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Distant Star: Roberto Bolaño
on Aesthetics, Fascism,
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Distant Star: Roberto Bolaño
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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After a decade or more in which much of Latin America had been governed by anti-democratic, authoritarian, and even genocidal regimes, from the mid-1980s the region experienced a widespread if gradual transition to democracy.

Much had changed, yet much also
stayed the same.

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The region was still plagued with the inequalities and historic injustices that had led to social conflict in the first place.

One of the first tasks of the new, nascent democracies was to account for the recent past in a bid to understand the sources of the bloodshed, hopefully to prevent its future re-emergence.

Some of these processes led to prosecutions. Elsewhere, various forms of amnesty were proclaimed, limiting who could be prosecuted. Investigations and judicial claims for recognition or recompense continue to this day.

Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star* expresses ambivalence about the way in which, in lieu of official inquiry and prosecution, private initiatives take matters into their own hands.

it also questions the role of literature and art: both their potential complicity with the violence itself, and their role in the struggle for memory, justice, and reconciliation thereafter.

Literature can never forget that it is first and foremost an index of barbarism, and only secondarily (if at all) any kind of recompense or restitution.



ART AND ATROCITY

“Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. [. . .] To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. [. . .] Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.” (Theodor Adorno)

The problem to which Adorno points has become more critical in our current “post-truth” epoch, for which everyone’s opinions are only ever relative, a function of the media bubble they happen to inhabit.

“Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.” (Theodor Adorno)

“Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed. [. . .] All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.”

(Theodor Adorno)

“There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. [. . .] A historical materialist therefore disassociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”

(Walter Benjamin)

“Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.”

(Walter Benjamin)

“We were mostly members or sympathisers of the MIR or Trotskyite parties, although a few of us belonged to the Young Socialists or the Communist Party or one of the leftist Catholic parties.” (6)

“Most of us there talked a lot, not just about poetry, but politics, travel [. . .], painting, architecture, photography, revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought.” (3)

“There was something distant and cold about his writing.” (11)

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“Alberto, she said, is going to revolutionize Chilean poetry” (14).

The real path-breaker, avant-garde shock troop of new forms of expression, will be this newcomer who will turn out to have the courage of his convictions, and then some.

“It seemed to be moving as slowly as the clouds. [. . .] There, high above the city, it began to write a poem in the sky. [. . .] the letters appeared, as if the sky itself had secreted them. Perfectly formed letters of grey-black smoke on the sky’s enormous screen of rose-tinged blue, chilling the eyes of those who saw them.” (25)

**“IN PRINCIPIO . . . CREAVIT DEUS . . .
CAELUM ET TERRAM.” (25)**

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.” (Genesis 1:3-4)

This is a didactic text for a new era, a new creation *ab nihilo* as Allende's defeated supporters are put to the sword.

“He was called upon to undertake something grand in the capital, something spectacular to show the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds, quite the contrary.” (77)

*“Death is friendship. [. . .] Death is Chile.
[. . .] Death is responsibility. [. . .] Death is
love and Death is growth. [. . .] Death is
communion. [. . .] Death is cleansing. [. . .]
Death is my heart.” (80, 81, 82)*

“Death is resurrection.” (82)

The poem suggests a necropolitics, or a political philosophy that puts death at its centre, exalting annihilation as the premise for national identity and community.

Chile will be a country founded on extermination. Culture and barbarism will unapologetically coexist.



FASCISM'S CONTRADICTIONS

It is as though the reader has to be kept at a distance, as though what the images reveal is too shocking to contemplate

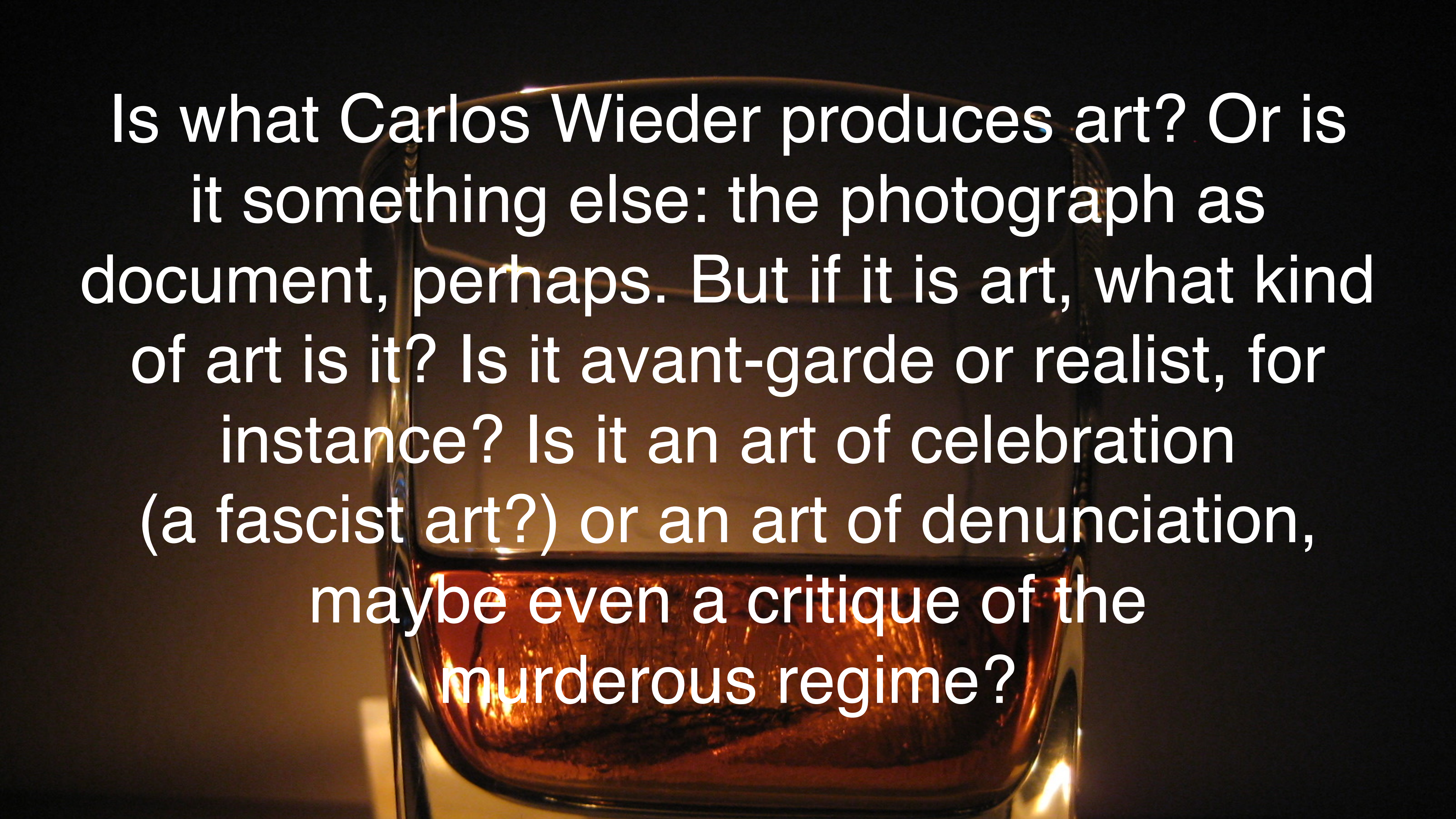
“Lieutenant Julio César Muñoz Caro, who years later was to publish a self-denunciatory memoir entitled *Neck in a Noose* relating his activities during the early years of the military regime, informs us.” (84)

“Muñoz Caro claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women. [. . .] The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures. [. . .]

A photo of a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement.” (88, 89)

“Muñoz Caro could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken.” (88)

Is what Carlos Wieder produces art? Or is it something else: the photograph as document, perhaps. But if it is art, what kind of art is it? Is it avant-garde or realist, for instance? Is it an art of celebration (a fascist art?) or an art of denunciation, maybe even a critique of the murderous regime?

A close-up photograph of a glass filled with a golden-brown liquid, likely whiskey, with a dark background. The glass is the central focus, and the liquid inside is illuminated, creating a warm glow. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, sans-serif font.

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Wieder's sky-writing calls to mind similar stunts organized by the poet Raúl Zurita, who, as critic Gareth Williams reports, in June 1982 arranged to have his poem "La vida nueva" "transcribed by five aeroplanes over the skies of Manhattan."

“MY GOD IS HUNGER / MY GOD IS
SNOW / MY GOD IS NO / MY GOD IS
DISILLUSIONMENT / MY GOD IS
CARRION / MY GOD IS PARADISE / MY
GOD IS PAMPA / MY GOD IS CHICANO. . .

MY GOD IS CANCER / MY GOD IS
EMPTINESS / MY GOD IS WOUND / MY
GOD IS GHETTO / MY GOD IS PAIN / MY
GOD IS / MY LOVE OF GOD.” (Raúl Zurita)

“‘The New Life’ [. . . was] composed as a homage to minority groups throughout the world and, more specifically, to the Spanish-speaking people of the United States.” (Raúl Zurita)

“I thought the sky was precisely the place toward which the eyes of all communities have been directed, because they have hoped to find in it the signs of their destinies; therefore, the greatest ambition one could aspire to would be to have that same sky as a page where anyone could write.” (Raúl Zurita)

“The military coup and consequent suspension of all law and political representation [. . .] was the avant-garde gesture that made national life succumb to a principle of authority in which the only legitimate language was that of the barked commands of the state’s military and police elite.” (Gareth Williams)

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,
because Auschwitz is already a
particularly barbaric poetry.

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A coup is a form of aestheticized politics
that no amount of politicized aesthetics
will ever undo.

**“Wieder seeks to employ art in the
service of foundational fascist discourse.”
(Andreea Marinescu)**

“Arturo would have preferred a longer story that, rather than mirroring or exploding others, was, in itself, a mirror and an explosion.” (1)

Carlos Wieder presents a tension or contradiction within fascism itself, holding up a mirror to barbarism that might also be its undoing from within.

“[Fascism is] an ideology that is deeply concerned with establishing a mythical conception of time geared towards the production of an endless war against that which it interprets as outside of itself. Fascism emerges as a process of hyper-rigidifying boundaries, an attempt at containment.” (Andreea Marinescu)

“Fascist literary discourse presents art as a sphere completely separate from politics and history, thus promoting a conception of the autonomy of art that seeks to cover its violent politics.” (Andreea Marinescu)

Fascism is “driven by a fear of dissolving borders, a reactive need to affirm the body's hardness and invulnerability”
(Andreea Marinescu).

Yet there is, especially in Wieder's final performance, also a countervailing tendency towards "deterritorialization," by which boundaries and borders are in fact breached and dissipated, and transcendence (hierarchical ordering) is replaced by immanence.

The regime's right-hand men (and women)
are confronted with an unapologetic
barbarism that undoes any claim that the
coup has somehow re-established civil
order or propriety.

“It was this reversion of the line of flight into a line of destruction that already animated the molecular focuses of fascism, and made them interact in a war machine instead of resonating in a State apparatus. *A war machine that no longer had war as its object and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction.*” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari)

“Fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition.” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari)



NI OLVIDO, NI PERDÓN

“In 1992 his name appeared prominently in a judicial report on torture and the disappearance of prisoners.” (108)

The pact of amnesia sets in, as the basis for democratic coexistence in a country whose wounds would never fully heal.


“Groups of boys and girls [. . .] getting on at one station and off at the next, as if it were a game.” (148)

“He didn’t look like a poet. He didn’t look as if he had been an officer in the Chilean Air Force. He didn’t look like an infamous killer. [. . .] Not at all.” (145)

Romero, or his client, seems to be operating in line with the slogan that circulates post-dictatorship Latin America's social movements: "no forgetting, no forgiveness."

“This really has been a dreadful business. Dreadful, repeated Romero, as if he were savouring the word. Then he laughed quietly, grinning like a rabbit, and said, Well, what else could it have been?” (149)

Brushing history against the grain will always leave some sense of discomfort, as we realize our inevitable complicity in its ongoing violence.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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