Unsettling Spaces: Responsibility and Complicity in Roberto Bolaño's *By Night in Chile*

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Abstract

This essay explores artworks' potential to foster a critical engagement with forms of involvement in political violence that often fall beyond the scope of the law. It does so by means of a reading of Roberto Bolaño's short novel *By Night in Chile* (2004) and drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives on the relation between complicity, responsibility, the law, and the arts. The essay argues that *By Night in Chile* compels readers to acknowledge a form of responsibility that is not attached to legal culpability, but also, crucially, to reckon with their own reluctance to assume such an expanded form of responsibility.

> *At the end of the day, we were all reasonable […], we were all normal, discreet, logical, balanced, careful, sensible people, we all knew that something had to be done, that certain things were* necessary*, there's a time for sacrifice and a time for thinking reasonably.*
>
> —Roberto Bolaño, *By Night in Chile* 103

Introduction

In an article published in 2009 by the title "Memory as a Remedy for Evil," Tzvetan Todorov offers a bitter diagnosis: "Never again" has failed. Todorov notes how, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, most European countries had explicitly taken up the duty to remember the past in order to avoid it from happening again. And yet, "[w]ars, genocides, massacres, torture, rape, violence of all kinds, sufferings inflicted and endured stubbornly persist in our midst" (449). As a result of this persistence, a realization has spread across the humanities and social sciences that something in the way the past has been dealt with is wrong. A growing number of scholars across this disciplinary spectrum identify Western institutions of justice, and the conception of responsibility they embody, as the problem. Sociologist Danielle Celermajer, for instance, argues that the legal framing of responsibility, the notion that we are only responsible for concrete acts we commit deliberately, has so far stood in the way of a deeper understanding of the role collectives play in nourishing and sustaining violence (12). The limits of the individualistic conception of responsibility become particularly clear in legal trials which, focusing on punishing perpetrators, work to absolve "the massive body of the society that condoned the violations" (5). The ordinary subjects that make up this broader collective, writes sociologist Jill Stauffer, are also "site[s] of repair" (138) and have a duty to perform "revisionary practices" on themselves: practices aimed at marking "how we are all implicated in a responsibility for the worlds we inhabit" (130). For this critical exercise to unfold, "*more* is needed than legal trials" (43). Other supplementary spaces are required that might facilitate a critical engagement with subtle yet widespread forms of involvement in violence that the law is often unable to address.

This paper explores whether—and if so, how—works of art might be able to open up such spaces. The focus, here, then, is on the potential of cultural materials to help us locate our individual responsibility in issues that would seem to escape it. This exploration will be situated in a reading of Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's short novel *By Night in Chile* (2004) [2000]. Written in one single paragraph before the last sentence, this work is the deathbed monologue of the protagonist, Father Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, as he looks back at his life as a priest, an intellectual, and a literary critic—evaluating, above all, his ambiguous role during the Chilean dictatorship (1973-1990). I begin by providing a brief overview of the critique of the legal conception of responsibility and by presenting some theoretical perspectives on the potential of the arts to generate new understandings of responsibility that are not sutured to legal culpability. Drawing on these insights, I then turn to *By Night in Chile* with the aim of analyzing how Urrutia portrays his complicitous behavior during the dictatorship and the strategies he uses to justify his actions and omissions. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that the protagonist's testimony does more than expose his own involvement in the Chilean dictatorship. It also provides a terrain where readers are invited to critically confront questions of complicity and responsibility.

Complicity, Responsibility, and the Arts

Reflections on complicity and responsibility often stem from a dissatisfaction with the way in which justice has been understood and administered in the aftermath of acts of mass violence in the twentieth century such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, the Yugoslav Wars, or the Dirty Wars in Latin America. Celermajer, in this sense, claims that legal trials fail to "deal with the whole pallet of responsibility" (5). In her view, by attaching "responsibility to actions," liberal jurisprudence fails to address how the ordinary members of a collective —subjects that for the larger part fall outside the binary of victims and perpetrators—obliquely enable political violence (12). In order to capture more ambiguous forms of implication in violence, Celermajer calls for an expansive understanding of responsibility that moves beyond

individual and intentional action. In line with Celermajer, Stauffer underscores the limits of "the liberal story about culpability—that we are responsible only for acts we author and intend" (7). By narrowly focusing on the punishment of the perpetrators, she argues, legal trials exonerate the majority of the population, leaving "untouched a whole universe of harms that are not legally recognized" (42). In our current political landscape, Stauffer emphasizes, it is particularly urgent that those ostensibly positioned outside the violence recognize "duties beyond [their] legitimate legal duties":

> who is responsible for the refugee, the environment, the prisoner of war, the sufferer of poverty or famine, the victim of ethnic cleansing, the one to whom I never consented to owe anything, if we stick to narrow legal grounds? (66)

Stauffer and Celermajer, in brief, meet in a common call for ordinary subjects to assume an expanded form of responsibility for the role they play in helping produce and reproduce violence. And yet, how might such a form of responsibility be registered and embraced? According to literary scholar Mark Sanders, acknowledging one's own complicity is the foundation of responsibility (18). Similarly, political scientist Mihaela Mihai holds that thinking about complicity is a way of "taking political responsibility for the future" ("Understanding Complicity" 505). Seen this way, a careful consideration of how our individual actions, attitudes, and omissions contribute to the suffering of others can pave the way for alternative, broader understandings of responsibility. Stauffer conceives the critical engagement with one's own involvement in structures of violence as a "revisionary practice" (138). This practice, while crucial, is also deeply uncomfortable, in that it raises awareness of how those who would normally think of themselves as unrelated to the violence are "implicated both in the destruction of worlds and in a responsibility to rebuild those worlds" (138). The place for implicated subjectivities to work through complicity in order to transform their "attitudes, ideas about responsibility, and […] sense of self" (34) is not to be found in the legal realm. As has become clear so far, legal institutions

can only hold perpetrators responsible for their actions, but they cannot "reach out to the broader collective" (Celermajer 4). Other spaces are therefore needed, where those who are neither victims nor perpetrators might confront how their indifference, acquiescence, and passivity make possible terrible acts of violence.

In recent years, scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that certain artworks might be able to make such spaces available. Mihai claims that artworks can trigger "uncomfortable processes of reflection" by disclosing "our complicity in the reproduction of oppressive politics" ("From Hate" 195). In a similar vein, sociologist Jade Schiff holds that particular narratives can function "as invitations to face up to our implication in others' suffering" (26). Most recently, memory scholar Michael Rothberg has framed works of art as "powerful contributions to conceiving and responding to implication" (23). According to memory scholar Susanne Knittel, artworks' potential to enable a self-reflective engagement with complicity is inseparable from their affective agency. More specifically, Knittel argues that certain works of art can "elicit a productive sense of discomfort," which, in turn, can set in motion a process of radical self-questioning, whereby readers examine how they are involved in "past atrocities and present-day structures of inequality and political violence" (380)

In the remainder of this paper, then, I wish to mobilize the theoretical perspectives on the relation between complicity, responsibility, and the arts outlined above to approach thinking about *By Night in Chile*. My aim, hereby, is twofold. First, to track the self-justifying strategies used by the protagonist to rationalize his complicitous behavior during the Chilean dictatorship and evade responsibility. Second, to examine what this work might offer to considerations of the potential of the arts, and literature in particular, to encourage readers to reckon with their own involvement in different histories and structures of violence.

"My Silences Are Immaculate": Grappling with Complicity in *By Night in Chile*

On 11 Sep. 1973, Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean Chief of the Armed Forces, overthrew the democratic socialist government of Salvador Allende. In his place, a military junta was installed, and the "state of siege in times of war" was declared (Dávila 91). This gave the junta free rein to repress, detain, and execute all those perceived as 'subversives' without a trial. During the first two months of the dictatorship, 13.5 thousand people were detained, nearly 7 thousand exiled, and between 1.5 and 2 thousand killed (93). The Rettig Report, which comprises the findings of the 1990 Rettig commission investigating human rights violations under the dictatorship, documents that by 1990 there had been 3.2 thousand assassinations and disappearances in Chile (96).

Bolaño's short novel *By Night in Chile* is set in the aftermath of the dictatorship. Father Urrutia Lacroix, the protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel, is dying, and, in his final moments, he is suddenly overcome by feelings of guilt: "I was at peace. I am no longer at peace" (1). To blame for this turn of events is the mysterious figure Urrutia addresses his defence to: "the wizened youth" (1), a withered young man that might be read as synecdochically representing the generation of Latin Americans born in the 1950s, who would come to know "terror, abuse and persecution" (11) during the military dictatorships that swept through the region in the 1970s and 1980s.[1] It is the unsettling 'presence' of the "wizened youth" that triggers Urrutia's self-defensive monologue, aimed at reviewing "a couple of points" in his life "that have to be cleared up" (1).

The first of these points concerns Urrutia's silence throughout the years of the dictatorship. He swiftly clarifies that he is aware of the weight and implications of silence, yet underscores his innocence:

[1] Bolaño famously described this lost generation in the following terms:

> stupid and generous, as young people are, giving everything and asking for nothing in return. And now nothing is left of those young people, those who [did not die] in Bolivia, died in Argentina or in Peru, and those who survived went to Chile or Mexico to die, and the ones they didn't kill there they killed later in Nicaragua, in Colombia, in El Salvador. All of Latin America is sown with the bones of these forgotten youths. ("Caracas Speech")

> [o]ne has a moral obligation to take responsibility for one's actions, and that includes one's words and silences, yes, one's silences, […] one must be very careful with one's silences. I am responsible in every way. My silences are immaculate. (1)

This initial claim, however, is undermined as Urrutia's narrative progresses. Readers, in this sense, learn that during the larger part of his adult life Urrutia had been one of the most famous literary critics of Chile. In his own words, he "read other people's books and explained them to the public" (25), publishing them in a regular column in the newspaper. As a public intellectual, he had the means to speak up against the human rights abuses of the junta. And yet, he chose not to. When the coup takes place, Urrutia retires to his private sphere to reread the Greek classics—"Let God's will be done, I said. I'm going to reread the Greeks" (81). During the dictatorship—which he significantly refers to as the "years of steel and silence" (103)—he keeps his head down and resumes his "perfectly calm" life (85). Once again, he justifies this behavior by saying that he—and all other Chileans—had had to be reasonable: "discreet, logical, balanced, careful, sensible people" (103). All except for the wizened youth (103). What he does not see, what he refuses to see because he operates with a legal conception of responsibility, is that he, together with all 'reasonable' Chileans, does partake in a responsibility for the violence of the Junta. By "being too occupied with consolidating their life opportunities" and "adapt[ing] without reacting" (Forti 9), they had nurtured totalitarian power, enabling the suffering of thousands.

Bolaño alludes to this reinforcing dynamic allegorically, inserting a micro-account into the narrative that illustrates, in a nutshell, how silence and inaction reinforce and ratify violence. At the end of the novel, Urrutia recalls how he, together with some members of the Chilean literary vanguard, would hold gatherings at the house of an emerging artist. In these select meetings, whisky would be served and the latest novelties in the literary world would be discussed until the early hours of the morning. The narrator then recounts how, one day, one of the guests got lost:

> [b]efore he knew it, he was in the basement, […] he went along various passages […]. Finally, he came to a passage that was narrower than the others and he opened the last door. He saw a kind of metal bed. He put on the light. On the bed was a naked man, his wrists and ankles tied. The man seemed to be asleep, but it was difficult to verify that impression, since he was blindfolded. The stray guest shut the door […]. When he got back to the sitting-room he asked for a whisky and then another and didn't say a word. (119)

As Patrick Dove aptly points out, the guest who witnesses the horror of torture only to return to the party and remain silent illustrates the way in which the Chilean society of the time "both saw and preferred not to see" (150). In regard to this event, Urrutia disavows his responsibility once again. He smartly anticipates the question in the reader's mind: "Why didn't anyone say anything at the time?" (122). Then, he justifies his silence in the following terms: "I would have been able to speak out, but I didn't see anything, I didn't know until it was too late" (122). Here too, however, the narrative itself undermines his excuses, since it shows that Urrutia's ignorance was self-imposed. He knew it was safer not to know in order "not to stir up conflict" (2), and he made sure he remained ignorant.

As Dove ascertains, Urrutia's reflections are "anything but an ethical act of assuming responsibility" (148). This is true not only in relation to the protagonist's inactions, but also to his actions. At one point, Urrutia is contacted by a representative of the Junta. He is informed that Pinochet himself requires Urrutia's services as an intellectual. More concretely, the general wants to "understand Chile's enemies, to find out what they think, to get an idea of how far they are prepared to go" (100). To this end, he asks Urrutia to teach him the principles of Marxism. The protagonist acquiesces and performs his job successfully. Later, he is plagued by doubts: "Did I do what I had to do? Did I do what I ought to have done? […] Would some condemn my actions out of hand? Would some understand and forgive me?" (95). Once again, his reflections take a self-apologetic turn, and the priest defines his

choice "as a necessary […] course of action" (101), framing resistance as an impossibility and therefore exonerating himself from any kind of responsibility for his deeds.

As has hopefully become clear by now, Urrutia's self-reflective exercise is fruitless. He purposefully portrays his different complicitous actions and omissions in a way that frees him of any responsibility. He downplays his individual agency and adopts a helpless stance: "An individual is no match for history. The wizened youth has always been alone, and I have always been on history's side" (128). The face of the suffering Other—the wizened youth—fails to move Urrutia towards a recognition of how he has contributed to the harm of others. If anything, Urrutia's revision of his own past serves to alert readers that the step from acknowledging complicity to assuming responsibility is in no way easy or straightforward. As Schiff puts it: "we are all subject to a powerful urge to disavow our implication in suffering and to retreat into thoughtlessness, bad faith, and misrecognition" (10). *By Night in Chile*, in short, documents the hazards inherent to the uncomfortable exercise of grappling with complicity—the risk that implicated subjects will refuse to "step out of their comfort zone" (Knittel 383), and that self-questioning will morph into denial, indifference, or withdrawal.

Conclusion: Unsettling Spaces

Holding on to Schiff's claim that we are often reluctant to come to terms with our involvement in violence, I want to turn to the question whether *By Night in Chile* might, after all, prompt readers to confront their own complicities, thus "reveal[ing] an opening to responsibility" (Sanders 17). I would argue that Urrutia's failure to acknowledge his complicity is more productive than it may seem at first glance. By staging so clearly that his excuses to free himself of responsibility are blatantly invalid, and by exposing the stark discrepancy between Urrutia's perception of himself and what his narrative actually reveals about him, the novel turns him into some kind of coarse caricature: into the worst version of ourselves. The novel allows readers to see crystal clear how much we resist assuming responsibility. It discloses how desperately we

try to attribute responsibility to others and thus evade the demands that assuming responsibility would make on us. *By Night in Chile*, in other words, works as a sort of twisted mirror in which readers are invited to recognize, in the figure of Urrutia, their own desire to remain free of what Schiff terms the "burdens of political responsibility" (1).

Bolaño's work, in this sense, has the potential to elicit the sense of discomfort conceptualized by Knittel: an unsettling affective strategy that can bring comfortable subject positions out of balance and therefore inaugurate a space for critique (380-82). It sutures readers to the figure of Urrutia, allowing them to gain insight into his most intimate thoughts and forcing them to inhabit his perspective. In the process, the text opens up a terrain where readers are compelled to recognize that, deep inside, the mediocre, complicitous figure of the priest is no different from us. Just like Urrutia, we also "have all sorts of more and less effective formal and informal mechanisms for holding people and organizations accountable" (Schiff 16), thereby transforming ourselves into un-implicated, neutral, innocent subjects. The legal system is often made to operate as one of these mechanisms. While it performs the essential job of holding individual perpetrators accountable, it also offers the ordinary members of a collective the chance to leave matters to rest and not inquire any further into how they are involved in the violence. *By Night in Chile*, in contrast, obliges readers to direct their gaze to the realm of implication in order to apprehend the complex network of complicities that underpin large-scale harms. In the process, moreover, it prompts readers to acknowledge a form of responsibility that "exceed[s] the legal frames in which crimes are usually adjudicated" (Rothberg 7) and their worst tendencies at disavowing that responsibility. Importantly, what readers do with the knowledge generated in the act of reading cannot be prescribed. Whether or not they choose to resist the urge to disavow responsibility and instead perform "revisionary practices" (Staufer 138) on themselves is ultimately left to them. Responsibility, as has hopefully become clear in the course of this paper, cannot be imposed. It must be embraced.

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Biography

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