit “to a lesser degree” than Paris, London and New York (2004, 25), and as a “literal capital of the Spanish speaking world, allowing Latin American writers to reaffirm their cultural bonds and gain a European audience” (2004, 246). The fact that the success of Latin American authors is mediated by a city on a different continent serves to further elucidate the system’s overall inequality. This issue is specifically pointed out by Casanova: “The external forces exerted upon the least endowed literary spaces today assume 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 relations under colonialism and, this has been pointed out by Thorne, the term “Republic” often seems like a misnomer for Casanova’s conception.

Movement through Barcelona is also in keeping with Moretti’s model since it serves as the Spanish regional core. Once Bolaño’s work was published in this center, it could travel more freely to the peripheries of the Hispanophone system and, as we shall see, to other centers. Barcelona has a dual position with regards to Moretti’s model. On the one hand, it is the Spanish regional center, but in another capacity it serves as an Anglophone semi-periphery allowing peripheral works to move in and out of the Anglophone core. As Pollack puts it:

The publication of Los detectives salvajes [The Savage Detectives] in 1998 brought Bolaño international recognition, earning him two of the most important prizes for Spanish-language fiction: the sixteenth Herralde prize, one of the most highly regarded awards in Spain for an unpublished novel, and the Rómulo Gallegos prize, Latin America’s most prestigious prize in the same category. In the following years, with his name resonating in Spanish-speaking literary spheres on both sides of the Atlantic, Bolaño signed contracts in ten countries (not
including the United States) for the translation of his works. (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). However, regional success does not necessarily translate into international success, and as Thomsen argues, “national and international canonization realistically can be seen as separate if connected systems” (54). This seems no less true in the case of the US market, as Esposito noted:

Merely being a major figure in a country’s national literature and having won multiple international awards, qualities that describe Bolaño, does not ensure an author’s success in the United States. There are countless examples of such writers whose books have made little or no impact in American culture (2013).

What is also significant here is that the regional accumulation of literary capital, in Casanova’s terms, does not necessarily amount to much in the US. What mattered in his case was rather “the transfer of prestige” (2012, 283), integral in the endorsement of established authors in the US 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). Initially, Bolaño’s rise in the US was slow and his reception lukewarm, but a significant change occurred in between the publication of Amulet and the release of The Savage Detectives, when the publishing house Farrar, Straus and Giroux, which belongs to “the transnational multimedia Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holzbrink,” acquired the publishing rights from New Directions, and the “buzz about him had grown in the national media” (Pollack 2009, 355). A move from one publishing house to the other in this case signified a huge step upwards. New Directions is, according to Sarah Pollack, “an independent publisher that has historically published experimental fiction and poetry and has had a longstanding commitment to translation” (2009, 356). Jorge Volpi describes it as “a very prestigious independent publisher with a modest distribution” (1). And while New Directions could be accredited for testing the literary market with Bolaño translations and creating a buzz around them in national media, Farrar, Straus and Giroux “could
provide strong financial backing for the promotion and massive distribution of *The Savage Detectives*, translated by Natasha Wimmer and released in 2007, nine years after its publication in Spanish” (Pollack 2009, 355-6). Hallberg has described how the publisher then made a big bet on the novel: In anticipation of publishing *The Savage Detectives* (and later *2666*), Farrar, Straus and Giroux prepared “unusually attractive galley editions” with which it “carpet-bombed reviewers, writers, and even editors at other houses ‘basically signaling to the media that this was [FSG’s] ‘important’ book of the year”” (2). *The Savage Detectives* was considerably better received than any of Bolaño’s previous publications in English. As Esposito notes:

It was the subject of high-profile raves in *The New York Review of Books* (penned by Francisco Goldman), *The New York Times Book Review* (by James Wood), *The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, Harper’s*, and a lengthy profile/review in *The New Yorker*. All in all, well over a dozen major U.S. papers and magazines covered that book, setting the scene for the media storm surrounding *2666*, published in 2008, which New Directions publisher Barbara Epler likened to a “tsunami.” The response to Bolaño had been so widespread and so positive by the fall of 2008 that the literary journal *n + 1* dedicated an editorial to the question of why Bolaño had become canonized, alongside the German writer W.G. Sebald. (2013)

The most important indication of the success of *The Savage Detectives* was “when *The New York Times* published ‘The 10 Best Books of 2007.’” This is “perhaps the most reliable gauge of the approbation of an author by the U.S. literary establishment” (Pollack 2009, 346). The approval of the *New York Times*, a publication Volpi judiciously describes as one of the “trend setters of intellectual fashion” (1), is perhaps better understood in the context of the overall interest (or lack thereof) of 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 numbers are more likely to be somewhere between 0.7% and 2%, which is abysmally low when compared to similar statistics for, for instance, Spain (25%) and Italy (22%) (Pollack 2009, 346).

These numbers confirm Moretti’s description of a world literary system that is 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). The translation deficit thus involves an asymmetrical relationship in terms of literary influence, where the source (in this case the US) is able to interfere
with a target culture while simultaneously completely ignoring it (Moretti, 162). On a practical level these numbers are also cause for concern when the important role of New York (and by extension 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; since 1997, only three authors from the region have been granted the distinction of having one of their works included among the “100 Notable Books” listed each year: Jorge Luis Borges in 1998 (for his *Collected Fictions*), Mario Vargas Llosa in 1998 and 2003 (for *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* and *The Way to Paradise*, respectively), and Roberto Bolaño himself in 2006 for *Last Evenings on Earth*, a selection of his short stories, and again in 2008 for Natasha Wimmer’s translation of his novel *2666*. (2009, 347)

Bolaño’s trajectory more or less conforms to the theories of Casanova and Moretti in terms of cores and peripheries, or regional centers and the transfer of prestige. The reason for cataloguing Bolaño’s rise to prominence in the US in such detail is to establish that the process involved many different institutions, such as reviews, author endorsements and book of the year lists. The fact is that this success originated, or was largely organized in centers hitherto unexamined by Casanova and others.

The role of Seattle and Amazon

Casanova concedes that New York is currently the “unchallenged publishing capital of the world in financial terms,” but maintains that it “cannot be said to have become a centre whose legitimacy is universally recognized” (2004, 119). In Casanova’s terms, 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 a hitherto overlooked literary center that is growing in influence (Pollack, 2009), based on the fact that the headquarters of Amazon, Starbucks and Costco—the rising non-traditional book outlets in the US and beyond—are all located there. These companies have mostly risen to prominence and “increasingly influence what America reads” (Bick, 1) in the years after Casanova constructed her literary world model. It is therefore expedient to briefly examine the role of Seattle and these companies with regard to their part in Bolaño’s success based on the premise that, as Thomssen
observed, “the condition of global success is success in either Great Britain or the USA” (29). Moreover, the process of canonization is, according to Thomssen, expressive of “the harsh realities of unequal opportunities of even being in range of a wide and differentiated audience, and as such they are supported by a set of historically constructed premises” (55). These “harsh realities” are then somewhat counterbalanced by sheer number of individual selections involved in the consecration of a given work. As we will see, the rise of Seattle as throws new light on both these positions since it involves centralization and commercialization of a new order of magnitude, in which small groups of culturally and demographically identical editors wield enormous power, but simultaneously there is a marked development towards added democratization.

To a degree, all of these companies—Amazon, Starbucks and Costco—have the power to make book titles, and place them instantly on bestseller lists. Starbucks for instance sells one title at a time in all of its 7000 outlets with the result that, as Julie Bick puts it, “[a]lmost every book Starbucks stocks in its coffee shops sells more than 100,000 copies in its outlets alone” (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, it is rather that he reached more mainstream success than is usually available to literary authors in translation in the US. If a small group of people within a single company was responsible for giving Bolaño this extra push, it certainly throws new light on Thomssen’s view of consecration as 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 Northwestern passions (like a fondness for recycling, fleece and outdoor activities)” (1). In this case, it is not the “typical Northwestern passions” per se that causes alarm but rather that people with uniform (presumably Western) 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). The ability of such a group to be “universally perceptive” is highly suspicious, as Fredric Jameson notes:
[T]here 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; in other words, are not affected by the disproportions of power (59).

It is therefore conceivable that, with the enormous influence and reach of a company like Amazon, the confounding of the cultural and the universal can become a self-fulfilling prophesy with the universal gradually becoming identical to the Western (Jameson). This state of affairs certainly runs the risk of not only proliferating abstract tastes in literature but also a set of values and beliefs that are already central to the process of globalization.

Developments towards centralization are happening at a time when publishing houses are also consolidating into huge conglomerates. Simultaneously 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, or, more ominously, predictions regarding future purchases. Conversely, 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 and ultimately raises the question to what degree the literary market can be manipulated. Amazon’s recent foray into publishing its own titles added cause for concern:

in the book business the prospect of a single owner of both the means of production and the modes of distribution is especially worrisome: it would give Amazon more control over the exchange of ideas than any company in US history. Even in the iPhone age, books remain central to American intellectual life, and perhaps to democracy” (Packer, 1).

Moreover, the process of centralization is accompanied by new levels of commercialization in the form of promotional fees for added visibility. In a market where getting within range of prospective readers poses a significant challenge and there is still a modicum of belief in meritocratic movement, this development is especially worrying: From around 2000, “[j]udgments about which books should be featured on the site” as well as “the results generated by Amazon’s search engine were increasingly driven by promotional fees” (Packer, 1). This possibility arguably goes well beyond mere advertising.
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 where is the Greenwich meridian today, if it hasn’t completely evaporated, at a time when the even the most obscure titles have become available to the most isolated locations via Amazon (or similar outlets)? This element alone would suggest that on a global scale, the playfield is becoming significantly more level. Moreover, how decentralized is the process of selection now that we are seeing the role of professional critics diminishing, especially 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)? All in all, the changed role of professional criticism and the rise of non-traditional outlets can be read in both positive and negative terms. 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, or at least, as in the case of Bolaño, assist them greatly along the way. On the other hand, new lines of communication, especially via the internet, ensure that a reader, wherever his or her location, has unprecedented access to books, reviews, literary and scholarly criticism, literary journals, book circles etc. The main concern is that through these processes, commercialism might be trumping out artistic considerations. Such commercialism is a big part of the creation of the saleable figure of an author, or, put the other way round, the creation of a myth of a particular author is a major element in his marketability.

The Bolaño myth

When Bolaño’s successful reception is considered, there is a noticeable tendency through various reviews and articles to present him as an author who was as least as interesting as his work. This may well be an inclination typical of, or specific to the US market. Volpi observes that “[w]ithout a doubt, the relation between the life and works [of an author] possesses greater enchantment in the United States than in any other part of the world” (1). What is also of interest in this respect is that the author’s ‘image’ as presented in the Hispanosphere by book covers and book reviews alike—
Bolaño as a middle aged, middle class family man—did not travel with the texts themselves to the English audiences. Instead, an Americanized version of Bolaño was created somewhere along the way. His 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, in Bolaño’s case “has seemed to recent commentators as a sign of celebrity mongering [sic] and US cultural domination” (Kurnick 2012, 1).

When Bolaño’s works moved to the US, his image was redrawn, skewed and placed in the context of several unlikely Western cultural icons in mainstream media. It has been a matter of debate whether this “was part of a finely tuned strategy,” as Bolaño’s friend and fellow author Castellanos Moya and the critic Sarah Pollack have argued (Moya, 3). The “Bolaño myth” has since become a debate in its own right and one that provides valuable insights into the workings of the literary establishment. The questions raised by this issue mainly concern cultural imperialism and whether Bolaño (or any other foreign author for that matter) finds success by conforming to preconceptions and cultural stereotypes, or else becomes culturally standardized to meet these expectations. Moreover, the debate around the “Bolaño myth” partly revolved around whether or not “the landlords of the market,” whom Moya writes about, had picked up Bolaño, propped him up as the next Márquez, and were now using him to sell a reductive, condescending image of Latin America in order to confirm the superiority of northern Americans (Hallberg, 1). The most important part of that debate concerns whether or not the Moya’s “landlords of the market” exist as such, and if they do, whether or not they have the power to make an author in general. If that seems to be the case with Bolaño, Hallberg cites a number of authors with large contracts at large publishing houses with extensive marketing that were nevertheless unsuccessful.

Bolaño’s general biography has been used extensively for marketing his works in the US, since it holds both a certain fascination and conveys an idea of authenticity. But, as Kurnick notes, Bolaño’s biography “is certainly ripe for distortions of myth” (2012, 2). 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 (ibid.). Upon his return in Mexico he co-founded the
“Infrarealist literary movement,” along with the poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, “devoted […] to questioning the hierarchy of the Mexican literary field and its dominant figures” (Burgos, 302). They frequently sabotaged readings, conferences and other public events by what they thought were the most visible figures of the literary ‘establishment’, […] their main target was Octavio Paz” (Burgos, 302).

Bolaño then moved to Barcelona, Spain in 1977 where he struggled as a writer alongside diverse menial jobs until eventually finding success in 1996 (Burgos, 302). 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 succumbing to his illness ten years later. Bolaño’s illness was widely associated with his alleged heroin addiction, which has since been “revealed as false” (Esposito). “The culminating touch is Bolano dying on the operating table, just short of finishing his magnum opus” (Esposito).

At a glance, Bolaño’s biography, distilled into a paragraph, 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 in defiance of illness and (falsely reported) drug use all served to cast Bolaño as a heroic, uncompromising artist. Moreover, aside from stressing the factor of a general affiliation to Western culture, Thomsen has discussed the importance of the artist archetype in the Western tradition:

> The aura of being a pure and radical artist is important to the idea of [Western] antiquity. Sophocles, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and a number of other writers who were parts of significant movements in history that exercised a lasting influence on their past have been presented as possessed of that uncompromising attitude towards art. In the same way, there is something enchanted about the great projects that took place in the midst of post-First World War nihilism. (Thomsen, 51)

This image was pivotal to how he was later marketed in the US. This is how Esposito explains it:

> In a literary marketplace driven by personalities and photogenic authors, a media environment where journalists are just as likely to talk about an author’s life as his work, Bolaño’s story was a slam dunk. … Aspects of his books and life story were familiar enough that American readers could slot him into well-worn cognitive spaces, yet he was foreign enough that he satisfied the desire for novelty and exoticism
desired by the reading public. Notably, he was neither too foreign to be off-putting, nor too familiar to be banal. (2013).

Moreover, the Bolaño myth then mingled aspects of Bolaño’s life with familiar cultural icons. Arguably, it is that balancing of familiarity and foreignness that is at the heart of the reception of a foreign author. What is of special interest in this regard is how Bolaño’s biography and person was used and abused to construct a mythical figure—an amalgamation of cultural icons as diverse as Arthur Rimbaud, James Dean, Che Guevara and Kurt Cobain—that could then be slotted into ‘well-worn cognitive spaces’ in the United States. This process was greatly assisted by the blurred lines between fiction and autobiographical elements in The Savage Detectives. Volpi for one chalks it up to a misreading: “The American literary world has been obliged to construct a radical rebel from a simple misunderstanding: confusing a first person narrator with its author.” Moreover, as Esposito explains, Bolaño was able to fit into a major American artistic archetype: the bohemian poet/artist, who lives hard and has a romantic, often unhealthy obsession with his work. The Savage Detectives was the perfect book to deploy this myth, since it is highly autobiographical, and since it describes just this romantic lifestyle. As the book emerged across America, so did many particulars of Bolaño’s life, some true, some false. (2013)

What is mainly of interest here is that the creation, deployment and dispersal of the “Bolaño myth” through the US and beyond did not mirror a similar process in the Hispanosphere where his works had been in circulation for years. According to Volpi, 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—with almost always the same admiration—for more than a decade” (Volpi). This has several immediate implications. It raises the question whether literary criticism has an even lesser chance of traveling across language barriers than the works themselves? If that is the case, Anglophone literature is insulated from foreign influence on two levels—at the level of literary criticism as well as foreign-language literary production. While the prizes and acclaim Bolaño won in the Hispanosphere arguably helped him travel to the Anglosphere, it seems that his success traveled in abstraction and that reviewers on the English side did not examine
what exactly had been said about Bolaño or how he was being marketed as an author figure.

Moretti has advocated a stratified approach to the study of world literature that includes all of the world’s literature—a division of labor between the study of literature at the national and ‘world’ levels—where local/national scholars examine the works themselves while others higher up are focused on synthesis. “Without collective work”, Moretti writes, “world literature will always remain a mirage” (171). This aspect of Bolaño’s reception in the US emphasizes the need for bilingual or polyglot critics because the study of literature has moved past national and linguistic borders.

What Volpi is also describing is a form of cultural imperialism or a symptom thereof which Three Percent editor Chad Post has described as 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” (1). In this light, Bolaño’s reception seems like an effort to separate him from the herd, in a manner of speaking; erasing his Hispanophone past and creating a new one: as a whole, the American critics boasted about their discovery, as if they were responsible for unearthing Bolaño; they considered only their contrived mythological creation and didn’t take the real world into account (Volpi).

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, turning Bolaño into an identifiable type—the latest in a long line of similar types—placing him squarely in an American cultural context. The diversity of the tropes elicited is also very interesting. From the glaring inconsistency between Bolaño, the sober family man “whose major preoccupation was his children” and his representation in the US press, as, among others “the Kurt Cobain of Latin American literature” as a reviewer for Paste magazine proclaimed (Moya), to Bolaño as “a new example of the myth of the self made man” (Volpi, 1). The hype surrounding Bolaño and the overzealousness of some US commentators have increasingly turned into suspicion. As Kurnick observes:
It is not surprising that his consecration has provoked skepticism among Spanish-speaking critics who concede Bolaño’s importance but detect a condescension to Latin American writing in the fervor of the Anglo acclaim. Some caution does seem to be warranted: when a writer earns comparisons to Coltrane, Cortazár, Proust, and the Sex Pistols, the encomia begin to sound less like measured judgment than the symptoms of incomprehension, or the fruit of an overactive PR assault. (Kurnick, 1)

It is perfectly common to highlight interesting parts of an author’s biography to create interest in his or her works. In Bolaño’s case, not doing so would have amounted to “publishing malpractice,” according to Hallberg who also doubts that a centralized top-down reinvention of this kind could be pulled off (1). Against that it must be said that hegemony can just as well manifest itself as a bottom-up process. And then again, this is broad strokes territory; cultural imperialism isn’t necessarily a deliberate top-down project either but rather the term for a tendency towards approaching foreign artists and works of art in a certain way.

The question is, is the mythical Bolaño a sign of cultural imperialism or cultural standardization? Post has observed that the mainstream media is more to blame than Bolaño’s publishers 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. What the Bolaño myth ultimately reveals in no uncertain terms is that the figure of the author holds greater interest for US readers than others and in response to this fact we are seeing a trend towards returning the author to the fold in recent works of criticism. The creation of Bolaño as a world-literary figure cannot therefore be divorced from any consideration of his work as world literature.

Commercialization, Americanization, and Westernization

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 and 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 muddled and the success of Bolaño exemplifies just how flimsy the divisions between them have become.
Bolaño’s *2666*, for instance, appears as emblematic of our postmodern times. This challenging 900-page novel finds mainstream success, and for better or worse, Oprah Winfrey and the editors at Starbucks have become important literary institutions. Certain anxieties arise with the growing influence of the US through various institutions that this development is the triumph of the commercial over the artistic.

Moreover, Thomsen has described how the Western canon proliferates by favoring texts that are already somehow Western: “Considering what has made it into the Western canon or the Western idea of world literature, the extent to which these works and the authors behind them are involved in the Western culture and literature is striking” (99). After a brief overview of certain points of this debate, I will measure them against Bolaño’s *2666* with the aim of establishing that it explicitly solicits a Western readership through various strategies.

Casanova discusses the Americanization of the literary sphere, which she sees as a threat to avant-garde literary production:

> The fiction component of literary production in America, as in France, is divided between two distinct poles. The first consists of novels that belong to what Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘subfield of restricted production,’ which is to say autonomous, avant-garde works that exist on the fringes of mainstream publishing. In France, by contrast, such novels enjoy a large measure of editorial and critical attention. […] The second pole consists of commercial literary production, associated by definition with the least autonomous sectors of publishing, which today exercises all the more attraction as it manages to imitate the achievements of a certain narrative modernity. American (or Americanized) large-scale literary production, 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)

It is difficult to understand Casanova’s general qualms regarding the growing influence of the US market, especially when she had no problem with, or even lauded, a similar scenario when France was at its center and synonymous with the cultural-cum-universal. However, it is the dichotomies of commercial vs. artistic literary production that need to be examined. It is interesting to measure these statements against Brouillette’s work, *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*, which touches on similar subjects, albeit better supported by factual research. In the

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4 Casanova’s choice of words is interesting since already in 1998, Jameson described globalization as “what used to be called—when it was a far more limited phenomenon—Americanisation” (59).
most general terms, Casanova’s comments seem to be somewhat embittered and out of touch with globalization in general as a set of potentials as well as challenges, and that those can be viewed in a positive light as well as negative.

Brouillette’s text describes “fragmentation” as a prominent feature of the literary market today and that corporatization has not come at the cost of the number or diversity (or the dumbing down or flattening out) of titles published. 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. Aspects of these processes can certainly seem worrisome, but for other reasons. According to Brouillette, “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 commercialization as correlated with “massification” or what Casanova calls “American (or Americanized) large-scale literary production” is that in the literary market this does not pose an either/or question but is rather a “parallel process of concentration and diversification” (54). In short, the avant-garde is no less commercial per se than the blockbuster since it too is driven by market demands (the only non-commercial position would be non-participation), and “high culture” is just one of the many fragmentary niches.

In order to use Bolaño’s 2666 as concrete material in this debate, we need to take another look at Americanization and Casanova’s description of the US as a progenitor of global “national” novels:

In the case of the United States, this market has now come to assume global proportions, giving rise to a new breed of novel whose international success is the combined result of the triumph of the commercial model in the publishing industry and of the universal adoption of popular American tastes in fiction. America’s economic dominance, notably in the fields of cinema and literature, has created a global market for its popular national novels (of which Gone with the Wind is perhaps the classic example) on the basis of worldwide familiarity with Hollywood culture. (170)

If one looks past the fact that Casanova usually uses “commercial” in the pejorative sense, “the worldwide familiarity with Hollywood culture” as well as “the universal
adoption of popular American tastes in fiction,” are arguably prominent factors in 2666 and somewhat reminiscent of Tim Parks’ disputed description of “The Dull New Global Novel.”

Kurnick has recently argued that 2666 “is in no explicit way directed to an American readership” (2015, 124) and that “Bolaño’s work does not in particular solicit an American readership” (110). I disagree with this view and instead argue that 2666 caters to an American or Western readership through familiarity in several different ways, including its overall form, the styles of different sections, setting and its focalization technique. It confirms Thomsen’s claim that in order to facilitate travel, or cater to a global English readership, the foreign author would do well to Westernize in some recognizable way (100).

To begin with, this novel more or less conforms to the genre of Maximalist fiction. Stefano Ercolino claims that this form of novel was developed in the US in the second half of the 20th century but emigrated from there to Europe and Latin America. It is plausible that 2666’s success can be partly attributed to the fact that even though it is a challenging and innovative novel, its form was nevertheless familiar to US readers, following in the vein of Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. Furthermore, Esposito mentions the “American obsession with large novels, which are always perceived as more serious and more deserving of attention than novels weighing in at a mere 200 pages or less” (2013). In this light, a 900 page, overtly “challenging” novel made up of disparate sections already represented a distinct type of postmodern novel that carries prestige in the US market.

The familiarity of 2666 also extends to the styles and genres mimicked or pastiched in its individual sections. 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). All of these styles and genres are thoroughly established as such in the US but beyond that. The part about Fate deserves special mention. Deckard designates it as “Beat road novel” which points specifically to Kerouac’s On the Road (similar in form: a road novel with a protagonist headed south of the border and where the action is shaped by various chance encounters along the way). Moreover, it bears resemblance to another US classic, namely Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man through a number of themes, such as African-American history, community and identity.
politics, especially the role of the Black Panthers (with founder Bobby Seale thinly fictionalized in 2666 as Barry Seaman), and simply what it is like to be black in the US and abroad. The section’s overall “Western-ness” is perfected in the audiobook version (published by Blackstone Audio), where it is largely narrated in the African-American vernacular. At that point there is literally nothing left to remind the reader/listener that it is a book originally written in Spanish by a Chilean (of course some of the credit for that belongs to the seamless translation of Natasha Wimmer).

The five parts that compose 2666 have a wide variety of settings all over the world with the fictional Santa Teresa at the Mexican-US border as the only location common to all sections. The novel’s foreign setting is most often mediated via a Western visitor through whom the setting and its cultural particularities—such as the ingredients of salsa or the fact that the sandwiches are called tortas—are explained, usually with the aid of a local informant. This is in itself a clear example of the “specific features or techniques that compensate for the reader’s lack of first-hand experience of the context of a literary work” (Thomsen, 47). This technique, I argue, can also potentially tell us something about the work’s intended reader. As Thomsen observed: “There are […] historically popular genres, such as fantasy and travel literature, which describe places unknown or unfamiliar to the reader, and where the attraction is the experience of the strange through the eyes of someone akin to the reader” (44, emphases mine). By turning this assumption on its head, we can look at the characters through whom “the strange” is being focalized and assume that they are also “akin to the reader” and thereby reveal the author’s proposed reader, which in this case would be Westerners.

Finally, in a way that is somewhat revealing of the problematic nature of the categories familiar vs. foreign, or Western vs. non-Western, Mexico itself has been described as “a kind of literary public domain” (Veitch, 4). This is due to its familiarity to the Western reader on account of its presence in a great number of works by British and US authors. Bolaño’s work seems informed by this familiarity of Mexico as it states that “almost 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).

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.” It is the ideal work to use as a point of departure for
considerations of artistic and commercial perspectives. From the “Note from the author’s heirs” that serves as a preface to the novel to its epilogue, Ignazio Eschevarria’s “Note to the first edition”, 2666 is presented as a grand narrative that involves the author’s death, and a tension between artistic and commercial concerns. Bolaño, who luckily had left the novel “very nearly what he intended it to be” (895), had, shortly before he succumbed to his illness, instructed his heirs to publish the novel divided into five books corresponding to the five parts of the novel, specifying the order in which they should appear, at what intervals (one per year), and even the price to be negotiated with the publisher. With this decision, communicated days before his death by Roberto himself to [his publisher], Roberto thought he was providing for his children’s future. (xi)

However, after his literary executor had read 2666 in his entirety, “another consideration of a less practical nature arose: respect for the literary value of the work, which caused [Bolaño’s estate and his publisher] to reverse Roberto’s decision and publish 2666 first in full, in a single volume, as he would have done had his illness not taken the gravest course” (xi). Through this story of the story, 2666 asserts its own artistic character and rejects commercial incentives even though it means challenging the author’s dying wish. This story then becomes published, commoditized and commercially successful, by dint of its unswerving resolve to be artistic rather than commercial when faced with exactly those two choices. If nothing else, this back and forth movement of a single work between commercial and artistic “poles” reveals how limiting it is to think of these aspects in terms of “poles.”

While this section has established just how familiar aspects of 2666 would appear to the Euro-American or Anglo-American reader, the next section will probe into its foreignness as a point in its marketability.

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

There exists both an idealist and realist picture of world literature. The idealist picture involves the idea of a meritocratic international canon, a “symphony of masterpieces” (Thomsen, 13) with emancipatory goals (Siskind). The realist picture stands then for a field fraught with “the more cynical vision of global distribution of books as
commodities” (Thomsen, 13), stereotyping, and cultural imperialism. Furthermore, the potential of world literature to expand cultural horizons is allegedly compromised by a propensity of publishers to perpetuate, rather than update, preconceptions regarding other cultures. As Siskind observes,

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. [Márquez’s] Cien años de soledad, as a global best seller, has in particular come to represent what a large portion of the world literary public sphere assumes is the essence of Latin American culture and social history. (Siskind 349)

This problematic role of the foreign author as a representative of his or her respective culture whose authenticity is calibrated by expectations that are in turn put in place by other representations needs examining further. Moreover, the fact that Márquez is often seen as a precursor can shed certain light on Bolaño’s success, especially with regard to Thomsen’s temporal sub-centers.

David Damrosch has used the metaphor of a beauty pageant to explain how nations come to be represented by single authors:

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).

This tendency is especially interesting with regards to Bolaño. Looking at his reception in the US, he has arguably replaced Gabriel García Márquez as Miss Latin America or a single monolithic author seen as capable of representing and meeting expectations regarding Latin American literature and culture in the US and beyond. Great many reviews placed him in the context of Márquez, who “long held a certain fascination among the American reading public” and named Bolaño as his successor which “immediately suggest[ed] that he [was] a canonical author” (Esposito). Arguably, the reason why Bolaño has come to represent Latin America on the whole, rather than just his native Chile, is that aspects of his life and works have given rise to a continental image. This image was established by the notions, real or perceived, that Bolaño’s writing about various Latin American locations and their traumas were rooted in personal experience.
Casanova discusses how authors are seen as examples of their national spirit. For instance, when Yasunari Kawabata won the Nobel Prize in 1968 “the judges noted in their citation ‘with great sensibility expresses the essence of the Japanese mind’” (2004, 151). There is a certain connection between national and international canonization in this respect. This representational quality is, a Miuri has argued, more likely to occur when national canonization precedes international canonization, as in the case of Kawabata. In Bolaño case, the acclaim he garnered in the Hispanosphere before finding success internationally contributed to his image as representative of Latin American literature and culture. This is only connected to the image, and not, as I pointed out earlier, the actual (critical) reception. According to Thomsen, the Latin American Boom constituted a temporal sub-center in years between 1960-1980. I will still maintain that Bolaño’s success can be viewed in the context of the Boom as a temporal sub-center (even though he wanted nothing to do with its heritage and belonged to a generation of Latin American authors who were actively trying to distance themselves from the generalizing labels of magic realism and the Boom). This connection to the Boom obviously sets him apart from authors from regions that do not have any such precursors in the Western imagination, and as we shall see, place him in the context of a romantic image of Latin America.

For Thomsen, the formation of a temporal sub-center in Scandinavia at the end of the 19th century was aided (in Germany in particular) by “a perception that the Scandinavian esprit was closer to something authentic and uncorrupted, which was given support by images of rough and cold life in untamed nature. Such perceptions would be misleading when trying to understand a number of the Scandinavian authors, but this is apart [sic] of their literary legacy” (38). Moreover, “just as the Scandinavian literature of the last decades of the nineteenth century thrived on a sense of Northern authenticity, it would be fair to say that the idea of a Southern authenticity is central to the idea of magical realism” (39). What Thomsen helps establish is that not only are these temporal sub-centers tied to a certain period of time and a geographical location, but also to a certain image of that location at the center into which the authors themselves are entangled. Moreover, the notion of “Southern authenticity” has been discussed by critic Sylvia Molloy as formation of a Latin American “South” in the Western imagination, similar to Said’s idea of the Orient (371). The “South” then serves as the US’s other and maintains a dichotomy of characteristics between North and South America. Bolaño’s first “big book” in the
US, The Savage Detectives, has been described as a either complicit in or satirical of such a North-South binary:

Unwittingly—or perhaps with provocative deliberation—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. Regarded from this standpoint, The Savage Detectives is a comfortable choice for U.S. readers, offering both the pleasures of the savage and the superiority of the civilized. (Pollack 2009, 362)

Be that as it may, what can be drawn from these postulations is that the representational dimension of authors such as Márquez and Bolaño is tied to an allegorical one. Pollack describes how Márquez and Bolaño both provide readers with a fictional space that is read as an allegory for Latin America (Macondo in Márquez’s Cien años…, and Santa Teresa in 2666). However, the post-national character of 2666 may be in the process of disrupting this trend, thus Bolaño may well prove to be the next but also the last Márquez or Miss Latin America.

The reason I argue that Thomsen’s temporal sub-center is a better way of describing the literary momentum of a given region at a given time has to do with agency. Thomsen’s idea can be read to involve cultural and historic factors at the center that would aid understanding of why a given location gathers momentum. It is thus not solely driven by the authors as Casanova would argue. Moreover, a scrutiny of her attempt to establish the independence of phenomena such as the Boom reveals certain problems that can be projected onto the reception of Bolaño or any Latin American author:

The case of the Latin American literatures would be further proof of the relative autonomy of the literary sphere, with no direct link, no cause-and-effect relation between political-economic strength and literary power or legitimacy at an international level. The global recognition accorded to these bodies of work, in the form of four Nobel prizes, the worldwide esteem for their great names, the established legitimacy of their leading aesthetic model, despite the political and economic weakness of the countries concerned, show that the two orders cannot be confounded. 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).
I disagree with the idea that Latin America can be used as an example of the “relative autonomy of the literary sphere” when there is plenty of evidence that points to the opposite (Pollack, Molloy, Siskind, Jameson, Green et al.). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that translations and the introduction of Latin American authors and literature to the US market, have been instigated by political programs (such as Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” policy and subsequent programs in similar spirit). Molloy describes how the emergence of Latin American texts has historically coincided with the US’s curiosity and needs. In that way the emergence of Latin American literature in the early 60s “coincide[ed] roughly with the Cuban revolution” (372).

Latin America’s literary relationship with the US (both as a market and a mediator for the larger international market) is better understood in terms of Thomsen’s temporal sub-systems since its authors are tied to a romantic image of Latin America. It is already established that the Latin American Boom is a clear example of a temporal sub-system, but I argue that even though Bolaño belonged to a generation of writers that were actively distancing themselves from the clichéd labels of magic realism and the Boom, Bolaño’s success might still be explained in the context of the Boom, either as an author suitable to replace Márquez as a monolithic representative of Latin American letters who can explain Latin America, or as it happens, update existing preconceptions without entirely subverting them. So, all in all, Latin America is a bad example for “the relative autonomy of the literary sphere” and/or “the relative independence of literary phenomena.” Moreover, the Nobel Prize is also a fundamentally unsound marker of the autonomy or independence of the literary world.5

Interestingly enough, Bolaño’s 2666 has the dual position of providing a US readership with inside knowledge about Latin America—and this effect is supplemented in 2666 by Bolaño’s use of thin fictionalization—and, according to Pollack, an allegorical model that could help “explain” Latin America. The perceived authenticity of Bolaño was aided both by personal experience and national canonization in the Hispanosphere which traveled in the abstract as just that; a token of authenticity to provide knowledge about Latin America.

5 See “The Literary Politics of the Nobel Prize” by Jeffrey Meyers.
What the case of Bolaño helps us understand with relation to the theories of Thomsen and Casanova are the problems of separating the literary from other contributing factors. Postulating the independence or autonomy of literary phenomena such as transnational success would only serve to obscure these factors. I now want to take a closer look at Bolaño’s 2666 where there is a marked tendency on his part to emphasize that different types of hegemony tend to go hand in hand. The reason why I am choosing this novel is exactly because it shows Bolaño’s awareness of his development as world literary figure.

The story of Edwin Johns as a discourse on autonomy

Bolaño’s treatment of overzealous admirers who seek communion with the artist most often ends up revealing the banality of such a project. Thus the critics in 2666’s first part realize that the closest they will get to the author Archimboldi is reading his works and, at most surveying the same literal or figurative scenery. Lola’s and Inma’s pilgrimage to the poet, “who lay in majestic and semisecret repose in the Mondragon asylum” (167), yields similarly thin results. However, the story of the painter Edwin Johns deviates from this theme in a significant way since his own insights drastically change the meaning of his artworks. His success story can be read as a statement on the subject of autonomy or an investigation into its conditions: both as a set of pressures or incentives affecting the artist and his creative process, and how the success of the artist or his works becomes tangible in the material world. Most importantly it reframes the question of autonomy as an epistemological issue and questions its conditions. Before examining how the story of Edwin Johns is relevant to this discussion, I will first look at how autonomy figures in Casanova’s work and the wider context of similar issues in the context of world literature, such as the romantic artist in the global marketplace.

An important part of Casanova’s literary world is the notion of autonomy and the relative independence of literary phenomena with regard to “political, national and commercial constraints” (2012, 282). Casanova’s conception of world literary space is structured “around two opposing poles”: “At the pole of greatest autonomy—that is, freest from political, national or economic constraints—stand the oldest spaces, those most endowed with literary heritage and resources” (282), while “[a]t the pole of
greatest heteronomy, where political, national and commercial criteria hold strongest sway, stand the newcomers, the spaces most lacking in literary resources; and the zones within the oldest regions that are most subordinate to commercial criteria. Each national space, meanwhile, is itself polarized by the same structure” (283). The “age” of the spaces in this context signifies the time they have put in on the (Western) literary arena and thus measures “certain ancient spaces such as China, Japan and the Arab countries are both long-lived and subordinate” (2012, 287). It goes without saying that Latin America is firmly placed among the “young” spaces in spite of its having a literary tradition in European languages that stretches back for more than 300 years. Casanova’s postulation of opposite poles raises questions regarding the validity of pitting various phenomena in contrast to one another. It does, for example, seem like an oversimplification to contrast the artistic and the commercial as binary opposite “poles” as the two are commingled in various ways.

However, for the purpose of this discussion it needs to be pointed out that, for better or worse, Casanova’s articulation of autonomy rests on the notion of a pure art, “art for art’s sake” or similar. Casanova describes literary autonomy along somewhat corresponding lines: “autonomy amounts to its own categorical imperative, enjoining writers everywhere to stand united against literary nationalism, against the intrusion of politics into literary life” (2004, 86). Thus, “[t]he oldest literary fields are therefore the most autonomous as well, which is to say the most exclusively devoted to literature as an activity having no need of justification beyond itself” (85, emphasis mine). Casanova’s treatment of the term autonomy reveals certain internal contradictions within her work, which Christian Thorne has pointed out, but what is mainly of interest at this point is that the notion of autonomy poses a certain epistemological question: What can be know about the presence or absence of determinants that make a work of art either autonomous or heteronomous, and who can conceivably provide this information? Thorne hits upon the crux of the matter by stating the “we call autonomous those works whose dependencies we are unable to spot” (60), and cites as an example how seemingly autonomous abstract art in the US became entangled in Cold War ideologies.

In what seems to be an extravagant display of art for art’s sake, the painter Edwin Johns cut off his own hand and had a taxidermist embalm it for him for use in a self-portrait. The gesture appears to be autonomous since Johns’ work of art demanded the painter’s painting hand and thus took precedence over, or rather
disregarded completely, the painter’s well being, career and future endeavors. His artistic success then became entwined with economic success as the works generated monetary value through artistic prestige and an “Arab who worked in the City” bought Johns’ self-portrait and several other works at astronomical prices (53). Moreover, Johns’ success then spearheaded the gentrification of the run down neighborhood, which his paintings as well as his artist persona had served to romanticize:

Other painters, meanwhile, began to move into the neighborhood. Mostly because it was cheap, but also because they were attracted by the legend of the man who had painted the most radical self-portrait of our time. Then came the architects, then some families who bought houses that had been renovated and remodeled. Then came the boutiques, the black-box theaters, the cutting-edge restaurants, until it was one of the trendiest neighborhoods in London, nowhere near as cheap as it was reputed to be. (53)

The critics take an interest in Johns and three of them; Morini, Pelletier and Espinoza, go to Switzerland to visit him where he is staying at a “convalescent home” or clinic for the mentally ill. Upon meeting Johns, the critics learn that Johns has replaced the missing hand with a prosthetic, thereby backtracking slightly from the finality of the act of severing his hand, and is in the process of learning how to draw with his left hand, which further weakens the statement of the self-portrait. Johns can thus no longer be seen to have totally sacrificed the use of his arm or his ability to create. Thus, the excessiveness of the artwork, its meaning and most importantly its autonomy are undermined. When Morini asks Johns why he cut off his hand the answer comes as such a shock to Morini that he disappears for several days before revealing Johns’ reason to Norton:

“For money,” said Morini.
“Money?”
“Because he believed in investments, the flow of capital, one has to play the game to win, that kind of thing.”
Norton looked doubtful and then said: maybe.
“He did it for money,” said Morini.” (97)

When Johns makes this revelation the statement of the self-portrait gets irredeemably altered and the fact that Morini seems shaken to the core serves to highlight this fact. What’s more, the change of perspective is only made possible through extra-textual information provided by the artist himself. It is worth
mentioning that the critics in the first part of 2666 are not above looking to the artists themselves for extra-textual information, as in the case of Johns, or clues regarding the interpretations of texts, as in the case of Archimboldi. In this respect it is the artist himself who ultimately holds the key to the self-portrait’s true meaning; that its autonomy was bogus and its artistic statement a guise that could easily be reduced to a financial transaction.

In this way, Johns’ story serves to highlight a relevant aspect of the author as romantic artist and his autonomy from commercial considerations. Can the reader really make such demands and can the author live up to them? Brouillette thinks not: “[N]o contemporary author could easily continue a romantic tradition of opposition to commodification, expressing a privileged elite disdain for material motivations. The economic conditions that prevail within the literary marketplace are a concern in part because negotiating any separation from them is rarely possible” (73-4). An alternative reading of Johns’ story would simply state that the pressures imposed on him, along with his willingness to divulge his true purpose adds to the artwork so that it becomes a discourse in itself—about pure art, autonomy and the ubiquity of commercial aspects—infinitely greater than the sum of its parts.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the story of Edwin Johns is that a) critics may have to look towards the author, counterintuitive as it may be, to probe into what sort of pressures or incentives have influenced a work of art, and b) these can be, just as an author’s biography, read as a part of the artwork itself. Brouillette discusses the return of the author to the fold after decades of exile, rigorously enforced by New Criticism and Roland Barthes. Brouillette discusses how the figure of the author is being marketed along with his texts. Here’s Brouillette:

[I]t is my sense that this separation between any text’s meaning and the circumstances of its existence as a marketed commodity is largely incomplete. Just as the proliferating ways in which authorial identities are marketed involves the construction of biographical fictions that audiences are asked to understand and respond to, recuperation of the careers of author-figures makes potentially fruitful material for literary interpretation in general. While the ‘genre branding’ of the author is undoubtedly important, and central to my own concerns, recuperating authors’ identities can and should be what some have claimed it is definitively not — that is, an interpretive practice that aims at insight into literature itself. (12)
Bolaño’s Edwin Johns, in a similar vein as Thorne, recasts autonomy as an epistemological problem: Works can seem autonomous until their dependencies are discovered. Johns’ story is also interesting in the context of Casanova’s literary world, as well as various phenomena within it, which purportedly function relatively independently of the economic and political worlds. In the most general terms his stance goes against the grain of theories of both postmodernity and globalization in which these worlds are all hopelessly intermingled.

Conclusion

In the field of world literature, as a paradigm of study for which Moretti’s, Casanova’s, and Thomsen’s texts are foundational (or at least significant as points of departure), there is an inclination towards separating the literary from the national, political and economic. This entails the risk of obscuring the function of literature as an exchange of ideas that has the ability to affect as well as reflect existing worldviews and thus shape political views and, as Siskind put it, “foster emancipatory goals” (355). In the most general terms, the case of Bolaño warns against the separation of the literary as an independent sphere in and of itself, and the material. In cases where political or economic agendas, incentives or imperatives seem lacking, it is more likely that they are obscure than non-existent. In broad strokes, I have argued that the case of Bolaño confirms the theories of Casanova, Moretti and Thomsen, but that it reveals certain problematic issues, which may help us update the theories.

To begin with, I have shown how 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. This is, in fact, something she has been criticized for (see Ganguly). Moreover, Seattle is an overlooked center that has grown into a 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 (in the case of Amazon), but I argue that these processes are already being compensated by the same modes of connectivity and that access to books as well as reviews, criticism, editorials, debates has never been better. 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.

As evident from Bolaño’s success, Casanova’s postulation of the independence of literary phenomena runs the risk of obscuring 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 risks obscuring important factors, such as the shared history of the source and target regions. Thomsen’s temporal sub-systems are arguably better suited to explain the momentum of peripheral regions, such as the Boom, since it is slightly more receptive to 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 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 momentum between 1960-1980.

Casanova’s positing of the commercial and the artistic as opposite poles is inaccurate and Bolaño’s success serves to underscore that point in many ways. For instance, the success of 2666 in spite of its challenging nature demonstrates that the two categories are not mutually exclusive. Casanova claims that the system is favoring the US blockbuster, but Brouillette describes the fragmented nature of the market and how avant-garde writing exists because it is driven by niche markets and thus commercially viable. Thus, the two concerns interact differently and can hardly be described as incompatible.

Regarding Moretti’s theories, Bolaño conforms to his model but reveals that foreign language criticism does not travel with foreign language works. This fact is cause for concern on many levels. Moretti has been criticized himself for relying too heavily on English texts for his own work in spite of the fact that literary criticism is, just as the literature it criticizes, practiced in many different languages. This poses an additional layer of problems including inequality, stratification and cultural tunnel vision. According to Moretti, “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. I argue that this position is more realistic than Casanova’s as it is more responsive to the
material directly (or indirectly even), influencing the intellectual and vice versa. Attempting to separate the two, threatens to obscure the ways in which the two worlds interact.

The paper has also discussed Thomsen’s notion of canonization being a decentralized process of selection versus the harsh realities of unequal opportunities of even being in range of a wide and differentiated audience. On the one hand, there is a marked centralization in the case of Amazon but also a marked democratization as is evident from growing influences of readers’ reviews and general access to literary works and criticism. Bolaño’s case demonstrates that even though his rise to prominence was greatly assisted by their endorsement, Amazon 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, but they can add significantly in the mass distribution of works that have already garnered acclaim. All in all there was hardly anything suspect about Bolaño’s rise to success, given the sheer amount of institutions, companies, critics and authors involved in the process.

However, 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). Thomsen claims that the Western canon is dominated by writing that has some affiliation with the Western tradition. As I have demonstrated, Bolaño’s work, in particular his latest novel 2666, is very much influenced by traditions typically associated with the US and Europe to the degree that one wonders what exactly is foreign about it, except the image of the author, which, as I have discussed, is already somewhat suspect. What is essentially remarkable here is the fact that the most critically acclaimed Latin American novel by the most prominent Latin American author in recent years both pastiches established US and European classics and largely mediates its “foreign” setting through US and European protagonists. However, these considerations need to be viewed in the context of his greater oeuvre. Unlike The Savage Detectives, in which we find a lot less of the overt Western-ness, 2666 seems to explicitly solicit a global English readership.
This raises the question of how representative such work can ever be of the Latin American cultures and nations (as it is frequently assumed to be). I have pointed out how this representability is used to sell such works. By adopting Miuri’s logic—that nationally canonized authors are more likely to be seen as representative of their respective cultures—I have established that there is indeed a connection between the systems that is made manifest when authors move from one system to the other. The regional success of an author thus becomes read in the abstract in the international arena as endorsement for national representation and cultural ambassadorship, causing the author’s works to be viewed as representative of his national culture. Indeed, Bolaño’s mythical image in the US reveals that his Hispanophone success facilitated his travel to the Anglosphere but the Hispanophone criticism garnered by his works did not travel with him. Put differently, his success traveled in abstraction. This fact suggests the existence of a linguistic barrier at the level of criticism, both in mainstream media as well as scholarly capacities. This fact might also explain why Casanova’s theories are not sufficiently in tune with fundamental theories on globalization and postmodernity (Ganguly), or, to put it more plainly, why her World Republic of Letters seems better informed by Bourdieu than by Jameson. 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 alternatives” (Thomsen, 31), but also looking for discrepancies in the criticisms that accompany works across linguistic barriers and search for signs of cultural imperialism.

As I have discussed, the perspective of world literature as proposed by Casanova, Moretti and Thomsen runs the risk of underemphasizing the political, national and historical conditions of the creation and circulation of literature. Conversely, post-colonial literature could be said to overemphasize these same factors. As a solution to the “blind spots” on both sides of the debate, Helgesson suggests “there may be good reason—up to a point—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 circulational phenomenon that moves
across languages and literary fields” (484). 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).

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. 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 factors 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. Notions of authenticity plausibly aided his success since Bolaño had both lived in and written about the Latin American continent’s past and present traumas (many of which involve or implicate the US). Moreover, 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. Just as the English is hypercentral among the world’s literary languages (Heilbron), the rootedness of globalization in US cultural norms needs to be appreciated. Thinking in dichotomies of core and periphery may in some cases obscure this fact.

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, and shunned when found lacking (Pollack 2013). Bolaño has thus managed to recalibrate US expectations towards Latin American authors, but the fact that a fixed set of expectations still affects their ability to travel is cause for concern.

In the past century or so, literary scholarship has actively avoided involving the author in the critical dissemination of texts. However, recently the focus seems to be returning to the author as someone who is, for better or worse, tied to the marketing and reception of his or her works, as “paratext,” through self-publication,
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general biography, interviews etc. (Brouillette). As I have discussed, 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 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 holistic view of how and why texts travel.

This paper has taken a single example from 2666 to frame a problematic issue regarding autonomy and the independence of literary or artistic phenomena. The ways in which sections of 2666 can be construed as commentary on literature are myriad. From the cult author Benno von Archimboldi to the journalist Oscar Fate the book includes scholars, poets, painters, publishers, fans and fanatics of every order as well as countless implicit or explicit homages, allusions, nods and jabs towards other authors and works. An exhaustive investigation of these is well beyond the scope of this paper and in the light of a growing body of scholarship on 2666 and Bolaño on both the Spanish and English side, one can surely look forward to the subject to yield many valuable insights in the years to come. Moreover, one anticipates that a novel such as 2666, which frustrates the limits of possibility for the very novel form, will usher in the spirit of co-operation across linguistic and national boundaries, lest, as Moretti would say, “world literature will always remain a mirage.”
Works Cited


