

# “Espejo y explosión:” Photography, Spectrality, and Extrapolation in Roberto Bolaño’s *Estrella distante*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the uses and effects of photography in the processes of narrative mediation and historic revision in Roberto Bolaño’s *Estrella distante*. In the preface to the novel, Bolaño announces that *Estrella* is a rewriting of a chapter in *La literatura nazi en América*. This retelling is based on Arturo B’s memories of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle/Carlos Wieder and mediated by letters, newspaper articles, literary magazines, and photographs. Departing from Arturo’s stated intent of producing a story that is neither “espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en sí misma,” I ask how the ekphrastic photographs included in the novel relate both to the project of a specular and explosive narrative and to reflections about photography by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and other critics. I argue that the novel establishes a relationship of self-referentiality or folding between the photos and the text that destabilizes assumed hierarchies between photography and writing in their access to a referent. I propose that the photos in *Estrella* develop into narratives that are, at once, fictional but also possible historical truths about the Chilean military dictatorship. Finally, I explain how these photos escape Sontag and Barthes’ understanding of time and death in photography.

**Keywords:** Roberto Bolaño, photography, ekphrasis, narrative mediation, Chilean military dictatorship

Roberto Bolaño’s 1996 novel *Estrella distante* retells and extends a story published in his *La literatura nazi en América*, released in the same year. According to the preface to *Estrella*, this time, the tale about the infamous Ramírez Hoffman is dictated by the memories, “sueños y pesadillas” (11) of the author’s compatriot and alter ego, the fictional character Arturo B. Arturo’s retelling of Hoffman as the avant-garde artist and assassin Alberto Ruiz-Tagle/Carlos Wieder relies, in turn, on letters, newspaper articles, literary magazines, and photographs. It is thus through several layers of mediation and references to different media that one accesses Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder and revisits, while also revising, a chapter of the history of the Chilean military dictatorship.

This article focuses on the uses and effects of photography in the processes of mediation and revision in *Estrella distante*. In the book’s preface, the author of *La literatura nazi en América* states that Arturo wants them to write a longer story, “no espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en sí misma” (11). With that in mind, I ask how the ekphrastic photographs included in the novel, that is, the images transposed into text, relate both to the project of a specular and explosive narrative and to reflections about photography by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and other critics. To answer this question, I argue, in the first section of this article, that there is a relationship of self-referentiality

or folding between the ekphrastic photos and the text that describes them. This interdependency destabilizes hierarchies of representation, which I identify in regard to theoretical and critical discourses, between photography and writing in their access to a referent or, as Magdalena Perkowska-Alvarez puts it, “a fragment of reality” (210). As for Arturo’s explosive intent, in the second section of this paper, I propose that the photos in *Estrella* often develop into narratives that are, at once, fictional but also possible historical truths. Still in relation to this explosive potential, I at last contend that Wieder’s pictures seem to escape Sontag and Barthes’s understanding of time and death in photography. While these critics argue that photos are *memento mori* because they suggest a future death, Wieder’s portraits become death themselves by eternalizing his victims’ last moments.

### **Espectros y Espejos**

In an article about photography and representation, historian Nick Peim questions the relatively unproblematic assumption, in his field, of a connection between photography and truth. According to him, “[t]he photograph has an historical relation to the concept of truth in representation ... From its inception, there has been an assumption that photography produces images by ‘autogenesis’ as a kind of natural writing (‘light writing’)” (78). The concept of light writing that Peim mentions summarizes the analog photographic process: exposing sensitive surfaces to the light reflected upon objects to form images. Because of the nature of this process, Barthes ponders, in his book-length essay *Camera Lucida*, that a picture is a sort of emanation of the photographed object, a surface to which “the referent adheres” (6). Peim contests this notion of unmediated, immediate access to a referent, on which Barthes insists throughout *Camera lucida*, by arguing that “making sense of the photographs ... depends on a number of supplementary factors” (93) that may be inferred differently from a picture, such as context, conditions, emotions, and purpose. In this sense, the author suggests that “the photograph follows – indeed accentuates – the necessary logic of the sign” (77) because “as an historic document, as a component in an archive—or a text among texts—[a photograph] cannot escape this logic of the trace and the supplement” (80-81). Peim, therefore, identifies in history a closeness between photography and writing, as pertaining both to the realm of signs and language, which is not only present but enhanced in Bolaño’s *Estrella distante* and which destabilizes hierarchies of representation between the photo and the text.

*Estrella distante* emphasizes the similarity between photography and written text first because the graphically reproduced photos that Peim discusses are absent in Bolaño’s narrative, even though there are, according to Gonzalo Maier, “más de treinta fotografías e imágenes” (214) in the novel. These numerous photographs appear through mentions or ekphrasis. An example of the former

is Arturo's memory that "[u]na vez Bibiano me enseñó una foto: esta era mucho mejor que aquella en la que la Gorda creyó reconocer a Ruiz-Tagle" (Bolaño 53). The later, in turn, involves what James A. W. Heffernan defines as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3), that is, a process of transposition through which images become words. This is the case, for instance, of Juan Stein's photo of the American poet William Carlos Williams:

[U]na fotografía que tenía de William Carlos Williams vestido con los aperos de médico de pueblo, es decir con el maletín negro, el estetoscopio que sobresale como una serpiente bicéfala y casi cae del bolsillo de una vieja chaqueta raída por los años pero cómoda y efectiva contra el frío, caminando por una larga acera tranquila bordeada de rejas de madera pintadas de verde o rojo, tras las cuales se adivinan pequeños patios o pequeñas porciones de césped – y algún cortacésped abandonado a mitad del trabajo –, con un sombrero de ala corta, de color oscuro, y los lentes muy limpios. (Bolaño 63)

Described in detail, the photo is, in passages like this and at a structural level, the very text that composes it. There is thus no clear separation between photograph and text as they fold upon each other in mutual constitution: a photo made of written text, a passage that stands for, that replaces a photo. This circular or self-referential relationship between photo and text appears throughout *Estrella distante* and unsettles, as I will discuss, hierarchies between photography and writing in theoretical discourses such as Barthes' in *Camera Lucida* and in some critical analyses of *Estrella distante*. Before addressing these topics, however, it is important to highlight that these photos do not necessarily exist prior and externally to Bolaño's novel, as Heffernan's notion of ekphrasis tends to dictate. It is true that, at the level of the plot, they are understood by characters and narrator as having the connection with reality Peim criticizes. An analysis of their description, nevertheless, reinforces the historian's claims about the logic of supplementation in photography.

*Camera Lucida* is arguably Barthes' most famous account of photography. The essay has generated its own critical legacy and influenced the way that other works dealing with photography are read. For example, as it is of interest here, several scholarly analyses of Bolaño's *Estrella distante*, such as those by Valeria de los Ríos, Gonzalo Maier, and Óscar Gutiérrez Muñoz and Juan Daniel Cid Hidalgo, apply Barthes' categories of "operator," "spectrum," "spectator," and "punctum" to the novel, or draw from the notion of referentiality in photography that Barthes formulates in *Camera Lucida*. Departing from the premise that "reference...is the founding order of Photography" (Barthes 77), Barthes infers that this medium would have a fidelity to the referent no other can offer: "painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs with referents,

of course, but these referents can be and are most often ‘chimeras.’ Contrary to these imitations, in *Photography I* can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (76). Barthes considers the referent of painting and writing as possibly fake or nearly monstrous and, thus, distant from the reality only photography can convey. He also implies that, as it is contrary to a painting and a text, a photo is not an imitation. In another passage, Barthes further emphasizes the difference between photography and writing by arguing that “[i]n the image, as Sartre says, the object yields itself wholly, and our vision of it is certain – contrary to the text or to other perceptions which give me the object in a vague, arguable manner, and therefore incite me to suspicions as to what I think I am seeing” (106). Throughout *Camera Lucida*, therefore, the philosopher seems to support photography’s superiority to writing as a means of accessing a referent. In other words, through the use or suggestion of adjectives such as “undeniable,” “real,” “certain,” and “unarguable” to refer to photography, Barthes appears to champion, in photographic theory, the relation between photography and historical truth that Peim condemns. In the same book, Barthes coins the often-quoted phrase “ça a été” (“this has been”) to define photography’s “inimitable feature” (79) and argue that, differently from other media, photography authenticates more than it represents.<sup>1</sup>

It follows from these considerations that basing an analysis of *Estrella distante* on Barthes’s reflections upon photography runs the risk of maintaining a hierarchy that the novel appears to question. In this sense, even though Maier, for example, contends that the photos in the novel are “la propia ausencia de la foto” (222), “los espacios vacíos” (223), and “la imposibilidad de ese testimonio” (226), he observes a “falta de independencia entre el referente y la fotografía” (226) in the narrative. Similarly, de los Ríos argues that “Bolaño recurre a la fotografía como el último refugio del significado, aunque esta ilusión de acceder al sentido a través de la fotografía será posteriormente desmitificada” (74), while also stating that the novel uses photography “para establecer un vínculo prosaico con la realidad (como testimonio de que algo ocurrió o simplemente existió)” (74). Analyses that fall back into Barthes’ conflation of photography and a referent as a fragment of reality seem to overlook the ways through which his text slips towards Jacques Derrida’s logic of supplementation, as I explain next. In my

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1 It bears noting that, although *Camera Lucida* is likely to be Barthes’s most cited work on photography, it is not the sole text in which he discusses it. The reader may also refer to his *Image, Music, Text*, particularly the chapter “Rhetoric of the Image.” In addition, drawing from both “Rhetoric of the Image” and *Camera Lucida*, scholars such as Johnnie Gratton argue that Barthes’ return to referentiality in *Camera Lucida* is not naïve or unqualified, even if “Barthes goes some way towards rehabilitating formerly discredited ideas and values, notably those associated with expressivism, essentialism, and referentialism” (355). For a Derridean questioning of Barthes’ referentiality, in turn, see especially Jacques Derrida’s interview “Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography.”

opinion, this, and not the presumption of a direct relation to the referent, might be the point of contact between Barthes' and Bolaño's view of photography.

Although Barthes affirms the transparency of photography as a medium, he also seems to see it somewhat inevitably through the Derridean lens of supplementation. He states, for instance: "[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence ... a reality one can no longer touch" (87); "[a]ll I look *like* is other photographs of myself, and this to infinity: no one is ever anything but the copy of a copy" (102); and "what I see has been there, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (78). The terms "certificate of presence," "reality one can no longer touch," "copy of a copy," and the "immediately separated yet already deferred" evoke the Derridean thought of the absence and/or inaccessibility of an original center of meaning in language and Western metaphysics. In this way, the absolute and irrefutable presence for which Barthes searches undergoes an infinite process of deference and replacement (*différance*), forming a chain or spectrum of signifiers contaminated by the trace of that spectral absence. It is, then, as the copy or certificate of an absent referent, forever separated and irretrievable, that the Barthesian photo (in *Camera Lucida*) can be understood as inscribed within a system equivalent to language in Derridean thought.

This notion of the specter haunts Arturo's attempted representation of Wieder. From the moment they meet Ruiz-Tagle, the narrator and his friends sense an undefined uncanniness about his poems, house, and manners. Wieder, however, is always one step ahead, eventually becoming the intangible "leyenda de Wieder" (Bolaño 107), in which, despite all efforts, "Wieder siempre se pierde" (Bolaño 118). In the particular case of the photographs that appear as elements of the plot, this character's spectrality emerges from a pervasive difficulty to see him in pictures. The first photo Arturo is presented with as proof of Ruiz-Tagle's double identity "está tomada a cierta distancia por lo que las facciones de Wieder son borrosas" (Bolaño 46). Accompanying this picture, "[e]n la segunda foto se observa, con más voluntad que claridad, algunos de los versos que el poeta escribiera sobre el cielo de Los Ángeles" (Bolaño 46). Even when he sees a much better photo than that first one, the narrator is only certain that "[e]n efecto, Wieder y Ruiz-Tagle se parecían" (Bolaño 53), but not that they were the same person. Maier argues that these photos are ironic because, whereas photography is traditionally an icon of memory, "[e]sas imágenes paradójicamente apelan a la lógica de la ausencia y de la desaparición, que se contraponen a la memoria" (216). Distant, blurred, and indistinct, the photographs of Wieder are not a means of unmediated access to this referent. Rather, they are traces of him that point to his absence and deferral.

In addition to contesting assumptions of presence and referentiality often found in theoretical and critical discourses on photography, the blurred pictures

of Wieder speak to some of Walter Benjamin's reflections about photography. In his essay "A Small History of Photography," Benjamin attributes what he considers the decline of photography to the media's openness to the possibility of a (mechanic) reproduction that destroys the aura. In this particular text, the aura is understood both as the fog that involves photographed objects as a consequence of the continuum between light and shadow in early photographs and as "[a] peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be" (83). Excerpts from "A Small History" would later be repeated in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin's well-known text about the understanding and consumption of art in face of modern technologies of representation, documentation, and copy. Interpreters of this text, such as Samuel Weber and Eduardo Cadava, argue that Benjamin proposed, then, a notion that would perhaps become more accepted after poststructuralism. This idea is that photographs, whether reproduced as ekphrasis or visual copies, increase the distance to a displaced original referent to the point of making this distance insuperable and of allowing access only to the media, to the copy itself. On the one hand, this is what Arturo's attempts at representing Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder accomplish. Throughout the novel, the narrator seems incapable of reaching more than the traces left by his object of obsession in photos, films, and writings. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that, instead of destroying the aura, the photos of Wieder preserve it exactly because they are blurry. To Benjamin, according to Cadava, "the most faithful photograph, the photograph most faithful to the event of the photograph, is the least faithful one, the least mimetic one – the photograph that remains faithful to its own infidelity" (15). The auratic, foggy picture, with no pretenses to transparency and access, such as the ones described in *Estrella*, would perhaps be, in this sense, a reconstruction of Benjamin's photograph *par excellence*.

Wieder's spectrality is suggested not only by the photos in which he (almost) appears, but also by the photos he takes. His dreadful photographic exhibit will be addressed in the second part of this article. For now, it is important to mention that it includes "[l]a foto de una joven rubia que parece desvanecerse en el aire" (Bolaño 98) to suggest that, like Wieder, his photographic objects are specters that fade and escape the possibility of representation. This characteristic is enhanced by the fact that Arturo only knows of the blond girl's picture because it is mentioned in lieutenant Julio César Muñoz Cano's report on the exhibit, published years after the event took place. In this way, other layers of mediation, namely, Muñoz Cano's text and memory, complicate the access to the vanishing referent. As for the pornographic pictures Wieder might have taken during the shooting of adult films, it is striking that, as Arturo and Abel Romero watch these movies in search of him, they are trying to reach someone that lies literally out of frame, for "el teniente está en todas esas películas, sólo que detrás de la cámara. ¿Wieder es el director de esas películas? No, dijo Romero,

es el fotógrafo” (Bolaño 134). Arturo, Romero, and Bolaño’s readers are left, once more, with an empty referent supplemented by a postponing of presence.

Wieder’s pictures are not the only ones that evoke the notion of spectrality. The poet Juan Stein, a type of preceptor in whose *taller* Wieder first appeared as Ruiz-Tagle, has in his house a photo of a distant cousin, “un general del Ejército Rojo llamado Iván Cherniakovski” (Bolaño 59), “el único general judío de cierta importancia de la Segunda Guerra Mundial” (Bolaño 62-63). This photo is surrounded by unanswerable questions: why did Stein’s mother give it to him the day he left home? “¿[Q]ué me quiso decir con ese gesto” (Bolaño 63)? Is Stein, in fact, related to a Bolshevik general? In other words, what does the photo mean and what is its relation to history and truth? Similar controversies arise when Stein’s students judge his photo of Carlos Williams, quoted above, “un hábil fotomontaje ... todo provenía de ocho o nueve fotos diferentes”, a conclusion to which Stein “no sabía qué decir aunque admitía todas las posibilidades” (Bolaño 64). There is no solution to these many inquiries, no achievable meaning, and the figure of Cherniakovski continues to haunt Stein’s story, as I will discuss in the second section of this article. The shadows of uncertainty eventually envelop the poet, who becomes a specter like Wieder and Cherniakovski: “Aparecía y desaparecía como un fantasma” (Bolaño 66). This similarity between the two apparently contrasting characters (Wieder and Stein) is a point of entrance to address the relationship between photography, spectrality, and specularity in *Estrella distante*.

The words “specter” and “specular” may have a common origin in the Latin *specere*, “to look at” (“Origin”). In *Estrella*, the coincidence between these two concepts intensifies as the spectral photographs I have been discussing are specular as well: Wieder’s, Stein’s, and others’ pictures are not only a copy of a deferred presence; they are also copies of each other as they reproduce a similar impression of absence, loss, and senselessness. Moreover, they are specular in the same way that their objects and observers, such as Arturo, Wieder, Stein, Cherniakovski, the Garmendia sisters, Lorenzo, and Diego Soto, have been considered doubles by Bolaño’s scholars, parts of the same spectrum, brothers on the same boat. It is in these ways that the ekphrastic photographs relate to a story that is “espejo en sí misma,” that is being told again, quoted, repeated albeit with differences. These photos already show an explosive potential by questioning a relatively fixed understanding of the relation between photography, writing, referents, presence, and (historical) truth. In the next section, I attempt at revealing other ways through which photographs contribute to make this story “[una] explosión en sí misma.”

## Historias y Explosiones

To consider the ways in which the photographs in *Estrella distante* contribute to Arturo's intended explosive story, I would like to first return to the idea of self-referentiality and interdependency between photography and text in the novel. As I mentioned in the previous section, the ekphrastic photos in *Estrella* fold upon the very text that, in turn, composes them. As it is of interest to this section, this self-referentiality becomes more evident as some of the photos unfold, or explode, into narratives within the main plot. Photographs, in this sense, not only coincide with text, but also generate it.

Several short and often parallel snippets of stories develop from the characters' observation and supplementation of photographs. A case in point is Arturo's envisioning of Verónica and Angélica Garmendía's parents from a picture:

Una vez vi una foto de ellos: él moreno y enjuto, de grandes pómulos salientes y con una expresión de tristeza y perplejidad que sólo tienen los nacidos al sur del Bío-Bío; ella era o parecía más alta que él, un poco gordita, con una sonrisa dulce y confiada ... ¿Julián Garmendía amaba desesperadamente a María Oyarzún? Me cuesta creerlo cuando recuerdo la foto. Pero no me cuesta creer que en la década de los sesenta hubiera gente que amaba desesperadamente a otra gente, en Chile. (Bolaño 28-29)

A similar instance follows the narrator's description of the photo of Carlos Williams, in which the American poet is "ni muy feliz ni muy triste y sin embargo contento (tal vez porque va calentito dentro de su chaqueta, tal vez porque sabe que el paciente que visita no se va a morir), caminando sereno, digamos, a las seis de la tarde de un día de invierno" (Bolaño 63). In both examples, Arturo extrapolates photography by turning it into a dynamic narrative. In his view, the images reveal more than they could possibly capture: emotions, movement, and characters that might have lied outside the frame.

Perhaps the most emblematic examples of the correlation between photography, text, and narrative, however, are Stein's picture of Cherniakovski and Wieder's photographic exhibit. In relation to the first, Carlos Walker argues that "[ ]a gesta revolucionaria que emprende el propio Stein en África y en Latinoamérica después del Golpe, parece cifrada en esa fotografía y en la admiración por las dotes bélicas de su antepasado" (Walker 195). Curiously, Stein was born in 1945, the year of Cherniakovski's death in a World War II battlefield. The revolutionary poet's journey through Nicaragua, Angola, and Mozambique is, then, both a continuation and a repetition of his cousin's fight, symbolized by the photograph on Stein's wall. In addition, the aura of uncertainty and impenetrability that marks both Cherniakovski and Carlos Williams's pictures transfers to Stein's story, as this character becomes another unachievable specter.

As a consequence, when Arturo and Bibiano follow his traces, they are unable to decide whether Stein had left Chile to fight guerilla wars or died of cancer in Valdivia.

The impact of Wieder's photographic exhibit, in turn, relies greatly not only on what the pictures attempt to show, but also on their organization inside the artist's room. In this regard, Wieder reportedly states that "después de la escritura en el cielo era adecuado – y además encantadoramente paradójico – que el epílogo de la poesía aérea se circunscribiera al cubil del poeta" (Bolaño 87). Inside the room, according to Muñoz Cano, "[e]l orden en que están expuestas [las fotos] no es casual: siguen una línea, una argumentación, una historia (cronológica, espiritual...), un plan. Las que están pegadas en el cielorraso son semejantes ... al infierno, pero un infierno vacío. Las que están pegadas (con chinchetas) en las cuatro esquinas semejan una epifanía. Una epifanía de la locura" (Bolaño 97). Wieder's confinement of the exhibit to his room allegorizes the photographic process, through which a broader scene, in this case, the poet's application of his poetics of death, is reduced to fit within a frame. From within the frame of the room, the sequence of photos, moreover, tells stories similar to those developed throughout the novel. The photographs attached to the ceiling, for instance, recreate hell in the heights, as does the airplane pilot when he fills the Chilean sky with messages of violence and death. This upward positioning of hell inverts the norm of placing it in opposition to the sky and illustrates both the subversive artistic values Wieder proposes and the place of a distant star he would occupy in his avant-garde movement. One notices, moreover, that this hell is described as empty, as it is usually the case of all references to Wieder's absent presence. In this same line of thinking, the photographs on the walls suggest an epiphany, that is, a sudden revelation of meaning, whose outcome is madness, senselessness, the absence and even the renunciation of signification. Furthermore, this epiphany and the coincidences between Wieder's artistic interventions and those of, for instance, the Chilean poet Raul Zurita, responsible for an actual act of writing of poetry in the sky with planes, insert Bolaño's character in the realm of the destructive and deconstructive vanguard practices that Nelly Richard identifies in relation to the period.

All these pictures and their consecutive stories, Julián Garmendia and María Oyarzún's, Carlos Williams, Cherniakovski and Stein's, Wieder and his victims', seem to imply that, instead of tokens of historical truth, photographs are narratives in potential, waiting to explode. To play with Barthes' famous words in *Camera lucida*, a photograph in *Estrella distante* is not, or not only, what has been (*ça a été*), but what could have been (*ça pourrait avoir été*) and can still be (*ça peut être*) every time it is reproduced, reviewed, redescrbed, reread. It is interesting to point out, in this regard, that, ultimately, even Arturo's narrative and Bolaño's novel weave themselves out of the photos, among other archival elements, that they attempt to portray. Photography is, in this sense, capable of multiplying the

stories that build the memory of the Chilean military dictatorship, challenging the unicity and authority of an official history.

After describing how the photos in *Estrella distante* contribute to Arturo's intended explosive story, I want to consider the ways in which this novel's use of photography expands other understandings in photographic theory. As discussed in the previous section, the circularity between Bolaño's ekphrastic photographs and text implies a degree of self-referentiality that challenges the assumption of photography's direct access to the referent and historical truth. Another important notion called into question, this time by Wieder's photographic exhibit, is the perception of time and death in pictures.

Sontag argues that photography is "an elegiac art" because "all photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (11). To the critic, a photograph metaphorically kills its object by stopping their life at a point in time that will reproduce itself to infinity, even after that object's literal death. A picture is, then, *memento mori* because it rehearses one's impending death. In this line of reasoning, Barthes deems photography a harbinger of death, an "image that produces death while trying to preserve life" (92). Similarly to Sontag, the philosopher contends that "the photograph tells me death in the future" (Barthes 96) by inscribing the observer's death in the finality of the object's pose.

The connection between the photos shown during Wieder's infamous exhibit and death is in some ways granted. After filling the skies of Santiago with verses such as "La muerte es Chile" (Bolaño 89), "La muerte es limpieza" (Bolaño 90), and "La muerte es resurrección" (Bolaño 91), in an act that Gutiérrez Muñoz and Cid Hildago consider "ensayos artísticos, esbozos desarrollados antes de su gran exposición" (54), Wieder presents his guests with a roomful of pictures of his dead or dying victims:

las hermanas Garmendia y...otros desaparecidos. La mayoría eran mujeres. El escenario de las fotos casi no variaba de una a otra por lo que deduce es el mismo lugar. Las mujeres parecen maniqués, en algunos casos maniqués desmembrados, destrozados, aunque Muñoz Cano no descarta que en un treinta por ciento de los casos estuvieran vivas en el momento de hacerlas la instantánea. (Bolaño 97).

Wieder's explicit shots of violent assassinations seem to behave differently in relation to time and death than predicted by Sontag and Barthes. First of all, as both photographer and murderer, Wieder is a true "agent of Death" (Barthes 92), literally participating of his victims' mortality and vulnerability. Additionally, if Sontag and Barthes take photography for a rehearsal of death, Wieder's

pictures are the realization of death in themselves. In other words, while those critics postulate that photography suggests the future death of the living (death in life), Wieder's pictures perform the eternal life of his victims' death, which is indefinitely reproduced (life in death or life of death). In this case, it is as if the Garmendia twins, for instance, were kept "vivas [mientras] muertas, casi como si fueran *zombis* y no pudieran dejar de morir" (Maier 225). It seems relevant to notice that this different relationship between photography, time, and death reverberates with Wieder's proposed aesthetics. In his sky poetry, which comprises the verses he writes in the sky with smoke from his plane in an avant-garde performance that catches the eyes of "algunos espíritos inquietos de Chile" (Bolaño 41), Wieder had already presented an unconventional view of death, one to wipe out traditional understandings: death is Chile, death is love, death is cleanness, he wrote. In this sense, his photographs materialize an intended extrapolation of the meaning of death in the Chilean art Wieder wants to inaugurate.

### Final Remarks

Departing from Bolaño/Arturo's project of writing "una historia más larga ... espejo y explosión en sí misma" (Bolaño 11), I have analyzed the role of photography as an important spectral and extrapolative tool for the process of mediation and historical revision undertaken throughout *Estrella distante*. This analysis was developed into two separate sections between which there are some noteworthy convergences. Both sections reveal, for instance, that the pictures in Bolaño's novel touch upon possibly problematic notions in photographic theory: does photography provide unmediated access to its referent? Does it follow the linguistic logic of supplementation? Is photography evidence of historical truth? How do time and death play out in a picture? *Estrella distante* contributes to this debate by writing photography as text and developing textual narratives from photographs. This interdependency shows that a sense of deferral and supplementation of meaning is shared by both media. In this way, as I have argued in both the first and second section of this article, the novel unsettles hierarchies between photo and text, as well as those that may still exist between literary narratives and history.

Bolaño's *Estrella distante* initiates, according to Walker, "una lógica de reflexión y de expansión que caracteriza de aquí en más a esta literatura" (191), that is, a meditation about repetition and difference that informs other works by Bolaño as well, such as *Los detectives salvajes* and *2666*. The novel also seems to anticipate a linguistic treatment of photography observed in 21st-century narratives of the post-memory of authoritarian regimes in the Southern Cone, such as the Brazilian, Chilean, and Argentine military dictatorship. In this regard, it dialogues with works such as Julián Fuks' *A resistência*, Claudia Lage's *O corpo interminável*,

Roberto Brodsky's *Bosque quemado*, and Pola Oloixarac's *Las teorías salvajes* in the ways that the photographs of Wieder's victims enact an understanding of time and death that may differ from what is commonly repeated in theoretical and critical discourses addressing photographs. *Estrella* thus seems to participate in a tendency to resort to photography, while consistently contesting its power of faithful representation, in contemporary fictional rewritings of the memory of violent and authoritarian South American regimes.

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