

# Facing Differences and Indifference in Mexico

Suggestions Concerning the Discursive Dynamics  
of Morality in *2666* by Roberto Bolaño  
and “El principio del placer” and *Las batallas  
en el desierto* by José Emilio Pacheco

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## 1. The blind and the winking eye of evil

The acclaimed novel *2666* by the Chilean author Roberto Bolaño was published posthumously in 2004 and centres around a moral dilemma: that of indifference towards evil. Set in the fictional city of Santa Teresa in the 1990s but based on real events whereby hundreds of unaccounted female corpses were discovered in landfills and in the desert around the Mexican city Ciudad Juárez, the narrative tries to get a grip on the mystifying scope of generalized inaction. The fictionalized events are mainly rendered in gruesome detail in the fourth part of the book, the so-called “The Part about the Crimes”.

The novel’s main question is somewhat similar to the one triggered by the staggering impact the Holocaust had on Western self-image and its moral foundations. In this case the question is: how can it be that in the 1990s hundreds of female bodies turn up in a major city on the Mexican border opposite El Paso, Texas, and no one is held accountable except for a number of blatantly obvious scapegoats? The sheer number of murdered women at hand is simply too big for one or several serial killers: rather something systemic must have been at work here. The constant lack of results in the ongoing investigation in the novel hints

at the fact that something has failed in the moral core of Santa Teresa's society that needs to be looked at more closely.

Possible explanations for the murders alluded to in the novel are serial killers, gangs of spoiled kids, satanic rituals, snuff movies, an ugly undercurrent of *machismo* in the police force and in society, wide-spread corruption and collusion between the police force and organized drug trafficking resulting in utter incompetency of self-serving authorities bent on sweeping everything under the rug. The problem is especially compounded by another dynamic: a generalized fear and rampant lack of moral courage stemming from the extreme social stratification and socioeconomic inequality in Mexican society, since most victims belong to an underclass of migrants from the South working for minimal wage in the so-called *maquiladoras* on the Mexican-United States border. In the end, nobody feels responsible for these people who cannot afford the protection of the state and somehow have been *too many* in the first place. But the novel's polyphony carefully steers away from closing in on one explanation only. Whatever the explanation may be, three shades of one particular type of moral shortcoming stand out, combine and seem to aggravate each other: a lack of empathy, indifference and self-interest.

In order to distinguish a lack of empathy from indifference for our purposes here, I would like to define a lack of empathy as the interested version of indifference, namely to actively repress compassion out of some ulterior motive, whereas simple indifference might be viewed more straightforwardly as the flaw of omission lacking a specific focus.<sup>1</sup> Even when one defines indifference as a lighter shade of a lack of empathy, indifference still lends itself to be an ideal breeding ground conducive to evil in a society that is preoccupied, for varying motives, with its own absorbing self-interests and that is unable to develop an interest in solidarity beyond its own narrow field of self-preservation.

Self-interest and self-preservation are initially neutral terms, describing a focus or direction of attention (the self or individual), as opposed to solidarity, empathy or altruism, which turn their focus outwards. Extreme versions of self-interest could be called egoism or narcissism, maybe hedonism or, with the stress on the absence of pain, Epicureanism, whereas the lighter version is better described as individualism, a central catalyst for modernity and therefore still highly valued with all its positive and negative effects. We might ask: But is there also a positive version of indifference? Obviously: tolerance. Without delving into the

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<sup>1</sup> When Daniuska González asked Roberto Bolaño about his concept of evil, his answer was: "Pensar que el otro no existe, no piensa, no siente, y hacerle daño. O saber que existe, piensa y siente, y hacerle daño. Destruir dentro de uno mismo, consciente o inconscientemente, toda atadura moral y ética. Creer que todo vale" (González González 2004, 28). This definition of evil would lay emphasis on an active lack of empathy combined with self-interest rather than on indifference.

debate between Michael Walzer, Karl Popper and John Rawls as to how far the intolerant can or should be tolerated as well, I would like to recall the promise a positive kind of indifference held for Voltaire in the age of Enlightenment, in the words of George Steiner:

Voltaire and his informed contemporaries expressed the confident belief that torture and other bestialities practiced on subjects or enemies were passing for ever from civilized society. [...] With the decline in the strength of religious creeds, there would follow [...] a concomitant decline in human hatreds, in the urge to destroy another man because he is the embodiment of evil or falsehood. Indifference would breed tolerance. (Steiner 1971, 42-43)

Indifference is, in this sense, tantamount to tolerating difference, but in highly individualistic cultures an unwillingness to look past one's own fashioned set of interests could lead easily to dismissing anything that might draw attention and resources away from one's own goals. On the flipside of tolerance then, rather than indifference, lurks an interested lack of empathy with a lot of potential for tacit approval of patent wrong-doings. Even in a time in history when tolerance might be viewed as the order of the day, one still has to decide constantly on what constitutes a minor evil worth tolerating and what should or must be interfered with.<sup>2</sup>

To return to the supreme example of negative indifference in modern times, the Holocaust, George Steiner reflects on the turning point in thinking about the difference between civilization and barbarism in the following terms:

When the first reports of the death camps were smuggled out of Poland they were largely disbelieved: such things could not be taking place in civilized Europe, in the mid-twentieth century. Today, it is difficult to conjecture a bestiality, a lunacy of oppression or sudden devastation, which would not be credible, which would not soon be located in the order of facts. Morally, psychologically, it is a terrible thing to be so un-astonished. Inevitably, the new realism conspires with what is, or should be, least acceptable in reality. (Steiner 1971, 57)

Allocating evil a place in the order of facts seems to be reassuring and might even be a simple cognitive necessity for human beings, even though it seems cynical at first. Finding a place for evil in the order of facts, giving it a place in relation to good, calls for a measure, a backdrop against which evil can be discerned and assessed. It is the essential task of ethics: establishing criteria for the separation of good and evil and possibly quantifying its differences when they are assembled on some kind of scale, distributed in some kind of hierarchy or coherent whole.

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<sup>2</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion of the concept of tolerance see Forst 2007 and 2009.

When we ignore in *2666* all the sideshows designed to distract the public from the real and deep-seated roots in the middle of Santa Teresa's society, one can look at what a journalist, Guadalupe Roncal, who is investigating the crimes and whose work does not get much attention, has to say in a key sentence of the novel about being so "un-astonished": "Nadie presta atención a estos asesinatos, pero en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo" (Bolaño 2004, 439). The secret of the novel, that is, the identity of those responsible for killing all the women, is never given away, but the secret of the world alluded to here is that the supposed secret is not a secret, but is in front of everyone's eyes without being noticed. The secret of evil is its apparentness that does not register because it is systematically abetted by a culture of impunity founded on all forms of indifference which undermine any understanding of evil that might violate one's own interests. It would follow that the mentioned secret of the world can be found in the rationale of any moral code which by default functions in ways that interpret evil only as something harmful to a group one belongs to as a member in order to enjoy its protection, but leaves out those who cannot stake a claim to the group's protective moral cloak.<sup>3</sup>

Since the murders continue, a kind of superdetective from the United States, specializing in serial killers, is called in: Professor Kessler. He is as unsuccessful at solving the case as all the other officers, but makes a relevant observation:

A: esa sociedad está fuera de la sociedad, todos, absolutamente todos son como los antiguos cristianos en el circo. B: los crímenes tienen firmas diferentes. C: esa ciudad parece pujante, parece progresar de alguna manera, pero lo mejor que podrían hacer es salir una noche al desierto y cruzar la frontera, todos sin excepción, todos, todos. (Bolaño 2004, 339)

We can paraphrase here: (a) a lot of Santa Teresa's inhabitants do not belong to the circle of those citizens protected by their community and who fully enjoy its rights, but are separated by some invisible line and excluded from the perceived social order; (b) the committed crimes clearly have a systemic social dimension; (c) Santa Teresa is rife with all the problems and imperfections of a modernity which is out of kilter when it comes to protecting those who substantially generate economic progress for the enjoyment of others, for those across the border or Santa Teresa's upper class.

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<sup>3</sup> The moral relativist Gilbert Harman stresses that these types of 'agreements' (in this case here to enjoy the protective rights of an in-group not afforded in the same way to the out-group) need not be based on overt forms of agreements: "There is an agreement, in the relevant sense, if each of a number of people intends to adhere to some schedule, plan, or set of principles, intending to do this on the understanding that the others similarly intend. The agreement or understanding need not be conscious or explicit [...]" (Harman 2007, 84-85).

Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* as someone who may be killed, officially codified in Roman law as an exception to the *ius humanum*, describes a case similar to the point (a) addressed by Professor Kessler in the novel.<sup>4</sup> But how is it, one might ask, that these people count for less and seem to fall out of the established moral code? The official, visible code seems to be at odds with a *de facto* exclusion. One decisive answer given in the novel in the form of a conversation between Kessler and a younger interlocutor is the tendency to cloak evil through words:

—Nos hemos acostumbrado a la muerte —oyó que decía el tipo joven.

—Siempre —dijo el tipo canoso—, siempre ha sido así.

En el siglo XIX, a mediados o a finales del XIX, dijo el tipo canoso, la sociedad acostumbraba a colar la muerte por el filtro de las palabras. Si uno lee las crónicas de esa época se diría que casi no había hechos delictivos o que un asesinato era capaz de conmocionar a todo un país. No queríamos tener a la muerte en casa, en nuestros sueños y fantasías, sin embargo es un hecho que se cometían crímenes terribles, descuartizamientos, violaciones de todo tipo, e incluso asesinatos en serie. Por supuesto, la mayoría de los asesinos en serie no eran capturados jamás, [...]. Todo pasaba por el filtro de las palabras, convenientemente adecuado a nuestro miedo. ¿Qué hace un niño cuando tiene miedo? Cierra los ojos. [...] Las palabras servían para ese fin. (Bolaño 2004, 337-338)

Kessler dwells here on the curious phenomenon that a homicide can figure sometimes as such in the social discourse and cause scandal, being perceived and accordingly labelled as harmful and as a detrimental infringement upon the rules set up by society to regulate its interactions and further the self-preservation of the community. At other times, the deed cannot punch through into social discourse and is simply filtered out by means of words which prefer non-representation for the sake of propriety and discretion. The different reactions seem to be founded either on the relevance of the harmed person or the victim's capacity to summon attention. In order to receive just attention, the victim would have to be claimed after the fact as one of 'society's own', as having belonged.

Inversely, the fear of a perceived danger that might put oneself in peril when voicing concerns seems to unravel this social discourse on evil. The discourse hits a natural limit whenever an imminent threat to one's own well-being outweighs

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<sup>4</sup> According to Agamben it might even give a window into the foundation of law itself as a sovereign, unbound decision in the first place: "This violence—the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege. [...] This sphere is that of the sovereign decision, which suspends law in the state of exception and thus implicates bare life within it. [...] We may even then advance a hypothesis: once brought back to his proper place beyond both penal law and sacrifice, *homo sacer* presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted" (Agamben 1998, 82-83).

the benefit of throwing one's own weight of moral indignation behind the task of upholding the social fabric. The discourse on morality is, in the sense of a social practice, prevented from taking place, because no one wants to endanger themselves or established privileges. Nobody is barred from benefitting from an assumed agreement to actually belong to society's in-group by professing its allegiance to moral standards and tacitly refraining from enforcing them when it seems convenient. More precisely, and concerning only the discourse on morality, we are encouraged to talk about feeling for others up to the point where it becomes unlikely that people to whom one might feel an even closer social obligation want to hear about their privileges being attacked. The picture is complicated because we have two disparities with two moving parts each which are not necessarily visible at the same time: an open discourse, on the one hand, and a (diverging) practice, on the other hand; an implicit discourse on the universality of moral rights and a reality of assumed tacit agreements to be part of the group worth protecting. Everyone wants of course to belong to this in-group, but nobody can guarantee its precise status and nobody seems, more often than not, to be willing to do so when push comes to shove.

Discourse on moral behaviour, because of its inherent discursiveness, needs people who are willing to speak out and people who are willing to listen in order to take place. A transgression, as the word implies, figures as such only when some other agency feels encroached upon and the transgressor is called out. When one pits private pain against social harm, naturally the social relevance tends to win out in a discourse. But if there is a hidden social benefit to rephrasing the discourse, as it were, and to dissociating it from the social practice, the act of weighing the two against each other becomes virtually invisible. Discourses seem to have a special relevance for the individual whenever they touch upon his or her relation to society and therefore need a wider context to establish themselves. Because discourse, as an aggregate of (heard) voices, requires a solid foundation, there also seems to be a built-in restriction and a blind eye turned to its limits: since taking part in the discourse was initially motivated by the allure of making use of the protection the discourse offered in relation to the individual, the agreement on the extension of people it *practically* applies to must vary and remain unclear.

Therefore, there is a sharp contrast between moral discourses that usually strengthen the ties in an existing community and alternative moral discourses which establish a *communitas* outside existing ties. Joseph Campbell quotes the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:34-37<sup>5</sup> as an example to draw attention to the fact

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<sup>5</sup> "I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law", etc. (cit. in Campbell 2004, 326).

that in mythologies where son figures kill father figures in an act of apparent subversion of the reigning order, the patricide is actually only staged in order to usher in a new kind of hierarchical order. Another obvious example also taken from the Bible would be the serpent tempting Eve to eat the fruit in Genesis 3:4-5: “‘Of course you will not die,’ said the serpent; ‘for God knows that, as soon as you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God himself, knowing both good and evil’” (*The Revised English Bible* 1989, 2). The allure of knowing right from wrong brings about the fall from grace. Eve is ousted from paradise for assuming the burden to think for herself. In each one of these cases the discourse on moral behaviour is tied into a social framework and founded on the formation of alliances. The invitations to partake in a covenant seemingly superior to its alternative are at the same time designed as appeals to the individual’s fear of being an outcast, of standing on the outside of grace.

Our Professor Kessler from 2666 reflects in a similar vein on the fact that categories like good and evil have to be invented in the first place in order to figure as such in our discourses when he muses about the origins of Western civilization: “Los griegos inventaron, por decirlo de alguna manera, el mal, vieron el mal que todos llevamos dentro, pero los testimonios o las pruebas de ese mal ya no nos conmueven, nos parecen fútiles, ininteligibles” (Bolaño 2004, 338). It is interesting here to point out that the “invention of evil” means “seeing evil” and bearing witness to it in some form or another. Evil as a moral category needs to be conceptualized in order to distinguish itself from pain as a mere part of life. In a different context Malcolm K. Read makes an observation on a similar relationship between *violence* and *exploitation* which closely resembles the relationship between *pain* and *evil*:

‘Exploitation’ is altogether more politically charged and materially based. It immediately raises the specter of the exploiter and the exploited. My indigence is connected to your opulence. Violence, by way of contrast, poses as a telluric, primordial force or ontological condition prior to its historical configurations. (Read 2010, 196)

Evil would then be the politically charged and discursively based counterpart to pain here. My speaking of evil is connected to your pain only insofar as you are relevant in my moral code because you belong to a group which feels responsible for your pain. Pain on the other hand would be a primordial condition of life prior to its historical configuration as something evil. Only a discourse on evil then makes pain *socially* visible as well.

Another way of dealing with evil, rather than simply silencing it or not having a formulated concept at one’s disposal that distinguishes evil from pain, involves ignoring it willingly by partially blending out its inchoate representations in discourse. That is, one *decides* that testimonies and proofs are irrelevant and futile;

that they do not make sense in relation to the privileges of one's own group. But how, one might ask, does this very interested kind of indifference, this habituation to evil, come about? In the words of Professor Kessler it becomes apparent that language cannot only be revealing but is very suited to cloak pain and to further the negative kind of indifference mentioned earlier by drawing attention to a certain class of victims and taking it away from others. In the English translation of the novel by Natasha Wimmer, “[u]na explicación plausible es que *la sociedad*, en aquella época, era pequeña” (Bolaño 2004, 338, emphasis added) in the original is rendered as: “Maybe it’s because *polite* society was so small back then” (Bolaño 2006, 266, italics mine). This small change in the form of the insertion of an adjective might not be an innocent one as we shall see when we look for another explanation for indifference in the works of the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues that human beings have a natural tendency towards not feeling for others, towards a lack of empathy and indifference under one specific condition, that is, when the group size is too large for a (moral) focus:

Our increasing interconnectedness—and our growing awareness of it—has not, of course, made us into denizens of a single community, the proverbial ‘global village’. Everyone knows you cannot have face-to-face relations with six billion people. [...] nations differ from the *πόλις* [polis] so substantially in scale [...] that relations between citizens must, of necessity, be relations between strangers. What accounts, then, for the thick, black line we draw between these strangers and (in a convenient shorthand of Michael Walzer’s) ‘political strangers,’ those who are not members of our polity? (Appiah 2005, 216-217)

The search for this black line is at the core of *2666*. The motivation behind the evil and the suppression of empathy, the very visibility and invisibility of those lines that cross and zigzag through the histories of our societies in so many different ways is what we should try to get a grasp on in order to be able to understand what the afore-mentioned “secret of the world” consists of. What accounts for the line we draw is shaped, portrayed, handed down and encouraged by certain discourses. These discourses rely on language that is somehow complicit in helping to delineate demarcation lines which uphold and further perpetuate forms of exclusion. Slavoj Žižek accentuates this even further when he points to this kind of understanding of moral codes as some kind of evil *Kulturfertigkeit*:

This limitation of our ethical concern to a narrow circle seems to run counter to our spontaneous insight that we are all humans, with the same justified claim to respect and dignity. Consequently, those who constrain the scope of their ethical concern are in a profound sense inconsistent, ‘hypocritical’ even. To put it in Habermasian terms, they are involved in a pragmatic contradiction, since they violate the ethical norms which sustain their own speech community. Refusing the same basic ethical rights to



those outside our community as to those inside it is something that does not come naturally to a human being. It is a violation of our spontaneous ethical proclivity. It involves brutal repression and self-denial. (Žižek 2008, 48)

We may still insist on asking ourselves: but how is this “cultural feat” (note the inverted commas) accomplished? How does a moral code become a *double entendre* in an almost official way? We might add here that the progressive inclusion of ever larger groups into the ideal of universal human rights has also considerably broadened the gap between a staked claim to universality and reality. The very effect of this gap is a rather counterproductive one insofar as the claim is understood more and more as a form of appeasing wishful thinking or simply as an imperfection and only a matter of time for the gap to be finally closed in the natural progress of mankind.

Harking back to Professor Kessler’s words that human nature and the archetypes of crimes do not change (cf. Bolaño 2004, 338), what indeed has changed is our way of conceptualizing evil: it has become synonymous with an exaggeration, an aberration, with something unforeseen and an error in the matrix that is essentially unintelligible from the standpoint of the Good and of righteousness. In this respect, Baudrillard goes as far as claiming that we have simply lost the capacity to speak of evil, or one might say, to speak ill of anything in the sense of a generalized but ultimately harmful decorum:

We can no longer speak Evil. All we can do is discourse on the rights of man – a discourse which is pious, weak, useless and hypocritical, its supposed value deriving from the Enlightenment belief in a natural attraction of the Good, from an idealized view of human relationships [...]. This is the condescending and depressive power of good intentions, a power that can dream of nothing except rectitude in the world, that refuses even to consider a bending of Evil, or an intelligence of Evil. (Baudrillard 2009, 97)

When Baudrillard says “we can no longer speak Evil” he essentially means that we prefer speaking Good, thereby cloaking real evil for our own purposes and intentions, as is the case in the example from *2666* mentioned above. It is important to emphasize that here again ethics itself is not at stake, but rather something much more tangible: the talk thereof, the discourse on Good and Evil. One only has to look to any kind of horror movie, or indeed any typical contemporary movie, to see that Evil is usually represented as something peripheral and anachronistic, as essentially impermeable and unreal. Evil has become somewhat a necessary myth, a myth that is, that can be beheld but not probed. One of the novel’s characters therefore aptly concludes the state of affairs in *2666* thus: “Hay algunos detenidos. [...] Pero la leyenda quiere que el asesino sea uno solo y además inatrapable”

(Bolaño 2004, 363). Legend holds, one might paraphrase, that evil exists generally only on the outside of the community or on the inside, but then it is *not to be seen* in the open. By propping up legends that tend to make evil formulaic, nobody really has to deal with any dimension of evil that might bear upon his or her own entanglement in its social fabric. The little overlap that exists between representing evil and the reality of evil is the foundation of its success. This must essentially be so, because evil is only visible and eligible for being communicated when it affects the very fabric of a community and its vital interests as defined by the prevalent discourse in that society. Any representation of evil in discourse has to pass the filter of general interest.

This very answer to our conundrum in *2666* is also perfectly echoed in a conversation in another novel, *Así empieza lo malo* (2014) by Javier Marías. Here the narrator is shocked to learn from his mentor and employer, the film director Muriel, that he all of a sudden does not want him to look any further into the murky past of one of his personal acquaintances. When pressed for his reasons, Muriel declares that he does not believe in justice anymore and goes on to accurately describe broken attempts at justice when judicial systems are faced with large groups, or rather, when the social practice of judging others hits too close to home:

La justicia no existe. O sólo como excepción: unos pocos escarmientos para guardar las apariencias, en los crímenes individuales nada más. Mala suerte para el que le toca. En los colectivos no, en los nacionales no, ahí no existe nunca, ni se pretende. A la justicia la atemoriza siempre la magnitud, la desborda la superabundancia, la inhibe la cantidad. Todo eso la paraliza y la asusta, y es iluso apelar a ella después de una dictadura, o de una guerra, incluso de un mero linchamiento en un pueblo de mala muerte, siempre son demasiados los que toman parte. ¿Cuánta gente crees que cometió delitos o fue cómplice en Alemania, y cuánta fue castigada? No me refiero a sometida a juicio y condenada, que todavía menos, sino a algo mucho más factible y más fácil: ¿cuánta fue castigada socialmente o a nivel personal? [...] Una minúscula proporción. [...] Seríamos los estúpidos justicieros los que nos quedaríamos apesta-dos y aislados, no te quepa duda. Nadie execra a sus iguales, nadie acusa a quien se le parece. (Marías 2014, 464-465)

Not only are large groups unwieldy when it comes to judging whole nations or specific portions of society; much more to the point here is the observation that groups are generally unwilling to formulate judgments against their own members. Generally speaking, people have a keen sense, more so than an awareness, of how to manoeuvre between paying lip service to morality and the fact that nobody wants to act against one's own (and the group's) interests.

## 2. Comparing the blind with the winking eye of evil

“El principio del placer” and *Las batallas en el desierto* by José Emilio Pacheco are two other literary examples which also reflect back upon the discursive nature of good and evil. The two small narrations, similar in scope, centre around young adolescents’ first unhappy love. “El principio del placer” is narrated as the personal diary of Jorge and *Las batallas en el desierto* is narrated by its protagonist, Carlos, who looks back at his childhood in the 1940s in Mexico City to tell the story of an unrequited love for the mother of his classmate Jim. In both accounts the cultural influence of the United States becomes more and more noticeable and Jorge and Carlos begin, most importantly, to establish their own moral criteria when they learn to critically observe a multitude of conflicting adult views on the changing world around them. They both have to reconcile contrasting viewpoints on offer in order to make sense of them and to arrive at their own worldview. The two narrations perfectly fit the mold of the initiation story showing how from the contradictions in the adult discourses they start to detect, they manage in the end to draw their own conclusions in order to find their place *between* them instead of simply accepting one of the models they are confronted with.

At the beginning of “El principio del placer” Jorge has to justify his girlish pursuit of writing a diary in front of himself and a supposed posterity. One of the teachers has recommended taking up the habit of writing a diary to see one’s own development through time, whereas the gym teacher advises his pupils plainly against too much reading, leaving Jorge wondering: “Nadie entiende a los maestros, uno dice algo y el otro lo contrario” (Pacheco 2010a, 176). However, the main objective behind his diary-writing soon becomes clear to Jorge: to chronicle his falling in and out of love with Ana Luisa, a girl from a lower socioeconomic class and, at age fifteen, two or three years older than him. One day Jorge sees a dead person for the first time, a victim of a crime of passion. He is astonished above all that someone would kill for an elderly and to him unattractive woman, having assumed that falling in love is a prerogative of the young and wondering what impact the sight of dead bodies during the Revolution might have had on his own father, “aunque dice que al poco tiempo de andar en eso uno se acostumbra a ver muertos” (180), just as Professor Kessler had observed. Only two diary entries later, Jorge comes into conflict with his own thoughts, having denied his interest in Ana Luisa after an inquisitive question by his older sister. In writing he becomes aware that he lied about his attraction to Ana Luisa, telling his sister: “—No, cómo crees: hay muchachas mil veces más bonitas” (181). With a little bit of distance, the diary helps him to notice the intricate pitfalls set up by the restrictions that apply to discourse in the open and he has to abide by, navigate or reconcile within himself.

His father, a military officer of high rank in the Mexican army, has to deal with farmers who are unwilling to clear some land the government has claimed for a hydroelectric project. Jorge's mother thinks (along the lines of the revolutionary discourse of the PRI) that there should not be this conflict of interests, since the army is supposedly only a mere extension of the people and her husband had heavily benefited from the uprising of the poor he himself formerly belonged to (cf. 185). But when Jorge's mother warns Jorge about Ana Luisa because of her low socioeconomic standing and bad reputation in unmistakable terms, Jorge reflects back, instead, on his own father: "Más debería avergonzarme el que mi padre se haya ganado la vida derramando sangre" (197). He is also quick to notice that the official discourse of adults does not always match their actions when he gets humiliated by the school's principal and lectured about sexuality as the bane of humanity, since he is well aware of the principal's lurid glances at girls' legs (cf. 199). His father turns out to be not unlike the principal when he exhorts Jorge that he ought to study and obey until he earns his own money, in order to have as many women as he wants, even though it would be the worst path to take, as he can tell from his own personal experience (cf. 206).<sup>6</sup>

The disillusionments that come upon Jorge in the discrepancy of words are not restricted only to adult discourse. A prime example of this is the last letter he receives from Ana Luisa which is supposed to explain and clarify why she has to end the relationship. Instead of finally giving Jorge the chance to make sense of her elusive behaviour, the letter becomes a mock example of further stonewalling and couching utter dishonesty in buttered-up terms. So much so that the passage becomes reminiscent of the "filter of words" mentioned above to serve the purpose of *Uneigentlichkeit* of semantics to a degree that everything in the letter can be taken as its exact opposite:

Resulta Jorge que ya nos vamos a seguirnos viendo como astaora [he has not been seeing her for quite some time at all], se que me entenderas [he does not understand at all] y no me pediras esplicaciones [he has, in fact, been asking for explanations several times already] pues tan poco podria dartélas [she could, of course, if she wanted to]. Jorge siempre e sido sinsera contigo [she is entertaining several love interests unbeknownst to him at this point in the narration] y te e querido mucho nunca sabrás cuando deveras [he will at the end, when he sees her with Durán, his confidant and his father's orderly], me será muy difisil olvidarte, ojála no sufras como estoi sufriendo y te olvides pronto de mi [he, ironically, does not think he could fall in love with anybody else until he quickly becomes interested in another girl named Yolanda]. (208)

<sup>6</sup> Dan Ariely illustrates this natural blindness towards moral double standards with a joke: "Eight-year-old Jimmy comes home from school with a note from his teacher that says, "Jimmy stole a pencil from the student sitting next to him." Jimmy's father is furious. He goes to great lengths to lecture Jimmy and let him know how upset and disappointed he is [...]. Finally he concludes, "[...] Why didn't you simply ask? You know very well that I can bring you dozens of pencils from work" (Ariely 2012, 31).

The experience of being confronted with such a rich density of insincerity leaves Jorge numb, but when his mother finds him crying, and embarrassed about it, he admits in his diary to giving her an embellished version of his plight (cf. 209). Jorge learns once again that he cannot count on his mother's empathy when she tells him that Ana Luisa is not worth his suffering and that he should be happy to network with children his age who could potentially be useful for his later career. Being honest with her would entail going against a perceived restriction in the discourse.

That Jorge himself is not free of contradictions can be easily gleaned from a careful reading of the diary: on the one hand he is always afraid of getting found out when he is writing about his feelings for Ana Luisa, on the other hand, he himself secretly reads his sister's diary and love letters. Jorge is shocked at himself, for example, when he relates eating meat for the first time with death, thus discovering another link between the Freudian *pleasure principle*<sup>7</sup> and the *reality principle*: "Soy tan imbécil que a mi edad no había relacionado los llamados placeres de la mesa con la muerte y el sufrimiento que los hacen posibles" (213). Relating two distant but connected phenomena is what Jorge has to accomplish in reverse engineering. Even though Jorge is wealthy, he arrives at the formula *my opulence is connected to your indigence* mentioned above, when he muses about rich people: "Si en México la mayoría de la gente es tan pobre ¿de dónde sacarán, cómo le harán algunos para robar en tales cantidades?" (213).

We can cautiously conclude here that in order to arrive at moral questions or to build moral criteria, the most important prerequisite in these texts seems to be some kind of wonder and estrangement from reality that is sparked by carefully observing cracks and inconsistencies in the fabric of reality. These inconsistencies can either become apparent in comparing some type of official discourse with observed reality (as a recognisable divergence from something professed, for instance) or by relating two phenomena which have not been thought together before.

Habituation to evil then can ideally also be detected in one's own behaviour, when Jorge catches himself for example in an instance of *Schadenfreude*: "La Nena, Maricarmen y yo nos moríamos de risa mientras Yolanda narraba y actuaba la tragedia de la gorda. Luego sentí remordimientos: soy tan canalla como Adelina. No está bien alegrarse del mal ajeno, por mucho que deteste a Óscar y a su hermana [...]" (214). Keeping this childish sense of wonder alive, being astonished at oneself, establishes a vital distance with oneself and others, opening

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<sup>7</sup> Cf.: "Desde su título mismo, la *nouvelle* remite directamente al conocido ensayo de Freud *Más allá del principio del placer* [*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*]. [...] En "El principio del placer" la incompatibilidad del deseo con la realidad promueve una revaloración de la experiencia vivida, que marca el paso de Jorge a la vida adulta, el comienzo del desengaño en su combate por la gratificación vital" (Verani 2003, 9-10).

up the confines of a purely subjective perspective. Fortunately, Jorge has still a grasp on his own inconsistencies and is able to reflect on his own behaviour in a way that is often abandoned in adult life at the altar of *all too* practical rationality: “No entiendo cómo es uno. El otro día sentí piedad al ver a los animales asesinados en el patio trasero de mi casa y hoy me divertí pisando cangrejos en la playa” (214). His main pleasure then derives from noticing that being removed from the immediacy of the world has something to do with writing the diary itself: it takes him out of the immediacy of the moment, the direct impact of his emotions and the rules he has to otherwise observe in social interactions. It is not so much the activity of writing itself, but the sensation of having a tool for the preservation of time, for creating a distance that enables Jorge to overcome bad experiences by making them seem more relative in a safe place for reflection. It is this distance even from himself and the keen observations he can make from this vantage point that help Jorge ultimately to grow and to find his way through conflicting impressions.

The narrative’s most emblematic disillusionment comes at the end as a double blow for Jorge when he realizes that his favorite sport, American wrestling or *lucha libre*, is not free at all, but a rigged game. After a match he not only sees the two enemies from the ring drinking and joking at the beachfront like old buddies, but also his father’s orderly Durán hand in hand with Ana Luisa. Just after Durán has rescued Jorge from angry fans because the corn cob Jorge had thrown at the “evil” one of the two wrestlers was eventually used to harm the “good” wrestler, he is lectured in what proves to be a premonition about their own relationship in which Durán is about to betray Jorge: “primero está uno y nunca hay que tomar partido por nadie” (219).

This drastic warning against solidarity is usually presented in a more disguised form in the narration. The reader has to compare, for example, the fact that Jorge’s mother and sisters preside over a festival for poor children but never miss an opportunity to dissuade anybody in their environment from succumbing to the charms of lower class girls (cf. 200). Applying solidarity<sup>8</sup> seems to be restricted once again only to in-group behaviour when we compare the official discourse, i.e. hosting a charitable festival for poor children, with the private practice of deriding servant girls and wishing they would not mingle with the upper class.

But “El principio del placer” is not a clear-cut coming of age story: Jorge himself does not yet overcome his own contradictions similar to those he observes in the behaviour of others. The reader only witnesses his being baffled by the fact that the discourse does not seem to align with his own observations. He also cannot help getting revenge upon Durán’s ex-girlfriend in the end. More than

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<sup>8</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the concept of solidarity see Scholz 2012.

anything, Jorge learns that it is very difficult to act for the better even though he should know better: “Qué metida de pata mi supuesta venganza” (223). The *insight* has only been possible here with *hindsight* due to the *posterior pleasure* of reflecting back on it in writing.

This perspective of hindsight is, in *Las batallas en el desierto*, fully realized in the form of an adult narrator who looks back at his childhood. In particular, the promise of modernity and progress in the official discourse can now be put into a clear focus by the narrator:

La cara del Señorpresidente en dondequiera: dibujos inmensos, retratos idealizados, fotos ubicuas, alegorías del progreso con Miguel Alemán como Dios Padre, caricaturas laudatorias, monumentos. Adulación pública, insaciable maledicencia privada. [...] Para el impensable año dos mil se auguraba –sin especificar cómo íbamos a lograrlo– un porvenir de plenitud y bienestar universales. [...] Las máquinas harían todo el trabajo. [...] El paraíso en la tierra. La utopía al fin conquistada. (Pacheco 2010b, 14-15)

From whatever moment in posterity the narrator speaks, it becomes clear that the charm of the future, of unlimited progress and modernity is broken. In the case of Mexico, modernity in the late 40s appeared to be almost synonymous with the uncritical Americanization of Mexican society and to be a version of modernity that was still only accessible to the upper classes.<sup>9</sup> This process of unreflecting adaptation does not only include copying tastes, but trickles down from the adult world into Carlos’s classmates schematic conceptualizations of good and evil. The *battles of the desert* in the title of the book are the games of foe and friend which are modelled on real-life historical developments on a world scale, even without having a direct relevance in the context of Mexican culture:

Jugábamos en dos bandos: árabes y judíos. Acababa de establecerse Israel y había guerra contra la Liga Árabe. Los niños que de verdad eran árabes y judíos sólo se hablaban para insultarse y pelear. Bernardo Mondragón, nuestro profesor, les decía: Ustedes nacieron aquí. Son tan mexicanos como sus compañeros. No hereden el odio. Después de cuanto acaba de pasar (las infinitas matanzas, los campos de exterminio, la bomba atómica, los millones y millones de muertos), el mundo de mañana, el mundo en el que ustedes serán hombres, debe de ser un sitio de paz, un lugar sin crímenes y sin infamias. En las filas de atrás sonaba una risita. (17)

The battles fought out in the desert (the schoolyard being referred to as a desert simply because it is a dry and unappealing courtyard) could, ultimately, be a meta-

<sup>9</sup> Cf.: “La Coca Cola sepultaba las aguas frescas de Jamaica, chía, limón. Los pobres seguían tomando tepache. Nuestros padres se habituaban al jaibol que en principio les supo a medicina. En mi casa está prohibido el tequila, le escuché decir a mi tío Julián [...] hay que *blanquear* el gusto de los mexicanos.” (16, emphasis added)

phor for the motive of evil itself: even without any real-life relevance the pose of dichotomous thinking perpetuates itself on the playground, keeping some kind of shadow-boxing alive that becomes real again without any strict necessity. At the back of the schoolyard is significantly a half-forgotten passageway which was built during the times of religious persecution as an escape route (cf. 19). Only the adult narrator can qualify this supposedly “prehistoric era” of the *guerra carlista* (in which his mother’s family was even *gladly* involved) as a time in history that was at the time of his classmates’ infancy actually closer to them than it is to them now as adults. The power and historical reach of fanaticism seems to be stronger than those playing in the courtyard could possibly know in their innocence. The reader witnesses how concepts can indirectly acquire their own life and dynamic regardless of their cogency and current validity. Carlitos himself has his own very personal and interested view on those battles. Even though he takes part in them he distinguishes for himself another way of categorizing the classmates involved, a way of categorizing that is itself anachronistic and just a historic remnant like a dead star in the sky in hindsight, since the real line of division is, again, drawn according to economic criteria:

Hasta entonces el imperio otomano perduraba como la luz de una estrella muerta: Para mí, niño de la colonia Roma, árabes y judíos eran «turcos». Los «turcos» no me resultaban extraños como Jim, que nació en San Francisco y hablaba sin acento los dos idiomas; o Toru, crecido en un campo de concentración para japoneses; o Peralta y Rosales. Ellos no pagaban colegiatura, estaban becados, vivían en las vecindades ruinosas de la colonia de los Doctores. La calzada de La Piedad [...] y el parque Urueña formaban la línea divisoria entre Roma y Doctores. [...] Antes de la guerra en el Medioriente el principal deporte de nuestra clase consistía en molestar a Toru. [...] Nunca me sumé a las burlas. Pensaba en lo que sentiría yo, único mexicano en una escuela de Tokio; y lo que sufriría Toru con aquellas películas en que los japoneses eran representados como simios gesticulantes y morían por millares. [...] Hoy dirige una industria japonesa con cuatro mil esclavos mexicanos. (18-19)

In this ironic afterthought it becomes apparent how Toru has learned to excel at the game of dominating others in the adult world in a way that turns his childhood experience on its head, but that somehow abides by the same logic. Before the Arab-Israeli conflict, the children circled in on their Japanese classmate who could be singled out because of the status his nation of origin suffered in Mexico because of the (already bygone) Second World War and the enduring media representations of Asians as gesticulating monkeys. Once grown up, the (dominating) logic of economic success can establish itself and prevail again in a way that makes out of the ridiculed a respected business figure and “enslaver” of Mexicans. Carlos begins to learn to see through these sham battles, commenting about the recess wars: “Hoy los judíos tomaron Jerusalén pero mañana será la venganza de



los árabes” (25). The instability and fleetingness of historical domination is ironically mirrored in the fickle back and forth between rivalling schoolyard factions.

The problem of empathy and indifference towards those who are perceived as standing outside of (temporary) alliances extends to all forms of representation insofar as they manifest forms of discourse. When Carlos thinks back on the feelings he had when he saw Bambi for the first time, he remembers that he was deeply affected and that he had to be dragged out of the theater in tears, distraught at seeing how the hunters had killed Bambi’s mother (cf. 26). The adult narrator admits to sort of knowing even back then that millions of *real* mothers had been killed during WWII, but he did not cry for them, even though he saw the graphic newsreels in “Cinelandia” along with Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse. The famous Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures by Stanley Milgram has shown how much empathy and compassion have to do with encouragement and setting<sup>10</sup>. The visibility of evil, of being represented as such or not, is crucially linked to the setting and encouragement, namely whether they allow for something to register as bad and to speak out on it.

In a similar vein Carlos remembers one of the kitchen aids, Antonia, as having been very pretty and always kind to him: “Antonia era muy linda y era buena conmigo. Sin embargo yo le decía: Eres mala porque ahorcas a las gallinas. Me angustiaba verlas agonizar. Mejor comprarlas muertas y desplumadas. Pero esa costumbre apenas se iniciaba” (51). The narrative voice of the older Carlos has learned to appreciate Antonia’s kindness: looking back he can fully value her as an essentially good person because of the way she treated him. But from his childish and ultimately very telling perspective the visibility of killing the chicken can be dealt with simply by outsourcing the task of slaughtering the chicken. Carlitos takes umbrage at the sight of something he figures to be an ostensible sign of cruelty, but he takes no offense at the underlying practice he cannot relate to the consumption of chicken. His anger at Antonia might be misguided, but his sense for what is acceptable (eating chicken) and what is not (having to watch how animals die) is actually perfectly attuned to the society he is growing up in. In the political arena nowadays, the treatment of whistleblowers often mirrors this very same ‘attacking the messenger’ effect one can observe in Carlitos’s reaction to Antonia.

The servant girl Antonia is finally fired because Héctor, Carlos’s older brother, does not stop harassing her sexually. Héctor had tried to rape several servant maids in his youth, being egged on by his friends’ motto “Carne de gata, buena y barata” and the consumption of erotic novels:

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<sup>10</sup> Milgram theorized for example about the lack of emphatic cues in his experimental set-up that “[i]n the Remote and ... Voice-Feedback conditions, the victim’s suffering possesses an abstract, remote quality for the subject” (cited in Miller 1986, 44).

[...] forcejeaba con las muchachas y durante los ataques y defensas Héctor eyaculaba en sus camisones sin lograr penetrarlas: los gritos despertaban a mis padres; [...] regañaban a Héctor, amenazaban con echarlo de la casa y a esas horas despedían a la criada, aún más culpable que “el joven” por andar *provocándolo* [...]. (59-60, italics in the original)

As a grown-up Héctor will be a respected businessman at the service of multinational corporations not unlike Toru, as well as a Catholic “gentleman”, father of eleven children and an outstanding man of the Mexican extreme right (cf. 59). The apparent evolution in Héctor’s life is debunked as fully consistent with the double standards and sanctimonious discourse perceived in society and is commented on by the narrator in brackets: “En esto al menos ha sido de una coherencia a toda prueba” (59). Once again moral judgment comes harder down on those who are not afforded the protection of the in-group. ‘Do as I say, not as I do’ holds also true when everybody around Carlos is scandalized at his behaviour when he is caught for truancy after visiting Jim’s mother Mariana. He cannot help but muse: “Todos somos hipócritas, no podemos vernos ni juzgarnos como vemos y juzgamos a los demás. Hasta yo que no me daba cuenta de nada sabía que mi padre llevaba años manteniendo la casa chica de una señora, su ex secretaria, con la que tuvo dos niñas” (49-50).<sup>11</sup>

In order to fix his deviant behaviour, Carlos is sent to two psychiatrists and a priest. In the end, Carlos has to conclude that the attempts designed to fix him in the eyes of society are all spawned from criteria of judgment that do not necessarily apply to him from his own point of view: “Me juzgaban según leyes en las que no cabían mis actos” (64). The problem of his falling in love with Mariana and the ensuing scandal is struck at the root when Carlos is sent to a new school. The blemish associated with Carlos’s behaviour is removed much in the same way as his chance at further nurturing his infatuation is taken away from him: out of sight, out of mind. In the new school the battles in the desert have lost their importance as well, but in a chance encounter Carlos sees his old underprivileged classmate Rosales once again selling chewing gum on the bus and catches up with him to find out about Mariana. Carlos cannot feel empathy for the economic situation Rosales is in but invites him generously for lunch, only eager to obtain information about Mariana. Rosales is unwilling at first and more interested in his sandwich:

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<sup>11</sup> Carlos thus overcomes what is normally the case: “[...] social forces around us work in two different ways: When the cheater is part of our social group, we identify with that person and, as a consequence, feel that cheating is more socially acceptable. But when the person cheating is an outsider, it is harder to justify our misbehaviour, and we become more ethical out of a desire to distance ourselves from that immoral person and from that other (much less moral) out-group” (Ariely 2012, 206-207).

Déjame acabarme mis tortas. Están riquísimas. Llevo un día sin comer. Mi mamá se quedó sin trabajo porque trató de formar un sindicato en el hospital. Y el tipo que ahora vive con ella dice que, como no soy hijo suyo, él no está obligado a mantenerme. Rosales, de verdad lo siento; pero eso no es asunto mío y no tengo por qué meterme. Come lo que quieras [...]. (70)

Rosales remains on the outside of the established discourses designed to keep him on the outside of society since his mother has lost her job trying to form a union that could have possibly aggregated sufficient clout to establish an alternative discourse for the working poor if it had not been thwarted by opposing interests. In the sphere of familiar ties he also remains on the outside since his stepfather does not feel that he is responsible for a child born out of wedlock.

Only after receiving the shock news of Mariana's supposed suicide, Carlos has a kind of moral epiphany which provides him with a heightened sense of death and startles him into connecting all sorts of phenomena he has not been able to relate to before. He suddenly and fully comes to life in the very moment he is confronted with death, leaving behind his indifference towards signs of death. He becomes aware of the constant connections that exist between life and death all around him and which are open for observation when one has not gotten used to the blending out of death: "Vi la muerte por todas partes: en los pedazos de animales a punto de convertirse en tortas y tacos entre la cebolla, los tomates, la lechuga, el queso, la crema, los frijoles, [etc.]. Animales vivos como los árboles que acababan de talar[...]" (73). Inviting Rosales for lunch had cost Carlos a pittance, but the extreme subjectivity of his pain of loss for something he loved, Mariana, now extends beyond his own narrow focus and makes him sensitive and perceptive to other kinds of pain in an exaggerated kind of way.

His shell of an affluent *señorito* is shattered and he is jolted into life. Years later, the narrator does not even remember the year of the events or their certainty; nothing remains for him but the persisting feeling that they have shaped his life from that moment on.

The examples analysed in these different texts are highly indicative of how intimately intertwined conceptualizations of evil are with their respective representation in discourse and how difficult it can be to extricate oneself from this dynamic. While the extrapolations from these examples are not intended to necessarily say anything about morality itself, the literary texts clearly speak to an awareness of how predetermined any thinking on moral behaviour is by the social circumstances of those who partake in the discourse, and how naturally it lends itself to promote a hidden agenda. Observing differences and discourses closely can often help to uncover the underlying interested motives for indifference.

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