VISIONS OF THE END: TIME FOR REVOLT, TIME FOR INTERRUPTION

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This dissertation is a critical examination of the temporalities that posit a profound radical cut in the present as the precondition for the emergence of a new era of sociality and politics in Latin America, in particular, in Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. This is an immanent critique of these articulations of time that I label under the name of *messianic temporalities*. In particular, I contend that the messianic organization of time in Latin America demands a serious study as an analytical concept useful for addressing the question of the future of struggles for freedom. I advance the notion of messianic temporalities as a means to interrogate and reactivate the logics of a radical transformation of the present. In this dissertation, I provide a critical mapping of the shape and effects of the messianic within Latin American political structure through its aesthetic production that ranges from literary materials to contemporary art and experimental video. Ultimately, I assert the importance of distancing ourselves from this concept in order to address new temporalities of revolt that break with a present order that does not seem to end.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gustavo Quintero obtained his Bachelor of Arts in Literature and a Master of Arts in Literature and Philosophy from the Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia. He obtained a Master of Arts from Cornell University. He is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Harvard University.

A Tata y Gona. Porque lo que se perdió siempre se lleva.

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Introduction

Ours is a time in which right-wing political movements are rising on a global scale. As this last shape of the neoliberal rationale takes hold, representative democracies seem unable to repel this threat. Yet, at the same time, we hear that rapid technological and economic development is the path to achieve progress. These would seem to go hand-in-hand with the fulfillment of democratic ideals. Such politico-historical imaginary, which is nothing other than a slightly reinvented teleological conception of history, fosters the ravages of the neoliberal onslaught with its recent fascist nuances.

This imaginary rests upon an organization of time –understood as the way we collectively relate the past, the present, and the future– that claims to grasp the true meaning and sense of history. The linear and homogenous trajectory of progress depicts the future as an improved version of the present based on the premise of individual investment, debt, and profit. Such imaginary of history saturates any expectation about the future with the present political order, and in so doing, it rigs out any conception of a radical change taking place. The very thought of the future fails to depict a scenario other than the repetition of this grim present; it only appears as a story told over and over with slight variations. It seems that we are only able to ask: what is to be done?

It has already become commonplace to suggest that a disavowed teleology persists after the fall of grand narratives of emancipation. Yet, precisely because this widespread and powerful imaginary posits a linear sense of history in which past, present, and future follow an unbreakable continuum, conceptions of future emancipations have become saturated with an imprecise temporality. These depictions seem more akin to be doubtful utopian thoughts than possible sociopolitical alternatives. Throughout this dissertation, I claim that, it is the very conception of

chronological time as measure to trace how the present follows natural single direction what obscures creative forms of political struggle that conceive the future other than the linear outcome from the present order.

In what he calls "imperial futures," Fernando Coronil studies how chronological organization of time legitimates colonial expansion by asserting that the colonies' future is the quest for reaching an always-deferred civilized state. "Under the burden of imperial futures, the present has appeared as a transitional period, a stage of history to be left behind, if not simply rejected as an embarrassing reality. These ideal futures have always already been known because they have always been the present of metropolitan centers" (Coronil 2011, 245). Chronological time, as the bearer of these imperial futures, is one major agent of concealment of multiple and dissimilar forms of struggle in the present. In Latin America, under the lens of chronological time, revolutionary legacies can only be seen as echoes of utopias turned into ruins after the fall of grand narratives of emancipation. The glorious years of the Cuban Revolution have become a timeless set of ruins. Colombian guerrillas have evolved into symbols of senseless violence and drug smuggling. Mexican institutionalized politics have coopted the image of the Mexican Revolution to use it as a means to neutralize any counter-rationality opposing the state. These widespread conceptions about the failure of revolutions only reassert that insurrectionary movements in Latin America offer no alternative to think beyond non-sustainable neoliberal political regimes.

This dissertation demonstrates how other conceptions of time, in particular, visualizations of a profound radical change in the future, as they posit new forms to think about the future in terms of potentiality and hope, are the condition of possibility for the development of a collective subject intending to change the present state of affairs. This dissertation will focus on Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico, as three of the major revolutionary cultures in Latin America, to enquire

about how these conceptions of time that visualize a profound break in history serve as the basis for a new state of affairs to emerge.

Visions of the End is also a critical examination of the temporalities that posit a profound radical cut in the present as the precondition for the emergence of a new era of sociality and politics in Latin America, in particular, in Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. This is an immanent critique of these articulations of time that I label under the name of *messianic temporalities*. In particular, I contend that the messianic organization of time in Latin America demands a serious study as an analytical concept useful for addressing the question of the future of struggles for freedom. I advance the notion of messianic temporalities as a means to interrogate and reactivate the logics of a radical transformation of the present. In this dissertation, I provide a critical mapping of the shape and effects of the messianic within Latin American political structure through its aesthetic production that ranges from literary materials to contemporary art and experimental video. Ultimately, I assert the importance of distancing ourselves from this concept in order to address new temporalities of revolt that break with a present order that does not seem to end.

In *Visions of the End,* I posit that, because of their inherent fictional character, the literary and visual materials that I study have played a critical role in delineating the contours of the radical rupture that breaks with the established form of institutionalized politics. I use literary materials such as novels, letters, and short stories, and visual materials such as films, contemporary art, and experimental video, to study how each insurgent movement has visualized the moment of interruption and the futures that might emerge out of it. Through those aesthetics portrayals of a radical cut, I trace the hopes, anxieties, and frustrations that such possible interruption entails. By creating a series of dialogues between the visual and written materials, in conjunction with three

different geographical locations –Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico– I establish a comparative imagery of revolutionary processes, each one with their own logic, and their own messianic temporality.

Although the messianic has been a widely-discussed question in continental philosophy, which has led to fruitful readings of Walter Benjamin, Jacob Taubes and Ernst Bloch by several thinkers from the European tradition (Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, and Werner Hamacher are just a few of them), I attempt to immanently think how these messianic figures take shape in the recent history of Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico.[1] This is not to say that I disregard the discussions of philosophers from the French, German, and Italian traditions; in fact, my research has been incredibly enriched by them. However, I stand away from any application of a deterministic concept of the messianic, since I run the risk of occluding the very same threads of history out of which messianic temporalities in Latin America emerge, each with their very own dynamic. Ultimately, this critical remapping of the shape of the messianic will enable me to elicit its analytical shortcomings, which, in turn will lead me in a quest for alternative approaches to historical processes that extend beyond this concept without discarding the idea of the emergence of new temporalities that work against chronological time.

Messianisms and Messiahs: Figures of the Continuum of History and its Ruptures

When I use the term "messianic temporality," I refer to a given organization of time that enables us to think about temporality beyond its chronological dimension. The messianic organization of time posits that a future radical change in a social and political structure will eventually occur.[2] In

[1] Agamben's entire opus is influenced by Benjamin's Theses. See, for instance, *The Coming Community*; *The Open*, *The Time That Remains*. We can see Derrida's debt towards Benjamin in texts such as "Faith and Knowledge," "Force of Law," in *Acts of Religion*; *Specters of Marx*; Hamacher's texts such as: "Affortative, Strike," "En-Counterings of Time," "Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion'," "Messianic Not." I leave aside secondary bibliography about these texts because of the sheer amount of material available.

[2] I use the terms messianic temporalities and a messianic organization of time interchangeably.

this articulation, past struggles for emancipation and social justice can serve as the basis for imagining possible futures in which a profound transformation has to occur by taking the form of a clear cut, bringing a halt to the present state of affairs. Such a profound cut recuperates past attempts to find alternatives for self-government and uses them as a breeding ground for new practices and new modes of political organizing. These messianic temporalities do not entail a teleological idea of progress as their conditions of possibility; instead they offer plural modes of imagining an impending and thorough transformation of the present by rigorously addressing the task of recuperating the past. To enquire about such messianic temporalities is to think about the shapes that a profound cut in history can adopt in such a magnitude that it can be capable of bringing an end to the present state of affairs and serve as the basis for making a whole different structure come into being. Logically, my question is not about a prediction of when, or how, such a change will occur. Instead, it is a query of how that shift has been envisaged through a number of aesthetic materials in different moments of social turmoil in Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. Through the study of these different messianic temporalities, I aim to approach the future not as an irreversible juggernaut that has already taken place based on certain epistemological parameters of the present. This is a study to conceive of the future as a horizon of expectation whose construction depends on a series of collective mobilizations that aim to interrupt a seemingly unalterable organization of the present. There is not *a single future*, there are *different possible futures* that go beyond the epistemic boundaries of the present.

Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" offer to me a point of departure to enquire about how time exceeds its locality in a linear trajectory in order to adopt other shapes in which the past, the present, and the future connect with each other in dissimilar and discontinuous modalities. Benjamin's text is also a starting point to visualize history as dense and

multilayered structure of interconnections between a plurality of pasts, presents, and possible futures. I approach Benjamin's figures of history not as final products to which I claim adherence. Instead, I consider them as preliminary figures necessary for me to begin this study. The more I explore multiple shapes of time, the more I stand away from the figures he proposes. For now, and in order to start this text, I will briefly sketch his reasoning.

Benjamin brings forth the main structure of a history conceived in terms of a radical rupture through a messianic break.[3] Against what he calls a "historicist" approach to history, which assumes that progress is the engine of historical movement, Benjamin asserts that the historical materialist approach has the task to trace the critical point in which history unfolds its fully redeeming potential. For him, the messianic rupture takes place as a moment in which the present breaks away from a continuum of empty time. In the time of the now [*Jetztzeit*], the present overflows beyond its own chronological structure. It is no longer a punctum in a linear trajectory of time. Instead, the present reclaims the forces of the past, and adopts a different shape, destabilizing the previous organization of time understood as a linear trajectory. The past can no longer be seen as a series of successive moments left behind, since it emerges in its full actuality in this fulfilled present. Through this movement, Benjamin delineates a figure of time that no longer resembles a straight line, nor an ascending spiral. If anything, and precisely as a starting point for my enquiry about the shapes of time, Benjamin's figure of time can be likened to a gigantic wave that crashes against the rocks. Time adopts a fluid and yet powerful formation that simultaneously breaks into myriad different instants.

[3] The bibliography about Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is overwhelming. I limit myself to name the texts that helped me organize my own posture towards the messianic. See, for example: Bensaïd "Walter Benjamin, thèses sur le concept d'histoire," *Walter Benjamin: sentinelle messianique*; Marramao, 397-405; Martel's *Divine Violence*; *Textual Conspiracies: Walter Benjamin, Idolatry, and Political Theory*; *The One and Only Law: Walter Benjamin and the Second Commandment*; Löwy *Fire Alarm*.

Now, as much as Benjamin helps us articulate the messianic in terms of a rupture in a continuum of time, he proposes a schema that needs to be filled with content and further challenged as it adopts new and more varied shapes. By this I mean that Benjamin continues to rely upon a dichotomy between, on the one hand, the empty time, and, on the other, the time of the now. If we are to take seriously the claim that there can be a radical rupture capable of inaugurating a new era and a new organization of time, we need to go beyond Benjamin's dichotomy. Let me begin by saying that not all "empty times" are equal, just as much as not all "times of the now" are the same: these are contingent on historical processes in a given geographical region. To abstract the organization of time from its geographical component is to overlook a series of localized dynamics by merely considering them as part of either the "continuum of history" or the "time of the now." The temporalities before the revolution are not the same in Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico, and it would be a profound methodological and historical mistake to assume that these temporalities are equivalent as much as to assume that the revolutionary processes in each one of these countries are equivalent. To engage in such a project is to neglect the shape that localized struggles take against geographically-bound power dynamics. Furthermore, to condense these processes into the overarching concepts of empty time and the time of the now is to conceal the actors of everyday forms of resistance by focusing solely on the all-embracing concepts of "the victors" and "the vanquished."

In order to explore the possibilities of the messianic beyond this dichotomy, Reinhart Koselleck can shed a new light on the category of historical rupture. In *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Koselleck studies how historical time can only be conceptualized by means of two very general categories, namely, *experience* and *expectation*:

> experience and expectation are two categories appropriate for the treatment of historical time because of the way that they embody past and future. The categories are also suitable for detecting historical time in the domain of empirical research since, when substantially augmented, they provide guidance to concrete agencies in the course of social or political movement. (Koselleck 258)

In other words, the categories of experience and expectation are empty concepts crucial to understand how a prevalent vision of historical time emerges and develops in a given epoch and, I will add, in a given geographical location. As such, the modalities through which past, present, and future connect with each other are by no means a given. Chronological time is not the only organization of time that exists, just as the messianic temporality is not a latent, deeper, movement of history. Neither of these modalities to think about time find their raison d'être in a preexistent law of history. They are two modes to imagine how history moves, two modes of articulating experience and expectation, and as such, two guiding lights that serve as basis to explore other figures of time, in particular, the ones concerning the question of interruption of the present political order.

Therefore, the wager in this dissertation is to conceive of *the messianic organization of time as a strategic concept* that will eventually lead me to elucidate shapes of time that depart from the messianic model of imagining a future rupture. By this, I mean that I approach the image of the messianic as a theoretical tool that is useful for exploring how moments of social turmoil mobilize the image of radical change as the precondition for a completely different future to emerge in the first place. This study will lead me to elicit the shortcomings of the messianic, and to further elaborate upon the figures of the radical futurities that go well beyond that strategic concept. Thus, I claim that the messianic organization of time is a productive tool to approach how

a profound transformation in the status-quo has been imagined in Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico, and how this has had profound effects in the dynamic between the constituted power of the state, and the constituent power of a collective subject. This is a necessary step to explore what figures of time can help us go beyond that model in order to articulate new orders of time more akin to the emerging forms of struggle. As such, in each section of the dissertation, I explore the dynamics that make the radical change to emerge as a possibility to create a new future. I study the imaginaries related to the messianic transformation of the present. I focus on the nuances, divergences, and failures that each configuration of possible futures has to face. Finally, I contrast three different revolutionary paths: the so-called *exhaustion* of the Cuban Revolution, the efforts to *interrupt* Colombia's institutionalized politics, and the *hopes* to find a new future of revolt in Mexico.

Exhaustion, Interruption, and Hope: Approaching Ruptures

I divide this dissertation in three sections that I call Exhaustion, Interruption, and Hope. In each of them, I compare written materials, such as literature and political theory, with visual formats that encompass films, contemporary art, and experimental video. In the first section, Exhaustion, I analyze the 1976 film *The Last Supper*, by Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, in conjunction with the 2007 text *La Fiesta Vigilada* by contemporary writer Antonio José Ponte. Through this comparison, I study the shifts in the conception of the future of the Cuban revolution. In *The Last Supper*, I explore how Gutiérrez Alea recreates a scene that took place during the XVIII century in a sugar mill called *Casa Bayona*. I argue that, by thinking about an emancipatory collective force beyond the institutionalized Revolutionary Government, Gutiérrez Alea mobilizes a veiled critique to how Fidel Castro portrayed himself as a messiah during the initial stages of the

revolution. In the second part of this section, I focus on Antonio José Ponte, whose stories create a Cuba trapped into a never-ending time in which past, present, and future become indistinguishable. I enquire into the Cuban revolution as a messianic rupture that was unable to fully break with a chronological organization of time, creating a scenario in which the future is nothing else than a series of attempts to grasp the revolutionary past.

The second section –Interruption– addresses the question of the future of revolt in Colombia. I elicit two forms to think about the relation between pasts, presents, and possible futures by approaching the civil population in terms of a potential collective actor of social change. I establish a counterpoint between the 2011 video called *The Knight of Faith* by multimedia artist José Alejandro Restrepo, and the letters that the revolutionary priest Camilo Torres wrote to the civil population in 1965. In Restrepo's video, one witnesses how the violence that the state uses against the civil population becomes an ordinary situation. His video is part of a security camera footage that, during the 1985 events known as *The Palace of Justice Siege*, recorded a man feeding the pigeons while the army mercilessly burned down a government building taken by a guerrilla group. I contrast this depiction of the civil population's passivity in front of state violence, with the 1965 popular mobilizations against a formal democratic system known as *El Frente Nacional*. I dedicate the second part of this section to study creative forms of self-government that strived to bring down such political system through everyday forms of resistance. I pay special attention to the collective movement of *El Frente Unido* organized by Camilo Torres, a priest turned guerrilla fighter, and I investigate this often-overlooked aspect of Torres by focusing on a series of messages he addressed to the Colombian population via the newspaper *frente unido*. For Torres, the Colombian population could bring to a halt the present state of affairs and bring forth a new form of radical democracy through a series of coordinated everyday actions.

Against this portrayal of a collective will to interrupt the status quo, the third section – Hope– focuses on how hopes in an upcoming change fail, and how, nonetheless, from the urban rubble and decay, new forces to create possible futures can emerge. In this section I establish a contrast between Mexican writer Juan Rulfo and video-art pioneer Sarah Minter. I study Rulfo's short-story compilation, *El llano en llamas*, to see how these stories narrate the flip-side of a profound rupture in the present. These narratives are fictional descriptions of the change that did not happen and of the despair that ensues after the characters realize that their situation will not change after all. The second part of this section intends to break away from this underside of messianism, and points towards new counter-rationalities in the neoliberal age. Here, I study the experimental video of Mexico in the 1980s through the work of Sarah Minter. In *Nadie es Inocente* and *Alma Punk*, Minter depicts the underground punk-scene of Mexico City, in particular, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. In this part of my text, I come back to the question of the ruins of the messianic promises of revolutions past. However, in this situation I study how the videos depict a process of appropriation of the debris in order to transform them into instances where new forms of community emerge at the margins of a Mexico at the verge of the neoliberal turn. I finish this last section by considering how Minter depicts Tijuana and the border as a threshold where counterhegemonic cultures appropriate the space in a way that transgresses the very concept of the border. Minter shows that the punk communities' shout "La Neta no hay futuro" is not a cry of resignation, but a new form of militancy striving to open a new epoch.

EXHAUSTION

Over the last years, Cuba has endured several major changes concerning the leadership of its government and its foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States. This unprecedented conjuncture in the Cuban Revolution opens several questions about the future of the Revolutionary government and, more broadly, about socialism in Latin America. How do the hopes in the Cuban Revolution evolve throughout its nearly sixty years of existence? How did its initial promises collide with difficult circumstances such as the fall of the Soviet bloc? How did many intellectuals in Cuba, but also abroad, manifest their betrayed hopes in the Cuban Revolution? To properly understand the messianic character of the Cuban Revolution, one has to trace the dreams that the revolution as a constituent force carried with it. One has to trace how those hopes as later on were crushed by the actual paths taken by the Revolutionary government. In this section, I will explore how the utopian hopes of a future redemption collided with its historical exhaustion.[4]

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, one of Cuba's most important filmmakers, and Antonio José Ponte, a contemporary Cuban author now exiled in Spain, offer two different perspectives of an emancipatory messianic promise and its violent negation though its encounter with the historical reality. These two perspectives offer the possibility to trace, contrast, and theorize the messianic aspects of the Cuban Revolution at two different moments of its history. On the one hand, Gutiérrez Alea, with the film *La última Cena*, depicts the unsuccessful grassroots revolt at the *Casa Bayona* at the end of the XVIII, and in so doing, he attempts to think Cuban history beyond the grand narratives of redemption. At the same, he depicts a need to use *history as a weapon* to pursue an emancipatory struggle that the film leaves as a promise to come. On the other hand, Antonio José Ponte's *La fiesta vigilada* reflects upon contemporary Cuba by depicting it as a land in ruins, where

[4] In a way, I expand Slavoj Zizek's statement that to properly understand a past epoch, one has to take into account the utopian hopes of a future redemption that did not happen (Zizek 89).

the Messiah arrived and left the island behind. Ponte traces the history of the ruins, and in so doing, he uncovers two dialectically opposed aspects that articulate the organization of time that takes place in this post-messianic Cuba. Such aspects are time and eternity. I contend that Ponte's journey through the different layers of ruins in Havana offers a reflection not only about the fatigue of a linear conception of history, but also, about the question of how to think of forms of revolt in Latin America in a moment of exhaustion of the Revolution as an upcoming promise of emancipation.

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I. Messianic Promises of Radical Futures in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *The Last Supper*

The beginning of the 1970s marked a turning point in the trajectory of the Cuban Revolution. The economic crash following the outcome of the ten-million-ton sugar harvest program, and the repressive measures taken against artistic production, made clear that its initial idealism began to conflict with a Socialist state under the wing of the Soviet Union. The ICAIC [Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry], an organization that emerged only three months after the overthrowing of Batista, and which played a key role in disseminating the revolutionary vision of struggle towards freedom, was not exempt of this institutionalization process.[5] The ICAIC incorporation into the National Ministry of Culture "marked the symbolic loss of the privileged autonomy the Institute had enjoyed since its founding" (Burton 133).[6] It was

[5]For the sake of clarity, in the following pages I will use the term "revolution" in lowercase letters to refer to the constituent process of forming a new government. I will use the capitalized "Revolution" when I allude to the constituted governmental structure.

[6] For more studies about the emergence of the ICAIC and the Cuban revolutionary cinema, see Castillo "El cine cubano, más allá de Fresa y chocolate," and King *Magical Reels*. Also, it is worth noting that even though most

clear, then, that the Cuban Government had taken a path of bureaucratization, leaving behind the enthusiastic initial phase that enabled Fidel Castro to consolidate its leadership by crafting a public persona of messianic redeemer. Although in the 1970s Castro would not abandon its use of religious rhetoric, it was during the first decade of the revolution that he would craft his self-image as savior of the island while framing the Cuban Revolution as part of a grand narrative of liberation by relying on a rhetoric of millenarian redemption and guilt. Castro depicted himself as a harbinger of change who would bring closure to an epoch of moral and political decay.

In 1976, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, a founding member of the ICAIC, released the film *The Last Supper* (*La última cena*). This was a film based on events registered in a short passage from the 1964 book *The Sugar Mill* by the historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals. At the end of the eighteenth century, an eccentric Count, owner of a sugar plantation called *Casa Bayona*, attempted to recreate the biblical scene of the last supper for the sake of commemorating Holy Week. The day after the dinner, the slaves revolt and the Count hunts each of the former apostles. After showing their heads impaled on stakes, the film ends by focusing on the only survivor, the most rebellious slave, who successfully escapes. This motion picture was released eight years after his internationally acclaimed *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1969) and five years after *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* (1971), a movie loosely based on historical events from a book with the same name by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz.

In a conference he had meant to read at Duke University before being denied entry to the United States, Gutiérrez Alea explains why in *La última cena,* he decided to adopt a historical perspective and focus on the events at the sugar mill in the *Casa Bayona*. At that point of his

histories of post-revolutionary Cuban cinema usually begin with the assertion that the ICAIC was the first cultural act of the new government, another revolutionary organization preceded it: *Cine Rebelde*. This organization was founded as soon as the rebels took power (Burton 124).

career, historical research enabled him to trace back the emergence of what he calls "the religious feeling" in politics:

> Religious feeling, as long as the causes which engender it do not completely disappear, remains stubborn and deceptive; and it is not strange that it appears in a worldly disguise *where you least expect it*. But the real problem is the orchestration of the religious spirit (in whatever form this is presented) to subjugate a class and to check the development of society. If on several occasions we've alluded to that problem starting with Catholicism, it's because it's nearer to us. (Alea 54, emphasis on the original).[7]

According to Gutiérrez Alea, Catholicism and the religious feeling needed to be differentiated for the sake of recognizing multiple currents within the long legacy of Christianity in Cuba. For him, the problem is not religion per se, but its use as a tool to legitimize a political regime under the pretense of obeying a divine hierarchy. Here, Gutiérrez Alea also renders visible one of the political tasks underlying his cinematographic career: to unveil the religious feeling that is still present even "where you least expect it." The filmmaker warns us against a mystifying use of religious rhetoric to cover the structures of exploitation in a political order. His critique, however, cannot be fully understood if one sees it as only an attack on religious institutions, and isolates it from an acute denunciation of the path the Cuban Revolution took immediately after his initial momentum. The filmmaker adopted a historical perspective in his motion pictures to unearth deeply rooted power structures whose means of self-legitimation largely depend on fostering religious visions of eschatology and messianism. *The Last Supper*, therefore, stands as a veiled

[7] The occasions to which Gutiérrez Alea refers here are the films *Una pelea Cubana contra los demonios*, and *La última cena*.

and yet acute critique of the Revolutionary Government's claim to belong to a grand narrative of providential emancipation and redemption.

The historical setting has led critics to highlight mainly two different aspects of the film. The first one is the reshaping of Hegel's master/slave dialectic between the Count and Sebastián, the slave who manages to survive. This reading has elicited productive commentaries about the depiction of Afro-Cuban religions in Cuban cinema, and on the ways directors in the 1970s have engaged with the Revolution's views about the legacy of slavery.[8] However, this interpretation has mainly portrayed the film as an account of the politics of the Cuban Sugar mill, and had fallen short in signaling the film's social commentary about Cuba between 1959 and 1976. Critics have also focused on a second interpretation, which signals a hypocritical attitude of the count towards the slaves.[9] To only see in the film a denunciation of religion through the figure of the Count, however, means to overlook the filmmaker's warnings about the pervasive character of the "religious feeling." This second reading forecloses any possibility that the film was actually pinpointing that the religious rhetoric had imbued the very structure of the Revolutionary Government.

[8] For Marilyn Miller 59-74, for example, the film depicts a space of resistance where the silenced voices of the slaves emerge to write a new history that corrects the colonial partial view of the past. Conversely, Peters 90-96, focuses on the master/slave dialectic to develop a highly compelling argument where she asserts that the film confronts the audience by asking them if "they are truly at ease with the concept of black liberation" (96). However, her text barely insinuates any commentary about the film position vis-à-vis race politics in Cuba during the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, Hernández 839-848 mobilizes the theoretical apparatus of Deleuze, Virno and Negri to go beyond a reading of the Hegelian dialectic. Nevertheless, he merely gives a few hints about the film's social commentary of post-revolutionary Cuba when he mentions that the Count's paternalism could be read as an allusion to Fidel Castro's leadership (844).

[9] Fiorani 85-96 displays a theoretical framework mainly centered on biopolitics to depict the Count as a sovereign that produces a series of *Homini Sacri* through the dinner. According to this reading, the Count uses Christianity to suspend the law and assimilate the slave alterity into an alleged process of creolization. Havard 58-67 makes the unfounded claim that the film uses the biblical rhetoric to evade Cuban censors and only serves a propagandistic agenda. In the same vein, Sundt 71-79 asserts that the film makes "anti-religious commentary through the actions of the count and the hypocritical ideologies that he preaches" (80).

This text considers *La última cena* as a narrative where Gutiérrez Alea, by depicting the unsuccessful grassroots revolt at the *Casa Bayona* at the end of the XVIII, attempted to think Cuban history beyond the grand narrative of redemption. Specifically, I argue that the film's focus on a suppressed upheaval is a means to antagonize the Revolution's teleological reading of Cuban history as a series of stepping stones that *necessarily* had to lead to the events in 1959. By looking at that episode, Gutiérrez Alea invites us to focus on the *unexpected* and the *contingent* as articulations of a history that goes against the grain of the grand narrative that enabled Fidel Castro to craft a persona of a messiah. This essay also conceptualizes Gutiérrez Alea's approach to history as a participatory process where popular revolt is the main actor for radical change, into what I call a messianism beyond a messiah. My aim is to illuminate how this conception of history goes together with Gutiérrez Alea's commitment with cinema as a tool to be critical towards the Revolutionary State, while assessing a loyalty vis-à-vis the radical rupture that the revolution initially entailed.

Indeed, Gutiérrez Alea's relationship with the Cuban revolution, which he himself characterizes as being both criticism and profound adherence, cannot be adequately grasped if one does not take seriously his claim of using *history as a weapon*.[10] For him, film is a privileged instance that enables the spectator to no longer "view reality as an unshakable given, but rather as a process. And even more, looking in this way gives us information and clues about where this process is taking us, while at the same time enabling us to participate in it" (Gutiérrez Alea 55). This assertion reveals that for the Cuban director, there is no other way to demystify the "unshakable given" of the status-quo than through collective bottom-up practices loyal to the initial

[10] About Gutiérrez Alea's assertion that his task as a filmmaker is to stand both in loyalty and criticism towards the revolution, see "No siempre fui cineasta" in Fornet*, Alea: una retrospectiva crítica.*

constituent force of the revolution, and beyond the constituted structure of the Revolutionary State.[11]

I trace how Fidel Castro skillfully crafted an image for himself as a messiah by inscribing his discourse of redemption in a prior narrative of republican nationalism. Then, I will show to what extent *La última cena* antagonizes both this conception of history and Castro's claim to be a harbinger of change. This initial emphasis on the metanarrative of the revolution enables me to delve into the means Gutiérrez Alea uses to shift the focus away from a top-to-bottom version of the Revolutionary History, towards a grassroots approach to past revolts. This will allow me to engage with a more formal analysis of the film where I will pay special attention to the scene where the Count sits with the slaves at the dinner table. Here, the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist plays a key role in the Count's attempts to legitimize his authority, but also in welcoming the ghost of the Haitian Revolution into the *Casa Bayona*. This ghastly presence will be highly important to approach the outcome of the revolt that emerges the day after the dinner as an enactment of the use of history as a weapon. These steps will help us further understand the cinematographic work of Gutiérrez Alea in his quest to visualize the messianic radical force of the Cuban revolution beyond its institutionalization. Accordingly, in a movement analogous to Gutiérrez Alea's, I attempt to trace the possibilities that the messianic force can offer as a concept that exceeds a purely theological sphere, and enables us to think of creative forms of emancipation and further self-government.

[11] In a further gesture to elucidate the relation between film and history, Gutiérrez Alea borrows the title *History as a Weapon* from another text by Moreno Fraginals, where the latter asserts that History as a discipline is also a site of class struggle. Given that most of primary sources are documents made by the dominant social classes, Moreno Fraginals advocates for coming back to them with the critical perspective that Marxism can offer (Moreno Fraginals 16).

1. The Messianic Shroud of Fidel Castro

The crafting of a grand historical narrative that depicted the Cuban Revolution as a necessary and ultimate step in a road towards Cuban freedom dates back from well before 1959. The political imaginary among intellectuals of the republic served as a breeding ground for the millenarian discourse of the early years of the Cuban Revolution to emerge as a decisive step towards redemption. As Rafael Rojas has pointed out, the revolutionary nationalism is not an invention of Fidel Castro, it emanates from a generalized republican frustration due to the limited sovereignty within the Cuban territory, largely incarnated in the Platt amendment, and its submissive pledges towards the United States (Rojas 190). This frustration led to a widespread feeling among the Cuban intelligentsia of an absence of direction, and a lack of a telos that could guide Cuba towards a national destiny (191).[12] This lack of a common telos caused the events of 1959 to seem as though they were an irreversible breakthrough towards near-future emancipation. In addition, this lack also retroactively inscribed the establishment of the Revolutionary Government into a narrative of tortuous emergence away from decay.

Moreover, six years prior to the ousting of Batista's Regime, this grand narrative was about to gain momentum when Castro pronounced his famous speech "History Will Absolve Me" as his defense in a trial that would send him to jail for one and a half years, and then to exile in Mexico.[13] In his analysis of "History Will Absolve Me," José Quiroga highlights that Castro relied on the "Oracular tradition of Cuban history" (a term Quiroga borrows from Rojas) that infused mainly apocalyptic and prophetic connotations in what was going to become the foundational text of the

[12] For a careful research about the feeling of frustration among the *letrados* in the republic, see also, Rojas *Tumbas* 51-68, and Rojas *Las repúblicas* 21-48.

[13] The bibliography about this period in the life of Castro is overwhelming, therefore for further reference, I will limit myself to mention Alonso 12-31; Martin 135-189; and Andrés Suárez 26-82.

Cuban Revolution (Quiroga 28). The framing of history that Castro presented in that document, and which later on became one of the keystones in the grand narrative of the Revolution, relied mainly on the question of the debt: "[this document] is about all the debts one individual voice speaking for the collective may have to the past, and it talks about the duty living generations have to those who already have come and gone. Fidel fashioned his struggle as the relationship between debtor and creditor" (29). Thus, far from a plea for absolution, the text depicted a historical movement that relied on a debt towards an individual who was carrying the weight of bringing a future of freedom to the many. The text shaped history in terms of obligation to that individual voice: future generations would be indebted towards him for his endeavors. Additionally, through the body of the speech, this indebtedness only becomes more evident as Fidel claims that the obsolescence of the legal system of the Batista regime would soon come to an end. A new set of laws would eventually emerge to inaugurate a new era while remaining faithful to both the historical struggles and the republican ideals upon which Cuba had been founded (Castro "La Historia" 48).[14] This proclamation, performatively depicted Castro as the *harbinger of changes to come*, but in so doing, asserted a founding moment in terms of obligation towards him. Hence, the inauguration of a future of freedom was simultaneously the inscription of an indefinite duty towards the liberator.[15]

In the first week of January 1959, a triumphant Fidel pronounced a series of speeches from Santiago de Cuba all the way to Habana. In those initial mass rallies, which would later become

[14] For a more optimistic analysis of this text, see Tariq Ali VII- XI. For further exploration about the "Oracular tradition of Cuban History" of this text, see Rojas *La Isla* 189-215.

[15] Here one can also think of the relation between gift/counter-gift that takes shape as debtor/creditor –or in this case, individual-liberator/liberated-collective. Émile Benveniste explores the relation between gift and obligation in the chapter called *Hospitalité*. In that same chapter, Benveniste references the foundational text on the gift by Marcel Mauss, "Le Don, forme primitive de l'échange."

his main mode to address and allegedly "discuss" with the *pueblo cubano*, he would nevertheless display a peculiar indebtedness towards the people in a way that he was never going to show again. In all these discourses, Fidel uses a tone of humbleness when addressing the crowd: "The Revolution reaches the triumph without any other compromise than the one it has towards the people, which is the only one to whom it owns its victory" says at Santiago de Cuba (Castro "Discurso militar" 41); "the revolutionary government will not receive orders from anyone but the people," he claims on January 6th in Santa Clara ("Discurso pronunciado en el parque" 15). Finally, after his triumphal entrance in Havana, where Castro would reiterate these gestures of gratefulness towards the Cuban people, he would quickly adopt a more self-assuring ventriloquism where he would claim to know the people's needs based on rhetorical questions he would ask at the mass rallies. Now, at stake here, however, is that the economy of debt would continue to be the founding ground for the relation between the constituent power of the Cuban population and the constituted power of the Revolutionary government. From that perspective, history would unfold either because the Revolution was indebted to the people, or the people were indebted to the Revolution.

Castro's speeches however, were only part of this discursive portrayal of the Revolution as an event taking place through a linear historical movement. Even before Castro presented himself as an anointed messiah in the *concentración Campesina* rally on 26 July 1959, where trained doves landed on his shoulders and many in the crowd fell to their knees (Guerra 41), the newspapers and magazines from both sides of the political spectrum depicted him as the undisputable harbinger of change. Only in the first nine days of January 1959, the conservative newspaper "Diario de la marina" published articles such as "La voz de la libertad," where the catholic priest Sergio García Pons portrayed Fidel as a prophecy by god; it reported how monsignors associated the triumph of the revolution with the triumph of the holy spirit, and entitled the front-page article about Castro's

entrance to Habana as an apotheosis. Similarly, the left-wing magazine *Bohemia*, went as far as to publish in February 1st 1959 a chronicle about how Fidel's mother, Lina Ruz prayed for the future of Cuba and for the triumph of her two sons, Raúl and Fidel. The periodicals, as Lilian Guerra asserts, "played a critical role in crafting a common history that all Cubans could share" (43), hence their amalgamation of religion with the revolutionary political discourse was capital in inscribing the 1959 Revolution in a grand narrative in terms of political and religious redemption.[16] This enabled the Cuban Revolutionary government to posit a continuity between two teleological visions of history: the nationalistic republican discourse, and the eschatological religious one. Thus, it seemed that Fidel not only had occupied a rightful place in bringing closure to an epoch of political decadence, but he had also inaugurated a new era of prosperity and "material change through moral redemption" (13). The outcome of this process was the identification of Fidel as the Messiah.

This identification is what propelled Castro, among crescent hostilities from the part of the United States, the revolution's rapprochement towards the Soviet Union, and a series of internal tensions between the Revolutionary government and revolutionary bottom-up organizations, to call for an enormous rally at the amphitheater of Havana a year later. In there, he asserted:

> We will see that the anyone who condemns a revolution that takes sides with the poor, that preaches the love for the neighbor and confraternity among men, that preaches justice among men, that preaches equality among men, that practices virtue and that condemns vices, that practices love, that practices generosity, that practices wellbeing, whoever condemns a revolution such as that one, betrays Christ and at the same time declares

[16] For a historical account on the way the magazine *Bohemia,* as well as *Carteles* and, *INRA* played key roles in the development of the doctrine of *fidelismo*, see Guerra, especially chapters 37-74, and 107-134.

himself capable to crucifying him once again, because Christ preached what we are doing! (Castro "Discurso pronunciado por el comandante" 29) [17]

Castro's messianism, and with it, the grand narrative of redemption, at this point were deeply rooted in a reinterpretation of the gospels.[18] This positioned the life of Christ and the Cuban Revolution in a same linear narrative, where the latter was putting into practice the former's lessons. This messianism, therefore, consisted in the assertion of a temporal continuity between two different forms of thinking about the future. The logical outcome of this process was the fulfillment of a redeeming mission through the Revolution. This alignment between Christ and the Cuban Revolution will reappear, albeit in an indirect manner, throughout Gutiérrez Alea's *The Last Supper*. The film focuses on an event of the eighteenth century to reflect upon the relation between the rhetorical use of religion, the conception of history that emerges out of it, and the possibility of interruption through popular revolt.

2. The Daily life at the *Casa Bayona* and the Holy Week

La última cena begins on Holy Wednesday by showing how the daily life of the sugar mill of the *Casa Bayona* starts to change in preparation for the dinner: The first twenty-six minutes narrate the quest for a runaway slave named Sebastián and the arrival of a very jovial Count who announces his intentions of recreating the last supper of Jesus Christ. While the overseer, Don Manuel, and other guards of the mill search for the missing slave, the Count inspects the sugar press and ponders whether to augment its production. This initial part already anticipates other

[17] For a more information about the relation between Castro and the Church see Betto, especially section 2, chapter 4; Crahan 156-184; Jans 110-122; and Kirk, chapters 3-5. Crahan in fact states that Liberation Theology had faint impact in Cuba, which contrasts with the most of Latin American countries at the time.

[18] For a study about the religious symbolism in Fidel Castro's speeches, see I. Miller 30-55.

events of the film: The narrative starts with Don Manuel screaming "Wake up, you shitty negroes" (*A levantarse, negros de mierda*) while he restlessly looks for the runaway, Sebastián. The overseer's attempts to control the slaves clashes with Sebastian's defiance, forestalling not only the end of the story, when the latter will escape once again, but also other moments of the film when the master/slave antagonism emerges in different intensities. These opening scenes announce the promise of a coming insurrection against the colonial order, also evoking the possibility of its future collapse.

After this inaugural scene, the Count discusses with the engineer, *Moniseur* Duclé, the need to increase sugar production because of "the events in Saint Domingue." This is the first of many euphemistic allusions to the Haitian Revolution and its consequences. The film reveals the fear of a possible revolt at the mill, but also the significance of Gutiérrez Alea's approach to Cuban history as a *long durée*. The incident that Gutiérrez Alea uses as the premise for the motion picture comes from a very short passage in the 1964 book *The Sugar Mill* by Manuel Moreno Fraginals, one of Cuba's most renowned historians of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Moreno Fraginals, the incident in the sugar mill of the *Casa Bayona* took place during the 1780s. In the film, however, the action occurs in the 1790s, after the slave uprising in the colony of Saint Domingue.

By situating the events a decade later after they actually occurred, Gutiérrez Alea emphasizes how the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution profoundly altered the Cuban means of production. Because of the events in Saint Domingue, the conditions for slaves in Cuba worsened. French landowners who left Haiti moved to the provinces of Cuba and brought with them the knowledge of how to run large-scale sugar plantations (Schroeder 80). "[A]s slavery and colonialism collapsed in the French colony, the Spanish island underwent transformations that were almost the mirror image of Haiti's. The sugar no longer produced in Saint Domingue was

now produced in Cuba" (Ferrer 10). After the fall of Saint Domingue, the need to satisfy the sugar demand not only entailed a fast and in-depth shift in the colonial organization of labor, but also the intensification of unpaid labor as the tasks became more and more severe: "Machinery, suddenly without a purpose in revolutionary Saint Domingue found its way to Cuba; so too did men who worked as sugar technicians and other considered experts in managing slaves. […] The Haitian Revolution thus hastened and hardened Cuba's sugar revolution and the brutal practices of enslavement that came with it" (10)[19]. Additionally, by modifying the date of the events, Gutiérrez Alea places the specter of the Haitian Revolution in the background of the narrative. When the topic of the Haitian Revolution emerges in a conversation, although all the characters know about it, none of them dares to name it explicitly, as if they ran the risk of invoking a haunting presence. *Monsieur* Duclé tells the Count that "there will be a moment when we will have more slaves than white people, and we already know what happened in Santo Domingo" (Gutiérrez Alea 1976). Moreover, other iterations of this peremptory sentence will also serve as the Count's justification for slaughtering all the slaves who were at the dinner. For characters in command, Santo Domingo is the locus of something that remains unsayable and whose impact here is only rendered audible through whispers as if it were a dreaded conjuring. [20]

In fact, the depiction of the Haitian revolution as a specter haunting the characters is a form to convey the constituent force of a popular revolt that resists to be fully integrated into the overarching linear narrative of redemption and debt. By this, I mean that the film evokes the

[19] A more detailed account of the historical context of *The Last Supper* would go beyond the scope of this text, please refer to Schroeder 78-92.

[20] For a literary approach to the influence of Haiti in Cuba, see Sklodowska, in particular, chapters 1 and 2. Fisher's research focuses on the philosophical and cultural impact of the Haitian Revolution in Cuba, see especially, "Introduction: Truncations of Modernity" and chapter 5. This also echoes Michel-Rolph Trouillot's statement that the "[Haitian] Revolution was on the limits of the thinkable" (Trouillot 88).

performative force of the Haitian Revolution as an unfolding event, not as a constituted referent whose meaning is already stable and closed. This presentation of the revolt *qua force* interrupts the status-quo at the sugar mill and simultaneously antagonizes any teleological approach to history. In addition, to grasp the Haitian Revolution's *impact of its constitutive force* in Cuba, Alea decided to look at the ways through which that event had been historically represented from a grassroots perspective. However, when he reexamined the archives of colonial slavery to focus on the narratives made by the slaves themselves, his endeavor reached a dead end. He realized that these documents "quite simply, they don't exist. That world has always been viewed *from the outside*" (Gutiérrez Alea 54).[21] Thus, the film, by narrating the incident at the sugar mill, breaks through that "outside," striving to pierce that opaque thickness of the history written only by the victors. In accordance with this historical task, Gutiérrez Alea guides the spectators from the daily life of the mill into the unusual reenactment of Eucharist. The day-to-day colonial structure, which represses forms of emancipation into mere whispers and euphemisms, slowly takes us to an instance where those concealed layers of history can unfurl from latency to actuality, reigniting a force considered to be forgotten, laying in the dustbins of history.

3. Would Jesus Want to Sit Once Again at the Table with the Apostles?

The dinner begins with a close-up of the Count's face while he is praying; then, the camera slowly zooms out and shows that he is sitting with his alleged guests at the dining table in a setting that mimics Da Vinci's painting.[22] During this camera movement, the Count looks at the slaves,

[21] To focus on the discussion of the cultural and political implications of the depiction of the Afro-Cuban in this film would lead me astray from the subject of this work. However, for careful studies of this topic, see the works of Morris 21-74; and Peters, in particular, chapter 1 and 4.

[22] For an analysis that explores the comparison between *The Last Supper* and *Viridiana* through the reenactment of Da Vinci's painting, see Sundt 73-75.

smiles, opens his arms in a gesture of hospitality, and says: "On a day like this, Christ gathered with his friends and his disciples, who were like his slaves, to say goodbye to them. Christ was going to die" (Gutiérrez Alea 1976). The camera then stays still, the Count remains the central point of the composition as he faces a table overloaded with food, while the slaves/apostles surround him and he looks directly at the camera, as if the spectators were his guests as well. While portraying the communion of the twelve apostles and Christ, the situation also renders visible the tension between the Count's ambition to reassert his authority, and the invitation to what is new and unpredictable. According to Tracy McNulty, the act of hospitality embodies a particular tension: on the one hand, the term comes from the Latin *potis*, which "names the master of the home, the one who makes the law in the house – the *casa*" (McNulty XI). On the other hand, McNulty points out: "being a host implies more than just mastery over the home; it means not only residing within the familiarity of the *chez soi,* but opening the *chez soi* of identity to what is unfamiliar to it" (XIV). Hence, as we will see in the following paragraphs, even though the Count organizes the situation for the sake of his power by trying to play the role of Jesus Christ, the same conditions that enable him to do so are the ones that bring forward the promise of change announced at the beginning of the film.

To be sure, the setting strives to reassert Count's mastery in different levels. The first one is the organization as the Eucharist: For Christianity, the commemoration of the Last Supper consists in the offering of bread and wine as the transubstantiation of the body of Christ, which is then shared by all the guests. When the Count offers his food as a gift to the slaves, he makes them enter in relation to one another "only to the extent that they 'actualize' the inactual essence of

Christ" (McNulty 142).[23] From this point of view, the slaves enter in communion only via the transcendent figure of the Christ/Count. The second level consists in *introducing the economy of debt and obligation through the notion of the gift*. The food that the Count offers to the slaves is an attempt to make them indebted towards him. Given that they will be unable to reciprocate the offering, the slaves will be tied to the Count in a relation of debt and moral obligation that would no longer be subjected to the official colonial rule.[24]

However, to reinforce this scheme, the Count is still obliged to bring forth a discursive element where he manipulates the biblical narrative with notable distortions: He narrates a story of Saint Francis of Assisi and Brother Leo where he compares slavery to their wandering through a cold winter while enduring grievances for the love of Jesus Christ. He also resorts to Saint Augustine as he elaborates a "narcissistic soliloquy about the function of slavery as a punishment for the Original Sin" (Downing 292). The Count uses these biblical scenes as fundamental instances where the material conditions of colonial exploitation and a spiritual legitimation of these conditions converge and close the disparity between them. According to him, the present state of affairs obeys to a divine law that he solely can explain, and by brining that knowledge to the slaves as a gift, he aims to both reassert his power over them, and obtain their complete recognition as a rightful redeemer. To say it somehow differently, he attempts to posit himself as a messiah, a bearer of redemption for the slaves, so they are morally indebted towards him. Just as in the

[23] Also, as Benveniste points out, Eucharist comes from the Latin *hostia*, which is a rite "the victim is used to compensate the anger of the gods" (Benveniste 193).

[24] For a detailed study about hospitality in relation to psychoanalysis and femininity, see Tracy McNulty, especially chapter 2 and 4. For a deconstructionist development of the question of hospitality, the gift, and the debt, see Derrida's *Politiques de l'amitié*; *De l'hospitalité*; and *Donner la mort*.

communion Christ transubstantiates into the host (*hostia*) and wine, the logic of the debt transubstantiates from the colonial sugar economy into a theological explanation of history.

The Count's attempt to become a messiah, nevertheless, renders visible a conceptual deadlock in a conception of history that mainly relies upon the debt towards the harbinger of redemption. If the messiah is the decisive actor in historical change, then no other transformation can take place after his arrival, for this would imply that the messiah would merely be an ephemeral component in a movement that exceeds him. This excess would cancel the debt that those redeemed, and their future redeemed generations, have towards him. Therefore, to be the harbinger of change, the messiah has to establish a new status quo after he arrives. He needs to be considered as the harbinger of change, even after that event has already happened, so that the debt can still be in place. A circular movement that comes back to the founding moment of the new order is the only way the debt towards him can be carried on. The Count certainly attempts to perpetuate this circular conception of history, and furthermore, this perspective also allows Gutiérrez Alea to mobilize a critique of the Cuban Government use of a messianic rhetoric. As seen in the first section, the Revolutionary discourse posits Fidel as the harbinger of change, and fashions history in terms of creditor/debtor.

Alea avoids making facile comparisons between the Count and Fidel Castro given that the Count is still an eccentric slave owner that takes advantage of his privileged status. However, the filmmaker underlines what is at stake in a conception of history that posits a harbinger of change as one of its foundational myths. Gutiérrez Alea draws an analogy between, on the one side, the Eucharistic hospitality, where the guests/slaves enter in a communion with the Count/Christ to the extent that they acknowledge to be under his supreme authority/generosity, and, on the other side, the implementation of the "love for the neighbor and confraternity among men" that the Revolution

preaches under Fidel (Castro "Discurso pronunciado por el comandante" 29). In fact, the movie highlights that these two discourses have in common the aspiration of subsuming a vast plurality into the image of a transcendent singular entity: The One that organizes the many. The Count, Christ, and Fidel share the conception of a community around what Saint Augustine calls "a single heart": "children regenerated by grace, […] citizens of the free city, in which they become fellow sharers of an eternal peace that excludes all love of merely individual self-will in favor of a love rejoicing in a common and immutable good and molding many souls into a single heart, into a perfect symphony of submissive love" (Augustine Book XV iii). In this community, however, dissent is seen as an unwanted act of "individual self-will" that needs to be excluded. Thus, the condition of possibility for this communion to emerge, is the exclusion of the remainder or excess that does not comply with the transcendent authority.

4. The *Hostia* and the Pig

The film shows that in spite of the Count's own will, his hospitality is also an opening to the unknown. A few moments after the supper begins, the Count demands that Sebastián, the runaway slave who was caught and beaten the day before, to sit next to him, so he can try to show how stubborn he is in trying to escape. However, after repeated failed attempts to obtain a response from Sebastián, the Count raises his hand and yells: "In the name of God, recognize me!" (Gutiérrez Alea 1976). There, the characters silently stare at each other, and Sebastián spits on the Count's face. Now, even if several articles have pointed out that this scene is an allusion to Hegel's master-slave dialectic given that the Count nearly begs Sebastián to recognize him, and he even uses the term "recognition", I maintain that the importance of the scene rests not only upon that

dialogue, but on its very staging and on the ensuing sequence of events. [25] During the encounter, as the Count alludes to God's authority to support his claim for recognition, the camera symmetrically frames the two characters: they see each other as equals in this shot. In this paradoxical overlapping between the Count who claims recognition in the name of God, Sebastián who remains silent, and the frame that depicts their equality, the supper visually depicts the tension between the authority of the host, and the openness towards an excess that, in any other moment, would have been excluded or suppressed. This gesture, nevertheless, takes off the shroud of divinity of the Count. Sebastián's insubordination interrupts the movement of the Eucharist, and thus reasserts the gap between the Count and Christ.

At any other moment, this defiance would have ended in Sebastián's expulsion from the communion around the Count. However, in welcoming the unknown, the dinner steps away from the ordinary and meshes into the unpredictable: In an allusion to the blood of Christ, the Count decides to invite his guests to join him for a glass of wine. At that moment, Sebastián stands up and drinks exactly in the same way as the Count. The force of this scene is undeniable: not only it evidences the interruption of the hierarchy regardless of the Count's attempts to reinforce it, but it also marks an overlapping between the guests and the ghostly spirit of revolt that haunts the sugar mill since the beginning of the film. The communion of the supper opens towards the excess of the unknown, and it becomes an invitation extended not just to the slaves as indebted guests, but also to the ghostly popular uprising that asserts a force of interruption of the logic of debtor/creditor. When Sebastián stands up just like the master and drinks the blood of Christ transubstantiated into wine, he interrupts the logic of a multiplicity that becomes One through a transcendent authority. Thereby, with Sebastian´s gesture, we witness the transformation of the

[25] For readings that focus on the master/slave dialectic in this scene, see: West 183–196, and Miller 64.

ghostly presence of popular insurrection into a tangible collective force. Thus, the slave's rebelliousness shifts the question of the messianic into a different order by setting in motion a *force of change* that relies upon a heterogeneous configuration of emancipatory potentials.

Here, the invitation to the unpredictable provokes a movement where the criticism of the theological disquisitions at the Eucharist transmutes into the criticism of politics at the sugar mill, and the interruption of the communion transmutes into a quest for a participatory mode of bottom-up organization.[26] This movement is by no means accidental in Gutiérrez Alea's work, as it has been a recurrent motif in the filmmaker's life. In the filmmaker's own words, although he was raised Catholic, he familiarized himself with Marxism: "The idea of communism to me looked very much like the one of paradise. The only difference was that the former was an expression of a logical and rational consequence of humanity's development and needed to be attained in this life" (Gutiérrez Alea 21).[27] In fact, earlier in *The Last Supper*, the Priest of the mill, while preparing the slaves for the dinner, nearly repeats the same words, when he affirms that in heaven "no one has authority over anyone else […] no one says 'this is mine and this is yours' because there everything belongs to everyone and no one lacks anything. Don't you people want to go to heaven?" (Gutiérrez Alea 1976). According to the priest, in heaven, private property has been abolished, and so has been the government. The transmutation of spirit and matter of the dinner introduces a radicalized version of this heavenly vision of socialism when the ghost of popular revolt is also invited at the table. In other words, the guest/host dynamic of the dinner leads to the

[26] With this sentence, I am obviously alluding to Marx's "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right,*" where he asserts that *the task of history* is to establish the "truth of this world" and where, "the criticism of heaven is transformed into the criticism of earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law*, and the *criticism of theology* into the criticism of politics" (Marx 54).

[27] For a study about the question of Christianity framed as an ideological remnant in Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, see Bosteels 109-114.

emergence of *a situation that defies the horizon of knowledge of the Christian discourse*, and also enables the constituent force of change to take over.

Half-way through the supper, the Count falls asleep, and immediately after, Sebastián begins to describe the formation of the world in the Yoruba theology. He narrates the creation of truth and lies by Olofi, one of the manifestations of the Supreme God: truth wears the head of lies, "so it goes around the world, tricking people, with the body of truth and the head of lies" (Gutiérrez Alea 1976). While telling this story, Sebastián grabs the head of a pig served at the dinner and places it in front of his face, as if it were a mask, so the spectator sees him as if he had a pork head instead of a human one. Given that Gutiérrez Alea actually did archival research about the primary documents concerning the sugar cane plantations in Cuba at the end of the eighteenth century, and about the Saint Domingue Revolution, he was necessarily acquainted with "The Bois Caïman Ceremony." This was a gathering of slaves in August 1792 where they planed the uprising that resulted into the Haitian Revolution: "hundreds of men and women held as slaves gathered together at a clearing in a forest called Bois Caïman, […] they were there to prepare for a radically different future. […] at the center of the gathering, a woman lifted a knife and killed a black pig in ritual sacrifice" (Ferrer 1). [28] From this perspective, by placing the head of a pig in front of his face, Sebastián refuses the *hostia* of the Eucharist, which, as we saw before, even if it is the "Christian name for 'host' or eucharist," it is "a close derivative of *hostis* in its compensatory connotation, designating a victim who serves to compensate the anger of the gods" (McNulty 258). The slave asserts a cut in a dynamic of the creditor/debtor, allowing the ghost of the Haitian

[28] Ferrer develops the connection between the sacrifice of the black pig in Bois Caïman, and a shortage of pigs in Havana around the same period: "The mention of the killing of pigs in Havana for the benefit of foreign black insurgents, however oblique, hints at some surprising possibilities. […] Might this brief and enigmatic allusion to foreign insurgents and pork shortages be a documentary trace of the ritual sacrifice of pigs in Havana in support of black revolution in Saint-Domingue?" (6).

Revolution to introduce an uncertain future beyond the status-quo that the Count wanted to preserve: "In the French colony the killing of a pig at Bois Caïman served as the ritual beginning the war against the slave regime" (Ferrer 10). This is the messianism beyond any messiah that Gutiérrez Alea proposes: Sebastián's reference to the slave gathering at Bois Caïman is a call to begin a collective movement of rebellion that endeavors to create a radically different future. In addition, by asserting "the body of truth walks with the head of a lie," Sebastián interrupts from the outset the logic of the many that become One: any transcendent entity will always already be permeated by a remainder that resists the logic of appropriation. Hence, as it displaces the image of a *harbinger of change*, this gesture conveys a shared force of revolt, a persistent and bottom-up fight for the very creation of coming times, whose only known characteristic is that they will be radically different. As I will show in the third part, even though the revolt of *Casa Bayona* fails, and most of the slaves are slain, Sebastián succeeds in his escape and in doing that, leaves an open future for struggle and resistance.

5. The Revolt and the Death of Jesus

A revolt arises on Good Friday: The night before, the Count had promised a free day for the slaves, but when he wakes up in the early morning, he assumes his duty is complete, so he goes away from the mill and leaves his former disciples behind. In the meantime, as if the dinner and the Count's promises had never taken place, the overseer violently enters the barracks, awakening the slaves in the same way he did at the beginning of the film by yelling at them: "Wake up you shitty negroes" (Gutiérrez Alea 1976). The failure of the Count's promises propels a discrepancy between Don Manuel's forceful attempts for continuing the colonial law and the slaves' desire for pursuing an uncertain future through revolt. Sebastián ends up killing Don Manuel, and in so doing, he allows the slave uprising to go well beyond the ghastly character it had until the dinner.

When the priest and the Count arrive at the scene and see the overseer's body, they realize that Jesus Christ died at that very hour. In spite of all his efforts, the Count failed to become a harbinger of change, and any attempt to justify his authority through Christianity has also crumbled down. The film shows one last transmutation when Christ dies as the Overseer, the absent figure in the dinner, which marks a halt in the logic of the communion around a supreme host. The Count is left behind, expelled from the very community that he wanted to assemble. Thus, after looking at the body of Don Manuel, the Count walks a few steps, looks at the burning mill, takes off his wig and drops it into the floor with anger and frustration. Thereby, the remainder of this process is a Count for whom the last resort against the ongoing revolt is to embrace the brutal means of repression that the colonial order uses when threatened. Thereby, the Count brings forth a law-preserving violence that feeds upon itself for maintaining not just the rules of the sugar mill, but also the very violent core upon which the Cuban colonial apparatus rests.

At the end of the film, eleven of the twelve apostles are dead, and in the same place where their heads loom impaled, the Count decides to build a chapel as a commemoration for Don Manuel. At this point, colonial cruelty merges with the Count's void religious rhetoric: the camera frames with a crane shot the wooden cross standing in the middle of the impaled heads. However, the camera is still moving and shoots one last close-up, this time at the empty stick meant for Sebastián, who managed to escape the nearly complete eradication of the dinner guests who saw the possibility for radical change. In the final shot, the former slave runs up a hill towards the sun, the montage makes rapid cuts between him and wild horses galloping, rivers flowing and an eagle flying. These last images depict a Sebastián meshing into a larger movement of a messianic hope that exceeds the brutal establishment of the Church (shown almost literally, since the Count orders the establishment of a chapel around the impaled heads of the slaves).

The film ends with a crushed revolt, but far from a defeatist vision of the future, it asserts that the colonial edifice of oppression is not as unshakable as it claims to be. When Gutiérrez Alea claims the need to use *history as a weapon*, he points towards the historical task of focusing on those excesses that the colonial apparatus cannot integrate. He asserts the need to look for instances that counter a historical metanarrative that claims to obey a divine order. Those instances reveal the empty kernel at the heart of the established hierarchy, by silently shouting that history can take other paths. This is the messianic promise that *La última cena* discloses: a constituent force of change that relies not on a single individual who claims to be a harbinger of change, but on different forms of action and horizontal organization that aim to alter a supposedly unflinching present.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea was a filmmaker both critical of the institutionalized Revolution, and partisan of the constituent revolutionary force. He makes it clear in *La última cena*, as he depicts a situation where an individual who asserts to be the messiah encounters face to face *a messianic force of change* that exceeds his mastery over the situation. What was supposed to be only a reenactment of a biblical episode changes the everyday forms of colonial oppression: the ordinary meshes with the extraordinary, and history attempts to take a different path than the one already paved for it to take. In this essay, I have tried signal Gutiérrez Alea's attempts to criticize the religious rhetoric that the Cuban Government used to root its position in a millenarian discourse by signaling that Fidel Castro's image of messiah shares with the character of the Count a conception of community based on a communion under a single transcendent entity. Hence, the film highlights the importance of the constituent force when it comes to think of creative modes of self-government, and encourages us to study the aesthetic depictions of those insurrectionary bottom-up practices.

II. A Land Left Behind by The Messiah: The Ruins of Eternity in Antonio José Ponte

Less than twenty years after Gutiérrez Alea released *La última cena*, a new generation of writers emerges in Cuba with a very different perspective about the Revolution. These writers, among which are Abilio Estévez, Ángel Escobar, Raúl Hernández Novás, Rolando Sánchez Mejías and Reina María Rodríguez, grew up during the harshest moments of the *período especial*. Thus, unlike most of Alea's contemporaries, they have a generalized disbelief about the promises of the Revolution.[29] In an interview from 2012, Antonio José Ponte states: "I never thought the Revolution or whatever was going on in Cuba could improve until leaving me satisfied" (Danciu 157). This peremptory sentence puts on display how the Revolution, as an ideal, has fallen behind the new era it had created.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Ponte has written in a multiplicity of genres, ranging from poetry, short stories, and essays to novels. Through all of them, Ponte has tried to grasp what he considers to be the Cuban decay. How does Ponte narrate the decay of a land that, according to him, cannot escape a circular time? What is at stake with his depictions of territories in which *everything remains*, and where any possible messianic event occurred more than fifty years ago? I address these questions as I follow the analysis that Ponte makes of the ruins and the different layers of time these enclose. I will mainly focus in three of his texts: "Un arte de hacer ruinas" (2000), "La viga maestra, el tiempo" (2006) and *La fiesta vigilada* (2007).

Ponte belongs to a generation of writers that critics such as José Quiroga and Isabel Álvarez-Borland have named "La Generación de la Diáspora," given that most of its members, including Ponte, are exiled from Cuba to settle in Paris, Madrid or Mexico City. These writers

[29] See Guillermina Di Ferrari, *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba*; Marta Herández Salván *Mínima Cuba*; and José Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests*.

were born in a moment of "process of Rectification of Errors." Initiated in 1986, this process entailed policies characterized by "a return of Guevarian ethical principles, [which] contributed without a doubt (whether intentional or not) to the eighties' cultural and political ebullience." (Hernández Salván 4). In that moment, where there was "space for dissent and debate that emerged at the universities as a result of the weaker political control of the State" (4). After 1990, this atmosphere collided with the scarcity policies. During the first years of the Special Period, literary production was almost non-existent because of the constant blackouts, a crisis of paper, and the exile of most of the printing technicians.[30] Indeed, the end of the twentieth century in Cuba was characterized by a socio-political convulsion that shook the Revolutionary regime into its roots. With the beginning of the post-Cold War period, marked by Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika in 1985, Cuba entered in a period of hope, deception and economic adversity. This period was "the best of times and the worst of times for the Cuban Revolution. The period began with the Perestroika and the hope for change for Cuba, only to end with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent economic and political crisis" (Herández Salván 4). Therefore, this generation of writers endured the profound change that entailed passing from an incipient cultural cheerfulness, to the fall of the revolutionary promise, in which the economic instability was bitterly widespread.[31]

The government took measures to counter the crisis during the Special Period with two main strategies: the first one concerned internal issues on the island. It aimed to equally distribute the social impact of the crisis among all citizens, so all society would feel the crisis in an almost

[30] For more information about this period, please refer to Esther Whitfield's "Prólogo a *Un arte de hacer ruinas*."

[31] For a more detailed account of the question of whether one can assert that there is a literature from the special period, see Rojas, "Un arte de hacer Ruinas, de Antonio José Ponte." Also, see Alonso's critique of this position in 93-108.

uniform manner. The second strategy had a global character in so far as it aimed to insert Cuba in a world economy beyond the Soviet bloc. This meant that Cuba opened its doors to foreign investment and also became a highly valued touristic attraction (Alonso 93): "As one way of rebuilding the economy, tourism was encouraged, hotels were renovated, and privately owned rentals and restaurants were permitted. Havana was the city that profited the most from the ensuing boom of foreign visitors to the country, drawing tourists from Europe, the Americas, and beyond" (Birkenmaier and Whitfield 3). This insertion into the world economy also meant for Cuba a reframing of its ideological principles. The island had to transform into attractive commodities what used to be aspects of the revolutionary myth. Moreover, the government used the Revolution's successful policies such as high-level education and free medical coverage as a means to appeal foreign investment:

> De igual modo, los esfuerzos de insertar la isla en el Mercado global pasaban por alto el hecho de que, desde 1959, Cuba había vivido del prestigio internacional de su revolución: de su cotización internacional como suceso histórico y modelo social tanto para los países en vías de desarrollo como para la intelectualidad occidental de izquierdas. (Alonso 94)

This shift opened a gap between, on the one hand, the Revolutionary myths and the social improvement of the island, and on the other hand, the commodification of these achievements to attract foreign capital. Cuba entered in a moment of fetishism of its past in order to show itself as a commodity to obtain foreign investment.

This situation implied the need to materialize the mythic past of the Revolution in a semi-static commodity: The past needed to become appealing and undistinguishable from a present that depended on the exoticizing foreign gaze. The commodification process of the past demanded the *concealment of its very condition of past*. To say it somewhat differently, the Special Period

materialized a commodified version of the past through myths and symbols of the Revolution, overlooking its historical movement and its becoming.

Ponte, I argue, attempts to take off the veil of the Past as a commodity to uncover the multiple layers of history that the ruins carry with them. In this part of the text, I show how Ponte problematizes and attempts to go beyond the concealment entailed by the conception of the past as a commodity. I will show how Ponte's journey through the different layers of ruins in Havana offers a reflection about the fatigue of a linear conception of history. Ponte develops an organization of time in which eternity encounters everyday life. Moreover, through this process, Ponte addresses the question of how to think of insurrectionary movements in a moment of exhaustion of the Revolution as an ideal of an emancipatory promise.

1. The Commodification of the Ruin

To attract foreign investment, the revolutionary government created the image of a City of Havana that seemed suspended in time. As Esther Whitfield and Anke Birkenmaier highlight, this is certainly "how a booming industry portrays it" (Birkenmaier and Whitfield 4). Many of the literature about Ponte argues that ruins are a "hot commodity," and that it is nearly impossible to find a book with pictures of Havana without a nostalgic recreation of its debris (Morán in Basile 46).[32] The commodification of the ruins is partly due to an "external intellectual voyeurism" (Alonso 104). To this, one needs to add a commodified nostalgia for a place both protected from globalization and also bearing the traces of the 1950s hedonism that the tourism industry seems so desperately to revive (Whitfield in Basile 77). The ruins have become at the same time an emblem

[32] Among those critics, one can find Carlos Alonso, Anne Birkenmaier, Ana María Dopico, Francisco Morán, and Esther Whitfield.

of the "local color" and a symbol of resistance to global capitalism. In so doing, however, the ruins suffer the same fate as the other fetishized emblems of the Revolution: they become static symbols of a shallow recreation of the past to appeal to the gaze of the voyeur/tourist. They are a mere commodity that conceals its historical conditions of production. As Ana María Dopico mentions:

> The gaze of the lens in Havana has accompanied the eye of the market, reflecting the fashionable status and historical exceptionalism of the city as living ruin, and the allure of a scarcity still set apart from the flawed and normative narratives of development, democratization, or global economic integration. With every photon of nostalgic, alluring, or foreboding light emanating from the romantic ruins of a picturesquely suspended Havana, with every cracked and peeling wall, every voluptuous body or wrinkled face, we are reminded that this hat this photographic bounty is not merely an aesthetic rediscovery or the latest fashionable migration of the image market. This visual scrutiny, selective and seductive, has a banal and ominous significance for a city that lives in multiple temporalities. (Dopico 451)

Facing this landscape of consumption of images of the debris, I contend that Ponte consciously embodies the voyeur/tourist, only to evidence the ambiguous temporal situation of the debris. On the one hand, he embodies the fetishizing gaze of the tourist, but, on the other, he digs into the layers of history of the ruins of Havana. Indeed, Ponte engages into a journey through the multiple temporalities of rubble, he explores the tensions, convergences, and empty spaces that result of the interrelation of those temporalities. He describes the areas where the past seems to be congealed in the present, the moments when the present seems to open to the fantastic and the irrational, and the points where a myriad of horizons of expectation unfold in the eyes of the readers and of the characters.

Through his voyage, he points out that the touristic gaze is a manifestation of the global economic market which commodifies the past, his writings encompass unyielding doubts and angsts about the future. What is the horizon of expectation in the Cuba of the Special Period? How is the future imagined and projected in this extended point in time? Moreover, these texts also comprise an enquiry about how are we to think about emancipatory movements in this moment of exhaustion of the glorious times of the revolution. Ponte engages into a twofold quest: The first one is how are we to think about the future of Cuba according to his fictional depiction of Havana? The second one concerns the need to think the promise of emancipation in a non-teleological regime of temporality. He questions to what extent it is still possible to think emancipation as a promise in a temporality that can no longer be conceived as an unidirectional history that leads towards its own fulfillment.

Considering this panorama, instead of offering us a definite answer, I argue that Ponte fictionalizes several possible pessimistic answers. In his texts, he depicts the outcomes of the Cuban Revolution in the deadlock of a regime of historicity articulated solely on teleology. The future perceived as a promise by the means of revolution has become an enclosure where hope in an upcoming change has faded. It is as if redemption had already arrived but had turned its back on Cuba. Here, time would only to be found as the remains of a history scattered in the long shadow of teleology.

From this point of view, Ponte's texts reflect upon the space of experience and the horizons of expectation in the Cuba of the Special Period. He highlights a regime of historicity that, although it emerged through the revolution, it is unable to break with a chronological conception of time. As such, the past, present, and future related to each other according to a movement towards an ultimate telos, a promise to be fulfilled. I speak of space of experience and horizon of expectation

vis-à-vis a teleological regime of historicity by borrowing the terms to Reinhart Koselleck. He states that, in order to think about historical time and the way it has been conceived through history, one needs to use the conceptual dyad "space of experience and horizon of expectation." These concepts, Koselleck maintains, are methodological notions as general and as indispensable to think the anthropological condition of time, as time and space are required to conceive anthropological points of reference and orientation (Koselleck 257). The dyad of space of experience and horizon of expectation redoubles in itself, which means that to think about the "space of experience" as a "present past" (259), one inevitably needs to think about what has not yet come in temporal terms. The necessity to think of the projections in the future based on what has already passed, is "the horizon of expectation." These two concepts are the conditions of possibility for something like historical knowledge to exist. They indicate how, in a given epoch, one conceives history as a particular relation between past, present and future, and how one organizes time according to a certain epistemic regime of the epoch.

Within this framework, I reach out to the notions of hope and memory as elements inextricably related to a messianic approach to history, or, rather, as the very conditions for such a historical conception to be possible. The fact that the space of experience and the horizon of expectation are methodological concepts to conceive of a certain regime of historicity indicates that these concepts are a different articulation of the dyad of "memory and hope." As Koselleck himself points out: "The conditions of possibility of real history are, at the same time, conditions of its cognition. *Hope and memory, or expressed more generally, expectation and experience – for expectation comprehends more than hope, and experience goes deeper than memory – simultaneously constitute history and its cognition*." (258, emphasis on the original). Hope and memory (and one can also mention other categories of Christian inheritance such as promise and

remembrance) are comprised within the broader dyad of space of experience and horizon of expectation. However, these latter categories exceed the former in offering a wider range of possibilities to articulate an order of time. Put in other terms, the space of experience and the horizon of expectation open the possibility to think about temporalities that relate past, present, and future in a frame other than through a teleological conception of history. As such, they exceed the conditions of possibility for a messianic approach to history. In doing that, they raise the question of whether is it still possible to think about a messianic event in a regime of temporality other than teleology. In short, how can one think of a messianic event, such as the promise of emancipation from oppressive forms of power, in an order of time where past, present and future unquestionably follow a linear and regular one-way direction towards a goal?

Indeed, the two concepts, besides opening the possibility to think about other forms of temporality, they render visible the potential to articulate long-term *and* short-short term horizons of expectation. As such, the two categories would be the basis to think other forms of history, just as much as teleology is just *another form* of articulation of experience and expectation. These formal categories enable us to think teleology as a historiographical discourse, which, although tremendously persistent and extremely pervasive, emerges out of a given historical context with its own epistemic regime.[33] These pressing questions surface by further conceptualizing the dyad "space of experience and horizon of expectation" through Ponte's texts.

Ponte's texts encompass a reflection about the fatigue of a teleological conception of the revolutionary promise. Ponte's gesture is the depiction of an exhaustion of the future as the horizon of expectation reduced to a linearity of time in which a promise *needs to be fulfilled*. In his texts,

[33] Following this line of thought, one can even raise the theoretical question of whether is it possible think contingency as the very heart of a teleological conception of history. Since this question is a theoretical project in itself, I will not approach it in this text.

Ponte journeys through the conception of history as a one-way street up until its ultimate consequences: he describes Cuba as a land where the promise of revolution as the ultimate horizon of our times has already passed, and it remains only as a shattered temporality. In dwelling in the remains resulting from the aftermath of a teleological approach to emancipation, Ponte poses the pressing question of how to reconsider revolution as something different than a promise to be fulfilled. Indeed, his texts show that the very conditions that equate the revolution to an upcoming promise are in fact the very conditions of its own decay and further ruin, or to be more precise, to its *ruinification*: a never-ending process of becoming ruin. The way in which Ponte depicts this movement is by focusing on several forms of ruins in Havana. The different ruins mark the rise and decay of multiple historical moments of the city, and certainly of the island as well.

In Ponte's texts, history piles up in layers in which the only way to perceive the passing time is the difference between the ruins of multiple forsaken buildings. Time is confined to circulate between different layers of ruins where chronological progression does not exist anymore. What Ponte's text shows is a mere relationality among layers, a specter that runs through a limbo with no outside.

2. The Ruin and Its History

Ponte approaches these layers of history by distinguishing three types of ruins. The first layer refers to the inhabited ruins, they were built before 1959 and the citizens of Havana are still living inside them. The second type of ruins covers the Soviet structures abandoned after 1989, and the third type encompasses the ruins of projects that the Cuban government began and that for a variety of reasons were abandoned before their conclusion.

The first kind of ruins, the inhabited structures built before 59, bear the traces of a wealth now in decay. Ponte uses the example to the *Hotel Pasaje* to describe this type of ruin: "un edificio por caer [que] quedaba frente a la escuela donde estudiaba. Cien años antes había sido un hotel de buen tono, el Pasaje. Llamado así por contar con una galería igual a las que sirvieron de pretexto para que Walter Benjamin escribiera su libro inacabado sobre París" (*La fiesta* 159). Ponte establishes a contrast between the building's former glory and its present condition: "[El hotel] soportaba el destino de tantos hoteles expropiados, parcelados para muchas familias […] ahora reinaba el abandono" (160). The situation that Ponte describes about these ruins, concerns, as Esther Whitfield points out, highly contemporary problems that have taken root during the fifty years of the Revolution. The text refers to "la sobrepoblación a consecuencia de la migración del campo y el muy lamentado problema de la vivienda, y la dilapidación de colapsos frecuentes de los viejos edificios de la ciudad, particularmente en el barrio de Centro Habana" (Whitfield 27). Moreover, Ponte uses two technical terms from urbanism studies to describe (and study) the conditions that enable these buildings to still standing: "tugurización" (*tugurization*) and "estática milagrosa" (*miraculous static*).[34] The fact that Ponte uses terms belonging to the terminology of urban planners and architects evidences an attempt to grasp the ruin from an almost technical perspective in order to study how the structure is built. Ponte attempts to go beyond the arbitrary visual scrutiny of the ruin to approach how the structure is able to stand up against all odds.

However, one also has to highlight the use of the term *miraculous static* precisely because, as we saw before, *La fiesta vigilada* depicts a city that already left behind any instance of

[34] Ponte defines *tugurización* as the capacity that an overpopulated city has to make divisions within the urbanized space and architecturally devaluate these spaces by piling up lives within that limited space. Also, *Miraculous Static* is the astonishment of urban planners and architects at realizing that, according to the calculations, several buildings that are still standing should have already collapsed (Rodríguez "Enrevista" 184).

fulfillment, any redemption, or any miracle. The *miraculous static* refers to a structure that has not yet fallen down, even though according to all probabilities *it should have already collapsed*. The only miracle in this land of forgotten time is the fact that the structure that maintains everything together has not yet collapsed. The miracle converges with the ordinary: the island's usual time – one that does not seem to bring anything else than ruins that are still standing– is a miracle in itself. The time that *La fiesta vigilada* depicts is a time *where history meets eternity*: history meets the extraordinary (the miracle) only to mesh with it. History is eternalized and nullifies itself into a single instant that repeats itself for an indefinite time, or rather, for the time that the miracle lasts.

Ponte uncovers two aspects of the ruin: history *and* eternity. I will discuss these two aspects later in the text. For the time being, I will focus on the act of unveiling of the fetish of the ruin. Such task is undertaken by the narrator, which Ponte describes as "a ruinologist." The ruinologist's historical task, as Ponte reveals, is to show the material conditions of production leading to the ruins. He writes about how they embodied a number of hopes in their former life as buildings, and also a number of crises led to their decadence. As Birkenmaier and Whitfield affirm: "we are foregrounding an accumulation of crises and transitions, that is, of pasts to be interrogated and futures open to question" (1). One should also add that Ponte's writing foregrounds the hopes of past epoch in a possible future that did not happen, and whose ruins are the only traces of their former life.

In doing that, he shows that the first type of ruins –the inhabited buildings– is constantly rendered useful to satisfy the necessities of the present. These inhabited ruins are not fossils awaiting for a new historical time to begin, they are incessantly reinscribed back into the regularity under which their inhabitants organize their routines: "La búsqueda de estragos tendría que remitir, antes que a piedras, al cultivo de esa apatía general que entre nosotros permite cualquier

arquitectura convertirse en ruinas" (*La fiesta* 197). This general apathy leads to the slow and never-ending decay of Havana. In the *La fiesta vigilada*, temporality is condemned to permanently wander around the same desolate places, and the direct consequence of it is that the ruins are functionalized again and again *even though they remain as ruins*. The temporal loop is complete: the past becomes the future as it also becomes the present.

To explain this, Ponte recounts how a family, whose children and mother want to kill the father, always stands on the verge of murder without ever daring to carry the transgressive act:

> En su ausencia, [la del padre], madre e hijos celebraban conclaves donde lo maldecían […] Y de flojear en algún punto la complicidad de la madre, sus hijos se encargaban de vaticinarle una vida a solas con el ogro. Porque la dejarían atrás, se irían por el mundo a formar sus respectivas familias […] Entonces [a la madre] se le traslucía su admiración por el macho fuerte que regresaría de un momento a otro" (154)

While one can see in this case echoes of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, the sons never dare to commit the murder that is at once the original crime and the foundation of society. The echoes of a foundational myth become a trivial fight in which the characters never dare to establish a clear-cut origin that would initiate a different story. Therefore, the sons stay on the verge of history; they stay in the a-temporal structure in which they will not kill their father. In this way, it can be said that precisely by creating a story where the routine is immersed in a land where time does not pass by, Ponte delves into the different layers of history in Cuba.

Digging through these layers of history enables Ponte to arrive "into the gap of his present moment, […] where he has to recognize that the nation's process of ascension has gone to hell" (Álvarez-Borland 448, my translation). The ruinologist excavates in history to find its "geological basis" where history itself is lost into immemorial times. His writing is a process of excavating to

the depths of time where history and void are inextricably bound (Rodríguez "Interview" 182). This is where his texts grasp the relationship between history and eternity. Indeed, his narrative encompasses an attempt to grasp the immemorial, the absolute completeness of time, the pure simultaneity of what is immutable and undifferentiated, which is nothing other than *the Real*. However, Ponte, in attempting to grasp the timeless condition of eternity, already introduces an act, a cut, out of which temporality unravels through a regular movement in the symbolic. The immemorial is then repressed, temporalized while described in these texts. On can thus say that these narratives are a constant iteration of a suture between the symbolic and the real. They articulate a tension/repression between history and eternity.

Hence, one can explain why Ponte affirms: "Havana es el escenario de una guerra ocurrida nunca" (*La fiesta* 204). This sentence offers an insight into how to interpret the temporality Ponte depicts. The sentence has an unusual grammar structure, since instead of saying "La Habana es el scenario de una guerra que nunca ocurrió" (Havana is the scenario of a war that never occurred), which would be a more common turn, the translation for this sentence would be: "Havana is the scenario of a war occurred never." The sentence's main focus lies on its last word: "never." This grammatical structure does not imply a negation. Rather, it marks the factuality of the sentence: the war has occurred in a historical time, but that time is a "time of the never." This order of time, I maintain, is one of the main wagers of Antonio José Ponte's narrative project. The temporality of the never is a suture, a point of articulation between historical time and eternity. Here, time compulsively attempts to become one with its founding gesture. The result is a time whose movement relates past, present, and future in a deadlock of presentness. At the same time, this deadlock also carries with it the specters of what could have been, the crashed expectations, as well as the hopes that still remain about the Cuban Revolution. The time of the never encompasses

the collapse –or rather the exhaustion– of the horizon of expectation that an upcoming emancipatory change entailed. The space of experience and the horizon of expectation overlap to the point where, at moments, they seem indistinguishable. and as such, they persistently ask the question: What else is there to do after emancipation as a promise?

One needs to stress here that Ponte's texts approach the Cuban Revolution from two instances that emerge through a dialectics at a standstill: one instance is the history concealed behind the commodification of the ruins. The other is the void of eternity inextricably bound up with the historical movement.

In "La viga Maestra, el tiempo" a text Ponte published only in English until 2006, he develops his view of the relation between temporality and revolution: "Toda revolución puede considerarse como un artefacto que combate el Tiempo. Comienza con una serie de inconformidades con lo temporal, por un deseo irreprimible de sobrepasar hábitos y figuras, condenar a éstos a un pasado sin continuidad, darles tapia y clausura" (Ponte "La viga"). Here, revolution and time are inextricably related in so far as the revolution's impact depends on the disruption of time. Ponte relies on the trope that revolution involves a struggle against chronological movement:[35] to interrupt time is the ultimate clear cut not only in the present, but also in the future as it opens up towards the projection of a new beginning. This interruption does away with the very movement of the ancient structure, unveiling a new temporality with new hopes

[35] At this point, not only we can hear the echoes of Walter Benjamin's Thesis XV, but also, as Koselleck evidences, Marx himself conceived the coming revolution as a complete break with previous conceptions of time: "What was novel about Marx, however, was his conception of the repetition represented by the actual revolutions of 1830 and 1848 as merely a caricature of the great French Revolution; on the other hand, he sought to complete this repetition in consciousness so that the past might be worked through. Marx sought to engender a learning process which would, through the acquisition of a new revolutionary language, found the singularity of the coming revolution. 'Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.' […] The social revolution must write off the past and create its substance out of the future. Socialism is the 'revolution's declaration of permanence.'" (Koselleck 54).

and new utopias. This new temporality would only approach the revolutionary event *après-coup* as something impossible to integrate in this new structure.

As Ponte says, a revolution attempts to bring a closure to the previous structure out of which it emerges. However, to do that, a revolution attempts to cancel the time under which the previous structure took place. Therefore, the cut in time that the revolution entails is a cut between the closing time and the possible future it opens. At this point one encounters what seems to be an impasse: if the revolution is a split in time, then it does not obey to the regime of time upon which it inflicts the cut. If there is a *before* and an *after* the revolution vis-à-vis the orders of time, then, what is the order of time *of* the revolution? In fact, one can even ask the question of whether an *order* of time is the accurate terminology to describe the temporal modality of the revolutionary event. How, then, can one conceptualize the time of this splitting?

There are two scenarios to approach this question: in the first one, the revolutionary event brings the previous time into a closure. In doing this, it opens a limbo that escapes any possible measure of time (since the previous time has been suspended and another time is not properly in place). The radical change takes place through a succession of instants to which no unity of time can give a cohesion or causal effect until the event finally stabilizes and opens a new time radically different from the previous one. In such case, the revolutionary event becomes the foundation of a structure from which it is excluded. To a certain extent, this can be seen as a Freudian traumatic event that inaugurates history.

In fact, one can see in the approach of the revolution as a traumatic event in history a link with one of the first meanings of the term Revolution: "In 1842, a French scholar made a historically instructive observation. Haréau recalled what had at the time been forgotten: that our expression actually signified a return, a rotation of movement back to a point of departure, as in

the original Latin usage. In keeping with its lexical sense, revolution initially signified circulation" (Koselleck 45). The term revolution would carry with it the sense of a revolving movement (in latin: *revolutio*), and such movement would lead us back to its point of departure. However, this dynamic causes a further questioning: does this return necessarily entail the repetition of all the steps already made, but this time as a dramatic re-enactment of its founding acts? Although this would be a more faithful perspective to approach Ponte's texts, one may also wonder to what extent this return could entail a revisiting of the conditions of possibility out of which the revolutionary event emerged in the first place. This approach –this swerve– would entail the prospect to think about the contingency of this movement, and as such, it would allow us to enquire into what can be rescued from the exhaustion of the revolutionary event described in Ponte's texts.

Now, in the second scenario one can think of when conceptualizing the time of the revolution, one can consider that the two times (the "pre-revolutionary" and the "post-revolutionary") overlap in the revolutionary event. From this perspective, the revolutionary interruption would become an axis that articulates these two times. In this case, the new time would always carry the traces of its predecessor as its condition of possibility. This would also work the other way around: the pre-revolutionary time would immanently carry the echoes of the time to come. This second version resonates with Walter Benjamin's assertion that every generation carries with it a weak messianism as traces of the messiah to come. The weak messianism, thereby, would be a revolutionary force that resists any conceptualization under a pre-established meaning of the category of Revolution. It would only be a force that derives its cohesiveness out of the material conditions of a certain moment, and whose configuration into a "revolutionary group" would only happen *ex-post facto*, once the revolutionary event has already taken place. This procedure retroactively gives shape to a configuration of constitutive elements that determined the

radical cut. In this scenario, history would not be restricted by a single directionality, but it would be a two-way street. The new time retroactively determines the conditions out of which it surfaces, and the old time would carry with it the elements that give shape to the revolutionary event, but whose formalization can only happen in the new time. In other words, the weak messianic elements of history can only be encountered once the messianic event has arrived. This perspective on the messianic time would enable us to think about the messianic promise of emancipation in a register of temporality other than the teleological single directionality. However, this perspective would lead us off course from the quest of exploring the "temporality of the never" that Ponte narrates.

For Ponte, "[La Revolución] intenta abrir en el Tiempo una brecha insalvable y ese ataque a la fortaleza de lo temporal muy pronto pasa a ser encasillamiento propio. […] El calendario inventado para la nueva era gira hasta celebrar –una vez más, incansablemente– el único momento verdaderamente revolucionario: aquel en que fuera derrocado el régimen antiguo" (Ponte "La viga"). The very openness of time becomes an enclosure as it turns into a permanent point of reference for this new time. Thus, revolutionary time, instead of leading to an openness, leads to a never-ending referentiality towards the truly revolutionary instance that made the ancient structure collapse. As such, the revolutionary time reveals itself to be a loop that attempts to grasp over and over again the full meaning of the rupture. The Messianic event of this new temporality is its very foundation, a mere iteration of an echo that still resonates among the ruined hopes that this event could have entailed.

This is what Slavoj Zizek brings to light with his research on eternity, history and trauma: "'Eternity' is not atemporal in the simple sense of persisting beyond time: it is rather, the name for the Event or Cut that sustains, opens up, the dimension of temporality as the series/succession of failed attempts to grasp it. The psychoanalytic name for the Event/cut is, of course, *Trauma*" (Zizek

96). From this perspective, Eternity/the real is what emerges during the revolutionary event that opens up the dimension of a new temporality. However, in doing that, the event also establishes the structure that will repress it into an eternal past (Zizek 94). Now, in his texts, Ponte unveils a very particular situation of this principle: if for Zizek "Eternity is, rather that which is *excluded* so that historical reality can maintain its consistency" (96), in Ponte's Cuba, eternity and time are standing next to each other on a paralyzing synchronicity. History and the void of eternity go hand in hand, and hence, uncovering the layers of history in the ruins *necessarily leads to uncover their openness into eternity*. In Ponte's texts, the second layer of ruins bring to light this openness.

3. A Man Walks into the Temporality of the Never

In *La fiesta vigilada,* Ponte describes a second layer of ruins as if they were the result of a post-catastrophic situation: The Soviet structures from the Cold War are now abandoned but they are still standing as an effect of the "Miraculous static":

> Imaginé entonces otro paisaje de basuras fuera de la ciudad, un lugar donde reinaba un silencio digno de Pascal, la clase de silencio solamente obtenible en el laboratorio. Pensé en la base soviética de Lourdes, en el campo de radares que durante décadas brindara información sobre los objetivos estadounidenses a los servicios cubanos de inteligencia. Enclavada a no muchos kilómetros de la ciudad (sin que yo supiese en cuál dirección), empezaba a convertirse en un paisaje de chatarras desde que el gobierno ruso desistiera de espiar a su antiguo enemigo. […] La base de Lourdes desmantelada y el amontonamiento de desperdicios en las calles de La Habana cumplían una simultaneidad estricta. Como en un cuadro de Brueghel, concurrían *el tiempo mítico y la temporalidad más común*. (*La fiesta* 146, my emphasis).

The allusion to Pascal's fragment "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie" (Pascal Fragment *Misère* nº 17/24) refers to a *locus of absolute solitude*, where the human has no possibility to be, and where time no longer flows. Silence is eternal and no possibility of disturbing this infinite quietness is conceivable. Ponte strives to describe this space, first, by comparing it to the ruins of a military base from the Cold War, which lacks any purpose nowadays.

Second, he compares the coexistence of the temporalities of Havana and the Lourdes Soviet base with a Brueghel Painting. Since the text presents two times in the same space, any causal time is torn apart by this simultaneity. On the one hand, the mythical time refers to the former glory of the Cuban Revolution, and also alludes to immemorial events that escape a chronological order of time. On the other hand, the mere routine of the individuals neighboring the area alludes to the struggles of the present. Just like in a Brueghel painting, both elements bleed into each other: here, the mythical turns into routine and the routine becomes mythical. In Brueghel's "The Tower of Babel," for instance, the mythic biblical tower coexists with the most common scenes in the present of the sixteenth century. In the landscape that Ponte portrays, the coexistence of these two temporalities offers a scenario where the mundane occurs next to the void. Ponte's post-apocalyptic landscapes display an era in which the end of times has already arrived, but the end of the world has not –and will not– take place. In his texts, no other event will come.

In the short story "Un arte de hacer ruinas," Ponte narrates the act of approaching to the void in a very similar way. In this text, an engineering student who wants to write his thesis about the concept of *Tugurización*, finds himself following a man into the sewers of Havana, after his advisor died under his collapsed house. The student goes inside the tunnel in a scene reminiscent of Ernesto Sábato's "Informe sobre ciegos." As the sewers become large tunnels with several crossroads, the narrator assumes that he ended up in "un ramal de metro que no será" (a subway

line that will not be) ("Un arte" 71). Once again, the peculiar grammatical structure of this sentence echoes the "war that will not be" and hence leads us again to "the temporality of the never."

When the narrator finally sees the light at the end of the tunnel, he describes it as something that resists any symbolization: "Miré […] la luz al final, más allá de la cual no parecía haber nada," and then again, he mentions: "al final del túnel la luz brillaba más que en un día soleado" (72). This ultimate signifier escapes any accurate description, so the narrator uses several images to describe this scene. He describes the place as a setting for a spectacle. Then, he says that this is an enormous space with reflectors instead of a sky. Finally, he realizes he is "trapped in a nightmare city" with no way out (72). Here, any possible rational explanation falls down; and the text adopts a Lovecraft-like aura by emphasizing the unbearable angst towards the immensely unknowable when the narrator enters into the space of eternity: "Pocas cosas ocupaban ese espacio que parecía no tener fin. No se veía a nadie y la desolación de tan gran lugar no invitaba a avanzar. Sería tan aburrido como recorrer un sol" (72). Ponte, in his attempt to describe eternity and the void, once again references Pascal with his allusion to the boredom of walking around a sun reminds us of Pascal when he writes "un roi sans divertissement est un homme plein de misères" (Pascal *Fragment Divertissement* nº 5/7). In addition, in Ponte's story, this space is so desolate that he compares it to the sun, the very source of light, a trace of eternity.[36]

The narrator soon realizes that he is in a city named *Tuguria*, which bears a striking similarity to the city on the surface except "that everything stays just like in memory" (todo se conserva como en la memoria) (73). Here, everything stays the same, there is no loss: the buildings that have fallen down in the surface appear in this city that seems to multiply itself to infinity. The

[36] To have a more detailed analysis of "Un arte de hacer ruinas," see Serna 83-94. To further explore the relation between the Ruins and Eternity in Ponte, see Diard 215-130.

narrator feels anguished as he is trying to describe a land with no finitude: nothing lost; *everything remains*, forever unredeemed. These descriptions of eternal structures can be read as an attempt to reflect upon an epoch where the future and the utopias it entails are nothing else than an anguishing eternity where nothing changes. Men are trapped in that space with no way out, since there is no loss, no finitude and no death. This anguish, according to Ponte covers the failure of the Revolution (Ponte "La viga"). In fact, in reflecting upon the cycle of failures of utopian futures whose traces pile up in this particular temporality, Ponte approaches a third layer of ruins that result from the failed projects of the Cuban Regime. [37]

4. The Cuban Project of Utopia: or the Faint Echoes of Futures Past

The already mentioned quote "Havana es el escenario de una guerra ocurrida nunca" also alludes to the belligerent rhetoric that the Cuban regime uses to legitimize some of its policies: "las escenas de destrucción de la ciudad sirven a un propósito hondamente ideológico: proveen espejismos de batallas utilizados políticamente como recordatorios de la guerra que no sobrevino a la Crisis de Octubre de 1962" (Whitfield in Basile 78-79). This belligerent rhetoric is a tool for glorifying the mythical past where the "truly revolutionary act" took place, but it also offers the possibility to research the imaginary sense of utopia that the Cuban Regime has used to legitimize its position.

In an interview with Ida Danciu, when asked about the revolutionary time and its struggle against the sacredness of chronological time, Ponte replies: "one should understand such struggle as a *Theomachy*, as a battle among gods. The revolutionary administration does not operate to

[37] For other approaches to the global aspects of Ponte's writing, see: Rojas "Partes" 121-128; González 84-97, just to name two of them

desacralize or to open a breach of profanity in the sacred time. Quite the contrary, the new caste of Priests will substitute a god for another one, it will expel Chronos to enthrone the Goddess Revolution" (Danciu 160). What is at stake in this theomachy is the quest for redemption from one sacred time into another: The government attempts to redeem Cuba into a "new era of the Revolution." From this point of view, one can see Che Guevara's project of the "New Man" as the very act of deliverance into a sacred subjectivity, which, according to Hernández Salván, results in a loss of the subject herself (Herández Salván, 7). This struggle for redemption depends on two events inscribed in time: on the one hand, we have the Revolutionary event out of which emerges this new era and where Chronos, vanquished, falls down. On the other hand, we have the utopian instance of a community fulfilled, where the "new man" converges with the body of the State and with the Revolutionary party. In that sense, Ponte tells us: "viene en mi auxilio este lema político que tantas veces vi en grandes caracteres, y que debo haber coreado alguna vez durante mi infancia: 'Los hombres mueren, el Partido es inmortal'" (Danciu 160). Ponte narrates the tension between this ambition of deliverance and a remainder that resists any possible redemption/new symbolization.

This resistance to redemption takes place in two levels: the first one is the revolutionary inaugural event, the "único momento verdaderamente revolucionario," which cannot be fully integrated into the structure it opens. As such, it creates a temporal movement that attempts to grasp this moment over and over again: this is what Ponte refers to as the circular time that incessantly celebrates these mythic emblems of the revolution. The second level in this resistance to redemption concerns the fact that, as we say before, in Ponte's Cuba, eternity and history are inextricably bound together. Thus, it is impossible to fully redeem or re-symbolize history, since it is already drenched in eternity. One can say, quoting Zizek, that there is a "traumatic spectral

'rest' that resists 'confession'; that is, integration into the symbolic universe – or, in Christian terms, that can never be redeemed-delivered, laid to rest, pacified/gentrified" (Zizek 98). The theomachy takes place in a landscape where history and void are bound together to the point that the struggle results in the desolate limbo that Ponte narrates. Indeed, to illustrate this, Ponte focuses on the moment where the government decides to renew the *Hotel Pasaje* and bring back its former glory to commemorate the triumph of the revolution: "Pocas semanas antes de su derrumbe pareció abrirse otra suerte para el Pasaje" (*La fiesta* 160). However, the renewal takes the building away from its monotony and inscribes it into another temporality. As a consequence, the building collapses: "Hasta que la estructura no pudo más, lanzó un libido, un chorro de polvo al cielo, y se vino abajo (el colmo pudo ser el cierre de una puerta, alguien que cerraba el refrigerador luego de servirse agua)" (*La fiesta* 161). The building is torn apart because the revolutionary government attempted to reclaim it out of the ruins, which causes that the most inane act, such as a closing door, makes the building crumble down.

The Cuban regime's attempt to work towards an instance of fulfillment in a New Era takes place in this circular time that tries to grasp the mythic emblems of the Revolution. This is Ponte's third layer of ruins: the buildings that collapse under the tension between the regime's project of an abundant future and the historical movement that drags them down/back into a mythic past. The official discourse of the Cuban regime promotes "leyes aparentemente auspiciosas, en medio de un optimismo multitudinario" (*La fiesta* 197). Such discourse envisions society as something yet to build: "busca proyectar así la sociedad hacia el futuro" (*La fiesta* 188). It encourages a vision of society as a project in which "the new man" can fulfill its own essence in becoming an indistinguishable part of the Cuban nation. The Cuban discourse would encourage the conception of community as a complete identity, seeking to embody reality as a project, an *opus to fulfill*.

Ponte narrates how, in 1961, the regime engaged in a rush to build monuments in order to praise the triumph of the New Man, so that its emergence would coincide with the inauguration of a whole new architecture (*La fiesta* 185). In doing this, the Cuban regime sets a discourse of social integration through multiple representations of its teleology, in which architecture is one of many manifestations of the national project of the New Man.

The paradigmatic monument of this project is the Art School of Cubanacán. The whole project is part of the will to demolish what is left of the Cuban regime that ended in 1959: "Qué mejor lugar que el campo de golf del clausurado club, uno de los más caros terrenos de la capital, para construir en él las escuelas de arte dedicadas al hombre Nuevo?" (*La fiesta* 185). Here, the text depicts how, from the destruction of the old world, a new structure was going to rise. In there, art, pedagogy, and politics would be tied together to perpetuate a new socialist era. Ponte describes the way in which, even if the project takes some time to begin, the "jefe de gobierno" speaks about it as "[l]a más Hermosa escuela de artes del mundo" (*La fiesta* 186). This opus was meant to fulfill "el augurio sartreano de una belleza revolucionaria" (186) which would emerge with no obstacles as the very symbol of the revolutionary future.

However, the text immediately makes clear that the project is placed on hold because the Cuban regime (without any explanation) arrives to the conclusion that:

> edificaciones, planeadas para condenar el elitismo del antiguo régimen, terminaban por fomentar el elitismo de sus creadores. [...] Los autores del proyecto habían adoptado un monumentalismo erróneo. Ninguno era lo suficientemente revolucionario. [...] Lo planeado por Porro, Garatti y Gottardi suponía soledades que de ningún modo encontrarían sitio en

> la nueva sociedad. Ni soledad del político ni soledad del creador, ni dictadura ni torremarfilismo. (186-187)[38]

The regime paralyzes the project since it privileges "individuality" and "solitude," values only praised during the capitalist regime before 1959. The construction of the art school of Cubanacan, even if it was meant to be the avant-garde project for the New Man, ends up reflecting only counterrevolutionary standards. The building was not revolutionary enough; it did not have the impulse to project society into the revolutionary future. Hence, it is condemned to stagnation and further ruin by staying on hold since 1964. This project, therefore, returns to the ruins: "[e]l empeño constructivo revolucionario" (the revolutionary determination for construction) and its ultimate outcome, "sus ruinas más hermosas" (its most beautiful ruins), disclose that not even the will of the Cuban regime to project society into a future fulfillment can avoid the return to the stagnant temporality of the ruins. The very intent to build a revolutionary utopia leads the regime back to this unredeemed Cuba.

At this point, Ponte's texts can only leave us wondering what else there is to do. Should we embrace resignation and apathy and quietly emulate Ponte's characters in waiting for the ultimate Cuban structure, the revolutionary regime, to fall apart? Should we just become one of the fetishizing tourists that see a crumbling building from afar and turn away as it collides with the neoliberal global market?

Ponte's texts evade any possible answer. Instead, they expose us to the blinding light at the end of a tunnel, where there seems to be nothing else beyond a nightmare city that extends to infinity. The undefined future of the island is the flipside of Ponte's stagnant temporality. And so, one can trace the hopes, fears and anxieties of that future by reading Ponte's narratives against the

[38] For a detailed account of the history of these schools, see Loomis 1-31.

grain, or rather, *via negativa*. One can, for example, think that there is a hope that Cuba will be *not* in a stagnant temporality and there is a hope that Cuba will *not* be ruled by what Ponte describes as a circular time that permanently refers back to the revolutionary event. The questions that Ponte leaves open, however, express several fears and anxieties about that new possible future: is revolution as a radical emancipatory movement in Latin America deemed to failure and ruin? Is capital the only economic alternative not only in Cuba, but in Latin America, as neoliberal governments are on the rise once again? Even if a teleological conception of history is no longer tenable, are we to linger in its long shadow under neoliberal pretenses of progress? These questions seem to assert the pressing task of conceiving revolutions and emancipatory struggles against oppressive economic policies no longer in terms of a promise that will arrive. The initial thrust that animated the revolutionary fight in Cuba needs to be articulated with different conception of the horizon of expectation. One that profoundly differs from a one-way direction of history.

As we will see in the following sections, a profound cut through which a new future can emerge will indeed go beyond a teleological conception of history. In fact, the assumption that a revolutionary change will eventually occur has had great repercussions for the consolidation of a collective subject in Latin America. Moreover, this powerful imaginary that such a change might occur has organized popular movements but also has legitimized state violence against the civil population. In order to understand how the constituent power of a collective subject and the constituted power of the state have approached the messianic interruption, we will have to focus on two articulations between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the rule, and the exception. Beyond the organization of time that asserts the decline of the revolution as a stagnation of history, for both constituted, and constituent power, the possible interruption of the status-quo will carry with it eschatological undertones. The next section will develop how the instance in

which the ordinary goes beyond its boundaries can either create the image of the end of the state as the end of the world, or, the depiction of the end of the state as the creation of plural modalities of political participation. In the first instance, a messianic order of time will legitimate a violent protection of the state against any movement of opposition. This is what José Alejandro Restrepo, Colombian multimedia artist, will reveal in the video "The Knight of Faith." In the second case, the messianic temporality will be the very structure to foster everyday forms of interruption of the present. Such is the dynamic organization of *El Frente Unido*, a collective movement in Colombia during the 1960s, led by the Colombian radical priest turned guerrilla member Camilo Torres. The objective of the group was to create a critical mass of daily gestures of interruption, so that the formal democracy in place –*El Frente Nacional*– would come to a halt.

INTERRUPTION

On November the sixth 1985, 35 armed guerrilla fighters violently irrupted into the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, Colombia. They were members of the left-wing armed group called the 19th of April Movement, or the M-19. They intended to held the Supreme Court Justices as hostage to attract international media coverage. Their final aim was to hold a trial against the President of Colombia, Belisario Betancur. The episode did not go as expected: the government answered by deploying a military operation designed to exterminate the militias. The maneuver, called "*operación rastrillo*" (Operation Rake), was never envisioned to be a hostage negotiation process. At noon in November 7th, after the army used different kinds of explosives and artillery, including rockets and tanks, the siege was over. Seventy percent of the building was destroyed, and more than a hundred people were killed, including Supreme Court Justices, law students, employees of the cafeteria, and most of the guerrilleros. Eleven people are still missing today.[39] This event, known as The Palace of Justice Siege, continues to be a deep and open wound in Colombia's collective psyche.

Nineteen years before this bloodbath, a Catholic priest from an upper middle class family of Bogotá was shot dead by the army when he was attempting to take the rifle away from a soldier he had just killed. That priest was Camilo Torres; he and other members of the Marxist guerrilla ELN were attempting to ambush a military convoy in Santander, a northern region in Colombia.

[39] Most of the information about the Palace of Justice Siege I use comes from the *Informe final de la Comisión de la Verdad sobre los hechos del Palacio de Justicia*, by Jorge Aníbal Gómez Gallego, José Roberto Herrera Vergara, Nilson Pinilla Pinilla. Until this date, the document of the Truth Commission is the most complete source of information about the events of November 6 and 7 of 1985. For other sources, consult for example: Behar, in particular, Chapter 1 and 2; Cardona 37-45; Carrigan, in particular, Chapters 3, 4 and 5; Reyes Echandía 44-55, among many others.

The priest's dead body is still missing. Conflicting versions about his burial site continue to emerge fifty years after the episode.[40]

Born in 1929, Torres was ordained as a priest when he was 25, and shortly after, he flew to Leuven, Belgium, to study sociology. By 1960, he had come back and co-founded Colombia's first department of sociology at the National University. In 1964, nevertheless, Torres engaged in a series of confrontations with the Church's most conservative wing, and was held responsible for fostering several student protests. He was accused of being a communist and, on June 1965, was forced to renounce his ministerial orders. In the meantime, Torres initiated a political coalition intended to boycott the presidential elections. Yet, by November of the same year, he joined the ELN –a group that even today is still very adamant to negotiate. It was during Torres' first combat in 1966 that the Colombian army killed him.[41]

What do the siege of a government institution in 1985 and the death of a radicalized priest in 1966 have in common? The events of the Palace of Justice involved the M-19 (Movement April 19), a guerrilla group that became part of the civil population in the early 1990s, whereas Camilo Torres joined the militia of the ELN (National Liberation Army). Thus, it is completely legitimate to ask about the common ground that these events share.

Even though nineteen years separates one from the other, these two episodes are both situations that take place in a fringe zone in which the established order, with its prevailing set of laws, finds itself to be in direct contact with a threat that radically challenges its structure. These are two depictions of the encounter between the norm and the regularity it entails, with its outside

[40] As in January 25, 2016, his remains were exhumed and, shortly after, official reports denied that they belonged to Camilo Torres. About the disappeared body of Torres, see: http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Remains-Dont-Belong-to-Camilo-Torres-Colombian-Experts-20160425-0053.html.

[41] All biographic references about Camilo Torres are from: Broderick, Walter J. *Camilo Torres: El cura guerrillero*.

and its extra-ordinary character. In the following pages, I explore how these situations reveal two different approaches to this zone between the law and the exception, the state and its outside. I argue that the two episodes maintain a chiasmic relation with one another, and in so doing, they illuminate a complex interaction between violence and religion that underlies the conflict between the Colombian state and several insurrectionary groups during the last fifty years.

To say it somewhat differently, I contend that these two episodes show a reflection of each other in the encounter between the ordinary and the extraordinary. In the first case, the multimedia artist José Alejandro Restrepo depicts how the Palace of Justice Siege is a paradigmatic manifestation of a ruthless violence within the structure of the liberal state. He evidences how the Colombian government has adopted the juridical figure of the state of exception as a regular measure to suppress any movement of opposition regardless of the latter's violent or non-violent character. The video shows how the suspension of the law by the government has led to the regularization of the extraordinary. It reveals how state violence against the civil population has become engrained to daily-life.

In the second case, back in 1965, the priest Camilo Torres wrote a series of letters addressed to different sectors of the civil population as part of a larger social movement he was organizing at the time. The letters render explicit Torres' aim to conform a broad movement through which the civil population would interrupt the bipartisan political system known as the National Front (*El Frente Nacional*). The broad movement, called *El Frente Unido*, had the purpose of ending such a political regime through non-violent means. The final aim of its members was to bring the existing set of laws to its own collapse, so that new, creative forms of self-governance, would arise out of the unchanging and exclusionary formal democracy that was in place. For Torres, the

extraordinary would emerge out of the ordinary, in order to bring forth a whole new political system in Colombia.

In this section, I maintain that Restrepo's depiction of the Palace of Justice Siege serves as a basis to examine the incorporation of the extraordinary in the ordinary. The juridical state of exception had functioned as a means to shut down the political arena, understood as an instance of antagonism and struggle.[42] Conversely, Torres' letters to the Colombian population are an endeavor to elicit creative forms of disagreement and antagonism in ways other than through the armed struggle. Even if this pursuit might seem contradictory since we are speaking about someone whose moniker is "el cura guerrillero" (the guerrilla priest), I contend that, now more than ever, we need to look for a revolutionary change in Colombian society through other means than through merciless violence against the state.

In this analysis, Walter Benjamin's thesis VIII is particularly useful to expand upon two different and antagonistic forms of state of exception. For Benjamin, a first form of exception is "the state of emergency in which the exception has become rule." Yet, against this juridical procedure of inserting the ordinary into the ordinary, he points out that there is a second form of state of exception, which completely deposes the present juridical structure. This is what he calls the "real state of emergency" (Benjamin "Theses" 257). This means that, on the one hand, by using the juridical figure of the "state of exception," the state suspends a series of laws and individual liberties, while enforcing a series of non-legal measures to preserve its authority. On the other hand, under certain conditions, from the established political system can emerge an instance that irreversibly interrupts this status-quo and brings forth a totally different social structure. From a

[42] I am borrowing the term "Political Arena" to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I will go more in detail about this notion in the second part of this section.

conceptual level, the importance of this difference cannot be underestimated when approaching the relation between the present state of affairs, the eruption of a different order that seeks to overthrow it, and in reaction, the modes of self-preservation that the established form of government deploys against what it can only perceive as a threat against its very existence. Now, from the perspective that concerns us here, the *Estado de Excepción* is a juridical figure that the Colombian government has recurrently used to suppress violent *and* non-violent movements of opposition.[43] One needs to distinguish this procedure of suspending the law as a legal measure from the eruption of the exception *as revolution*, which is a new structure that brings the present political system to a closure. This latter figure of exceptionality has been one of the main factors in the emergence of rebellious groups.

I argue that Restrepo and Torres are two paradigmatic cases that reveal how, in Colombia, political violence cannot be thought without an underlying basis of an eschatological rhetoric deeply embedded from the Catholic imaginary. While the state has made of the juridical exception a recurrent motif to suspend individual liberties, the violence it exerts upon opposition groups is legitimized by alluding to a vision of *the end of the state as the end of the world*. This rhetoric has been an attempt to sustain the state of exception as a violence necessary to preserve the social sphere from a predatory other who wants to destroy it. In addition, it has led to the neutralization of violence a tool for emancipation. Hence, by exploring Camilo Torres' collective movement, I

[43] It is worth mentioning that, by 1984, the Supreme Court Justices declared: "En Colombia el estado de sitio se ha convertido en mecanismo ordinario de gobierno a partir de 1948 (el 9 de abril de ese año ocurrió el asesinato del líder político de izquierda Jorge Eliécer Gaitán). En efecto, desde el mes de abril de ese año hasta hoy se ha decretado el estado de sitio en quince oportunidades que sumadas temporalmente abarcan un período de 25 años y 9 meses; lo que significa que durante los 36 años comprendidos entre 1948 a 1984 apenas hemos vivido 10 años y 3 meses de plena normalidad jurídico-institucional" (Reyes Echandía 147). However, several legal scholars have pointed out that in Colombia, the state of exception has been a regular practice since the constitution of 1886. In fact, the article 28 of this constitution, which states that the government can arrest civilians "against whom are serious hints of threatening public peace" (my translation), is a nearly-literal translation of the article 145 of the French constitution of the 5 Fructidor, year III (August 22nd, 1795) (Echeverri 45). About the history of the state of exception in Colombia, see Ayoro, 4-17. Echeverri 6-17; Iturralde 29-46, among others.

argue that if we are to rigorously approach the logics of struggle in Latin America, one needs to consider the multiple nuances of collective organizations against the established order.

Recent attempts to rethink the Marxist and communist tradition as theoretical frameworks to approach new emerging struggles against neoliberalism in a global scale have focused on the emancipatory potential of revolutionary violence.[44] In the global periphery, theorists have not hidden their praise for newly combative movements as an awakening of history.[45] Under this lens, open violence against the state would be the ultimate manifestation of rebelliousness and disagreement with the established order. Multiple and dissimilar forms of collective organization such as social movements, general strikes, and spontaneous riots are considered to be an antechamber for a radical break. However, conflating multiple forms of combat against the ongoing state of affairs by seeing them as a re-ignition of the political arena, entails a number of perils that one cannot simply overlook. First, to emphasize the epoch-shattering character of violence is to unknowingly verge towards a praise of a historical imaginary based on a teleological movement: once creative forms of bottom-up politics reach a critical mass, the subsequent outcome is a large-scale coordinated violence. Thus, violence would stand as a gatekeeper between the old and the new, structuring a linear progression of time between cycles. Second, through this focus, we lose sight of the difference of shapes and objectives between varied alternatives to interrupt the present consensus. Last but not least, we dangerously run the risk of disregarding how long histories of violence have equally affected combatants and civil populations in several Latin

[44] See Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*; Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism*; Clover, *Riot, Strike, Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*; King, *When Riot Cops are Not Enough: The Policing and Repression of Occupy Oakland*.

[45] See especially Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror*; Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*; Martel, *The One and Only Law: Walter Benjamin and the Second Commandment*, in particular, 148-173.

American countries. To uncritically see violence as the creation of the future means to fall silent about the long legacy of injustices towards past generations.

To be sure, I am not making a case against collective forms of struggle that fight the myriad shapes of neoliberalism and the raising threat of white supremacist discourses. What I am arguing for is a rigorous critique of violence against state apparatuses. Not all forms of struggle are equal, not all combats against the status-quo open a space for disagreement or conflict. Indeed, violence against the state can in fact bend the stick in the opposite direction, not only by being coerced by the state's rhetoric to preserve the status-quo, but also by shutting down the political arena in ways that brutally suppress any form of dissent. In the case of Colombia, there is a need to think about a revolutionary change through other means than merciless violence against the state.

I should warn the reader that I do not study these two episodes from a strictly historical point of view, but I address them through *the narratives* that have emerged out of them. This not only means that I will study how these two historical conjunctures have been depicted ex-post facto, but also, I will concentrate on the way these episodes depicted their own futures. The exploration of possible futures that these narratives sketched allows me to focus on how these episodes also convey the latent kernel of religion and violence running as an underground current in Colombia's recent past.

This also pinpoints my second enquiry: in the following pages, I tackle each one of these episodes from different standpoints. On the one hand, I approach the Palace of Justice siege of 1985 through its aesthetic depiction by the multimedia artist José Alejandro Restrepo, in a video called "The Knight of Faith" (*El Caballero de la Fe*). In this work, Restrepo reflects upon what the Palace of Justice Siege left open in history, since the video begins with a conversation between two members of the army in 2008, and later on goes back to the events of 1985. Restrepo brings

together these two moments by introducing a peculiar notion of *faith*. Therefore, in the first part of the section, I will work on José Alejandro Restrepo's video "The Knight of Faith" to render explicit the relation the artist establishes between revolutionary violence, brutal state repression, and civil population passivity. Here, I raise the following questions: in Colombia's recent history, has antagonism against the state always needed disproportionate amounts of violence to assert itself? Has it ever been a situation that *could have potentially ended otherwise*? Has Catholicism in Colombia always been a means to appease the population in front of legitimized forms of repression? That is why I turn to the image of Camilo Torres, the "Revolutionary Priest," as an effort to think about him not as a guerrilla fighter but rather, as an organizer of a collective movement, which dispersed when he joined the ELN. To address this often overlooked aspect of Torres, I decided to focus on his writings between 1963 and 1965, in particular, the newspaper *frente unido*, which he coedited as part of the organization of his political platform, named *El Frente Unido*.[46] Thus, my procedure in this text stands as an attempt to run against chronological time: I start with Restrepo's recording of two army officers in 2008, then I shift towards his depiction of the 1985 siege, and I finish in 1965, with the letters of Camilo Torres.

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III. José Alejandro Restrepo's "The Knight of Faith": Resignation in Front of the Bloodbath

1. On Nearly-Divine Violence

On 2011, the Colombian artist José Alejandro Restrepo presented in the Art Museum of the National University of Bogotá a series of multimedia works, which included performances,

[46] Torres insisted on not using capitals in the name of the newspaper. His movement, however, was preceded by the pronoun "*El*" and has capital letters.

soundscapes, and video installations. This exposition was called "*Hacer el sacrificio*" (To Make the Sacrifice). One of Restrepo's videos "The Knight of Faith" (*El Caballero de la Fe*) comprises two parts: the first one is an audio recording of a conversation between two members of the army in 2008, and the second is a footage taken from a security camera feed that filmed the Palace of Justice Siege back in 1985. The conversation at the beginning of the video is between a soldier and a captain about the army's extra-judicial executions of civilians. These executions, known as "*falsos positivos*" (False positives), became a regular practice during the years of Álvaro Uribe's presidency (2002-2010). It consisted in the murder of low-income civilians to present them as guerrilla fighters killed in battle. This was a means for middle-rank officers to show successful results and ascend within the military ranks (FIDH Report 8).[47] In the same period, president Álvaro Uribe adopted a policy known as the "Democratic Security Policy," which gave the military forces a large degree of freedom of action. This included: the possibility to hold civilians in custody without any reasonable cause, an increased state surveillance to any possible suspect, and a considerable raise in the military budget. This policy relegated human rights and economic concerns to a secondary place, privileging security measures both in the city and in the countryside. The official statement released by the presidential office on 2003 about the "Seguridad Democrática" program stated:

> El pleno respeto a los derechos humanos, a la vez condición fundamental y objetivo de la democracia, sólo se logra cuando la democracia es fuerte y llena la brecha entre la norma y la realidad: cuando las leyes y las instituciones del Estado son efectivas, el debate político

[47] The report from the International Federation of Human Right states: Although this is not anything new, because historically instances are known in which people have been killed by the security forces and then presented as killed in combat, during the 2002-2008 period, this practice became an unprecedented phenomenon, with specific features, clear patterns, and a high degree of organization, which compel us to look at them as a set of interrelated events. It is this practice that has come to be commonly called false positives, a technical expression generally used to designate "the coldblooded and premeditated murder of innocent civilians for the sake of profit." (FIDH Report 7).

está libre de amenazas y los ciudadanos asumen un papel activo, participando en los asuntos de la comunidad, fiscalizando sus instituciones y dando muestras de solidaridad. (Presidencia de la República 15) [48]

In this statement, the territorial securitization prevails over human rights and democratic ideals. In other words, democracy and the respect for human rights *come after* the process of rendering the land secure of possible threats. This means that the organisms assigned with the task of "strengthening democracy" (i.e. the military, the police, and the intelligence groups) have priority over human rights. One of the outcomes of the militaristic focus of Álvaro Uribe's presidency was the "Falsos positivos," which reveals a systematized attack to the civil population by the state. The audio conversation in Restrepo's "The Knight of Faith" is a recording of a standard conversation between two members of the army in 2008.

In this first part of the video, the screen is dark, the spectator can only see the subtitles transcribing the conversation between the two military. One of them is in charge of executing civilians to make them count as *guerrilleros* killed in combat. The other is a colonel supervising the captain's mission. The colonel is asking the captain how many deaths have occurred until that

[48] Furthermore, one needs to highlight that this official document asserted: "Si es necesario, se buscará *la modificación de algunos artículos de la Constitución para este fin*, sin afectar las libertades o las garantías ciudadanas. Se establecerá igualmente un orden de prioridades en la lucha contra el crimen, teniendo en cuenta los delitos que más afectan a la sociedad. La formulación de una política criminal integral permitirá al Estado perseguir en primer término a quienes representan el peligro más grave para la sociedad y la democracia, como los terroristas y los narcotraficantes, y asegurar a la vez que estás conductas sean sancionadas con las penas más fuertes y los regímenes penitenciarios más severos" (Presidencia de la República 37, my emphasis). "El Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad-DAS- fortalecerá su capacidad de análisis y producción de inteligencia estratégica, en coordinación con los demás organismos de la Junta de Inteligencia Conjunta; desarrollará igualmente su capacidad de contrainteligencia, que *concentrará no sólo en las amenazas que penden sobre el Gobierno, sino en todas las que afectan la gobernabilidad democrática*; y, a nivel táctico, concentrará sus esfuerzos en estudiar y desmantelar las estructuras y el apoyo logístico de las organizaciones terroristas y la criminalidad organizada." (Presidencia de la República 41, my emphasis). It is worth mentioning that the DAS, the Colombian Central Intelligence Department, was later found guilty of spying on private conversations of journalists and members of the political opposition. About the DAS wiring of calls, also known as "Chuzadas," see, http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/chuzadas-asi-fue-la-historia/376548-3 and http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/chuzadas-del-das-crimen-castigo/419365-3.

moment: "*Cuénteme, ¿cuántos muertos van?*" ("Tell me, how many deaths have there been until now"). The captain replies to the colonel that he almost got killed: "*Casi me quiebran, más bien*" ("I almost got 'peeled'"). The colonel, upset, repeatedly insists in asking whether the captain was able to kill anyone or not "*¿Entonces no mató a nadie?*" (So you did not kill anyone?). The latter does not give a straightforward answer, instead he repeatedly tells the colonel: "*No pierda la fe, mi coronel. No pierda la fe*" ("Don't lose the faith, Colonel. Don't lose the faith").

The audiotape ends, and the title of the video –The Knight of Faith– appears in a white font out of the dark screen. The video's title is both a reference to Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and to the sentence repeatedly uttered by the captain to his superior officer: "Don't lose the faith." Thereby, this part of the video presents a discordant relation between faith and violence: instead of depicting Christian faith as a mode of belief in Jesus Christ' *good news* (the etymology of *evangelio*, the Spanish name for Gospel) in which the love for the neighbor plays a key role, it encompasses the belief that the extrajudicial execution of civilians will eventually arrive.[49] However, the audio recording seems not only to be an anticipation of a concrete circumstance in the future (the murder of civilians to please army officers), but also, it is a reflection on a certain articulation between temporality and violence.

Here, the insistence to *not lose the faith* is an allusion to a future in which a desired event will take place. *Faith* is a form of articulating an expectation, a projection of aspirations and hopes into the future, or, to borrow a formulation from Reinhart Koselleck, *a prognosis which is inscribed*

[49] I will explore the relation between violence and a particular reading of the Love for the Neighbor in the following part of this section. Also, for further reading about the relation between Love and Faith, see Agamben's *The Time That Remains*, when he says: "Love has no reason, and this is why in Paul, it is tightly interwoven with faith" (Agamben 128).

into a horizon of expectation.[50] The category of faith is a Christianized form of expectation, it is a mode to articulate a possible and awaited future based on the past experiences that lead for such an anticipation to take place. In this case, however, the anticipated event to which the captain alludes when using the term faith is a manifestation of state violence against civilians. To say it somewhat differently, the use of the word faith conveys a horizon in which the expectations and hopes projected into a certain possible future mesh and become indistinguishable with the violence from the state against the civil population.

As Koselleck points out, moreover, expectation, moreover, goes hand-in-hand with experience. Hence, the anticipation of the eventual execution of civilians emerges out of the past experiences in which such event has regularly taken place: in 2008, the "false positives" have become a customary procedure. The tone of the conversation of the audio recording strikes for being calm and unemotional, while it openly describes the hunting of civilians. This tone evidences that such practice, far from being an extraordinary situation, is a regular procedure that sooner or later will be implemented. This part of the "Knight of Faith" proposes a reflection about how Colombian pasts, presents, and futures are inextricably bound with different manifestations of state violence. The use of the term "faith" in this part of the video renders explicit the bleak ordinariness of how the state exhibits its violence against the people. Restrepo's video makes a leap from 2008, when the conversation takes place, back to November 6 and 7, 1985, during the Palace of Justice Siege. This gesture, by showing what seems to be an element of *timelessness* shared by those two events, renders manifest how this form of violence, propelled by a religious emphasis of an expectation in the near-future, is deeply ingrained in Colombian recent history.

[50] For a more detailed about Koselleck's concepts of space of experience and horizon of expectation, see the introduction to this dissertation, and the second part of section 1.

2. A Man Feeds the Birds, Eleven Bodies are Still Missing

When the audiotape ends, the title of the video slowly appears in a white font out from a dark screen. Then, some passages from the text *Fear and Trembling* appear also in white. Immediately after, the video shows an image of a person walking in the Plaza de Bolívar, the main square in Bogotá, which is surrounded by the buildings of the main political institutions: The National Capitol, the Palacio Liévano, the Palace of Justice and the main Cathedral. The person walks around the plaza and feeds the pigeons, a traditional activity for the neighboring population. The man begins to feed the birds and he is quickly surrounded by them.

The video focuses on his repetitive movements of throwing rice and walking calmly around the square while the birds follow him. There is no sound, except for the slight resonance of the rice thrown. While this conventional act occurs, in the background of the video, the army gathers in front of the gates of the Palace of Justice, house of the Supreme Court. In the video, one can see a tank next to the soldiers. They seem to be rescuing hostages covered in blood, who manage to escape from the Palace. The army takes them into military vehicles and ambulances. Sometimes, the video focuses for a few seconds on the people carried in stretchers and in the back of the solders. All this happens while the man continuously feeds the birds.

As spectators, therefore, we only see the Plaza de Bolívar, the man, and the frontal façade of the Palace of Justice. We do not have access to the inside of the building. In fact, even though we are seeing this recorded footage from the afternoon of November 6, 1985, we do not know exactly what happens during the Siege that took place more than thirty years ago, since, even nowadays, there is still a lack of clarity in official version. As spectators, we are belated witnesses who continue to be ignorant about what we just saw.

What is known today is that approximately one hundred people died during those events, including eleven of twenty-four Supreme Court justices, thirty-three out of thirty-five guerrilla fighters of the M-19, multiple civilians, and three members of the army. Eleven persons are still missing today.[51] For twenty-three years, several versions emerged while the military remained silent. In 2008, the Truth Commission for the Palace of Justice Siege published a research under the title: *Informe final de la Comisión de la Verdad sobre los hechos del Palacio de Justicia*, which is one of the most complete recounts not only of the events, but also of the irregularities in the procedures for lifting the bodies of the victims. By focusing on what happened outside the Palace of Justice while these events were taking place in the inside, Restrepo addresses how this situation entails yet another instance *of normality and everyday practices*.

What needs to be highlighted here is that Restrepo's video engages with a moment of overdetermination: what the video allows us to see is the man's slow movements, characterized by the calmness of a routine. However, behind the walls of the Palace of Justice building, which act as the background of the scene, a history-changing event is taking place. During those very moments, there is a violent clash between the M-19 and the army. This latter aspect is something that the video conveys but does not show, as if it stated that the ebbs and flows of normality concealed a decisive but not fully showable brutal event.

For the sake of clarity, let me recall how the video unfolds as a *nodal point* where multiple temporalities weave through anything but peaceful articulations. On a first level, "El Caballero de la Fe" brings together the 2008 conversation with the 1985 siege. Restrepo's work achieves this act of rendering contemporaneous events separated by almost a quarter of a century through a

[51] For a detailed description of the contemporary procedures to elucidate the truth of those events, see: Gómez Gallego, et al. 184.

chiasmic formal operation: the part of 2008 does not display any image, it relies only on the sound of the conversation, whereas the 1985 segment presents the image of the man walking in the Plaza de Bolívar with very few sounds. Also, the first fragment is about two militaries who speak about murdering civilians, while the second fragment focuses on a safe and sound citizen who feeds the birds while, in the background, the army takes people away from the Palace of Justice. On a second level, the audio recording approaches the notion of faith as a prognosis into a possible and desired future, while the video recording focuses on a man feeding the birds through repetitive movements that evidence how ordinary that activity is. Finally, on a third level, this second segment juxtaposes the repetitive movements of the man who feeds the birds, with the unseen battle raging behind the façade of the Palace of Justice. The man seems to perform a movement devoid of temporal progression as he repeatedly makes the same gestures. In the meantime, the unseen interior of the structure is the scenario of a violent encounter between the army and the M-19, two actors with their own historical trajectories. Thereby, the video is a staging of a *critical mass* of temporalities, each one marked by different and concealed modalities of violence. To say it differently, the video is a node where pasts, presents, and futures turbulently entangle: the ordinary encounters the extraordinary and is engulfed, once again, into the ordinary time, but whose very movement rests upon overdetermined modes of violence.

At this point, to fully understand the node of temporalities, one needs to allude to the histories of the two actors whose main confrontation emerges in the overdetermined moment that the video conveys. The M-19, the guerrilla movement that entered the Palace of Justice in the morning of November 6, 1985, intended to display a spectacle for the medias, just like it had done

back in 1980, when they took the embassy of the Dominican Republic.[52] The group's procedures were already known: by taking members of the government or diplomatic personalities as hostages, its members made their demands manifest. This guerrilla, influenced by Cuban Marxism, became visible three years after the presidential elections of April 19, 1970. By then, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, former *de-facto* president in a military government between 1953 and 1957, was the presidential nominee for the political party ANAPO, and the leading candidate running against Misael Pastrana Borrero, a member of the political group known as *Frente Nacional*.[53] Even though the vote counting signaled that Rojas was likely to be the winner of the election, on the night of April 19, the president at the time, Carlos Lleras Restrepo, prohibited the broadcasting of the vote count. The next morning, official results declared that Misael Pastrana was the president-elect of Colombia. This caused an uproar: it was suspected that a fraud had taken place, and the socialist wing of the ANAPO decided to become the guerrilla movement known as the *Movimiento 19 de abril*, or M-19.

On the other side of the political spectrum, in 1978, Julio César Turbay became president of Colombia by leading a campaign based on three premises: security, production, and employment. A month after becoming head of the state, on September the 6th 1978, Turbay declared the state of exception as a means to implement extraordinary measures against the armed groups, including the M-19. He enforced the decree 1923, also known as the *Estatuto de*

[52] The M-19 became known for its spectacular acts intended to draw national and international attention. In 1973, before it became clear that it was a guerrilla movement, the M-19 made newspaper advertisements such as "Parásitos… Gusanos? Espere el M-19" or "Decaimiento... Falta de memoria? Ya viene el M-19." In January 1974, the group stole Simón Bolivar's sword from la Quinta de Bolivar, which used to be Bolivar's house and is now a museum. The M-19 left behind a note saying "Bolívar, your sword returns to the battlefield." For more studies about the emergence and development of the M-19, see: Yamel, *La espada de Bolívar: el M-19 narrado*; Restrepo, *Colombia, historia de una traición*; Castro Caycedo, *Del ELN al M-19: once años de lucha guerrillera*; Pabón, *Así nos tomamos la embajada*.

[53] For more information about the *Frente Nacional* see the next part of this section.

Seguridad: "Through which thereby laws are enforced for the protection of life, well-being, and belongings of the population, and through which security is guaranteed" (my translation).[54] This law gave special powers to the military and the police, created new forms of felonies, such as the distribution of subversive propaganda and the gathering in public spaces with subversive purposes. Regarding this decree, the Supreme Court declared:

> Amongst the measures that our governments usually take during the periods of state of siege, the most significant and frequent one is that of giving to the military justice the capacity to conduct investigations and run trials on the civil population for political and common crimes. We have always considered that this measure is unconstitutional. (Reyes Echandía 87, my translation)

The *Estatuto de Seguridad* gave the military and the police a large degree of freedom to consider any mode of antagonism against the state as a threat to national security: protests, strikes, and peaceful gatherings were seen as political crimes and entailed the same penal sanctions. Also, any civilian was prone to detention with no probable cause (Jiménez 89). In addition to all this, the decree does not give any detail about what kind of crime was a National Security concern. The consequence was a grey zone in the law. The military took this to their advantage and carried out a form of "legal repression":

> El cumplimiento del articulado del Estatuto por parte del ejército posibilitó la institucionalización de acciones represivas bajo el argumento de la defensa de la seguridad nacional y el control del orden público, convirtiendo en hecho cotidiano las detenciones, allanamientos y desaparición de personas integrantes de colectivos específicos como

[54] "Por el cual se dictan normas para la protección de la vida, honra y bienes de las personas y se garantiza la seguridad de los asociados." One can access this decree in: http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/colombia-otros-documentos-4/html/0261557c-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_1.html

> sindicatos, líderes de movimientos sociales e indígenas, académicos, estudiantes, intelectuales, abogados, periodistas o médicos. (Jiménez 92)

As soon as Belisario Betancur began his presidency in 1982, he initiated a peace deal with the guerrilla. He changed the government focus from overt war against insurgency, into a more flexible stance open for dialogues between the state and the radical groups. However, Betancur's gesture alienated the high-rank military officers who interpreted it as a betrayal of what they considered their successful mission. Therefore, in spite of Betancur's efforts, the militarization of the state continued to have preeminence over other governmental issues: "el *modus operandi* y la mentalidad imperante en las Fuerzas Militares seguían siendo en el gobierno de Betancur los vigentes en tiempos del Estatuto de Seguridad y reflejaban la doctrina de seguridad nacional." (Gómez Gallego, et al. 37). At this point, one cannot but hear the faint echo of the 2008 conversation between the two soldiers in the first part of that Restrepo's video. Turbay's *Estatuto de Seguridad* back in 1978 already legitimated the systematic detention and further disappearance of civilian population. These procedures would become manifest, once again, with Álvaro Uribe's *Seguridad Democrática.* Based on this, one can understand why the first part of Restrepo's video is a seemingly casual conversation between two members of the army about a regular activity deeply engrained within the military.

By focusing on the religious rhetoric that both the military and the civil population informally use, Restrepo's "The Knight of Faith" establishes a bridge between different moments when state violence against the civil population became manifest. The video depicts the Palace of Justice Siege as the event where multiple historical processes violently overlap. These, in turn, will become precedents for measures that the state will enforce more than twenty years afterwards. However, Restrepo's work does so by *not showing elements that are overwhelmingly present in*

the scene: the video does not portray the combats in the Palace of Justice. As spectators, we have only the surrounding layers of such a concealed and yet history-changing form of violence.

So far, I have focused on the 2008 conversation, on what lies behind the walls of the Palace of Justice, and on the long trail of survivors outside the building. But what about the man who seems to be the main concern of the video? He seems completely detached from what happens in the background, so why does the video focus on him? He seems to be a man who only pays attention to the birds he feeds. In addition, how are we to approach the quotes from *Fear and Trembling* that appear around him in a white font? What is the possible relationship between Kierkegaard's *Knight of Faith* and this man? A first step to answer these questions can be to enquire into *Fear and Trembling* to see possible connections between the man, the Palace of Justice, and the question of Faith.

3. The Knight of Faith and the Bird Feeding Man

Based on the Lutheran tradition, Kierkegaard's notion of Faith is the way by which individuals establish a relation with God. It is a task that the individual must achieve by itself, and in doing so, he has the possibility of becoming a true self. To explain this movement, Kierkegaard refers to the story of Abraham and Isaac. When Abraham had to offer Isaac as a proof for God. He had to accept to kill Isaac, and thus, he was forced to renounce any possibility of saving his son. In doing so, he also gave up any probability that his community would understand him. He needed to accept that he was on a singular task and that he was not going to have a reward for it –he had to forgo any likelihood of fulfilling his task to achieve a higher and collective good. This is, according to Kierkegaard, *the movement of resignation*, a necessary step to become a true self: it involves paying the highest price to fulfill his task and giving up everything else. "This is the peak

on which Abraham stands. The last stage to pass from his view is the stage of infinite resignation. He actually goes further and comes to faith" (Kierkegaard 37). Such a gesture goes hand-in-hand with a second movement, which is *the movement of faith*. It consists in *keeping a belief even if one embraces resignation*. Although he had completely given up on any possibility of protecting Isaac and he had accepted the impossibility that God was going to save his son, Abraham kept on believing that Isaac was going to be spared.

For Kierkegaard, having true faith is to believe "by virtue of the absurd" (35): the yearning of a future situation also entails its complete negation by assuming that such situation *will not take place under any circumstance*: "He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should on the next moment rescind the requirement" (35). Therefore, to show true faith, one has to repeatedly believe in something beyond all reason, even though one's life leads to the conclusion that such thing is impossible. Even when embracing resignation, the belief beyond reason has to be constantly reassessed in one's habitual and regular life. The two conditions of possibility to achieve the individual relation of God are *resignation and belief by virtue of the absurd*. [55]

[55] Furthermore, for Kierkegaard, faith also is a personal choice and as such it is a solely individual task. "Faith concerns the individual, the subjective. […] The subject is addressed by the divine in a personal mode, or called by private conscience, or moved by deep and private intuitions" (Mooney 73). Since faith is personal and simultaneously goes beyond reason, it cannot be intelligible to others (Kierkegaard 62). To follow one's belief in the impossible, one has to necessarily comply with it in solitude and isolation. This means that one has to renounce everything and abide by a belief beyond reason. As the task is impossible to communicate, the individual steps away from the collective to pursue her belief in isolation. Her renunciation of the dearest things she possesses by following her faith has to be brought back from a transcendental instance to which she defers that belief, onto the daily normal life. Put in Kierkegaard's terms, the individual needs to constantly make the movement from the infinite to the finite, out of which the infinite emerges again. Every single gesture made in the present, aims to an infinitely deferred future that one has already assumed shall not take place. This constant gesture alluding to the infinite in every instance of the finite is what makes an individual *the Knight of Faith* (Kierkegaard 38). In her daily routine, she is able to go beyond the impossibilities imposed by reason, into the instance of the infinite, and to act in her daily life accordingly to the faith in the infinite.

The Knight of Faith conveys what seems to be a carefree existence, as all his gestures indicate such attitude. However, at the same time, he is embracing "the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation" as he gives up everything he has in the world (40). Simultaneously, he handles every single aspect of his life through relentless allusions to his belief in something shown to be impossible: "And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd" (40).[56] Thus, the individual's belief by virtue of the absurd depicts a transcendent instance that will introduce the extraordinary into the norm. This is a belief in a divine intervention that will solely take place only when the future adopts the shape of a mere repetition of the present. Because the individual surrenders his own agency, this sovereign transcendent instance is the only one able to intervene in the present.

This background allows us to tackle why Restrepo's video juxtaposes quotes of *Fear and Trembling* with the movements of the bird feeding man. We have two interpretative possibilities to approach this association: the first one is to assume that the quotes are indeed a referential allusion to the man, in other words, the video wants us to believe that *he is* the Knight of Faith. The other possibility is that the video is playing with us, and it is pointing to a much more troubling situation: besides the fact that eleven bodies from the Palace of Justice Siege are still missing nowadays, some of the bodies *were misidentified*: "in several cases the bodies were misidentified, which resulted in them being returned to the wrong families, because of political pressure to expedite the bodies' return" (Gómez Gallego, et al. 184, my translation).[57] By reenacting a sinister

[56] For more in-depth analyses about Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith see also: Lippit 122-141; Kellenberger 9-18; Krishek 75-108.

[57] The chilling report of the truth commission asserts: "Así, la falta de precisión sobre las víctimas que perecieron como consecuencia de dichos eventos, originada en las múltiples negligencias que por acción u omisión conllevaron a que las necropsias no se practicaran adecuadamente, generó, entre otros aspectos, que se desconozcan las reales causas de muerte de la mayor parte de las víctimas y, lo que es igual o aún más grave, que en muchos de los casos los cadáveres fueran mal identificados, lo que supuso, en consecuencia, la entrega errónea de cadáveres a los dolientes, debido a las presiones políticas y a las derivadas de la angustia de los familiares. […] A lo anterior se suma que

act of misidentification, the video would deliberately overlap the quote "The Knight of Faith" with the image of the man walking with the purpose of tricking us, spectators. We would be the ones taking his identity for granted, enacting another act of faith: believing by virtue of the absurd that the bird feeding man somehow is el *Caballero de la Fe.*

Given the ambiguity of the video, I shall explore both interpretive possibilities: if we assume that Restrepo's work maintains that the man is the Knight of Faith, then, the man is somehow engaging in the movement of resignation and belief by virtue of the absurd. He certainly seems to have a relaxed demeanor when he plays with the birds, even though, in the background one can even see a tank trying to break into the Palace (in fact, it is one out of three tanks, the other two are already inside the building). He seems to absolutely disregard the armored vehicle and about the soldiers taking people into ambulances and trucks. He is purely involved in his task of feeding the pigeons.

Now, Kierkegaard tells us that although the Knight of Faith seems to live with "the freedom from care of a reckless good-for-nothing" (Kierkegaard 40), he is constantly paying the highest of prices by feeling the pain of renouncing all the precious things in the world. From this perspective, while the bird feeding man appears to have indifferent and peaceful movements, he "drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation" (40). Thereby, he is be a broken individual who renounces what he cares for the most. He would be turning his back on the fall of the Palace of

cuerpos que lograron ser correctamente identificados fueron enviados a una fosa común, por el hecho de ser guerrilleros o de sospecharse que lo fueran, bajo órdenes de los jueces penales de instrucción militar a cargo del tema. […] No obstante, estas no son las únicas situaciones complejas alrededor de las personas que el 6 y 7 de noviembre de 1985 quedaron atrapadas en el Palacio de Justicia. Aún, a la fecha, y a pesar de que se han realizado múltiples acciones, incluyendo la exhumación de la fosa del Cementerio del Sur y posteriores inspecciones en las instalaciones de la Escuela de Caballería y el Batallón Charry Solano, aún permanece sin resolverse el paradero de 11 de las personas que desaparecieron una vez analizada la retoma del lugar por parte de las Fuerzas Armadas" (Gómez Gallego, et al. 184).

Justice *because he is resigned about it, and yet he has faith beyond all certainty that* "*everything will be fine in the end.*"[58]

4. Katechontic Messianism

The man witness with resignation the slaughter and catastrophe at the Palace of Justice. However, even though he has already accepted the impossibility of doing something about the events that surround him, he keeps on believing that a divine intervention will take place, and miraculously resolve the situation. His resignation makes him act in an ordinary manner in front of the dreadfully extraordinary. He acts by virtue of the absurd by believing that a godly and transcendental instance will interrupt what otherwise seems absolutely unalterable.

To phrase it in blunt terms, the man never loses the faith that a sovereign act will interrupt the cycle of violence rendered manifest in the Palace of Justice Siege. The faith of this Knight rests upon a salvific intermediation from the army and the state. In that sense, he is the paragon of the faithful subject who believes in a godlike sovereign emergence as a means to resolve violent eruptions of struggles deeply rooted in history. Such belief in a militaristic intervention echoes the official reasons president Turbay gave to enforce the Security Statute after 1978: "in the extreme situation when [the Country finds itself facing] an ostensible political void, which necessarily leads to generalized anarchy, the Armed Forces are compelled to exert power" (Turbay qtd. in Jiménez 87, my translation).[59] Such assertions pave the way for the army to arise and exert a deadly sovereign power when facing a threat to stability. These assertions legitimize the state violence

[58] I intentionally use the vague phrasing of "everything will be fine in the end" both to highlight its everyday use, and also because it is a purely constative expression that depends on the context: "everything" does not refer to a particular set of elements, and "the end" does not allude to a moment in particular. As such, it expresses the always-deferred faith in an uncertain future.

[59] The original text by Turbay reads: "en los casos extremos en los que ante *un ostensible vacío político que necesariamente conduce a la anarquía generalizada*, las Fuerzas Armadas se ven precisadas a ejercer el poder."

against the civil population, since they depict the army as "legitimate saviors of the nation and of the homeland values" against any possible threat (Jiménez 87, my translation). Here, one needs to highlight how the executive branch of the government uses the eschatological rhetoric to legitimize the state of exception and the military forces' unbridled violence while nevertheless claiming to be enforcing the law. Turbay's exceptional situation would take place against the threat of a zone of anomia, the "political void" that, if unleashed, would irredeemably lead to a chaotic end of the political order, "una anarquía generalizada." In this eschatological vision, only the army can restrain the zone of anomia by deploying a salvific violence against none other than the civil population, in order to purge it from a chaos that could completely do away with the law. Now, Restrepo's video depicts how this eschatological rhetoric is acknowledged by this faithful subject who appears in the video with his repetitive movement, which strives to continue his daily life in this situation.

The Knight of Faith, therefore, would be the subject who binds together the catholic faith in a transcendent intervention with the militaristic procedures of the state. As such, he has faith in a sudden eruption of a salvific force that will suspend the historical continuum and will defend the status-quo from forces threatening it. This messianic sense of faith becomes the ideological means to legitimize and justify the actions of the army. The knight of faith idealizes state violence to the point that he depicts it as divine violence, sent to preserve the law from generalized chaos. This approach to the messianic contrasts with the previous cases I have explored in my dissertation, since in this situation the messianic is not an *emancipatory force that would suddenly emerge to reconfigure the symbolic order*. Instead, this messianic faith is the belief that the state, along with its military apparatus, will violently resolve the struggles that have taken place both in short-term and long-term history. One can also see this faith as a belief in the *katechon*, the violent restrainer

of the end of the world, or in this case, the restrainer of the historical change, the preserver of the status-quo. One can even call it a *katechontic faith*.

The figure of the *katechon* appears in 2 Thessalonians 2-6; it is the restrainer of the arrival of "the lawless one" "whom the Lord will abolish with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative by the manifestation of his presence [*parousia*]" (*Authorized King James Version Bible*, 2 Tess. 2-6). The precise meaning of this figure remains obscure –according to Roberto Esposito, "even Augustine says that he has no idea what Paul is referring to in this passage" (Esposito 63). However, what has not been put into question is that it has the function of holding back a zone of lawlessness (63). In the *Nomos of the Earth*, Carl Schmitt renders visible how the figure of the *katechon* relates with the protective character of the state in front of a political and social turmoil that risks overthrowing the present order. By describing the *katechon* as the force of order that stops the chaos threatening the *Respublica Christiana* (Schmitt 43), Schmitt shows to what extent republican juridical institutions are deeply rooted in the protective and restraining character of this Pauline figure. What concerns us here is that the *Katechon* cannot be solely conceived as a barrier that keeps the threatening anomia at a distance. In fact, to be operational, it must be in direct contact with a zone of non-law: The lawlessness that the *Katechon* restrains *also constitutes it*. This is why Esposito mentions: "We could go as far as to say that the *katechon* – its constitutive juridical principle – opposes the absence of law by taking it up inside itself" (Esposito 63). The protective character of the *Katechon* only works because it also incorporates a zone of anomia. The violence it exerts to protect the republic bears the mark of impunity –it cannot be punished by the same law that it protects. Hence, it can claim to be enforcing the law without any repercussion. Now, albeit not explicitly, the rhetorical strategies to legitimize the state of exception in Colombia rest upon these eschatological motives: the juridical apparatus needs violence to

preserve legal institutions from a ubiquitous threat seeking to destroy the law. Jose Alejandro Restrepo's video evidences to what extent the division between the fringe zone of lawlessness and the instance of adequate application of the norm has become non-existent.

In uncovering these eschatological motives, Restrepo's video also highlights that social modalities to oppose the state, regardless of their violent character, are coopted by being depicted as entities threatening not merely a political order, but the very existence of the present. This is why the eschatological rhetoric of the state of exception in Colombia is so effective. It blends the movements of opposition into a menacing and yet threatening entity, and so the state of siege becomes the only way through which the army can fully focus on its own salvific/katechontic mission. The outcome of this process is that any form of revolutionary violence, far from fostering a combative collective spirit against the status quo, reinforces the eschatological discourse where the army is the only barrier between sociality and lawlessness. What this eschatological discourse achieves is the atomization of the social body: as social modes of opposition are stigmatized as elements of chaos, the civil population gives up collective assembly, choosing a more isolated relation with the state.

Thus, the interpretive possibility of the bird feeding man *qua* Knight of Faith enables us to explore the reasons why the man seems to be aloof from what happens in the background of the video. Kierkegaard asserts that faith is a solely personal task, that the Knight of Faith has to follow his belief in solitude, he cannot communicate it to the community. As such, he pursues his path in isolation. We witness here nothing less than the isolation of the individual from any possible common cause. The Knight of Faith is necessarily a detached subject who disregards any form of collectivity, given that his faith is impossible to communicate. The Knight of Faith carries on with her individual task by focusing on the ordinary, and hence she perpetuates the status-quo as she

surrenders her own agency and as she believes that a militaristic intervention will resolve any conflict and antagonism.[60] The Knight of Faith believes and awaits, in resignation, isolation, and by virtue of the absurd, for the *Katechon* to effectuate its task. As such, he completely disregards a collective subject who would seek to fulfill conjoined demands. The Knight of Faith is the individual who, in resignation, *passively awaits* for a miracle to eventually arrive in to maintain the present order.

We can now see why Restrepo's video depicts a man with seemingly timeless movements. The Knight of Faith has no time, he has no interest in actively changing the established order of things, and he has faith in an upcoming resolution from a sovereign instance. The perfect temporal loop that allows the Knight of Faith to move such freedom is reinforced by the man's apathy towards any collective struggle, by the man's passivity in awaiting a godly entity that will appease the overwhelmingly dire circumstances, and by the man's unshakable faith based on resignation. His faith in a salvific intervention also perpetuates and even glorifies the violent repression of any group that antagonizes the status quo, regardless of whether such an antagonism involves armed mobilizations, collective movements, or strikes. The Knight of Faith waits in resignation for the sovereign violence to intervene through what would seem to be a complete impossibility to change Colombian history. Restrepo's video asserts that the belief and resignation of The Knight of Faith is key for the cycle of violence in Colombia to be perceived as timeless.

However, let us not forget that the association of the Knight of Faith with the bird feeding man is only one interpretive possibility of the juxtaposition between *Fear and Trembling* and the

[60] The main difference between this reading of the Knight of Faith and an approach to faith as the basis for a militancy and universality, such as the one that Badiou makes in *Saint Paul ou les origines de l'universalisme,* is precisely the question of passivity. The Knight of Faith fulfills his task without questioning why, passively waiting for something he already assumes will not arrive. Badiou's Saint Paul focuses on the militant aspects of faith, and as such it is an exhortation to a practice beyond the established symbolic order.

man moving around with the pigeons. The video introduces yet another displacement: even if the text appearing next to the man explicitly states, "this is the Knight of Faith," the video can be in fact introducing a form of radical misidentification between the man and Kierkegaard's character. We need to keep in mind that during the Palace of Justice Siege, eleven people went missing, and some bodies were misidentified. By overlapping quotes from the *Fear and Trembling* with the man moving in the square, the video would be reflecting upon the implications of the incorrect identification of the missing individuals that were at the Palace of Justice on November 6, 1985.

This second move takes us to relate the video "El Caballero de la Fe" with other artworks of Colombian contemporary artists who have addressed the issue of the disappeared persons because of the armed conflict.[61] When the video juxtaposes the label "The Knight of Faith" with the man, it would be enacting the situation where an individual is taken for whom he is not. The video shows an entirely anonymous man, and in places the label "Knight of Faith" next to him. Through this, the video would make us identify the man as this kierkegaardian character. Through this movement, we are taking away the man's very own anonymity: we cast aside the lack of identity of the man who feeds the birds by associating him with the character of *Fear and Trembling*. Very much alike those bodies from the Palace of Justice, the man is considered to be someone he is not: the video fills the lack of identity of the man with a discourse embedded in religious motifs. The lack recedes from view, placed under the religious character of the Knight of Faith. Once again, we reach an instance of convergence between religious discourse and state

[61] Just to name a handful of the contemporary artists in Colombia who have focused on the question of the disappearances, see Muñoz's several artworks, including *Aliento* and *Departures*; Salcedo's *Shibboleth* and *Noviembre 6 y 7*; Echavarría's *Silencios*; Diettes' *Sudarios* (2011), Relicario (2011-2015). This list is by no means exhaustive. For a detailed study about the relation between art and violence in Colombia, see *Resistencias al olvido: Memoria y arte en Colombia* edited by Acosta.

violence: here, the religious discourse based on faith and belief covers the traces of the ravages that the state has left behind.

In a way, the video tricks us, spectators, who passively believe that the man *is* The Knight of Faith, even though we ignore everything about him and about the rest of the people running behind him. We would therefore be Kierkegaard's character: we would have faith by virtue of the absurd while believing that the man's history, along with the victims of the Siege, did not get lost into an anonymous past. This interpretation introduces a direct interpellation of the spectators: to what extent are we also immersed in a passive modality of faith in which we desperately believe that the past is not lost, that it is there for us to recuperate and interpret, in order to find possibilities for new futures among its debris? To what extent are we also not waiting for the miracle to arrive so that we would understand that Colombian history can be retrieved from a spiral of violence? The questions that José Alejandro Restrepo's "El Caballero de la Fe" leaves open are still highly prevalent today: Has the belief in a redeeming militaristic Messiah faded away since 2008? Has the faith in a violent response of the state against any possible threat gone away since the Palace of Justice Siege? Has faith become less pervasive as a means to appease and pacify Colombian population?

Restrepo's video reminds us to what extent the juridical exception has served to suspend civil liberties and rights, and has allowed the army to exert violence against the population with a large degree of impunity. Restrepo renders visible in what ways the religious eschatological narrative has legitimized these measures to an extent that it has even made the army boast through a salvific image about its law preserving violence. In so doing, Restrepo denounces how the fringe zone where the law meets its outside has permeated Colombian juridical system up to the point where the state repressive measures have meshed into the ordinary. The outcome of this process

has been the neutralization of movements of opposition by coopting their forms of antagonism and framing them under the eschatological narrative in which the end of the state equals the end of the world. In this context, violence has become a form to shut down the political arena, and a formal and empty law has become the norm for the preservation of the status-quo. As through a convex mirror that reflects the obverse side of Restrepo's panorama, between 1965 and 1965, the Colombian population attempted to organize a collective movement to open the political arena by bringing the present governmental system to its collapse via non-violent means. The radical priest Camilo Torres led this movement, called the *frente unido*, to make the out-of-the-ordinary character of a new form of political system emerge out of the ordinary and everyday means of antagonism against the status quo. Torres developed a militant interpretation of the Christian notion of *love for thy neighbor* in order to deactivate the law through its fulfillment, so that creative forms of self-governance might replace an exclusionary political system under the guise of a bi-partisan democracy.

IV. *El Frente Unido* in "La hora Cero de Colombia": Camilo Torres' Calling

Can one consider Camilo Torres more than a character engrossing the long-standing queue of martyrs of revolutions past? Can Camilo Torres be revisited through a lens that shifts the focus away from his death as a guerrilla fighter? This text is an attempt to rescue Camilo Torres' project of reactivating a political arena, understood as a space for disagreement, antagonism and social organization against constituted power, *from within the space of the established order*. I borrow the term *political arena* from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. For them, the political is an ontological instance where conflict between forces that dissent with one another reshapes the existing forms of governance. It is because of this instance that a new, unprecedented organization, not lacking conflict in its own way, might emerge.[62] The re-ignition of the political arena depicts a situation where this instance of antagonism becomes the decisive actor in bringing forth new modes of socialization. It is a movement that shatters a power system coerced by a reduced elite.

Before his untimely death, Torres wrote a series of letters addressed to different sectors of the civil population. The letters were an indispensable tool for Torres: they called for the people to conform a broad social movement that would interrupt the established bipartisan political system known as the National Front (*El Frente Nacional*). The movement, named *El Frente Unido*, had the purpose of ending an unchanging and exclusionary formal democracy through non-violent

[62] See Laclau and Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. See also Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*; *On the Political: Thinking in Action*. Laclau and Mouffe draw the conceptualization of politics as agonism from French philosophers such as Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis. For a recount of the history about the concept of "Politics as agonism," see Breckman 96-103, and 183-215. One can also see this instance as the space for *disagreement* (*Mésentente*) for Rancière, or *dialectics* for Fanon who reclaimed the term in a radical gesture of creolization of Hegel. I am well aware that these terms are by no means synonymous, however, to carefully draw the distinctions between each author would go well beyond the extension of this article. For a rigorous mapping of the conceptual intersections between these authors, I refer the reader to Castro-Gómez, in particular, chapters 4 and 5. For the sake of clarity, I will rely on the term "Political Arena" when I refer to this instance.

means. The final objective was to make the existing set of laws collapse so that new, creative forms of self-governance would emerge as a sui-generis radical democracy. For Torres, the extraordinary would come to light from ordinary modes of bottom-up resistance. A whole new political system in Colombia would thus come into being.

The following pages bring forth and further theorize Torres' calling to collectively interrupt the existing political order. In his calling, he emphasized creative forms of disagreement and antagonism in ways other than armed struggle. Torres' pursuit may seem contradictory since his moniker has been "*el cura guerrillero*" (the guerrilla priest). Nonetheless, analyzing Camillo Torres' collective movement allows us to rigorously approach the logics of struggle in Latin America, by examining the nuances of popular organization against an established order. As an attempt to conceptualize other forms of politics, this text focuses on an often-overlooked aspect of "The Revolutionary Priest" in order to approach him not as a guerrilla fighter but as an organizer of a collective movement. To do so, this section first explores the historical context of Colombia in the sixties together with the legacies that Camilo Torres has left for both the ELN and for non-violent movements of opposition. Second, the text rescues Camilo Torres' project of antagonizing a constituted political system, *from within the space of the established order*.[63] Here, I will focus on how Torres' movement, *El Frente Unido*, hinged upon popular practices of resistance and collective action. This allows me to examine, in the third and fourth sections, Torres' writings between 1963 and 1965, in particular, the texts he published in the newspaper *frente unido,* which he co-edited as part of the organization of his political platform (Torres insisted in not using

[63] Here, I am using the term "constituted power" in the sense that Enrique Dussel develops in his text *The Ethics of Liberation* and later on decided to synthetize in his book *Twenty Theses on Politics*. Dussel contends that *constituted power* is a coalescence of the *constituent power*, which is the shape that a popular assemblage such as *the people* takes in a given moment. After a certain period of time, *constituted power* becomes obsolete and requires the reshaping by that same *constituent power*. One can also think about this movement in the terms that Ernesto Laclau describes as the *plebs* that claim to be the *populus* antagonizing an institutional order.

capitals for the newspaper's name, whereas his movement would have its initials capitalized and preceded by the pronoun "*El*"). I investigate how these writings are in fact *open letters* that Torres used as a means to send a message to the Colombian population. No matter how remote the region was, each individual was called to unite in the movement through an unprecedented form of coalition: by getting together through difference.

1. Revolutionary Legacies of Camilo Torres

As Michael Löwy has argued in his book *The War of Gods*, the emergence of Camilo Torres is not an isolated case: it is part of a broader Latin American phenomenon which consisted in the development of radical groups that read the Gospel in a sense that emphasized the emancipatory character of Jesus and the apostles (Löwy 44). Torres was a figure influenced both by the tradition of one of the most reactionary and conservative institutions in Latin America, namely the Colombian Episcopate, and by the emerging momentum of the Latin American militant left, fostered by the success of the Cuban Revolution.[64] The success of Castro's 26th of July Movement in Cuba was greatly felt in Colombia's opposition groups. It reconfigured the organization of the left as it tipped the balance in favor of armed struggle as an effective means to overturn the established government. Cuba rendered tangible the hopes in a different future through radical armed mobilization.[65]

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[64] For a historical study of the Colombian Episcopate, see Arias, especially, chapter 3; Cifuentes, María Teresa and Alicia Florián 321-372; González 280-315. For a history about the emergence of a radical branch of the Church in Colombia, see: Arango Zuluaga 57-80, and 121-150; Broderick, Walter J. 28-45. Finally, Enrique Dussel, gives a highly-detailed account of the relation between Church, state, and base communities in Latin America throughout the XX century in *Historia de la iglesia en América Latina*, in particular, 221-374.

[65] The influence of the Cuban Revolution reshaped the ideological contours of the violence by galvanizing two main poles: On the one hand, the state had a militaristic approach against any possible resistance, which was fueled by the U.S. policy called "'Alianza para el progreso' promoted by the president Kennedy to counter the 'Cuban example'" (Jaramillo 221, my translation). On the other hand, there was a significant emergence of rural self-defense

Nevertheless, to counter what it perceived as the communist threat, between 1957 and 1958, the Colombian government sought to immunize itself against these shifting forms of violence and emancipatory ideals. The leaders of the liberal and conservative parties, namely Alberto Lleras Camargo and Laureano Gómez respectively, made a pact in Benidorm –a small beach town in Spain under Franco's regime, where Gómez, a former president of Colombia himself, was living in exile since 1953. With this pact, the leaders of the two main political parties installed a bi-partisan political system, where state power was meticulously shared: after the term of a liberal president, a conservative one was to be elected, after which a liberal would succeed, and so on. This form of government, known as the *Frente Nacional* (the National Front), was created to encourage plural participation in the elections. However, it quickly became a question of sharing political positions between the two parties, excluding any other political actor in decision-making processes.[66]

Thereby, the Colombian state galvanized into a formal democracy where elites filled official political positions with their acolytes, and where any opposition movement was excluded from the decision-making process: "it became practically impossible for political minorities to achieve [any governmental] representation" (Palacios 260, my translation). The logical outcome of the instauration of the National Front was widespread popular discontent, which manifested through large-scale vote abstention, general strikes, and the consolidation of multiple unions in the most powerful Colombian companies. Facing these events, the government violently repressed

organizations encouraged by Castroism and Maoism. For a study about the influence of Castroism in the guerrilla struggle throughout Latin America, see Bosteels "Marx and Freud in Latin America," 195-230; Ratlilff 53-98.

[66] For more studies about the Frente Nacional and its system of formal democracy, see: Ramos 39-64; Schuster 9-26.

most of the popular manifestations of discontent by repeatedly declaring a state of siege.[67] This perception of the state as a dangerous organization led to an unspoken alliance between much of the countryside population and armed movements. Since the political arena was shut down, at least from an institutional point of view, armed opposition seemed the only alternative to antagonize the state.

As such, on the fourth of July of 1964, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) proclaimed itself a rebel group. It was only a few months later that Torres started to send letters to the guerrilla group by March 1965. In less than a year, he radicalized his posture so that, in November, he would join the armed group. He wanted to embrace their revolutionary cause, so he started not as a leader, but as a low-rank soldier; a fellow combatant whose form of living had to take the shape of other members of the insurgent army.

When the priest died in February 1966, his image became one of the leading elements for the ELN ideological tendencies: "Torres has become, in a certain way, private property of the National Liberation Army" (Semana, my translation). Even if other groups appeared, such as "Comandos Camilistas," "Movimiento Camilista M-L de Colombia," "Comité Distrital Camilista," "Núcleo 15 de febrero," sooner rather than later, these groups disappeared or merged with the ELN. Since then, the image of Camilo Torres has become a synonym of the ELN revolutionary struggle. The group named one of its front-lines "Frente Camilo Torres," and still continues to maintain that it has been widely influenced by Torres's writings. Thereby, Torres' life before the ELN is often approached through the lens of his last four months as a guerrilla fighter. This, however, coopts and reduces his prior political gestures and depict them as mere means for

[67] For more information about the emergence of general strikes in Colombia in 1965, the brutal repression that ensued, as causes for the consolidation of *El Frente Unido*, see Jaramillo, 212-239. For historical accounts of strikes in Colombia at the time, see: Archila 51-126; Múnera, in particular, chapters 5 and 7.

becoming a fighter. From this point of view, his political actions are reduced to a series of minor gatherings that took place before the fulfillment of seemingly predetermined destiny of dying as a guerrilla fighter.[68] Contrary to the image of Camilo Torres as a combatant whose purpose was achieved in death, his former companions of *El Frente Unido* have described his resolution of joining the ELN as a hasty decision. According to these versions, Torres seems to be an ingenuous utopian dreamer who was not able to measure the consequences of his actions. This portrayal of Torres, which emerged in academic circles during the eighties, meant conceiving of Torres as politically naïve and inexperienced.[69]

However, I argue that Camilo Torres was anything but naïve in the political terrain. Rather, it would seem appropriate to think of Torres' trajectory as a restless quest to find an instance for politics grounded in antagonism and insubordination. This is why this text focuses on an image of Camilo Torres that exceeds that straightjacket. After a careful examination of his writings, one can conclude that Torres' interrogations go beyond the image of him as the "guerrilla priest" and as a member of the ELN. This also entails the need to trace his potentialities toward a *radical futurity* that arises from a certain modality of social mobilization. Such conceptualization delineates his

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[68] There is an extensive amount of bibliography about the emergence of the ELN. I will limit myself to mention only the ones that explore in different ways the relationship between Torres and the insurgent group: Corporación observatorio para la paz. *Las verdaderas intenciones del ELN*. Correa, *Sueño inconcluso: mi vivencia en el ELN*. Medina, *ELN: Una historia contada a dos voces. Entrevista con el cura Manuel Pérez y con Nicolás Rodríguez, Gabino*. Palacios, *De populistas, mandarines y violencias. Luchas por el poder*
For an account of the different groups that claimed Camilo Torres as an emblem see: Harnecker. *Unidad que multiplica: entrevistas a dirigentes máximos de la Unión Camilista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional*.. López Oliva, *El camilismo en la América Latina.*

[69] For a detailed account of the ways Camilo Torres has been represented through the overflowing amount of literature about him in the last forty years, see Sánchez Lopera's article: "Ciencia, Revolución y creencia en Camilo Torres: ¿una Colombia secular?". One can also refer to the following texts, while also keeping in mind their hyperbolic titles: Broderick, *El regreso de los rebeldes. De la furia de las armas a los pactos, la crítica y la esperanza*. Guzmán, *Camilo: Presencia y destino*. López Vigil, *Camilo Camina Colombia*. Peña Díaz, *Camilo Torres: Cruz de Luz*. The title of this latter volume is also the title of a song by the Chilean songwriter Victor Jara. Pérez, *Camilo Torres Restrepo: Profeta para nuestro tiempo*. Umaña, *Camilo Vive. La Rebelión del maestro ante la injusticia social. Su vivencia, su obra, su actualidad*.

project as something that did not reach its exhaustion in the events of 1965 and 1966 –including his decision to join the ELN. This text is a process of tracing and further theorizing the potentialities of such a movement beyond the merely contextual political circumstances –namely, Colombia in the sixties– to see what remaining aspects can allow us to think about a reactivation of the political arena beyond that historical moment.

Camilo Torres' movement, known as *El Frente Unido,* was a nodal point: different discourses with myriad hopes about the future dovetailed in this organization. This was an instance of convergence where a multiplicity of groups congregated because of the frustrations towards the established political order, and because of their readiness to participate in collective actions to radically change the sociopolitical structure. *El Frente Unido* was meant to be a force to resist and *reshape the political system from the inside*. The movement was anti-nothing, but the objective was to change everything.

2. *El Frente Unido*: When the Ordinary Becomes the Extraordinary

From May to October 1965, Camilo Torres organized his political platform through different strategies to give visibility to the population's discontents against the Colombian elite. He had a series of meetings with the unions of the most powerful companies in Colombia and coordinated peaceful demonstrations in several cities and towns, "gathering thousands of people in public squares, […], shaking up the state of siege declared by the National Front" (Herrera 39, my translation). Moreover, while carrying these public appearances, he simultaneously met with leaders of other political groups to collectively oppose the government. *El Frente Unido*'s leading principles were general enough to integrate any group as long as it stood in antagonism to constituted power, and yet, they also asserted how several parts of the population had shared

concerns that needed to become collective claims against the establishment. When Torres died, the group dissolved due to tensions between its different factions.[70] Even though the profound change the movement had hoped to establish at that time came to no fruition, there was a tiny displacement of the sociopolitical structure of Colombia. Nothing was going to be the same again, for the forms of collective action that *El Frente Unido* expressed remain latent as possible alternatives to conceive other horizons of expectation in the Colombian political arena.

When discussing modes of assembly in Latin America, Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez point out that because of their very fluid nature, social movements resist a thorough definition of their objectives, modes of assembly, and modes of operation. The authors draw attention to the fact that the common denominator of social movements in Latin America is that they "challenge our most entrenched ways of understanding political practice and its relation to culture, economy, society and nature" (Alvarez and Escobar 7). This was the modus operandi of Torres' movement: The project of *El Frente Unido* was to conform a unity of multiple forces in different social sectors that would stand in opposition to the established form of a bi-partisan power sharing system.

What we need to highlight here is that through popular practices of resistance and collective action, *El Frente Unido* encompassed a mosaic of unfulfilled demands that were so diverse that

[70] The ideological broadness and the use of terms with no concrete reference, such as "oligarchy," "liberation," "Colombian methods and solutions," led to the group disbandment. The MOEC (Movimiento Obrero Estudiantil Campesino) as well as the Christian democracy soon withdrew their support as they were unsure of the meaning of one of the group's leading axiom: "*Hay que ir hasta las últimas consecuencias*." Also, this process included sabotage from within *El Frente Unido*: the publishing house *El Siglo,* known for printing the communist newsprint *La voz proletaria*, denied to publish the newspaper *frente unido*, and the communist party itself, entrusted to distribute the broadsheet, sabotaged its circulation (Pérez Ramírez 253).

their only point of convergence was the discontent towards the political system of the National Front.[71] During an interview, Torres states:

> I believe that the Colombian people has a great amount of unconformity. This unconformity has been continuously frustrated. I think that one of the greatest frustrations of our Country has been the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in the year 1948, when *El Bogotazo* happened. After that, the people have always yearned for a guide to transform the political institutions. […] But I think that now the people begin to see a certain solution. This is a form to channel its discontent, not only within a party, within a certain ideology, but in a broad formation around concrete principles. (*Cristianismo* 426-427, my translation)[72]

The priest maintains that his platform does not intend to take the shape of a political party, nor take sides in an ideological brawl between the two traditional factions of conservatives and liberals. Instead, he proposes another mode of popular organization: the act of giving a broad and open identity to this platform, so that a coalition proceeds through the shared antagonism against the constituted power of the state. Indeed, *El Frente Unido*'s own constitutive and yet general principles for assembly make it an incomplete structure: its common ground is the conjoining of repeatedly frustrated demands of the people, as such, it can include all those demands whose individual content is actually different in relation to one another.[73] It was not a question of voting,

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[71] Here, I am also relying upon Laclau's approach for the study of populism and collective movements, particularly in *On Populist Reason*, chapter 4.

[72] In April 9th, 1948, the charismatic leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was killed in downtown Bogotá. The people engaged into an enormous uproar with more than half of the city burned down, and the body count rose to thousands. This monumental riot is known as *El bogotazo*.

[73] Gustavo Pérez Ramírez makes a brief account of the principles of *El Frente Unido*: 1) Liberation from external and internal dependency on the oligarchy. 2) Start with the country's present situation, based on research about the present context, with methods and solutions emerging from Colombia, which do not mimic the Soviet Union. 3) Violence can only emerge as an answer to the violence exerted by the oligarchy. 4) Commitment until the last consequences; never

it was a question of assembling through difference to exert pressure as a collective movement on a national scale.[74] Stepping away from the traditional political party, this articulation of people's discontents implies both a mode to become noticeable as a collective in the social structure, and also a common ground to embrace a plurality of demands. The ways by which *El Frente Unido* merged its claims was through an *organized movement of interruption* aiming to hijack the status quo by turning its own political procedures against itself. Here, ordinary forms of resistance strategically organize to become extraordinary modes of grand-scale interruption. The collective transforms the routine into a disruptive movement.

As the vote abstention for the presidential elections rose from 31.1% in 1957 to 63.2% in 1964, Torres saw a mode to use that widespread lack of participation as means to disrupt the United Front's formal democracy.[75] In the first issue of the newspaper *frente unido*, he published an opinion piece named "*Por qué no voy a las elecciones*" (Why I don't go to the elections). By rejecting a "passive electoral abstention," he advocates for an "active, belligerent, and revolutionary abstention" (*una abstención activa, beligerante y revolucionaria*) (Torres *Cristianismo* 525, translation modified). An active and belligerent abstention is the means by which a revolution can be carried forward (which in his own terms is a radical reshaping of the sociopolitical structure). Such reconfiguration turns the political structure against itself through an

retreat. 5) Uphold the Christian duty of being a revolutionary in front of injustices. 6) Love has to be effective. 7) Maintaining the importance of peasantry (Pérez Ramírez "Su aporte" 242, my translation).

[74] In fact, Torres' outlining of the political platform will produce an incipient theorization in 1964, as he was searching for a common language with which he intended to articulate all the demands of the Colombian population. This approach shifted in 1965, when he declared that the means by which the movement could take form was through a bottom-up structure that would find union through difference. "Let us sponsor a popular organization developed from the bottom up: from neighborhood to town, from suburb to center, from countryside to city. To do this, the Colombian popular class bust be organized into groups of five or ten, with no distinction between partisan or opposition movements" (Torres *Revolutionary* 373).

[75] The information about vote abstention comes from the official data from the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil.

active form of interruption to render it inoperative. In the fourth issue of *frente unido*, Torres declares: "Electoral abstention alone is not a weapon of revolutionary combat. It must be led by an organization and a belligerent and active discipline. The nonaligned, the nonpartisan revolutionaries, will have to transform from a weak, amorphous mass into a battering ram that will not stop battering at the system until the system has totally crumbled" (Torres *Revolutionary* 381). The act of not voting –a passive maneuver by itself– endures a metamorphosis through collective organization. It becomes a battering ram that will tear down the established system. Abstention becomes boycott, which in turn develops into a Revolution. This momentum interrupts and hijacks the constituted power of the state by means of a belligerent action. This, I argue, is *a praxis of interruption*.

This praxis of interruption is meant to transform the system from the grassroots level up to the top: "what concerns us is to transform the system from the bottom all the way into the top, to transform it fundamentally" (Torres *Revolutionary* 348, translation modified). With these practices, everyday political actions correspond to shared ultimate values which can unsettle the established political apparatus. One of the movement's most important cases of interruption through everyday practices was when its members refused to buy *El Tiempo,* the chief newspaper of the Country. "Much better than throwing stones at a building, we will not buy *El Tiempo* for a week, we will destroy any copy of that newspaper that we run into. This way we will lower its circulation" (Torres *Cristianismo* 511, my translation). The outcome of boycotting Colombia's main newspaper for a week (from October the 6th to the 12th) was a series of anti-government protests in cities such as Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Popayán. One can see here to what extent the assemblage of constituent power exposed the very fragile kernel of arbitrariness upon which the formal democracy was relying. The movement was a collective force aiming to crack open the

political system from within (*resquebrajar el sistema politico del poder actual*) (Torres *Cristianismo* 483). It revealed the gap between the constituted form of government –encroached upon itself by depending on the electoral machine of the bi-partisan system– and the heterogeneous entity of the constituent power that was attempting to adopt a collective identity.

Facing this situation, traditional parties sought to end the creative forms of communal organization that *El Frente Unido* was fostering. They tried to co-opt the priest's organization by shaping it into a familiar form, and thereby insert the movement back in the established formal democracy: "The fear of political abstention, which [Torres] promoted in every single public square in Colombia, makes the next government to endow him with the status of 'leader of the opposition.' In exchange, he would have had to present his candidacy to the elections" (Maldonado et al 54, my translation).[76] Colombian elites understood very well that this interruptive force not only could do away with a democratic system reduced to bi-partisanship. They understood that what was at stake here was the quest for a means *to construct a future other than the mere extension of a present*.

One can see that this is a search for a shared will to radically change the present so that a radically new future can emerge. Torres strived for ways to live in common that could reshape the democratic institutions. This endeavor was also an exploration of a certain kind of universal calling: "This is the quest for a revolutionary union beyond the ideologies dividing us" (Torres *Cristianismo* 451, my translation). As such, it was an axiom by which people could organize beyond their circumstantial differences. Through a series of messages he published in the newspaper *frente unido*, Torres circulated his calling for collective interruption.

[76] To immobilize Torres' from of politics, the leader of the main opposition political party, and former head of the state in a military government, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, offered him the positions of Cardinal or ambassador in Paris, with the condition that Torres would had publicly declared to be in favor of the elections (Maldonado et al. 54).

3. Addressing the People: The Newspaper *frente unido*

What means did Torres use to assemble this movement? What were the rhetorical devices he employed in his writings to express this message? How did he allude to the question of universality which, for him, was a keystone for the integration of the masses? As we will see in the following sections, Torres' writings map another possibility for thinking about militancy, politics, and religion. In addition to his open letters, the revolutionary priest's calling also involved other texts he wrote and delivered as speeches to the most important unions of Colombia and as interviews to national and international newspapers. These three formats–letters, speeches, and interviews– are part of Torres' message to rally around a non-hierarchical political organization.[77]

The newspaper *frente unido* was published weekly, it was sold for 1 peso, was usually eight pages long, and was issued from August 26, 1965 to December 9, 1965. A total of 14 numbers were released, including a special edition. Camilo Torres wrote in 11 of them. Each one of his writings is "a message" addressed to a part of the population. For example, in the first issue he writes a text entitled "Mensaje a los Cristianos," in the second one he sends a "Mensaje a los comunistas," and so on. [78]

The broadsheet had mainly two ways to disseminate the message. First, its circulation was not limited to main cities, so that his call would be received by parts of the population until then excluded from the democratic process. Second, the visual layout and written content emphasized

[77] In addition, my focus on these writings also obeys a practical and yet usually overlooked question because of the emphasis placed on his guerrilla activities: Camilo Torres' written production peaked in the years 1964 and 1965, when he was organizing *El Frente Unido*. When he joined the ELN, his writing (at least of what we know so far) ceased completely, except for the "Proclama a los colombianos" (Proclamation to the Colombians), which was his official statement about the enrolment in the ELN, published by most Colombian newspapers on January 7, 1966.

[78] Later on, in 1969, the radical Catholic group *Golconda*, largely influenced by Torres, relaunched the newspaper. Although it lasted for a year, the weekly paper did not achieve the same popular impact as in 1965, since it was not in conjunction with a political movement.

the need to stand against the two-party power-sharing system. For instance, the second and third pages of the first issue depict the political elite through close-ups, one picture for each one of the statesmen. In contrast, the third and fourth pages display the crowds gathering around Camilo Torres. They show a caricature of the president at the time Alberto Lleras in front of three farmworkers, telling him that they are choosing *El Frente Unido* as a response to the multiple betrayals by the elite political class. The contrast is evident: members of the traditional political class were now alone and isolated, whereas the people were assembling in antagonism against them. Such multiple forms of disseminating the message not only sought to confront the traditional political faction. Rather, it was a matter of recognizing a certain kind of social bond that could not be accounted for through the means of the representative democracy in Colombia.

In the terms that Enrique Dussel develops in his *Twenty Theses on Politics*, this is the process of recognition that makes the *plebs* at once not countable and yet holders of the power to constitute means to co-exist. According to Dussel:

> We will use the term *plebs* (in Latin) to refer to the *people* when considered in opposition to the elites, to the oligarchs, to the ruling classes of a political order. This term *plebs,* meaning a part of the community, nevertheless tends to encompass all of the citizens *(populus)* in a *new* future order in which their actual claims will be satisfied and will be equality achieved thanks to a common struggle *by* the excluded. (75)

Terms such as *plebs* and *the people* are liminal concepts: they have a highly unstable meaning and always entail the risk of homogenizing the referent to which they are alluding.[79] However, Dussel is careful in drawing the contours of the concept of *plebs*: its cohesion comes from its antagonism

[79] For recent studies about the question of the *people* as a heterogeneous category, see, for example: Badiou et al. *What is a people*; Ochoa-Espejo 1-16, 58-84, and 113-136. For a careful study of the overlapping meanings of the people/*el pueblo* in Latin America, see Eiss 1-19.

against the consolidated political order. It is only via this opposition that the people become a notion that gives a certain identity –which is necessarily unstable– to the different elements that conform it. To say it somehow differently, it is only by its character of rupture of the present state of affairs –and the will to create a new future– that one can approach the people as an agent of change. This is why the newspaper *frente unido* played a key role in the collective movement: it sought to become a means by which the *plebs* recognized its constituent power vis-à-vis the prevailing political order.

Through this effort to reach for the non-accountability of the *plebs*, Torres will finally find in the "no-alineados" (the population that is not part of a political group) the main source of organization and coalition. The "no-alineados," precisely for not having a predetermined political affiliation, are the excess that the political system cannot fully integrate. For Torres this meant that they were, in fact, the cornerstone for shaping a radically different future.[80] From this perspective, the non-aligned would be the sheer force of constitution of a future not-yet envisioned, for they have the potentiality to assemble into a purely constitutive force that pierces through the constituent power without having the ambition to insert themselves into the constituted power: "It is not a question of forming a new party or a new movement; it is a question of forming a new organization of the unorganized to get them to align themselves to the United Front and the revolution. But let us not oblige them to adopt new titles if they do not wish to" (Torres *Revolutionary* 396). This is why the battering ram of the *plebs* would reshape the political structure, but its outcome would resist a symbolization into a cohesive future.

[80] In fact, one can even say that Torres himself attempts to adopt a position of non-aligned: He resists being aligned with one single social group. He says that as a Colombian, as a sociologist, as a Christian, and as a priest, he is a revolutionary, but also as a Colombian, as a sociologist, as a Christian and as a priest, he cannot be a communist (Torres *Revolutionary* 370-371).

One can say that for Torres, the non-aligned are a potential force that does not exhaust itself in the act of interruption. The non-aligned are a potency that resists a complete coercion into the established order. As such, they become the main source for the collective action that *El Frente Unido* coordinates. Torres goes as far as to repeatedly describe the all-encompassing force of his movement as an "anti-nothing" coalition.[81] This anti-nothing momentum openly maintains the refusal of adopting an anti-communist position, and in so doing it distances itself from the widespread demonization of the far left. On July 14, 1965, in a meeting with the Bavaria brewing company union, Torres declares:

> This movement built on our platform is naturally not a movement anti-anything. It is neither against any revolutionary party not any revolutionary individual. We are not anti-communist. Neither can we be called communists. We are revolutionaries, and we believe that among the revolutionaries there is a place for communists. (*Revolutionary* 352)

The negation of any exclusion in "our platform is naturally not a movement anti-anything" shows the all-encompassing calling as the very organizational principle of *El Frente Unido*. Those who do not belong to a political group, those who are innumerable and hence not taken into account when it comes to political decisions, are called to join the collective call. The "non-aligned" and the rest of *El Frente Unido* were called to organize themselves through a set of practices that the priest ceaselessly described as the only means to enact the love for the neighbor. For him, the one who intensely lives the love for the neighbor brings the law to its fulfillment. This is another instance of approaching a gesture of interruption.

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[81] Torres used the term "anti-nothing" mainly in the speeches he gave in front of the unionized worker. In the speech he gave at the Colombian company of tobacco (COLTABACO), he said: "We need to finish with that taboo. This is why is so important to insist in our premise that this movement is anti-nothing. Even if some individuals are communists, if they look for the well-being of the people, we can unite with them in those points that we all have in common. We need to search for well-being of majorities with no prejudice. With arms wide open, in favor of all Colombians" (Torres *Cristianismo* 468, my translation).

4. Love, Praxis, and Interruption: Torres Beyond Torres

Well before the conformation of *El Frente Unido*, Torres had been elaborating upon the question of love as a bottom-up politics not reliant upon any representation. In 1961, Torres published a text called "El hombre bidimensional" ("The Bi-Dimensional Man"), in which he enquired about the role the Christian community needed to adopt to make an effective change in the Colombian society.[82] He stated that a certain efficacy of the love for the neighbor was needed to pursue this task:[83] "I do not think that we, Christians, can take the responsibility of taking the initiative to frame the political struggle in religious terms. […] However, Christianity must certainly keep in mind the question of efficacy as part of its principles, since ineffective Love is nothing more than hypocrisy" (Torres *Cristianismo* 156, my translation). For Torres, love for the neighbor exists only under the premise of its effectiveness. It has to be enacted through a set of "exterior practices" (157). Hence, love cannot be an isolated gesture, it needs to be a continuity of actions that extend through time and whose outcome is an actual social change.

By 1965, he radicalized his approach: rather than a certain mode of charity, love is a militant engagement with the fulfilment of the law of Christ. The priest's claim changes from "inefficacious charity is not charity at all" (*Revolutionary* 293) to "[a]s a follower of Christ, it is for me impossible to not be a revolutionary" (*Cristianismo* 199, my translation). This shift posits the articulation between revolution, praxis, and love as a cause-consequence relationship: "I am a

[82] Although it would be tempting to hear in the title "The Bi-Dimensional Man" echoes from Herbert Marcuse's *The One-Dimensional Man*, the former dates from 1961, whereas the latter is from 1964.

[83] At the time, Torres was relying on a highly positivistic approach to the social sciences as a tool for politically organize. I shall not address the topic of the science and positivism in Camilo Torres in this text, for I do not have the space nor the time to approach that topic. To see a careful study about Camilo Torres and its relation to social sciences, see Sánchez Lopera's text already mentioned above: "Ciencia, revolución y creencia en Camilo Torres: ¿una Colombia secular?"

revolutionary because I am a priest and because I am Catholic" (Torres *Cristianismo* 395, my translation). Love emerges as an imperative to act: as a follower of Christ, the individual *has no other way* than to carry the praxis interruption as a demand for neighborly love.

This leads us to a crucial point: Torres's conceptualization of his message about *El Frente Unido* relies on his reading of Paul's epistles: long before thinkers such as Badiou, Zizek or Agamben (just to name the usual suspects) approached Saint Paul as a source for theorizing the formation of emancipatory communities, Camilo Torres repeatedly attempted to renew this Pauline message. Even after renouncing his position as a priest, even if his later writings are stripped bare from most of biblical quotations, the reference to Romans 13:8-10 is constant: "It is true that our people, in its majority, are Catholic, or, rather than Catholic, our people are baptized. The essence of Catholicism, the essence of Christianity, is love, so much so that Saint Paul tells us that he who loves his fellow man fulfils the law. So, if we were really Catholic, we would not be torn apart by violence" (Torres *Revolutionary* 350). According to his reading of Paul, love is the basis to create an emancipatory horizontal community: Love is the fulfilment of the law, understood as a *deactivation* of the status-quo, its cracking open, and its subsequent reshaping.

Now, if one is to further theorize Torres' approach to collective action, one needs to differentiate and further articulate these three stages –*deactivation, cracking open, and reshaping* of the political structure– even if he condenses these movements into the term "revolution." In an interview with Jean-Pierre Sergent in June 1965, published in Spanish in 1967 on the Communist newspaper *Voz proletaria*, Torres explains what he calls an "inevitable revolution" (Torres *Cristianismo* 407, my translation). He describes it as a "fundamental change in the economic, social and political structures" (407, my translation). With the fulfilment of the revolution, he says, love for the neighbor also attains completion. This is nothing other than the completion of the law

through a radical reshaping of the political structure. The fulfilment of the law is two-fold: first, the deactivation of the norms that the prevailing order has established to organize the population; second, the fulfilment of the commandments in the Decalogue by the means of loving the neighbor.[84] For Torres, the realization of the revolution demands a simultaneous deactivation and fulfilment of these two versions of the law: "I understood that in Colombia one could not achieve this love [for the neighbor] solely by the means of charity. There was an urgency to make a change in political, economic, and social structures. This demanded a revolution for which such love was inextricably linked" (407, my translation). Such completion of the deep change necessarily requires the interruption of the present state of things and the start of something new. The revolution brings together the ultimate practice of love for the neighbor as a battering ram, the fracturing of political institutions that reveals their empty core, and the ensuing change and reorganization. This process involves the disclosure of the people's constituent power as a mode to interrupt the prevailing order. In so doing, the movement reveals an emergence of emancipatory bottom-up organizations that promulgate a direct form of participatory democracy. In short, this revolution calls for a creative restructuring of democracy by upholding plural ways of participation through paths other than electoral machinery.

At this point, if one wants to read Torres' engagement with the politics of *El Frente Unido*, one needs to read Camilo Torres beyond Camilo Torres, or rather, beyond the image of Camilo Torres as a charismatic leader, a *caudillo*, even though he has been historically portrayed as such.

[84] Here, of course, I am further theorizing Torres' reading of Saint Paul by relying upon Agamben's *The Time That Remains*. Agamben approaches the question of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* by relating it to the way Luther translated into German the term *Katargeo* in Paul's Letter to the Romans as also *Aufhebung*. Agamben explains that *katargeo*, the fulfillment of the law, can also mean to deactivate, to render inoperative. This interpretation opens the space to approach the question of the Hegelian sublation not as a totalizing movement, but as an openness towards a non-integrable negativity. Fulfillment will always already entail its own inoperativity, its own openness towards what it cannot fully integrate.

El Frente Unido had the potentiality of taking its "*anti-nada*" (anti-nothing) maxim to the limit, so it would have engulfed the leader, whose very own ultimate desire was to empty his position into the crowd.[85] In the speech the priest gave to the Union of Bavaria Brewing Company, he inverses the roles between him and the workers: "how much will you demand? Everything – all the way to the final consequences" (*Revolutionary* 345). The assertion that people need to carry on until the last consequences is his intent to engage in a collective action whose outcome is a gesture of facing *the very end of an epoch*. *El Frente Unido* and its coordinated gestures of interruption are directed towards the sense of an ending, up to the last hour where everything can begin anew.

The motives of the *last consequences* and of the zero hour as encouragements to organize against the established form of power are recurrent images in Torres' thinking. They also echoed Che Guevara's statement of "A Revolution that does not reach its last consequences is lost" (Guevara qtd. in Löwy 89). These elements open a space to further theorize the radical futurities that Torres' project demands. They show how, in fact, Torres' writings establish a conjunction between two approaches to emancipatory politics that would otherwise seem contradictory: the convergence between messianism and radical democracy. Messianism implies a conception of history based on an unforeseen and deep change in the present state of things. History carries emancipatory elements that remain latent but rise at different moments with no coordination. Under a given set of circumstances, however, these elements have the possibility to emerge as a sudden eruption that reshapes the ordinary practices into a new symbolic order. Such approach seems to be at odds with the conception of radical democracy as a process in which democracy is

[85] It is worth mentioning here that the force of this organization, which can also be seen as a momentum, leads to a time of reconfiguration of the political realm into alternative communities: hence Torres' insistence on the need to further organize *El Frente Unido* in groups of eight or ten members that do not need to gather around a leader.

reworked from within its own structure to be more inclusive even if there is no total closure in the horizon. As we saw earlier, there will always be an excess of the *plebs* that are not accountable in the present established order.

What is remarkable here, is that Torres' approach to collective action bridges these two visions of history and radical politics: it demands a mode of assembly to face the seemingly incoming zero hour in Colombia, and, at the same time, it requires love to fulfil the law via its interruption. Torres' conceptualizations about possible modes of collective participation are the very means to rearticulate the democratic structure from within. This posits a sudden interruption of the status quo through an emancipatory force that opens a new historical moment. In other words, Camilo Torres conceptualizes a creative and generative collective organization around an emancipatory hope. The movement reveals to be a messianic momentum that acts as a resistance against the established political machinery by building up a force through which a radically different future may emerge.

5. Temporalities in Conflict and the Future in Question

Torres's framing of the messianic momentum of *El Frente Unido* also engages with two different temporalities in conflict with each another. His approach to the revolution relies heavily on an eschatological approach to history. In June 15th 1965, during an interview, he urges the movement organize and get ready for the upcoming revolution: "It is not a matter of prophecies, it is a simple calculation. I think that the conditions producing a revolutionary change are partly complete and, the missing components are already in gestation. I think they will reach maturity in an approximate period of five to seven years" (*Cristianismo* 398, my translation). His urgency portrays an imminent future that will take place as a general law of history, which, according to

him, can be deciphered through calculation. The question of this impending future permeates most of Torres' texts in the newspaper *frente unido*. In "Letter to the Christians," he writes one of his most iconic phrasings: "Once my fellow man will have nothing against me, once he will have carried out the revolution, then I will return to offering Mass, God permitting. I think that in this way I follow Christ's injunction […]. After the revolution, we, Colombians, will be aware that we are establishing a system oriented toward the love of our neighbor. The struggle is long; let us begin now." (Torres *Revolutionary* 368-369). This new start where he can lead Mass again goes together with the fulfilment of the law. The intervention finishes by bridging the nearness of the revolutionary event with the urgency for strategic coordination.

The newspaper also proclaims such references to the upcoming radical change with headlines such as: "*Colombia: Hora Cero*" (Colombia: Zero Hour), "*Ahora más que nunca*" (Now, More Than Ever), "*Proponemos a la Oposición Alianza Inmediata*" (We Propose an Immediate Alliance to the Opposition). The future change would seem to be already emerging with full force, and with it, the generative moment the collective would be the very enactment of the forces of history. To say it somewhat differently, the immediate sense of an ending encompasses and overlaps with the movement of history. The new era will inexorably arrive, bringing the past structure to a closure. Facing this sense of an ending, the people need to organize, they are in charge of starting anew. Moreover, they need to retroactively render present past struggles that have not attained completion: "If what I am saying is outdated, that is, that very few hands concentrate all the power, and that those who have it are not using for the well-being of the majority, if that is dated, then those who are aware of the problem and do nothing about it are even guiltier" (Torres *Cristianismo* 481, my translation). This approach to revolutionary change is inseparable from a call to action, it is a praxis of organization and interruption. Torres presents a

crossroads of temporalities where the eschatological meets the praxiological: what seems to be the unstoppable end of the present can only take place through the contingent organization of the collective.

In doing this, Torres is still loyal to assessments he made in 1962 and 1963 about bringing the kingdom of God unto earth before the final judgment takes place (Torres *Cristianismo* 275). Although the 1965 speeches and texts are cleaned out from such vocabulary, they rely on the task of imagining a future where popular organization and further action are basic axioms to produce a revolutionary change. These motives are deeply engrained in what Gary Wilder calls an "untimely utopia": a constantly actualized projection of the future whose sense is reshaped according to the present that imagines itself into that possible future (Wilder 105). I would add that these imaginary configurations enable present struggles to find hope in situations that, at first sight, would not provide the material basis for such hope to emerge. These untimely utopias encourage Torres to assert that his movement will continue the struggle until the last consequences.

Nevertheless, for the priest, the slogan of fighting until the last consequences also meant to leave behind the movement in October 18, 1965 to join the National Liberation Army. In doing this, Torres split with *El Frente Unido*. His fight would diverge from the movement's conception of unity thorough difference. On February 1966, Camilo Torres was shot dead when he and other ELN members tried to ambush a military convoy. This was a tremendous defeat, not for the ELN, who claimed Torres image as an emblem of guerrilla combat, but for popular movements, who saw in his death a failure to acknowledge the interruptive force of constituent power. As the guerrilla group used his image to glorify the use of violence against the state, the government had the chance to reinforce the portrayal of the opposition as an entity of chaos and destruction. If we are to think about ways to interrupt an already decaying form of representative democracy while,

at the same time doing justice to the victims of struggles past, we need to be critical about an all-encompassing notion of "emancipatory violence." We, therefore, cannot keep away from the figure of Camilo Torres in the task of recognizing the interruptive potential of social movements as a praxis intending to bring a new form of politics into being.

These images of what could have been, of the changes that might have taken place, more than just reasserting a melancholic gaze towards the grand ideals of revolution, enable us to further study the frustrations that ensue when hopes fail. This is not a pessimistic and cynical claim that figures like Torres are deemed to disappoint the collective cause to build new futures. Rather, this is an enquiry about what happens when the expectations about a profound transformation that was sensed to take place crash with a historical movement that resists alteration. If, as we saw in this section, the eschatological discourse in Colombia legitimizes state violence against any possible actor, thus conveying the image that it is impossible to escape a spiral of violence, in Mexico the economic depression of the 1980s led to a widespread feeling of hopelessness and anger embodied in the slogan: "La Neta no Hay Futuro." However, it is only by facing those instances of catastrophic panoramas, that one can think about the shape of the deepest rupture with the present. The change that did not happen and the barren landscapes that remain with no redemption confront us with the task of strategically changing the very assumptions we have when it comes to think about a profound reconfiguration of the present. It is there, when deliverance is no expected, that true hope for political militantism can arise.

HOPE

It might seem counterintuitive to address the narrative of Juan Rulfo when my main concerns are the temporalities of radical change and the impact of upcoming revolts in the way we measure time. The author of *El llano en llamas* and *Pedro Páramo* is considered to be a writer of purgatory-like landscapes, where characters aimlessly wander in their unchangeable fate of repetitive and yet extremely violent daily lives. If our goal is to examine situations that approach the relation between revolution and messianism, why should we reflect upon a series of stories that so stubbornly come back to an apparent stagnation of time? What can Juan Rulfo bring to a conversation about narratives depicting the end of an era, the emergence of another, and the peculiar shape the measure of time adopts at the in-between of those two orders?

El llano en llamas is a collection of seventeen stories that repeatedly negates any chance to break away from a spiral of routinized violence. Precisely because of that reason, it offers a paradigmatic literary approach to *the catastrophe* in the sense that Walter Benjamin briefly and yet so compellingly sketched in the convolute N of *The Arcades Project*: "Catastrophe – to have missed the opportunity" (Benjamin 474). What the stories of *El llano en llamas* narrate is the counter-side of a profound rupture in the present. These stories are fictional descriptions of *the change that did not happen* and the consequences ensuing from the missed encounter. To read *El llano en llamas* is to bear witness to the hopes of potential but missed instances of redemption; it is to encounter the fictionalized portrayals of failed dreams and expectations that only took the shape of dreams that never became a reality. Juan Rulfo, in that sense, is the writer of a violent potentiality of hope that clashes with the catastrophe.

The barren character of the rulfian landscapes in rural Mexico will eerily resonate with an urban post-apocalyptic organization of space in the 1980s during the *década perdida*. To narrate these spaces, the image will play a capital role as it conveys other forms of self-government in

Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. In particular, Sarah Minter's videos, through their treatment of the punk scene and *the negative urban spaces*, they evoke the debacle of the post-revolutionary discourses of Mexican nationalism and modernity. In 1982, after what seemed to be the beginning of hard-sought bonanza years, President José López Portillo announced a catastrophic devaluation of the peso. The economy fell into a crisis only comparable to the great depression. His measures to nationalize banks only deepened the monetary disaster. The institutional post-revolutionary dream was over, and so was a long legacy of protectionist governmental measures. Not long after his inauguration, Miguel de la Madrid –Portillo's successor– adopted a series of market oriented measures that did not just affect foreign trade, but also had a profound negative impact on the working-class population nationwide. The official rate of unemployment reached 25% and migration to the United States and Canada doubled in two years of his government. Because of the social consequences of this disaster, the 80s in Mexico were known as La década perdida (The lost decade).

Amidst the municipalities that of Mexico City, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, one of the largest slums of Latin America, was the locus of emergence of a Punk-rock culture that soon attracted a substantial part of the young population. More than a mere music scene, Punk in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl soon became a means to give identity to several gangs whose members' age ranged from thirteen to thirty-five. While being completely discredited by the media, which depicted them as nothing more than dangerous criminals, these groups created a series of local initiatives that resembled more alternative communities organized through self-governance than mere agents of chaos. The gangs, moreover, made their awareness clear about the fact that the government had turned its back on the working-class population, leaving them aside in a precarious condition of dispossession on the outskirts of Mexico City. With a series of practices that ranged from graffiti

writing to a series of impromptu concerts in landfills and torn-down buildings, the gangs constantly made iteration of a widespread slogan: "La Neta no Hay Futuro."

One of the gangs that reached notoriety well beyond Ciudad Neza was "Los Mierdas Punk," which by 1985 had between 600 and 700 members (Urteaga 198). "Los Mierdas" were the main characters in a series of videos made by the experimental film pioneer, Sarah Minter. The videos, filmed over the second half of the 80s, became both a means to popularize a new burgeoning artistic format and a key element to show the gangs of Ciudad Neza as a community that largely surpassed the simplistic image about them displayed by the media. In this section, I establish a dialogue between two modes to approach a present that can only be perceived as a catastrophe. Juan Rulfo's dedication to create the underside of a messianic temporality brings forth a series of frustrations that will find an unlikely echo in the punk scene of Mexico City on the verge of the neoliberal turn. The creation of new and radically different futures depend on the hope that emerges through the catastrophe. As we will see, these forms of sociality proclaim different modalities of resistance against capital.

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V. The Stubborn Hope of *The Plain in Flames*: Beyond a Time of Failed Miracles

What follows is a journey that strives to track down the possibilities, the missed opportunities, and the dreams of change in *El llano en llamas*. This endeavor, however, requires a starting point that emulates the way the characters in *El llano* begin their own stories: by making the choice of what to narrate, what to tell, in a way that a localized point of view also conveys the vast surroundings where the characters are immersed. *Pichón*, the narrator of the story that bears

the same name as the book, "El llano en llamas," begins his tale while laying down among the rocks, a few moments before engaging in a confrontation against the members of a rival local army. His restricted point of view will nonetheless enable him to narrate the evolution of rural militias and their confrontations with the *federales* in Jalisco. The "Luvina" school-teacher, drinking inside a local cantina where he can see the sunset and hear a few kids playing, is able to describe the forgotten desolation of this town in Oaxaca. Following that same movement of conveying the barren and violent landscapes by opening with the characters' singular experiences in their localized surroundings, I will start by analyzing the narrative nuances and temporal complexities of *The Plain in Flames* by relying mainly in two stories: "Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa." While I do this, I will also unravel the main axis of thought that traverse the seventeen stories of the book.

The objective of this procedure is to delineate a buffer zone that encompasses the manifold ways through which Juan Rulfo approaches a moment of profound change in the established status-quo, without ever properly breaking through it. To say it somewhat differently, analyzing "Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa" allows me to make a speculative leap to study how, in *El llano en llamas*, Rulfo explores the density and malleability of temporal movement. The collection of seventeen stories engages with a thread of temporalities that oscillates between contingency, teleology, and pure routine. Hence, this essay is an effort to engage in an immanent critique of the catastrophe by scrutinizing points of tensions in a moment within time from which the messianic may or may not unfold. Here, I trace the means Rulfo uses to dangerously make his way towards the thinnest layers of ordinary time. He manages to never properly unleash a transformation of each story's state of affairs, even though he meticulously carries his narrative up to the brink of collapse into a completely different situation. By tarrying with Rulfo's obverse relationship with

radical change, I trace the divergent temporalities that emerge from a path intended to lead towards redemption. The following pages thus will focus on the detours and regressions away from a road that, had it been followed, would have displayed all the elements leading towards a complete reformation of the state of affairs. These situations are what I call *deadlocks before the messianic time*.

How does Juan Rulfo narrate the missed opportunities for a messianic rupture, while simultaneously depicting the hopes that the characters had in such a change? The answer to this question lies, I believe, in Rulfo's skillful crafting of a compound of temporalities in *The Plain in Flames*. The intricacies of time and change become especially visible in the stories "Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa." These are two stories with characters who either were hoping for –or are still expecting– a change that will never come. In the first story, four peasants walk through a barren plain given to them by the government, and in the second one, three characters participate in a pilgrimage to Talpa, so one of them can heal from a gruesome disease.

Before properly engaging in a close reading of "Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa," I consider it necessary to unveil the multi-layered organization of time that runs through the book. Indeed, it might seem that a twofold axis of time structures *The Plain in Flames*, namely, a stagnant time and an endless repetition of the past. However, one needs to pierce through this narrative device Rulfo uses in several of his stories to uncover a deeper layer where myriad temporalities in tension become a foundation for such stories to emerge in the first place. This procedure will bring forth the theoretical tools we need to explore the dynamics of time, hope and rupture in *The Plain in Flames.*

1. History, Choices, and Grievances in *The Plain in Flames*

From an overarching perspective, most of the stories in *The Plain in Flames* depict characters encountering a choice: either they follow a path that will keep them in their routine, or by choosing not to, they face a series of unforeseen circumstances through which, they hope, will radically break away from their initial setting. In this second scenario, sometimes the radical rupture takes place, but most often the story ends while the characters are still waiting for it to arrive. To further illustrate this, let us bring together the cases of Lucas Lucatero, from "Anacleto Morones," and *Pichón*, from "El llano en llamas." At a certain point in both stories, the characters find themselves in a similar situation: they are settled in, with a routine already established. In the story of Lucas Lucatero, a group of women visits him in order to convince him to bear witness about the sanctity of Anacleto Morones, his deceased father in law and former partner in crime. Lucas Lucatero chooses not to follow them, and the story narrates how one by one, the women give up in their attempts to persuade him and go back home. In "El llano en llamas," an iteration of this scenario takes place, but with a different outcome. *Pichón,* after fighting in a series of skirmishes between local *caciques* in Jalisco, hides in the *cañón del Tozín* where he begins to raise hens. After eight months, however, his former band member Armancio Alcalá visits him and encourages him to join, once again, the ranks of Pedro Zamora. *Pichón* chooses to team up with him, unleashing a wave of violence in the plains until, finally, the national army defeats him and his comrades.

In key moments of their development, these two stories present a mirror-like scenario of each other: the characters encounter a similar choice, and yet they decide differently –one leaves, the other one stays. The question that lingers, therefore, is what would have happened if *Pichón* had decided to stay, and Lucas Lucatero had decided to leave. The emphasis for each story to take

a certain path is thus placed on the characters' decision: on the sheer contingency that lies in the question of what could have happened, should the characters have chosen otherwise. This possibility, also becomes evident, for instance, in a son's decision to cross the border, leaving his wife and kids with his uncaring father in "Paso del Norte," only to come back after he fails to do so. The decision, therefore, leaves us with the uncertainty that, maybe, the opportunity these characters missed to radically change their situation, was in fact, in the road they chose not to take.

Now, far from using these alternative paths as minor devises intended to bewilder the readers, the stories of *El llano en llamas* insistently use these situations as part of a net-like structure of temporalities that interact in dynamic ways. This network of temporalities, however, sustains –and at the same time is concealed by– Rulfo's masterful crafting of the superficial and most visible narrative layer: one through which we, readers, have the impression that the stories only revolve around a stagnant time. Such a multi-layered examination of temporal movements results in the texts' resistance to a straightforward referential positioning within the framework of Mexican history. These texts talk about the violent ebbs and flows of the complex series of events considered to make up the Mexican Revolution, even though they do not make a direct reference to any historical incident during that period, and they only allude to its convulsive effects in very few precise instances.

Here, we witness the book's exploration of the density of historical movement. *The Plain in Flames* strives to narrate how history moves, not by thematizing this movement, but by alluding to myriad interactions between contingency, teleology, and daily life. The book's enactment of these interactions takes the form of the *deadlocks before the messianic time*. This is what is at stake when I argue that the book creates a buffer zone that strives to comprehend the possible outcomes of the convergence between the characters' everyday life, their own assumptions that a teleological

movement is taking place, and the aleatory nature of their choices, which, in turn, undermines such assumptions. As the stories convey multiple instances of convergence between these elements in order to describe the movement of history, the profound transformation that the messianic entails is just one of the possible outcomes of this dynamic interaction. The buffer zone is precisely that structure where this series of interactions take place, and where these same exchanges become deadlocks that prevent a moment of profound change in the status-quo to take place. Indeed, these relations can only be seen as deadlocks before a profound transformation: should they display this full alteration, these same elements would cease to exist as mere conditions of possibility for this situation to happen. In that scenario, the movement of history that these stories enact would only be a prologue to its thematized radical transformation. To say it somehow differently, the stories strive to tarry with the movement of history, but not to enact nor to thematize its transformation.

This procedure of engaging with the movement of history while simultaneously resisting the urge of its open thematization is what Neil Larsen emphasizes when he says that Rulfo's texts are "fictions about history before they are about culture, about time before they are about space" (Larsen 139). Larsen draws attention to the fact that Rulfo's stories are, first and foremost, an exploration of a "historical experience of the non-self-contemporary" (140). Now, if we further advance in Larsen's notion of the "non-self-contemporary" historical experience of these stories, we discover a further implication of the argument that Larsen leaves only briefly sketched. The historical experience of the non-self-contemporary does not just deal with a singular mismatch between "a past that goes on speaking" (Larsen 142) and a dislocated present that cannot come to terms with its own actuality. Rather, the historical experience of the non-self-contemporary is a much more elaborate structure –the buffer zone– that organizes *The Plain in Flames*: it is an intricate process of knotting together different threads made of a succession of independent

narrative moments; fragments of multiple chronological times that interrelate throughout each story and nonetheless give the impression of a nearly-homogenous continuity in which the markers of time are mainly changes in weather and/or season.

This interaction of time threads takes part even in the formal aspects of the stories. In a large number of syntactic and structural analyses of the book, many scholars before me have studied the question of the repetition of a certain word and the gesture of picking up the thread of an unfinished sentence previously uttered in the text. For instance, José Carlos González Boixo mentions:

> los personajes de Rulfo tienen la costumbre de recoger, cada número de frases, la frase inicial de su charla para hacer así que todas sus palabras queden suspendidas en un mismo momento de la historia. No se permite el paso del tiempo entre la primera palabra y la última. Se recoge todo en una repetición o una variante de la frase original. (González Boixo 85)[86]

What these readings assume, however, is that this procedure reduces time to a point of total immobility. The back and forth between a previous instant and the narrative present allegedly asserts a total immobility of that narrative present. The readings overlook the fact that the narrative time still moves forward. Even though there is a leap back to a previous sentence that shortens the distance between the present and the story's now past point of departure, the story continues to unfold towards its conclusion. What must be highlighted here is that while Rulfo seems to tell his stories in chronological order, those same narratives give the impression that time does not pass and that the characters are stuck in a certain limbo. However, this dialectic between chronological

[86] The question of repetitions and flashbacks to the same sentence at multiple times in the stories has been also explored by the Carlos Blanco Aguinaga 18-20; Amit Thakkar 7-27; and Rowe 51-58; among many others.

time and timelessness is just the surface level in Rulfo's quest to illustrate the relationship between the movement of time and historical events. The outcome of this process is a stratification of timelines. This deeper set of interactions can help us understand, firstly, the relation between regular time and its rupture. Secondly, it helps us grasp the importance of the characters' hopes in the possible arrival of a radical change, and their frustrations that ensue when those hopes do not attain fulfillment. Thirdly, it can help us grasp how the interaction between regular time, rupture, and the start of a new era, can collapse into a heterogeneous mixture of different orders of time.

As these narratives give the impression of timelessness, Rulfo's texts function as artifacts that work *against* any precise delimitation within a moment of history. In using "against," I am thinking of both being *in opposition to* and *in contact with*.[87] These texts resist being pinpointed in an exact context while simultaneously alluding to their own thematization of historical movement. The texts allude to events such as the Cristero war in "La noche que lo dejaron solo"; the plurality of armed movements during the earlier stages of the Mexican Revolution in "El llano en llamas"; and the problem of the land in conjunction with the agrarian reform in "Nos han dado la tierra." However, from out of those situations, these narratives elicit trans-historical problems that persist throughout the early part of the twentieth century Mexico. This is something that Rulfo himself makes clear when he says: "En realidad no era tratar de involucrar ninguna época, ni revolución, ni nada. Ninguno de esos materiales. Simplemente involucrar los hechos que habían pasado ahí. Y nunca se menciona una fecha" (Rulfo *Autobiografía* 64-65). The importance of these stories rests upon the fact that they narrate open questions that cannot be delimited to a certain period of time: "los hechos que habían pasado ahí" (the facts/deeds that took place in there). It is only by resisting being confined to a bounded moment, and by contesting any intent to privilege

[87] For an interesting conceptualization of ambiguous use of the term *against* see Erin Graff Zivin 2.

their referential function over their fictional qualities, that these narratives are able to unearth these deeds, these persistent demands that remain unanswered throughout the Mexican Revolution and its long aftermath.

One only needs to take a look at the efforts critics have to make when they attempt to track down the moment to which the stories supposedly allude, to realize that these narrations actively resist an approach that circumscribes them to a precise moment in time. When it comes to "Nos han dado la tierra," for example, critics like Edmond Cros, William Rowe and others assert that this is an episode of the land reform under the government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940).[88] These claims contrast with what Bill Richardson argues: "The story [Nos han dado la tierra] constitutes, therefore, a direct commentary on social power, relating implicitly – but without equivocation – to the questionable attempts at agrarian reform undertaken during the post-revolutionary regimes of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles in 1920s Mexico" (Richardson 77). One cannot but see how these attempts to contextualize the story paradoxically reassert the opacity of Rulfo's stories when it comes to reduce them to their referential value.

To be perfectly clear, I do not argue that the stories of *The Plain in Flames* are either cut off from their own conditions of emergence as the product of a writer who at the time was living in Mexico City, or oblivious to the rural life in the regions of Jalisco, Michoacán and Guerrero during the first half of the twentieth century.[89] Precisely because these are fictions about the movement of history, their meaning is far from exhausted when they reference a specific time period. By reflecting about history, they *indirectly elicit grievances that linger on as open demands through time*. Rather than denouncing and exposing one specific issue, in *The Plain in Flames*,

[88] See Cros 219-221; Rowe 27-28.

[89] For a detailed account of the conditions of emergence of *El llano en llamas* in relation to Juan Rulfo's life, see Reina Roffé 158-184; Cristina Rivera Garza 13-66.

Rulfo addresses the very persistence –the lingering– of grievances through time, which take different shapes through the stories.[90] For instance, the author's interest in the question of land destitution is something he will also make very clear in his non-fictional work: "[a]hí está la cuestión de por qué algunas personas llegaron a acumular muchas tierras sin tener derechos legales, hacienda desaparecer pueblos para correr a la población y evitar así la dispersión de la tierra" (Rulfo *Autobiografía* 82-85). This is why, in the particular case of "Nos han dado la tierra," Rulfo sheds light on the unremitting force of the agrarian question in rural revolutionary Mexico, and reveals its very lack of closure by stressing the *different horizons of expectation* the characters have after they have been given unproductive land.

2. The Stubbornness of Hope

Following Koselleck, the term "horizon of expectation" is the representation of the future from the point of view of the categories of knowledge one has in the present. In Koselleck's view, the horizon of expectation is a general category that can be used for collective as well as individual conceptualizations of the future. This notion proves to be a useful concept to think about the way the texts in *The Plain in Flames* narrate the future of each character. As I stated before, in most of these stories, the characters encounter a choice that they might take as an opportunity to change their present situation. Out of the temporal movement between the present and the past comes forth another order of temporalities: the horizon of expectation that each of the characters depicts. Thereby, the portrayal of the future is different for each character, and as such, we have not one,

[90] If anything, one could say that Rulfo's depiction of the movement of grievances through time is a fictionalization of what John Tutino characterizes as the impact the Cristero revolt had for the relation between the peasants and the State: "The strength of the Cristero Revolt made it plain that rural Mexico would not be pacified, that no regime would remain secure, until 'the agrarian question' was addressed in a comprehensive reform" (Tutino 8).

but several horizons of expectation.

"Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa" offer a paradigmatic perspective to elicit the connection between each character's horizon of expectation, which emerges through what I call the *stubborn hope*, and a series of contingent events that appear over the course of the narrative.[91] This interaction between hope and contingency is a key issue when it comes to exploring the temporalities of a messianic rupture and their aesthetic manifestations, for the unexpected is what makes hope appear in the first place. In the case of *The Plain in Flames*, this depiction of the characters' horizons of expectation takes the shape of fictional narratives within the stories themselves. This is something Françoise Perus delineates when she states: "al fundir el pasado (imaginado) y el futuro (presentido) con el presente de la enunciación, esta situación del carácter imaginario del monodiálogo *conlleva la instauración de la ficción dentro de la ficción*" (Perus 340, emphasis in the original). This mise-en-abyme, namely a fiction within the fiction, is inseparable from a reflection about the movement of knotting together different threads of time. Hence, if we are to formulate a comprehensive approach to *The Plain in Flames* by keeping in mind the imbrication of fictions that structure the book's narratives, we need to approach these stories as more than iterations of fate in a desolate limbo. Rather than the writer of timelessness, Rulfo also needs to be considered the writer of expectations and beliefs in possible futures; he manages to make the characters introduce new fictional narratives within the main story where they talk about what they expect is going to happen. The result of this process is that the reader obtains a privileged position to see an intimate side of the characters, given that they express their own dreams and wishes projected onto a foreseeable future. In that sense, one can say that Juan

[91] The question of *stubborn hope* is also particularly visible in "Diles que no me maten," "No oyes ladrar a los perros," and, to a certain extent, in "Paso del Norte," since the characters cling to hope even if all the odds are against them.

Rulfo is the writer of stubborn hope, a belief the characters hold onto during pivotal moments when their whole world is falling apart. In what follows, I will briefly sketch what I mean by this concept.

Pressing further Koselleck's theorization of a horizon of expectation, we can see hope as an unfounded prognosis that depicts a positive image of what is to come. It can be both individual and collective –when, for instance, collective movements assemble to assert demands shared by the constituent power vis-à-vis the constituted power of the State.[92] Both of these possibilities rely upon the gesture of drawing in the horizon of expectation a plausible scenario deemed beneficial to the one(s) who hope. However, hope also introduces an element of unknowability in what is to come. The scenario that hope grafts onto the horizon of expectation is not a mere projection of the present into the future, for this picture is not grounded on accurate predictions granted by calculations in the present. The specificity of hope consists in detaching itself from those estimates by introducing an element of utopian uncertainty in the line of horizon. Étienne Balibar lays the ground for this questioning in a text where he explores whether the term "Revolution" can still resonate with current struggles. Balibar states: "Il faut se demander si l'imaginaire n'a que la fonction fantasmatique de répétition du passé, ou bien comporte aussi une dimension 'utopique' d'anticipation de l'avenir, ou de transgression des limites, pour aller vers ce qui par définition est inconnu" (Balibar 50). Using the Lacanian notion of the order of the imaginary, Balibar wonders whether this notion, in the very act of bringing illusions of wholeness and synthesis, which suture and foreclose any access to the real, can paradoxically bring instances of redemption. In other words, he asks if the imaginary can only saturate the present with referential images of the past, or

[92] See my chapter about Camilo Torres for a more thorough discussion about collective movements and the creation of the future.

whether, by relying upon narratives that are not referential to past situations, it also has the function of approaching a series of gaps that those images cannot cover. In doing that, the imaginary would come forth as a means to *fictionally create images of the future* that do not merely reproduce points of references from the past.

If we consider the first case –the imaginary only saturates the present with references from the past–, then any act of thinking about the future would be a mere iteration of the present combined with specters of events that happened before. However, by considering the second case where the imaginary introduces non-referential scenarios –namely, fictions–, we realize that when it comes to think about the future, the imaginary unwillingly also carries its own points of flight (*points de fuite*) towards what it cannot fully integrate. These points, where the imaginary reaches its own limit, are the threshold towards that which Balibar calls the "utopian dimension of anticipation of the future." These openings, which take the form of fictions about the future, are constitutive of the anticipatory structure of hope. They are what enables hope to detach itself from accurate predictions of the future, and pierce into a realm of fictionality. This is the utopian dimension that comes into play when thinking about the future; this is what is at stake in the notion of hope.

Thereby, the utopian dimension that hope introduces in the horizon of expectation relies on a qualitative leap between the present circumstance and the envisioned future. This leap, however, as much as it is key for the structure of hope, also depends on pure contingency. Put differently, the utopian dimension of hope implies that the scenario it depicts may or may not happen. Thus, hope necessarily rests upon a cloud of unknowing. This allows us to perceive the slight mismatch between the structure of hope and the idea of progress. The latter rests upon the premise that a certain law of history dictates the pace of chronological time, forcing it to ascend

towards a hypothetical improvement of mankind. The former, by definition, emerges from a lack of clear data and calculations: its conditions of possibility are contingency and belief. Rulfo will explore this mismatch by showing to what extent hope goes beyond a belief in historical progress. He will elaborate upon the idea that progress is based upon a belief in a teleological law, whereas hope relies on the question of chance beyond any assumption that history moves towards improvement. Indeed, one can say that in his life, as much as in his texts, Rulfo will render visible the erosion of the progressive image of hope: "[This is] a feature of Rulfo's work not generally mentioned by critics: its critique of post-Revolutionary *desarrollismo*, i.e. of the notion that the modernization of the economy and culture in Mexico would create a more genuine national identity" (Rowe 26). By 1953, the so-called Mexican miracle, boosted by the government of Miguel Alemán, asserted the image that progress and modernization were possible, and that they were indeed taking place.[93] Rulfo himself was an active agent in that modernization impulse: he was working at the Goodrich-Euskadi and had already held different bureaucratic positions at the Mexican state. Yet, amidst this era of high economic growth, he nonetheless published his first book, *El llano en llamas*. In so doing, Rulfo did signaled the gap between the belief in progress and teleology, and a hope that can only emerge in the starkest of circumstances as mere contingency, a hope that deals with plausible utopian scenarios that can only rise out as chance: a stubborn hope.

As we will see in "Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa," Juan Rulfo pushes hope to its last

[93] In her book *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué*, Christina Rivera Garza uses the image of Benjamin's Angel of History to describe Rulfo's ambivalent position vis-à-vis the Mexican modernization. She makes clear to what extent Rulfo was an agent in the same process he deeply criticizes in his texts: "Rulfo no sólo fue el testigo melancólico del atrás que la modernidad arrasaba a su paso, sino también, en tanto empleado de empresas y proyectos que terminaron cambiando la faz del país, fue parte de la punta de lanza de la modernidad corrupta y voraz que, en nombre del bien nacional, desalojaba y saqueaba pueblos enteros para dejarlos convertidos en limbos poblados de murmullos" (Rivera Garza 107-108).

consequences: the characters persist in their stubborn attachment to the principle of hope. Even when the narrative already indicates to them, and to the readers, that those utopian scenarios will not take place under any circumstance, they continue to describe those futures now doomed to fail.

3. "Nos han dado la tierra": Waiting for the Weak Transcendence

As previously stated, in "Nos han dado la tierra", four peasants walk through an arid land the government gave to them. As they are walking, the narrator describes how, all of a sudden, because a drop falls from the sky, they all wait for the rain to fall, only to realize that such an expectation is pointless. They thus keep on walking until they reach the end of the plain and enter a village whose dogs' barking they have been hearing for a while.

Through the narrative, the characters manifest their expectations about a future that, on the surface, is nowhere to be found. Each one of them expresses their own hopes, and the story ends when the last one of them narrates what he hopes will happen with his part of the land. Faustino is the first to draw attention to the fact that it might rain over the plain; then, Melitón utters "this is the land they've given us" (Rulfo 4) and dreams about having horses that will run across the plain; Esteban carries with him a hen he covers with his coat until he can find a place to begin again; and the narrator, who is also a character, dreams of reaching the village whose dogs they have been hearing for a while. In the meantime, the narrator goes back and forth between how there used to be twenty of them and now there are only four of them left, and their present, from where he narrates their current situation and the different hypothetical futures of each character. This monologue immerses the reader into a non-linear narrative that not only comprehends the temporal aspect of the story, but that also permeates the relation between the narrator, the reader, and a listener who is also an intradiegetic figure, but who does not take part in the action.

The narration, therefore, disrupts a linear temporal progression while it also emphasizes the impression that this one, as well the rest of the stories in the book, are oral histories. The narrator seems to be telling this tale not only to the reader, but also to a listener who seems to stand at an in-between where he can see both what the characters go through and what the reader perceives. For William Rowe, this is a technique Rulfo uses to make the reader look at the characters from inside their own point of view while also looking at them from the outside perspective of that listener who stands in a threshold (Rowe 9). The outcome of this movement is the portrayal of Janus-faced characters who keep looking at the past while also looking at the present, and of a distant, quasi-extemporal listener who sometimes seems to be a state representative –like the *licenciado* in "El hombre," or the old cowherd in "En la Madrugada" who seems to be telling someone in jail about a murder he does not remember having committed. This movement pulls the reader through numerous threads of time, numerous points of view, as he simultaneously glances *at* these double-faced characters *from within* them, and as he is not fully able to differentiate himself from that implied listener.

As the reader gazes at the characters' past, present, and future, the formal elements in "Nos han dado la tierra" only increase the reader's contradictory stance: the story constantly repeats the adversative conjunction "*pero*" (but) to mark a mismatch between the present and the past. In addition, sometimes we find the "*pero*" twice in the same paragraph, along with the intransitive verb "*puede*" (it might), which indicates uncertainty about what could happen. These ebbs and flows set forth a combination between hope and the pure abandonment to contingency: the characters hope that something will happen, but they also have to deal with the fact that these are situations that might never occur. Rulfo leaves those situations open-ended. The outcome of those prognoses remains concealed even after the story reaches its conclusion. For example, by the end

of the text, Esteban, who now we know has been hiding a hen under his coat for the whole journey, says "this is where I get off!" (Rulfo 5) and he parts ways from the other three characters without any indication of his further whereabouts.

Moreover, each scenario that the characters imagine comes into view because of their journey through the plain. The *llano* becomes a space saturated with the characters' prognoses. Even if they walk through it, the plain turns into a convex mirror where they see themselves, not only in the present, but also in their past and possible futures. This is noticeable from the very first sentence of the story: "After walking for so many hours without coming upon even the shadow of a tree, not even the seed of a tree, not even a root of anything, one can hear dogs barking" (Rulfo 1, translation modified). This opening is also the anticipation of the story's concluding settings, when the peasants reach the village where the dogs are barking. This distant sound also echoes the story "No oyes Ladrar a los Perros," where the narrator interpellates his son to be the listener both of the dogs barking and of his recount of the characters' past, present and possible futures. Just like in "Nos han dado la tierra," this anticipation structures most of the characters' hopes in an uncertain outcome, transforming the trail they are walking into the convex mirror where the characters reflect upon their choices.

This process of transformation of the path into a reflection of both the character's frustrations and hopes leads to rendering opaque the land itself. Such an opacity is another way of naming a territory solely in terms of lack and nothingness. Coming back to "Nos han dado la Tierra," the first sentence also evinces that the plain, properly speaking, has nothing on it; the only thing that breaks the regularity of its surface is the faint echo of dogs in a village nearby. Far from being limited to the first sentences, the description of the plain as a desolate area runs through all the text: "So much land all for nothing. Your eyes slide all over with nothing to detain them" (3).

The characters confront their own hopes in this space that happens to be a land the government has promised them. As we mentioned in the first part of this text, by approaching this topic, Rulfo reflects how a multiplicity of open grievances which include the one known as "el problema de la tierra" persist through time.

When the government gives the peasants the land, it also takes for granted that it fulfilled its promise. By commencing the story *ex post facto*, Rulfo points out that the question of the land is far from solved with a tepid and over-optimistic solution of answering to long-standing grievances with institutional caveats. The story takes place past the point of realization and completion, past a presumed *telos* where the decades-old question of the land repartition has supposedly been solved. What "Nos han dado la tierra" narrates, is nothing else than the depiction of a stubborn hope emerging from the inhabitants of a landscape where any telos has long since gone.

This is why, halfway through the story, the narrator makes a flashback to describe how the government gave them the land: "They told us, 'From the village up to here, it's yours.' […] The agent hadn't come to talk with us. He put the papers in our hands and said to us, 'Don't be frightened by having so much land just to yourselves'" (Rulfo 3). The "They told us" impersonal phrasing echoes the title of the story "They have given us the land" and through a metonymical procedure depicts the government official like nothing more than a cog from a distant and nearly-absent procedural machine.[94]

Once the peasants complain about the poor conditions of the land they have been given, the official speaks about yet another unlikely future: "As soon as it rains there, the corn will come

[94] About the absent figure of the state as part of the shifting hegemony and government rationale in a postpopulist Alemanista regime, see Larsen's "Juan Rufo: Modernism as Cultural Agency" in *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies*, and William Rowe *Guide to El llano en llamas*, 19-31 and 45-50.

up as if it were being pulled up." (Rulfo 3). The success of the promised land that the government has shared in an attempt to bring closure to one of the determining grievances in the tumultuous events of the early century Mexico, relies entirely on chance: one day, maybe, it will rain on the plain, and then the peasants will have a good harvest. In one word, the promised land turns out to be dependent on pure contingency.

At that moment, the unapproachable and useless government representative turns his back to the still-perplexed peasants, leaving a dismal but nonetheless fulfilled promise: "now go away" (Rulfo 3), says the *delegado*, while the workers insist for him to wait "'Wait, *señor delegado*. […] Wait so we can explain it to you. Look, let's start from the beginning.' But he didn't want to listen" (3). Here, the repetition of the term "*espere*" (wait) is striking, for it resonates with the word *esperanza* (hope). The peasants' hopes for a long-awaited settlement clashes with the actual conditions that such a promise entails. The flashback concludes with the narrator asserting "That's how they gave us the land" (3). Although the government complied with the promise in terms of concluding an institutional procedure, the grievance prevails, this time devoid of any basis to quarrel against the distant institutions of the State. Thus, the promised land, full of regret and frustration, becomes the scenario of a story where four characters wander while they hold on to a tenuous and nevertheless stubborn hope that their situation will change based on natural processes –one day, it might rain– and not on a political intervention – the state has definitely abandoned them.

After this disappointingly fulfilled promise, this stubborn hope emerges in conjunction with a handful of restless expectations no longer attached to a profound and radical change. These are surmises about small, nearly imperceptible movements of transformation. They are what I call *the weak transcendence in Juan Rulfo*. These variations will not alter the course of history, nor

will they entail a complete transformation of the political structure. These weak changes involve a change in the routine and in the unfolding of ordinary events. However, in "Nos han dado la tierra," even those tiny displacements never take place. The story finishes, and the characters are left with unrealized high hopes about little changes that did not come to fruition.

"It may rain" (Rulfo 2), the text's first line of dialogue, refers to the possibility that a small reshaping of the plain's repetitive landscape might finally take place. A few moments later, a drop falls from the sky, making a cut in the horizon by introducing an ephemeral vertical gesture in the plain: "A drop of water falls, big, fat, making a hole in the ground and leaving a lump as if it were a spittle. It drops alone. *We wait for the other drops to fall*. It doesn't rain" (2). A drop has fallen from the sky, an announcement has been made; but it is a forewarning *of what could have happened and yet did not*. The heralded and nonetheless dim possibility of rain over the plain, which according to the government official would have made the crops miraculously grow in vast proportions, turns out to be a missed encounter, and the drop of water becomes a spittle quickly absorbed by the ground. This is the weak transcendence these stories carry out, a faint force of change that carries the characters away.

To say it somewhat differently, in his stories, Rulfo puts in motion a set of interactions between the hope of bringing forth a new epoch, and the sheer force of contingency. The different knots of temporalities reveal themselves to be dependent upon myriad intensities and nuances in a spectrum fluctuating between the two poles of rupture and chance. In "Nos han dado la tierra" and in "Talpa," the image of rain becomes a metonymical reference to a new beginning that could have taken place. In this latter text, moreover, the rain further adopts an image of sanctity and complete renewal. In this story, even if the characters embark on a journey, they are no longer walking a plain that was given to them, they are in a pilgrimage intended to find redemption from wrongs

they commit even while they are in that very expedition. In "Talpa," the narrator states: "The *Virgencita* would give him [to Tanilo, one of the three main characters] the remedy to relieve those things that never healed. She knew how to do it: wash things away, make everything anew, a clean slate, like a field right after it rains" (Rulfo 33, translation modified). As we will see, this sentence encloses the main queries of "Talpa": salvation, punishment, and the hope for complete restitution of the body.

4. "Talpa": When a Miracle is Far from Enough

"Talpa" approaches the question of pilgrimage and salvation while narrating the death of Tanilo during a pilgrimage with his wife, Natalia, and his brother, who also happens to be the narrator. For reasons that could not be more different from each other, the three of them embark on a journey to reach the *Virgen del Rosario* in the village of Talpa. Tanilo wants to ask the Virgen to miraculously help him regain his health, which deteriorated from a gruesome disease, whereas Natalia and the narrator, who have been involved in an affair as Tanilo's sickness worsened, want the exhausting journey to be a fatal blow to him.

Talpa is a town in Jalisco, a western region of Mexico. The *Virgen del Rosario*'s popularity comes from her reputation of healing the devotees' numerous diseases since 1664 (Ávila and Tena 232). The name Talpa is a Nahuatl term for "above the ground," and as we will see, Rulfo, very much aware of that meaning, will give the ground an important role in the story. Additionally, Jalisco bears the traces of being one of the most affected regions by the early century upheavals known as "the Cristero Rebellion," a series of notoriously violent clashes between a modernization-driven State and the traditional Catholic-embedded peasant population. The project of secularization on a national scale encountered a backlash from guerrilla groups organized by

peasants and priests. Although "Talpa" does not explicitly approach the Cristero conflict, it takes place in a context where Catholicism and religious violence are deeply entwined.

While walking along the same trajectory, from their hometown Zenzontla to Talpa, the characters of the story are actors of two different narrative layers: the first is Tanilo's fervent march to be healed by the *Virgen* of Talpa, despite having to carry on with his body rotting from the inside out. This layer describes the character's painful search for redemption; the *Virgen* stands as the image of a sacred instance where Tanilo's journey will reach its telos and in which, as we will see more in detail later in the text, he hopes his body will be born anew.

The other narrative layer operating in this story deals with Natalia's and the narrator's murder of Tanilo, and with their further ruminations about the ensuing guilt. This second narrative stratum comprehends what Françoise Perus describes as "'La historia de un crimen' y su legitimación" where Tanilo is "arrastrado y empujado por los oscuros designios de quienes lo acompañan" (Perus 50). This second layer sustains the first one. The pilgrimage to Talpa rests upon, and is enabled by, the drive to push Tanilo to his death, and renders evident something that Tanilo does not seem to notice: the series of covert sexual encounters that Natalia and the narrator have as they travel with him.

In contrast with the journey Tanilo undertakes, and which is guided by the purpose of healing under the *Virgen*'s gaze, the second layer of the story stands out as having a more telluric relation with the surroundings. This underground narrative's current is not only driven by the final murderous abandonment of a terminally ill character, but it also temporarily finds a substitute for such an ambition by gathering a driving force from the ground where they sleep: "It always happened that the earth on which we slept was warm. And the flesh of Natalia, my brother Tanilo's wife, would soon heat up from the heat of the earth. And those two hearts would burn together and

make a person wake up from his dreams" (Rulfo 34). The soil upon which Natalia sleeps becomes the element that makes the two bodies approach each other. The sentence establishes a metonymic displacement between the ground, the heat arising from it, and the character's bodies that slowly approach each other. In this chain, sexual intercourse is compared to two hearts burning together, and these two elements form a single cluster with the earth. This scene leads us back to the title of the story –Talpa– for it refers to what lies "above the ground." The story's multiple directionalities are rendered explicit through this pivoting of the meanings of the term "Talpa." Here, the term alludes to a space of convergence between the longing for the sacred in the temple of the *Virgen de Talpa*, and the violent drive nourished by the heat coming from the ground where they sleep during their quest. Talpa, referring to a shrine and to the ground itself, thereby turns into a unlocatable locus where means and ends become indistinguishable as a threshold where the two narrative layers interact.

Additionally, by reflecting upon the term Talpa, the story reveals a constant wavering between an expedition to reach an instance of transcendence, where religious and teleological overtones become evident, and a simultaneous gesture to foreclose such an access. The tale of Tanilo's pilgrimage and the story of his brother and Natalia's crime converge in a way that renders impossible to separate the quest for a beyond-the-ordinary instance from its ensuing negation. In the text, these two actions cannot be detached, they are rhythmic paces of the same dynamical movement, just like the motion that breathing entails –exhalation and inhalation– the longing for a transcendent intervention and its ensuing exclusion mark: the gait of the narrative development. One of the paradigmatic images of this duality arises when the three characters finally find the main path to Talpa and they get engulfed in a landscape covered in dust:

Tardamos veinte días en encontrar el camino real de Talpa. Hasta entonces habíamos

> venido los tres solos. Desde allí comenzamos a juntarnos con gente que salía de todas partes; que había desembocado como nosotros en aquel camino ancho parecido a la corriente de un río, que nos hacía andar a rastras, empujados por todos lados como si nos llevaran amarrados con hebras de polvo. Porque de la tierra se levantaba, con el bullir de la gente, un polvo blanco como tamo de maíz que subía muy alto y volvía a caer; pero los pies al caminar lo devolvían y lo hacían subir de nuevo; así a todas horas estaba aquel polvo por encima y debajo de nosotros. Y arriba de esta tierra estaba el cielo vacío, sin nubes, sólo el polvo; pero el polvo no da ninguna sombra. (Rulfo 76)[95]

The image, as harrowing as it is beautiful, describes how, because of the crowd in procession to Talpa, an immense cloud of dust emanates from the ground, attempts to reach out to the sky, then falls back to earth, impregnating the travelers' bodies, only to rise back up again and endlessly repeat the same movement. Since in Spanish the word *cielo* means sky and also heaven, what the idea of empty sky suggests is that there is no place beyond that cloud of dust surrounding those who look for transcendence in the Temple of Talpa. Despite craving to be redeemed, the characters are only filled with dust coming from the ground upon which they walk.

This description of the spirals of dust also allows us to flesh out what is at stake when we describe Tanilo's journey as a pilgrimage. Eade and Sallnow call attention to the fact that in the catholic view of pilgrimage, there is a pervasive tension between redemption and penance as a meritorious act (Eade and Sallnow IX-X). By emphasizing that the conditions of possibility to

[95] The English translation reads: It took us twenty days to find the main road to Talpa. Up until then the three of us had been alone. From there we started to meet up with people who came from everywhere; who like us had come to that wide road that resembled the current of a river, making us fall behind, pushing us from all sides as if we had been tied up with strands of dust. Because a white dust like corn germ would rise from the swarming of the people, and would swirl away up and then come down again; but all those walking feet would bring it back down and rise again; so we had dust above us and below all the time. And above that earth was the empty sky, cloudless, only the dust; but the dust doesn't cast any shadow. (Rulfo 35-36)

achieve redemption are the atonements endured over the journey, one can also see that the economy of pilgrimage rests upon a back-and-forth between the actions taken on the road and the shrine awaiting at the end of it. In fact, the sacred instance is what determines and gives full meaning to the previous stages of the ordeal, and as such, the shrine stands as the ultimate signifier of the whole journey. Every step is a purely referential gesture towards that telos. Here, the image of the rhythmic pace encompassing inhalation and exhalation is once again useful for our purposes: the shrine and the steps leading to it are inseparable parts in this depiction of pilgrimage; their rhythmic alternation is what makes both the pilgrimage and Rulfo's narrative unfold. The radical change Tanilo is desperately hoping to take place in his body by encountering the sacred does not start in his entrance to the Temple of the *Virgen de Talpa*, it had already started with the challenges he encountered in his journey. This explains why Tanilo, even though he knows he is on the verge of death, gets involved in practices of self-punishment where physical suffering is indispensable. Indeed, "The sacrificial discourse […], refines and sanctifies physical suffering, and by extension all forms of suffering, by focusing on the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ" (Eade and Sallnow 99). Rulfo's text does not spare any details of how Tanilo flagellates himself so he can be worthy of redemption: "As soon as he saw himself surrounded by men wearing nopal cactus as *escapularios*, he decided to wear some himself as well. He tied his feet together with the sleeves of his shirt so his steps would become more desperate. Then he wanted to wear a crown of thorns" (Rulfo 37-38). By plunging deep into his own physical suffering, this Christ-like Tanilo seeks for redemption and in so doing he brings to the front scene the cluster of temporalities in tension we sketched in the first part of our analysis. At issue here is nothing less than a journey that mimics the scheme of the physical resurrection of an unsoiled body in the Judgement Day: the *restitutio ab integrum*.

"Talpa" introduces this idea very early in the story by comparing the *Virgen*'s miraculous abilities of regeneration with a field recently washed by the rain: "The *Virgencita* would give him the remedy to relieve those things that never healed. She knew how to do it: wash things away, make everything anew, a clean slate, like a field right after it rains" (Rulfo 33, translation modified). The clean slate would completely interrupt Tanilo's horrid disease so that he would be able to start anew. The dust and rottenness where he remains would be washed away by the rain, and he would thereby commence again, with his unblemished body free from any physical decay. "Sin and suffering, grace and health are so closely interconnected that a pilgrimage comes to resemble an eschatological drama, with the terrible events of the Day of Judgment being played out in miniature" (Eade and Sallnow 23). As in the Day of Judgment, the bodily restoration into a former state of perfection was going to take place in the final hour of Tanilo's pilgrimage; the end of an era would spring out of this redeeming restoration. As soon as Tanilo finally reaches the gaze of the Virgen de Talpa he sheds a tear, echoing the hope that rain would freshen the fields.

However, just like in the forecasting movement of the spiral of dust, there is no transcendence, there is no future prospect of attaining such a profound alteration. Quietly but no less violently, Tanilo endures an unglorified death: "But it was no use. He died anyway" (Rulfo 38). At that moment, Tanilo's deceased body, instead of reaching a transcendent instance, achieves a full dehumanization in death, thus merely continuing the process of decay that he was trying to counter by undertaking the pilgrimage in the first place. The outcome of the quest, therefore, is a series of concentric circles where festivities and joy move around a dead and silent shrine, namely, Tanilo's body: "Outside you could hear the sound of dancing, drums and pipes; the ringing of bells. And that's when I gave in to sorrow. Seeing so many living things, seeing the Virgen right there, right in front of us, smiling at us, and seeing Tanilo on the other side, as if he were a burden.

It made me sad" (Rulfo 39). With this, Rulfo takes the reader as close as he can to the verge of change, bringing forth all the elements for it to happen, only to take us back into the ordinary course of events, leaving such a change as a mere unlikely possibility that maybe could have taken place.

With that procedure, Rulfo makes time fold upon itself. The thread of temporalities in his texts oscillates between contingency, teleology, and pure routine. In this constellation, the quest for a miracle to arise and give meaning to the three characters' odyssey leads them instead to the earthbound death of Tanilo. His death asserts that there will be no Day of Judgment for the characters; Natalia and the narrator's last hour is denied just like Tanilo's resurrection, they walk aimlessly while having no escape from guilt. This means that even though the superficial narrative layer –Tanilo's pilgrimage– comes to a bitter closure, the second narrative –the story of a how they let Tanilo die– goes on, but there the characters have actually reached their objective: Tanilo has died. And still, Natalia and the narrator continue to wander past their telos, as if any instance of redemption would be unreachable for them. Moreover, now that Tanilo is buried, the displacement between the ground, the heat arising from it, and the narrator and Natalia's bodies ceases completely as a manifestation of their guilt.

Despite the appearance that they committed the perfect crime, given that Tanilo died because of his own actions, the two other characters remain trapped in a post-teleological redemptionless wandering. Their violent drive fades away partly in the Temple of Talpa, but also when they bury the corpse of Natalia's husband in a shallow grave, where they unwillingly close the series of sexual encounters they had *above the ground*: "And from then on Natalia forgot me. I know how her eyes shone before, as if they were puddles illuminated by the moon. But suddenly they faded, the look in her eyes wiped out as if it had been twisted around into the earth" (Rulfo

35, translation modified). The journey no longer takes place above the ground, as the title of the story indicated, but it seems as if the earth swallows them and condemns them to endlessly make the same circular movement as did the spiral of dust, revolving around the earth with no end in sight.

The aimless drift they endure asserts that there is nothing beyond the characters' pointless journey. There is no solace for them, as they have to keep walking, devoid of their own final day. As such, there is a total negation of the idea of achievement and/or interruption, which also retroactively disavows their previous pilgrimage: "And I'm beginning to feel as if we hadn't gotten anywhere, that we're here just for a short while, to rest, and that later we'll start walking again. I don't know where to; but we'll need to keep on going, because we're too close to remorse here and to Tanilo's memory" (Rulfo 39). The story, ultimately, fully circles around its narrative threads and its manifold temporalities when we, the readers, realize that the beginning of the text consists in the narrator telling the story of their journey once Natalia meets with her mother. We witness how Natalia weeps on her mother's shoulder, only to be confronted with the fact that, after the story arrives to its conclusion, the two characters will eventually have to continue walking with no destination: their promise of relief was fulfilled, and yet it simultaneously loses its nature as a promise.

If we are to think about Rulfo's writing in a way other than relying on reiterative interpretations about the limbo and the timelessness in his stories, we need to think about the role the fictional representations of hope, in the elaborate structure of time of his texts, since, once fulfilled, it becomes a parody of itself. Moreover, reading Juan Rulfo from a perspective that encompasses *the depictions of the end* is also key to an in-depth analysis of the potentialities for the emergence of the messianic. As counterintuitively as it might seem, Rulfo's depiction of the

lack of profound change in his scenarios lead us to consider as narrative devices the hopes of missed radical ruptures. This enables us to imagine how such a break could have been. Hence the reason for focusing on "Nos han dado la tierra" and "Talpa": I traced how these narratives express a set of contradictory temporalities, even if they give the impression that they only rely upon the dyad of chronological time and timelessness. This duality is just the superficial layer in a much more elaborate process where a plurality of directions of time converge, separate, and overlap. This further asserts the idea that, if anything, the hope that a telluric rupture that breaks time in two may eventually occur can only emerge once we fully embrace the idea of the radical contingency of history, and once we prepare to fully assume the consequences of facing the sheer brutality of the aleatory.

Looking at narratives where the messianic emergence did not become actuality enables me to obtain a clear perspective to enquire into the relation between catastrophic futures and the messianic rupture. To study the missed opportunities to unleash this rupture is a way to explore the catastrophe that permeates a present that loses track of its own end. To focus on the hopes of an encounter that did not occur means also to focus on the frustrations that revolve around the destruction of the future in an empty present.

VI. *Nadie es Inocente* and *Alma Punk*: The Experimental Images of the No-Future

"La cámara está en un solo plano y hay un transcurrir temporal. Lo que hago es alterar el transcurso natural del tiempo, que sucede de entre un cuadro y otro"
Sarah Minter.

In the following analysis, I approach *Nadie es Inocente* (1987) and *Alma Punk* (1991), two of Sarah Minter's videos, to see how they render visible a punk scene in Ciudad Nezayualcóyotl as a new language that strives to articulate the feeling of hopelessness and anger of a disillusioned working-class youth in marginalized urban spaces during the depths of the lost decade. In the process of documenting the logics of these punk gangs, the videos manage to delineate *an aesthetics of the disaster*. That is, through their treatment of the punk scene and *the negative urban spaces*, the videos evoke the debacle of the post-revolutionary discourses of Mexican nationalism and modernity. Their open display of experimental assemblage of images, along with the portrayal of the punk movement of an expanding slum express the social and economic conjuncture whose outcome is the adoption of neoliberal policies and the opening towards free trade. In essence, the videos convey a post-apocalyptic image as the flipside of capital in the wake of neoliberal Mexico.

After briefly focusing on the context of emergence of the experimental video in Mexico, I will highlight how these videos give shape to spaces that the visible aspects of capitalist growth have desperately tried to conceal. This will lead me to explore how the experimental form of the videos is also a means to think how *no-future* as a complete obliteration of the horizon of experience is a quest to resist against the emerging neoliberal episteme. Finally, I will focus on how the aesthetics of the no-future are inextricably related with a depiction of the migratory experience of the population from these economically depressed areas.

1. The Devastation of the *década perdida* and the Emergence of Experimental Video

Sarah Minter has described these videos as "docu-ficciones," that is, a sui-generis in-between format that documents the life of the "Mierdas Punk" with fictional episodes where they are the main characters. Hence, if one wants to grasp the transgressive gesture of the videos, one necessarily needs to take in consideration the context of their emergence. This is mainly because *Nadie es inocente* and *Alma Punk* entwine a series of conjunctures in the social, economic and artistic spheres given that all three instances where deeply unsettled by the crisis of the 80s. Minter's videos are an aesthetic manifestation of the conjunction between these profound changes and their impact in the working-class population from Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. In what follows, I will briefly focus on the three main lines of events that the videos interweave as an antechamber to approach their content.

As Jesse Lerner points out, the emergence of the punk gangs in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl is the outcome of the population management, which involved a long process of marginalization of the lower classes to the outskirts of Mexico City, especially between 1970 and 1985 (Lerner 132). That process would also involved an increase in the migratory flux from the rural areas to the metropolitan zone surrounding the capital: "With this, the urban area expanded, and around the city's edges new neighborhoods, such as Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, with neither adequate infrastructure nor public services. Often dismissed as pockets of poverty, or *ciudades perdidas*, it is from these communities that the radical, counterhegemonic subcultures celebrated in Minter's early punk work emerged […]" (Lerner 132). The main factors of the expansion process of the MCMZ (Mexico City Metropolitan Zone) are therefore land destitution and informal occupation. On the one hand, the growth of el D.F. implied its urban reorganization, which entailed a re-signification and reshaping of the urban planning at the expense of working-class neighborhoods.

In case, these neighborhoods were not torn down but emptied of their historical legacy as shelter for the low-income population. On the other hand, this also implied a process of grassroots urban expansion beyond the order of the city.

The settlements at the outskirts of Mexico City grew as the result of the latter's reorganization, and because of that process, not accounted for by the normative vision of the cityscape, they grew through informal and non-regulated ways. The "counterhegemonic cultures" (to use Lerner's term) emerged in the informal spaces that grew hand-in-hand with the organized disposition of the space within the city. Nonetheless, as Mike Davis explains, the slums resist any accountability within the parameters used make sense of, and also manage, the urban core (Davis 23). Hence, the slums grew together with, and yet unaccounted by, the forms of spatial management of the organized city.

With the crisis that exploded in 1982, the formation of slums in the metropolitan zone only accelerated. This expansion, amalgamated with the short-term consequences of the neoliberalization of the economy and the lifting of protectionist policies, led to a phenomenon Olivier Debroise describes as "the fall from the pyramid on which [Mexico] was dreaming" (Debroise "Dreaming" 48). The encounter with the global market not only had economic consequences, but it also deeply marked the orientation of the national discourse. The end of the institutional post-revolutionary promise and the pauperization of middle and lower classes led to the emergence of *an urban imaginary of the end of the world*. This is a movement Ignacio Sánchez Prado has studied in relation with Mexican literature and film: "el tropo del apocalipsis ha sido una forma de configurar, desde lo literario, la desarticulación de los lenguajes del nacionalismo que primaron a lo largo del XX como la crítica a las nuevas promesas de modernidad concebida por la ideología neoliberal" ("La Utopía" 10). This imaginary, however, encounters further

mediations and transformations in the outskirts of Mexico City with the emergence of counterhegemonic subcultures such as the punk scene in Ciudad Neza, and adopts a much more transgressive attitude through the lens of Sarah Minter.

The trajectory of the punk scene in Mexico can also be traced according to its journey through the social class specter. It was originally a trend adopted by high middle-class adolescents who could afford travelling to England or to the East Coast of the United States: "It was first introduced by a handful of middle-class youths, many of whom had had the opportunity to travel abroad, where they acquired treasured LPs and clothing" (Lerner 133). At the same time, Punk was a cultural tendency that lower classes imported through migrations to and from the United States: "the habitus of community, kinship and work still evident in Mexico in the very life chances of working-class or marginalized youth and the sons of daughters of the economic elite. It is the difference between four months of illegal work in Los Angeles and an academic year spent studying business administration at Yale University" (O'Connor 176). Hence, to a large extent, the circulation of punk can be read as a map of appropriation of the aesthetics of counterculture: While in the upper strata of society, punk became a coopted trend merely reduced to an alternative mode of fetishized consumption of foreign commodities, in the marginal and lower classes it developed as a means to shape counterhegemonic forms of sociality that vindicated the rebelliousness of living in the catastrophe.[96] The punk scene thereby became highly influential in urban centers where illegal immigration was a regular practice among the youth. Because of that

[96] For example, one of the leaders of "Los Mierdas Punk" describes the appropriation of the punk aesthetic as a way to give identity to the youth's precarious modes of living in Ciudad Neza. Pablo Hernandez, aka "El Podrido" states: "En un principio, el punk era un movimiento netamente musical, pero a medida de que iba penetrando a las colonias populares, este se iba nutriendo y transformando lentamente, logrando apropiarse de una parte de la juventud allegada al sector popular, llenando el vacío de expresión que representaba la historia de sus vidas y de su cotidianidad llena de represión, violencia, drogadicción y marginación" (51).

reason, Ciudad Neza and Tijuana became major nuclei for these movements to emerge.[97] This background already helps us understand why Tijuana and Ciudad Neza are two main cities where *Alma Punk* and *Nadie es inocente* take place.

A third movement that one needs to address in the convulsed decade of 1980 is the emergence of video as a medium of artistic expression. At that point, a boom of the super 8 film that marked the militant video during the seventies was already beginning to fade due to the costs of production and the devaluation of the peso amidst the crisis. Filmmakers such as Gregorio Rocha, Andrea di Castro and Sarah Minter struggled to fill that void by turning to video-art, which was a hitherto inexistent field in Mexico. The only largely recognized artist who worked with video was Pola Weiss, who thought of herself as a performer, and aimed to find a niche in a transgressive and yet curated circuit of contemporary art (Debroise *The Age* 283). Nevertheless, even if video-art was already a recognized form of expression in the United States and in Europe, the critics still had a high degree of reluctance when it came to accept the experimental video as part of the Mexican artistic flux. Sarah Minter colloquially described the status of video-art during the eighties as "el patito feo de las artes" ("Conversación con Sarah Minter). One only needs to take a look at the disparity between the academic and curatorial texts dedicated to conceptual art in the 80s, and to the shift of cinema procedures with the adoption of neoliberal procedures, and compare them with the shortage of texts concerning experimental video of this same period. Additionally, in a brief history of the video in Mexico, Minter mentions that in 1986 a first attempt to make a collective presentation of video-art was made with the *Primera Muestra de VideoFilme*, organized by the filmmaker Rafael Corkidi: "To an extent, this first video exhibition exposed the videographic activity at work in our country. Before it, the panorama had seemed barren. The

[97] For an account of the Rock and Punk social dynamic in Tijuana, see Ejival 332-335.

artists didn't know each other, nor were they familiar with each others' work, which meant that this festival unleashed great liveliness in the field" (Minter 175). The impact of this burgeoning medium only achieved a full recognition four years later, in 1990, with the First Biennale of Video also organized by Corkidi (Llanos 6). Before this latter event, video-art continued to linger as a marginal procedure with small and informal means for circulation.[98]

However, this marginal status of the video-art in the 80s was far from being a disadvantage when deregulation policies deeply affected the circuits of contemporary art. Olivier Debroise emphasizes that when facing the global market, painting turned towards a nostalgic gesture of recuperating "the most banal iconography, taken from cheap prints, photographs, calendars, and the pages of the newspapers […] In practical terms, neo-Mexicanism corresponds to a crisis of values that led to the need to reappraise one's own heritage as a means of self-identification" (Debroise *The age* 281). Experimental video, on the other side, fell in an in-between zone since it also distanced itself from the main tendencies of the new forms of circulation of cinema.[99] This situation gave to video a wide range of possibilities to handle topics, means of distribution, and most importantly, to introduce *other modes of seeing* into the already-shifting cultural imaginary of late-twenty century Mexico.

The fact that experimental video in the eighties found itself in an in-between, and that it was considered to have "fallen between the cracks" (Lerner and González 34) allowed the artists to find new forms to work, precisely, on the fissures. By this, I mean that these artists displayed a nearly inexhaustible impulse to explore new modalities to shape the ongoing socio-economic crisis

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[98] For more studies about the *cine súper 8* and the "superocheros" in Mexico, see: Vázquez, in particular chapter 3 and 4; and Pelayo *La Generación de la crisis.*

[99] For a thorough research on the circulation of Mexican Cinema in the neoliberal age, see Sánchez Prado, especially "Introduction: The Reinvention of Mexican Cinema" (*Screening* 1-13), and "The Neoliberal Gaze: Reframing Politics in the 'Democratic Transition'" (*Screening* 105-153).

through the instability of the video-image. The network created around this new format grew through un-systematized channels, the video-art was "[d]istributed erratically, informally, or not at all, created less often by filmmakers than by visual artists, photographers, activists or amateurs, and frequently ignored by the film archives and retrospectives that define the cinematic output of the nation" (Lerner and González 34). Experimental video and its means of distribution escaped both mainstream art circuits and the commercial film industry. This underground status allowed the artists to adopt a counter-hegemonic stance through which they could narrate the crisis of the post-revolutionary institutional discourse and the grassroots manifestations of new forms of assembly. This was an attempt to find a new language to address the crisis, without reducing it to a homogenous form of historical organization; it meant to approach the crisis, the impact it had upon previous conceptions of prosperity and modernization, through a counter-hegemonic visual instability.

2. Slums, the Ordered City, and the Image: Giving Shape to Conjunctures

Nadie es inocente and *Alma Punk* narrate the story of the punk community in Mexico City Metropolitan Zone. The first video focuses on a fictional day of the "Aguiluchos Mierdas," a subgroup of the gang Los Mierdas Punk. The video begins with one of the gang members, Juanillo, leaving Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl when he clandestinely climbs on a train. The story unfolds in a back-and-forth between Juanillo, submerged in his thoughts while travelling in the train, and the whereabouts of the rest of the gang back in Neza, where they baptize new members in a landfill, and play punk concerts in ruined buildings. The second video, *Alma Punk*, is about Alma, a punk woman who slowly realizes that the punk scene in Mexico City is still largely dominated by a patriarchal form of sociality. A series of ill-fated events lead Alma to migrate to Tijuana in order

to cross the border so she can finally reunite with her mother in San Diego.

While telling the whereabouts of the punk adolescents, the videos also make of the excluded spaces an always-present character of the story. As much as these videos visually enquire into the counterhegemonic forms of sociality that develop side-by-side the capital flows, they also examine the estranged spaces where these creative forms of collective organization emerge. The videos film how these slums are the counter-side of the urban expansion of Mexico City. Thereby, they render explicit a dialectical movement between *the positive spaces of the city*, and *the negative spaces of slums*, where the rubble left by the flux of capital becomes part of the daily landscape.[100]

With the act of claiming the slums of Ciudad Neza and the ruined buildings in Mexico City as their narrative focus, the videos examine a series of landscapes that result from the social exclusion in urban organization in el *Distrito Federal*. As Brodwyn Fisher asserts: "Poor, informal neighborhoods are often dismissed as slums, as unfortunate and accidental scars on the urban landscape. But they are in fact thoroughly entwined with formal urbanity. […] Neither city could exist without the other; the relationship between them defines the Latin American urban form" (Fisher 1). As such, even if the videos' main focal point are the slums, they carry with them the weight of this dialectic relation in spectral form. They assert that the slums are by no means an accidental outcome in the process of formation of Mexico City. The informal settlements play a constitutive role in its inner organization, just as much as the dispossessed populations considered accidental by capitalism are its constitutive force.[101] Slums are an unaccountable space in

[100] The dialectic movement where the positive space of the bourgeois imaginary and the negative space where the leftovers of capital are supposedly rendered invisible is thoroughly studied by Gordillo (39-42). I will explore these concepts more in-detail later in the text.

[101] Just to clear any misunderstanding, following Enrique Dussel and his conception of politics as a split between constituted power and constitutive force, I argue that capitalism is a system of constituted power that tries to conceal its conditions of emergence of dispossessing and expropriating its constitutive force.

permanent reference to its flipside, the organized city.

Although Nestor García Canclini asserts that Mexico City's transformation into a megacity involves the impossibility to fully imagine its size, the city nevertheless achieved those dimensions by also following a clear territorial division of social classes.[102] In the introduction of *The Mexico City Reader*, Rubén Gallo describes the contradictions upon which the city rests. When he talks about the modernizing force that has transformed the city in the last forty years, he uses the concept of "The Generic City," which he borrows from the avant-garde architect and urbanist, Rem Koolhaas. For Gallo, "[t]his project […] describes the transformations undergone by Mexico City during much of the twentieth century. Entire sections of the city were razed to make room for new neighborhoods and new buildings, which in turn have been demolished after few decades" (Gallo 79). This organization of the city rests upon the complete erasure of historical spaces. Out of this process of destruction, new areas emerge; but this time, they act as self-referential signs. These new edifices do not refer to any preceding historical identity and they develop by obliterating the traces of any previous structure. Thus, the only history they have is the one of their ever-present contemporaneity. In short, this new order of the city is the one of untimeliness and a-historicity, arising by concealing its former history of expropriation, displacement and destruction.

The outcome of this process is an epistemic regime that delineates the urban habitat. On the one hand, the visible parts of the city are areas of wealth exchange, intended to *display* the concentration of power. This visible part of the city, Gastón Gordillo maintains, is celebrated as positive and full: "[i]f capitalism dazzles and rules through the power of its spectacle, as Guy Debord (1994) argued, this also means that it rules through the production of spectacular places:

[102] For the way García Canclini develops the duality between the contradictions underlying Mexico City's potential megacity and its divergent realization, which only increased with neoliberalism, see García Canclini *Mexico* 81-82; García Canclini *From National* 210.

phallic, huge, imposing, excessive, grand" (Gordillo 81). Gastón Gordillo introduces this duality between positive and negative space as a form to think the "material sedimentation of destruction" that crystallizes in nodes of rubble (Gordillo 10). These terms, which he borrows from Adorno and Benjamin also are extremely useful when it comes to approach the dialectic relation between the city and the slums. Additionally, at a local level, they help us understand the way the Punk bands engage with the rubble and trash of Ciudad Neza. Now, this display also conceals the spaces inhabited by working and poor classes. This is the other side of the order of the city, it is a side that needs to remain unseen, and as such, that endures multiple forms of suppression and erasure. As Davis explains, it is a common practice that governments attempt to exclude these spaces from the order of the visible through different means that range from hiding them by building a highway that isolates them from other parts of the city, to blatantly use bulldozers to demolish them.[103]

What this dialectic between the positive spaces of the city and the negative spaces of the slums unearths is a spatial manifestation of the antagonism between the status quo and the possibility of its transformation. The order of the city preserves the status quo by constantly asserting the borders, limits, and separations in order to restrain the circulation of capital only to certain areas, and thus it subsequently neutralizes any effort to subvert the established hierarchical division. The self-fetishization of the positive spaces in the city, namely, its self-conception as bounded objects completely disconnected from slums and other impoverished sectors, creates imaginary sutures that reinforce the ambition of full enclosure. However, this process also creates its own means of self-consumption and its own excrescences. The circulation of discarded commodities evidences that positive spaces cannot exist in isolation: the videos unravel the

[103] Mike Davis offers the most detailed account of the evolution of slums and their persistence against several attempts to obliterate them (20-50).

constitutive outside of these spaces by focusing on elements such as trash and rubble. Even if the order of the city attempts to render them invisible, those constitutive spaces persist in their negativity.

The dialectics between the positivity of the city and the negativity of the slum entails the depiction of the former as a no-man's land: because it escapes to the fantasy of wholeness in the order of the city, it is solely conceived in terms of a territory of disorder and chaos. Now, well before its official creation, in 1963, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl was already a negative space. It emerged as a refuge for the working-class population who could no longer afford to live in downtown Mexico City: as several authors point out, a vast amount of population inhabited this space through precarious housing well before the government recognized it as a locality of the metropolitan zone.[104]

Nadie es inocente and *Alma Punk* contest any attempt to conceal the negative spaces away from the epistemic regime of the city. The characters interact with each other in abandoned buildings, torn-down houses, landfills and unkempt trains. The houses where the Mierdas Punk get together, and the building where Alma sleeps after she is evicted from her apartment, are half-destroyed structures where rubble and trash pile up. Yet, the characters rehabilitate those places for their further use. Moreover, in both videos, punks go to the landfills to socialize with their companions and to re-claim some objects devoid of exchange value. In the case of *Nadie es inocente*, the characters begin to wear clothes that they gather from the trash, until they are interrupted by a small child who wants to be 'baptized' and belong to the Mierdas Punk. This ritual starts when each member of the gang spits on him, and then, collectively, bury him under a large

[104] For texts about the evolution of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, please refer to Morales Calderón 187-189, and Davis 23-31.

amount of garbage. For Alma, on the other hand, her visit to the landfill comes from the need to find a pair of boots to re-sell in a flea market called *El Tianguis del Chopo*, a well-known place of encounter for punks from all over the metropolitan area.[105] Minter's videos depict how there are other modes of engaging with the inert presence of rejected objects whose decomposing assemblage forms the landscape where the capitalist drive of fetish, displacement, and further dismissal is seen at rest.

Even though the punk's gestures are still a form of capitalist circulation, especially in the case of Alma, who re-sells the boots found in the landfill, their approach de-accelerates the movement of capital up to a point where one can see how its constitutive excrescences indicate approaches to a use-value of discarded objects.[106] These fringe zones of capitalism, even if they are not zones where a full interruption takes place, reveal another form of temporality that departs from the empty time that codifies the order of the city. They reveal the history of the objects that now pile up as trash and rubble, these fragments of time retroactively disclose the concealed historicity of positive spaces. Against the a-historicized generic city, the punk re-utilization of rubble and trash exhibits capitalism's *destruction of history*. Each element of the landfill is a mute fragment of the history of capital that, by entering in contact with other discarded objects, interrelates with a new temporality. By focusing on these leftovers, Minter's videos render partly visible the temporality of the remainder, which emerges in these fringe zones of capitalism as an indicator of an ongoing catastrophe. In short, the videos reveal a post-apocalyptic landscape as a

[105] *El Tianguis del Chopo* was an iconic place for popular culture in Mexico City. About this, see Monsiváis 120-125.

[106] For a detailed account of the circulation cycle of trash in Mexico City Metropolitan Zone, see the Alma Guillermoprieto's text "Garbage." Originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1992, it was later-on edited as part of *The Mexico Reader*. Although the publication date might suggest it is outdated, the logics of commodification of trash Guillermoprieto describes are still incredibly common in several Latin American cities.

constitutive outside of the positive spaces of capital.

Furthermore, Minter's work transgress the boundaries of the order of what is considered to be visible and what is deemed to remain invisible in the urban space, not only because of what they portray, but also through their formal procedures. As Cuauhtémoc Medina puts it: "Just as all representation construes the power relations we weave among groups and individuals, there is no record of the story that doesn't constitute, in turn, a window of emancipation" (Medina 120). This is why the experimental character of *Nadie es Inocente* and Alma punk plays a key role in this approach to the negative spaces during the convulse decade of the 80s. The videos engage with a double movement: their discontinuities in the time of the experimental image introduce the negative spaces into the regime of visibility of the urban order, and in so doing, they also insert interruptions in the already organized formats of viewing.

Sarah Minter also states that her videos dislocate the continuum of time that mainstream cinema uses and which also affects the spectator's ways of seeing: "The problem is that we're programmed by Hollywood movies, which have shaped the way you see and the way you see yourself. I think one of video's contributions, in general terms, is that it lets people consume and perceive in a different way; there's another wager, another kind of narrative" (Minter 155-156). Minter deliberately makes her videos run against the homogenous narrative of mainstream films, and she uses the unstable aspect of the videos as a means to resist the fetishization of the image as a transparent, bounded, and organized format. In *Alma Punk*, the camera seems to have its own character, sometimes it refuses to follow Alma and instead decides to focus on people laughing and dancing. Moreover, some characters directly look at the camera and nervously smile. This breaks with the effect of a sequence that unfolds independently from the spectators' gaze. Because of these glances, one immediately realizes about Minter's endeavor to distance herself from

solemn formats and to show instead an informal approach to these negative spaces.

In doing this, the videos render visible other landscapes via the unstable temporality of the image. This is a transgressive movement that turns the video into a defaced window, where the image of the collapse and of the no-future become a way to shape those areas concealed by the limits that the city builds for the sake of its own fetish. The heterogeneity of the videos is not only analogous to the unstable spaces they depict, but also, as we saw, it makes the landscapes appear *in their informality and unaccountable multiplicity*. The videos *are in solidarity with the fractures that the crisis entails* and with the process of re-appropriation of the rubble and waste.

3. Giving Shape to a Time of No-Future

Nadie es Inocente and *Alma Punk* render visible, albeit in unstable and experimental ways, an emerging language that expresses the generalized feeling of despair and catastrophe of the youth in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl and the other poor neighborhoods of Mexico City after 1982. The videos are the outcome of a need to make sense of the crisis, but at the same time, they refuse to subsume this emerging language into the categories that preceded that watershed moment. They escape the logic of the previous filmic genres to approach this ensuing uncertainty: "Beneath the dialect, episodes, and languages used in their staging, the young people established a dramatizing rationality around a kind of embodied apocalypse" (Medina 119). The aesthetics of the catastrophe and of the no-future that Minter explicitly approached by working in conjunction with the Mierdas Punk, and which she later used in *Alma Punk*, are a way of being in solidarity with the rupture of the sense of hope and of improvement that the López Portillo's post-revolutionary institutional discourse projected before its debacle.

The imagery of the no-future places forward the sheer anger of punk culture in the always-

delayed and yet ever-present apocalypse of these negative spaces. Debroise notes that such a representational process is highly influenced by two films: "The third-world aestheticizing of downtown Los Angeles in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* was read as a triumph of the mechanisms of cultural transference and a model for the reappropriation of bourgeois territories; while the apology of gang solidarity in Walter Hill's *The Warriors* was soon imitated throughout the suburban margins of Mexico" (Debroise "Dreaming" 50)[107]. Having said that, one needs to keep in mind that these movies had such an impact on the young punks because of their awareness of the generalized sense of chaos that the Metropolitan area was facing at the time. In *Nadie es Inocente*, the Mierdas continuously insist upon the complete obliteration of the horizon of expectation of those spaces. Amidst the daily piles of waste and debris, according to them, the no-future is the only time that remains. Juanillo, the character travelling on the train, asserts: "I don't think about the future anymore, why should I?" (Minter *Nadie*). Another character's internal monologue forecasts the violent fate of the children joining the gang: "They already feel the weight of life since toddlers" (*Ya sienten el peso de la vida desde morritos*) (Minter *Nadie*). This characterization of the no-future is yet another shape that these spaces' negative force adopts in order to resist an empty time of the a-historical ordered city. As these videos show, the proclamation "*La neta No hay Futuro*" is far from a cry of resignation, it is a mode to think the catastrophic underside of capitalist growth from within the cracks and leftovers at the limits of the city. The negation of the future in this context sheds light upon the different practices that were also ways to resist the emerging ethos of the neoliberal culture that began to permeate Mexico after 1985. As Sánchez Prado maintains, the imaginary of the disaster became "una estrategia de

[107] In addition to these two films, one can also think about Mad Max, which, just like the other two, was released in Mexico in 1979.

resistencia ante los embates de la cultura neoliberal" ("La Utopía" 10). The image of the collapse turned into a tool to render visible modalities to fight against the emerging neoliberal episteme.

In this process, Minter's videos depict alternative communities which can also be read as glances to utopian possibilities of sociality away from the neoliberal process of subjectification. Now, on a different scale, the videos stand in a fervent opposition against the role that the mainstream narratives had in disseminating the aesthetics of the neoliberal subjectivities. As Sánchez Prado argues, Mexican neoliberal cinema renders invisible the lower classes and in so doing it also erases the concrete relations between social classes ("Cine" 122). The outcome of this process however, subsumes the image of the lower classes into a mere spectral threat of insecurity: "el cine latinoamericano (y global) de la era neoliberal suele ficcionalizar la amenaza representada por las clases bajas (usualmente en términos de criminalidad) y las fricciones que emergen de los contactos entre la clase creativa y el resto de la sociedad" ("Cine" 122). *Nadie es inocente* and *Alma Punk* demystify the neoliberal aesthetics by taking away the veil that conceals class interactions and antagonisms, and which also adopt spatial terms through the dialectics between the positivity of the city and the negativity of the slums. The videos show a glimpse of the complex logic of the punk scene of the city margins. In *Nadie es Inocente*, for example, three characters meet to discuss whether they want to continue in the Mierdas or start a new gang. While arguing, one of them asserts: "We, the rockers, punks and other young people, we have rights. We cannot let ourselves be repressed. The shithole where we live is marginalizing us more and more. And we only take it upon ourselves, and we stay with our arms crossed" (Minter *Nadie*). The dialogue evidences the punks' awareness of class antagonisms, and the need for them to assemble into an organized collective that resists policing and repression.[108]

[108] Moreover, the elaborate processes of collective organization of the gangs in Ciudad Neza became evident during

In conjunction with portraying these forms of resistance against state policing, the videos explore the punk's radical dynamics by also searching for the limits of the experimental image. When showing a punk concert in *Nadie es Inocente*, Minter decides to make close-ups of the dancers in a mosh-pit, to take multiple shots of a penis urinating, and to repeat back and forth a man falling into other people laying on the floor. The concert comes to a sudden halt when a police vehicle chases after the gang. The video shows some of the punks hiding, and others making graffiti drawings in front of the officers' car. It then shows the car in flames and one punk staring at it while smoking a cigarette. These scenes of defiance also uncover new mechanisms of circulation of the image, since the footage of both the concert and the car chase are part of another film, *Sábado de mierda* by Gregorio Rocha, Sarah Minter's partner at the time. In his film, nevertheless, the organization of the scenes is completely different, given that Rocha strives to make a more organized narrative, while Minter, as we saw before, endeavors to subvert the audiovisual language of causality.

Nonetheless, Minter also reveals the shortcomings of the counter-hegemonic punk dynamic. In fact, she strives to disclose the underlying heteronormativity of the punk gangs, which sometimes unwillingly verges on hyper masculinized homo-eroticism. At the concert, attended solely by men, the display of aggressiveness goes hand in hand with instances where they take off their clothes to assert their ferocity and debauchery. In addition, in *Alma Punk,* most men in Alma's life become possessive and violent. One of her friends stays at her house for an indefinite period of time, and only leaves when she asks him for help to pay the rent. On top of that, her partner avoids seeing her during a large extent of the story, but when they finally go to bed together, he

the 1985 earthquake: "En Neza no tembló, pero […] miembros de los mierdas, sobre todo aquellos más politizados, coordinan con las casas culturales independientes de Neza y otras bandas, las brigadas para ofrecer ayuda, van de casa en casa pidiendo ropa y víveres" (Urteaga 217).

aggressively asks her if she had slept with other men, to which Alma responds by dressing up and leaving him. Besides getting weary of the toxic masculinity that surrounds her, Alma recurrently dreams of running nude across a dark corridor. The video suggests that this is an admonitory indication for her to leave: Minter shoots this scene with the same angle she uses to show Alma, and Juanillo in *Nadie es Inocente*, leaving on a train. While the camera frames the threshold of a door, it accentuates the depth of the image as the characters cross that threshold. This is a recurrent motif in both videos: Minter uses similar framing techniques to portray Alma when she is on a train to Tijuana, and Juanillo, on a train to Puebla. The characters look through the windows and through the rear door of the train, staring at the landscape they try to leave behind. With this, Minter renders visible another iteration of the *no-futuro*, and thereby asserts that any possibility of change lies elsewhere, stating that no-future and migration are two sides of the same coin.

4. Escape from Nezayork: Dreaming Beyond the Border

The first scene of *Nadie es inocente* takes place in a station of *Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico*, a railroad system in operation between 1903 and 1995, and now disappeared due to the mismanagement of its privatization process.[109] When Juanillo climbs on a train, he says the first words of the video: "Adios Ciudad Neza." The character's urge to escape is the element that leads the rest of the story to unfold. Minter uses a similar procedure in *Alma Punk*, which starts when Alma leaves the *oficina de correos* with a letter from her mother, where she suggests that Alma could have a better life with her in San Diego, a place she will finally attempt to reach at the end of the video.

[109] For further revisions of this section, I will establish a dialogue between the rubble of the *Ferrocarriles Nacionales* and Rulfo's photographic approach to trains.

The recurrent image of the no-future in Minter's videos is inseparable from the hopes that migration involves. Alma literally dreams of running away from her oppressive surroundings, and Juanillo, even though he seems to lack a precise destination, hopes his life will improve away from Ciudad Neza. In addition, the very spaces where the videos take place are areas historically infused with migratory ebbs and flows: "En Neza, ir y venir del *gabacho* [a slang word for the United States] es normal y rutinario, forma parte de sus vidas, sobre todo, cuando se es joven. Se trata de ir a trabajar para ahorrar, poder acumular y empezar algo en Neza, por supuesto. Forma parte de las estrategias de supervivencia del pueblo" (Urteaga 193). The no-future of Neza and the obliteration of the horizon of expectation in the negative spaces entail a displacement of desires and hopes towards other distant areas. The post-apocalyptic atmosphere of the videos produces a fetishization of the transgressive act of crossing the border as a mode to start anew, away from the rubble piling up in these negative spaces.

However, each video presents a different outcome for the characters who try to run away. On the one hand, in the case of *Nadie es Inocente*, Juanillo begins to suffer from withdrawal syndrome because he cannot find the drugs he had back in Neza. The scenes of him looking through the window of the train alternate with him regretting his decision of leaving. When he arrives to Puebla, he reproduces the same patterns of gang-belonging he had with the Mierdas. He asks a teenager from the area whether there are any gangs around for him to join, and finally, as soon as he starts making a graffiti on the walls with the peremptory sentence "Nadie es Inocente," the video makes a rapid back-and-forth between him painting, his friends back in Ciudad Neza, the train where he was travelling, and the punk concert. After this quick succession of images, the credits appear and the video ends. The oscillation between Juanillo's graffiti and the other scenes disrupt the linear temporality of this concluding part, and hence, Minter makes clear that starting

anew is impossible. The video suggests that Juanillo transforms these spaces into his previous surroundings, and that no one can be innocent, in the sense of having their sins washed away. There seems to be no escape of this new permanent crisis and catastrophe.

In *Alma Punk*, once Alma arrives to Tijuana, she wanders around the slums with other punks she befriends in there. While shooting the negative spaces of Tijuana, Minter also emphasizes the irregular growth of the border town: "With Tijuana's growth, spurred by the Border Industrialization Program (1965) and later the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994), a series of distinctive subcultures emerged during this period, in relative isolation from the rest of the nation and in close proximity to the United States" (Lerner 132). As Alma moves towards the frontier, the video experiments with means to visibilize limits, gaps and forms of division of the space. While Alma and her newfound lover approach the beach side of the border, the camera divides the screen in two, placing the characters in the middle in this separated space that they traverse while a Mad Max-like ominous synthesizer music plays in the background. Then, they sit down in a bench at Friendship Park where they discuss whether Alma should cross the border or not.

These images could not be more telling, besides the visually striking division of the frame when the characters approach the border, the use of Friendship Park as a shooting location renders visible the historically overdetermined character of the space of the border. In the words of Justin McGuirk, Friendship Park was a place "inaugurated by President Nixon's wife Pat in the 1970s, Homeland Security has put a wall right through it, making it rather less friendly. There are still a few picnic tables, though" (McGuirk 64). Minter's choice for this shooting location signals the important role the dynamics of space play in her work. She focuses on the ways the border reorganizes the space, and also how this organization of the geopolitical limit has its very own

history. The self-fetishized positive spaces with no history in Mexico City are now far behind.

If the order of the city aims to draw a limit between the visible and the invisible of the urban space, the disposition of the border implies a radicalization of such a process. This is "a territory bisected by a wall, like an endless blade slicing all the way to the horizon. This landscape is partly natural and partly shaped by Homeland Security" (McGuirk 309). However, Minter's videos, through their counterhegemonic exploration of the instability of the image and of the unaccountability of the negative spaces, depict the border a porous territory. In doing that, Minter explores other forms of seeing, other forms of engaging with the organization of the visible, while transgressing borders of genres and subverting linear narratives.

"So this is where Mexico and Latin America end" (Minter *Alma*) says Alma when she looks at the border, with this sentence she describes a limit that marks a division between the North and the global South. The end of the Latin American territory, as Minter portrays it, is a threshold where the future might be awaiting. Alma takes a look at the San Diego skyline surrounded by slums, and then crosses the border, doing away with the line that marks the end of a territory –the end of the Latin American world– and she strives to start again, stating that there is no other way to deal with the catastrophe than to face it.

The punk scene of Ciudad Neza during the 80s quickly became a widespread cultural identity for gangs of hundreds fighting to control part of the economically depressed areas. However, this movement goes well beyond a question of territorial disputes. The punk scene renders visible the wide-shared frustration about the lack opportunities for social improvement. In one of Latin America's largest slums, the gangs engaged in practices that re-use the leftovers capitalism attempts to leave behind or to conceal at any cost.

Sarah Minter, with her videos, captures the image of those negative spaces, of the

communities that carry on with practices of self-governance, and at the same time, she depicts the radical gesture of affirming the no-future within capitalism. She visibilizes other spaces, other practices, and other means of seeing, living, and being in community beyond the catastrophe that grows alongside the so-called progress. Gastón Gordillo synthetizes these possibilities that lie beyond the temporality of capital when he says "'We aren't afraid of ruins" has been the implicit rallying cry of all insurrections in history" (262). Although the urban disposition of Mexico City and its metropolitan zone after 1968 is deliberately intended to defuse any attempt for a rebellious massive rally to take place, the punk claim of "no hay futuro" is far from a cry of resignation. In fact, it is a claim to think about the future not as an irreversible juggernaut to come, but rather as a horizon of expectation entirely dependent on new forms of organization that strive to change the status quo. The messianic force does not rely in miracles or in divine violence, it relies on turning the collective assemblage into a constituent force able to reshape the political realm beyond institutional politics. Only the constituent force of the people and its creative forms of sociality can negate the future as a mere iteration of the present. This is what I mean when I say that any messianic movement necessarily exceeds any messiah.

Figures of Time: Reaching a Conclusion

After this exploration of different paths of revolutionary trajectories, one can only go further through a critical reprisal of the very concept of the messianic in order to avoid making of it a concept that folds upon itself without addressing its limits. To rigorously follow the trajectory of rupture of the messianic temporalities means to break with this model, following the conceptual reprisal of interruption until its lasts consequences, and beyond any remnant of cohesion and continuity. What are the figures of time to encounter after we break with the messianic formation?

To explore these new paths, one has to come back to the very instance that the messianic intends to shatter: the present. As we saw, under the neoliberal epistemic regime the present saturates the horizon of expectation, concealing any other possibility to think about the future. Now, even if the messianic helps us think about the consolidation of a collective subject through a commonly shared hope to create a new future, such process reveals to be insufficient to approach contemporaneous creative forms of struggle taking hold against the stablished order. Such organization of time is still unable to totally break away from a conception of the present that depends on the future.

Strikes, popular manifestations, and bottom-up forms of collective self-governance, as they elicit antagonistic political modalities in the present structure, they assert a methodological challenge to a messianic organization of time in terms of rupture and inauguration of a new era. These are modalities of revolt that show to what extent the present status-quo, even though it prolongs itself into the future as one long road in a desert, does not go unchallenged through present-tense logics of struggle and disobedience. Although these underground currents of revolt echo the well-known phrasing of Michel Foucault about how power circuits can only take place through antagonisms: “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault 95), these currents

accentuate and bring forth the temporal dimension to these antagonisms. By this, I mean that these modalities of revolt, as they contest the seemingly unshakable dynamics of the ongoing political order, they reveal that the present is by no means homogenous, and by no means follows a continuum that the messianic rupture would eventually break. Instead, these figures of disobedience reveal that this hegemonic view of the present as what is contemporary to itself is just a layer in a historical density in which pasts, presents, and futures relate to each other in complex interconnections that far exceed the logics of cause-consequence.

Hence, if we are to address the destabilizing impact of contemporary revolts in the ubiquitous present, and the political order it entails, we need to approach the figures of time through which these underground currents of revolt circulate and connect with each other. Such figures of time dislocate the messianic organization. This means that, to pursue this reflection, we have to consider the ways in which these forms of disobedience not only strive to create new possible futures, but how they articulate non-chronological figures of time. Such questioning brings forth the possibility to think that a history of these underground currents of revolt profoundly challenge a unidirectional movement of time. Moreover, in order to map how modalities of revolt connect beyond geographical areas and reproduce different strategies of disobedience, we need to displace our conceptual framework away from terms of continuity and rupture, towards mappings of networks of resistance that accentuate the mobility of struggles against established forms of power.

These underground currents of revolt reveal a complex network of influences that rely on the dynamics of a multilayered historical movement that only reasserts that the present is by no means contemporary to itself. There are multiple presents, each one with their own network of antagonisms between the hegemonic political structure and a series of radical movements that

contest it. These many contemporaneities also entails a multiplicity of connections with each other. In Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia, one needs to trace, for example, the transnational dialogues of revolutionary discourses by focusing on the influences, missed encounters, echoes, and simultaneous points of contact between dissimilar modalities of disobedience and contestation.

For instance, one should follow the legacy of the Mexican revolution with the movement July 26 movement in Cuba, the bridges between the Cuban guerrilla combat strategies and the Colombian organization of its own radical groups, or the impact that Colombian militant screen-printing techniques had for Latinx and chicanx artists in the US. Moreover, if we are to truly address the logics of struggle in the present, one cannot be oblivious of the principal battlegrounds of today's grim political landscape: immigration and border enforcement. The constellation of histories, hopes, and state oppression nowadays emerges as a clash between organized movements striving to resist white supremacy mainstream politics and its deep connection with flows of capital.

The question that emerges is how to think about the unification and further coordination of these forms of revolt to bring the neoliberal present to its point of fracture. However, as we saw in this dissertation, a messianic perspective of this possibility is unable to detach itself from eschatological discourses that still rely upon an understanding of history as following a single direction even if it is towards the end of an era. The challenge to address henceforth is how to think about forms of collective organization that, through grand scale coordination, establish the possibilities to carry a widespread interruption without falling into the logics of unidirectionality and eventual realization. Such is the formidable challenge we have to accept: we ought to organize in a large scale in order to interrupt an unhinged wave of racism and economic dispossession. The

task is to collectively break with such present without falling into the fallacies of fulfillment after the collapse.

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