Micrometanarratives and the Politics of the Possible

Adam Morris


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Micrometanarratives and the Politics of the Possible

Adam Morris
Stanford University, California

[Narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it.

—Jean-François Lyotard (1984, 20)

Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility.

—Fredric Jameson (1991, ix)

If world literature is, as Pascale Casanova (2004) suggests, a World Republic of Letters, then Mario Bellatin’s literary domain lies somewhere down a rabbit hole in one of the more perverse of the Republic’s enchanted forests. Nevertheless, and despite his rebellious approach to writing and teaching literature, Bellatin’s writing has gained traction, most notably in
France, where Casanova’s “Greenwich Meridian” of world literature cleaves a gentle path through the *arrondissements* of that majestic capital of the written word. This is especially curious considering—as I propose you do—that Bellatin’s writing refuses to inhabit the acres set aside for it in Casanova’s World Republic. Determined to resist literary genealogies and to remain an anomaly, Bellatin is bent on literary provincialism, creating works that only interact with each other in an increasingly expanding—but hermetic—system.

This is not to say that Bellatin eschews all references to the literary world beyond his own: he knows it exists and knows his reader does, too. Explicit references to a broader literary tradition abound, particularly in Bellatin’s “fragmentary” novels, such as *Flores* (2001), *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* (2005), and *El gran vidrio* (2007). Nevertheless, each work in Bellatin’s corpus seems to build the walls around his hermetic domain just a little bit higher: a quarantined rogue state—or terrorist cell, or commune—within the World Republic.

The concept of Casanova’s Republic, which attempts to suture the perceived rupture between text and world, reacts to a tendency that Fredric Jameson identifies as constitutive of postmodernist theory: the presupposition of some sort of radical “break” in aesthetics, politics, or some other aspect of “culture” (1991, 1). Jameson sees an explosion of culture to every sphere, such that politics and aesthetics (among other things) become knottily intertwined under the sign of “culture.” Casanova counters by delineating a “literary space” that has always been and continues to be separate from these other spheres, thereby according this terrain the privileged role of mediation between politics and aesthetics. Jameson’s observation is based as much on cultural artifacts in the plastic arts and literature as it is on “theoretical discourse,” an art he claims is more symptomatic of postmodernism than descriptive of it. One of these presumed “breaks,” central to Jameson’s thesis on the inherent impurity of the concept of postmodernism, is the break with “metanarrative” identified by Jean-François Lyotard as the defining characteristic of the postmodern.

It is precisely from these postmodern lacunae—Jameson’s “presupposed breaks” and Lyotard’s absence of metanarrative—that writers like Mario Bellatin and César Aira enunciate their art. In response to the alienating
detachment from some sort of trajectory and the correlated decentralization of the postmodern subject, these authors create their own metanarratives in bodies of work that are self-referential, creating symbolic systems that, although not wholly divorced from their literary heritage, refuse a genealogy. Furthermore, although Lyotard’s pronouncements about the end of metanarrative remained themselves “couched in narrative form,” as Jameson points out (1991, xi), writers like Aira and Bellatin enact the loss of narrative by replacing it—paradoxically—with a personal web of narratives that govern the closed textual network of their literary production.

Coordinating a larger corpus of works, these molecular textual networks articulate a micrometanarrative of the author’s oeuvre. The micrometanarrative has contact points with the larger culture to which it belongs—references to other works that function like windows to the exterior literary field—but subsists as a slowly inflating bubble (or a tumor, metastasizing) within it. As the disease metaphor intimates, these vesicles are neither harmless nor empty: micrometanarratives, I argue, have a distinct and subversive political purpose. Focusing on the work of Mario Bellatin, I will contend that by refusing to go along with the streamlined systems of a World Republic of Letters, Bellatin stakes out an avant-garde posture that is both reactionary and progressive. His avant-garde posture is characterized less by rupture than by a new exteriority, a form of resistance that insists on the necessity of reimagining the possible. In a world increasingly governed by what Alexander R. Galloway (2004) calls “protocological” control, Bellatin’s avant-garde project is necessarily political.

I. Protocol: New Designs of Control

A theorist of technology’s effects on society, Galloway delineates a process at work in what Jameson calls “the production of postmodern people” (1991, xv). Jameson is mostly concerned with the ideological task of aesthetics in providing an intellectual and perceptual foothold for a particular sociohistorical moment. For Galloway and others, a concept central to our contemporary moment is the network: a political, aesthetic, and material assemblage that offers the sort of explanatory power for theorization on the effects of
new technologies of production on personhood and society that teleological metanarratives held for the modernist era. Galloway begins his theoretical undertaking by identifying this shift between eras: taking Deleuze’s claim that “every society has its diagram(s)” quite literally (qtd. in Galloway 2004, 2), Galloway produces diagrams that correspond to the changes in societal organization that Deleuze, following Foucault, observes. The first is the centralized network, which corresponds to the sovereign society and hierarchical management. The second is the decentralized network of the disciplinary society, managed by bureaucracy. The third is the diagram of what Galloway identifies as the society in which we now live. It is the distributed network, native to control society.

Following Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1992), published in French in 1990, Galloway asserts that our contemporary society has transitioned from the bureaucratic and disciplinary society identified by Foucault—which itself was born as societies of sovereignty withered away—into a new societal diagram with a new form of managerial control: protocol.

Galloway’s progression of models is explicitly political. Protocol, he explains, is the managerial style of Empire in an age of global capitalism (2004, 26). He quotes Hardt and Negri’s definition of a control society, one “in which mechanisms of command become ever more ‘democratic,’ ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens” (25). The new diagram of societal arrangement that Galloway identifies is the distributed network, a web of connections with no central hubs or local nodes, “a structural form without center that resembles a web or meshwork” (3).¹

The strategic advantage of a protocologically governed network is that control itself is decentralized; rules governing conduct in the system are established by an accepted etiquette among the participants: “A distributed architecture is precisely that which makes protocological/imperial control of the network so easy” (Galloway 2004, 25). Refusal to abide by the rules of the system simply means that one no longer exists within it, and gets or remains disconnected from it. Galloway illustrates this scenario with an example where protocol is “materially immanent”: the Internet (50). Without first accepting the rules of hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP), a machine
Figure 1. Centralized network (top), decentralized network (center), distributed network (bottom). A = hub, B = node. (From Galloway, Alexander R., Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization, figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3, © 2004 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of The MIT Press.)
cannot communicate to other computers through the Internet. As far as the protocol that manages the Internet is concerned, that machine may as well not exist. In the years since Galloway first set forth his theory on protocol (which, incidentally, are the years of Mario Bellatin’s most prolific production), other protocologically governed systems have evolved: social networking sites and Wikipedia are only two more examples of the ascent of the protocological model of control.

With these concepts in place and in dialogue, I now turn to their manifestation in postmodern aesthetics, and more particularly, in literature. Postmodern cultural artifacts, Jameson asserts, reflect the new anxieties and limitations (real and imagined) of a still-nascent system of control inspired by computers and networks and propelled by multinational capitalism:

I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. (1991, 37–38)

The anxious, decentered subjects of postmodern literature are everywhere. What I will attempt to describe in the sections that follow are methods of writing that respond specifically to the anxiety Jameson signals: the construction of textual networks that mimic—but cannot be reduced to—the distributed network described by Alexander Galloway as the diagram of contemporary society. These textual networks are interconnected by means of a symbolic system whose individual symbols demonstrate a resistance to interpretation, a technique characteristic of protocol. This resistance at the symbolic level allows the texts constituting the always-shifting and ever-expanding textual network to avoid quantification and other attempts by scientific paradigms to consolidate hegemony over other sorts of knowledge.
II. MICROMETANARRATIVE: THE CLOSED TEXTUAL NETWORK

The “exteriorization of knowledge” resulting from the deprivileging of narrative by scientific discourse that Lyotard predicted for our technological age has already come to pass. Together with the emergence of postmodern writers acutely aware of these mutations of knowledge, this leaves us in a suitable position to attempt to answer a pressing question suggested by Lyotard’s text: as scientific knowledge consolidates its hegemony, what has been the response of narrative as it loses ground to a scientific mode of discourse that does not recognize its legitimacy? Perhaps—by retaliating with the construction of systems that resist interpretation (at a symbolic and thus, individual-text level) and confound the categorizations required by Franco Moretti’s “abstract models” for the quantitative study of the literary field. What I am suggesting is that the arrangement of a body of texts as a distributed network permits re-investment of the work with an aura that resists quantification: in a distributed symbolic network, the aura is transient and depends on the transport of the reader through the system. This transportation will necessarily be rhizomatic. “Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways,” Deleuze and Guattari write (1987, 12). Likewise, transport into, through, and around Mario Bellatin’s textual network is determined as much by the system’s textual protocol as it is by each reader’s decisions.

Now, what exactly do I mean by a “distributed symbolic network?” I’ll begin with the symbolic network, which refers to a tendency easily observed in the writing of César Aira and Mario Bellatin. The tendency is one of incessant self-referentiality: an emergent code of referentiality between works that cohere as a larger Work through their participation in an autonomous symbolic system. In both Aira and Bellatin, this system functions like a hypertextual web, where certain symbols accrue importance inside the textual network based on their repetition and placement. In Aira, these include ice cream, gym locker rooms, Marcel Duchamp, the Mona Lisa’s “sonrisa seria,” the character César Aira. In Bellatin: dogs, blindness, the golum, prostheses, the writer that resembles Mario Bellatin.
These symbols have dual functions: they facilitate the frustration and satirization of a metanarrative’s convenient apparatuses of interpretation, and they act as connecting nodes within the closed system. The former strategy is best illustrated with the most liberally applied and easily parodied of metanarratives: psychoanalysis. Aira thoroughly undermines the psychoanalytic grid with his novel *Cómo me hice monja* (1993), which is narrated by the protagonist César, whose identity at the time of narration cannot be positively determined: she or he is neither male nor female, neither child nor adult. The novel opens with a scene deliberately—and hyperbolically—intended to bring the Freudian house down: César’s father, furious with his gender-troubled offspring for not enjoying a first taste of ice cream, force-feeds the child until she or he becomes ill. Upon learning the ice cream is poisoned, he throttles the salesman and is banished to jail, beyond the narrative’s purview. Mario Bellatin performs a similar end-run around psychoanalysis when he begins his novel *El gran vidrio* with these two fragments:

1. Durante el tiempo que viví junto a mi madre nunca se me ocurrió que acomodar mis genitales en su presencia pudiera tener una repercusión mayor.
2. Estaba equivocado. (2007, 9)

With novels so hyperconscious of their play with psychoanalytic tropes, how could any reader entertain a psychoanalytic interpretation? The text thus resists incorporation and interpretation, feeding on the moribund metanarrative like a cancer: a parasitic, yet insubordinate relationship.

This first act of resistance to incorporation or contact with other narratives facilitates the second function of symbols in the closed textual network: Aira’s ice cream and sites on Bellatin’s narrators’ bodies (prostheses, luminous or decaying skin) are both examples of recurring symbols that connect works in the respective authors’ literary systems. This tendency is most obvious in Bellatin’s writing, where symbols of prosthesis and disease surface in nearly every novel.

Since the function of these signs is to act as connective devices between
works, they tend to resist interpretation at the level of the individual novel or work in which they appear. This corresponds to a more general tactic in Bellatin’s writing to confound facile interpretations through the use of red-herring images. As Diana Palaversich points out, “Bellatin está consciente de que los lectores occidentales no pueden resistir la tentación de jugar al detective y por esta razón conscientemente deja pistas, es decir, tiende trampas textuales que prometen el desciframiento del sentido” (2003, 31). Readers that attempt to decipher these signs as keys to the meaning of a text will be frustrated because individually these symbols do not necessarily mean anything. Specific instances of the sign are not attached to a fixed signifying relationship. They remain signifiers, but are detached from the referent to which they normally correspond. Instead, their signifying function is split: although still performing their usual signifying labor—albeit perfunctorily, as blindness and prostheses are still blindness and prostheses, though as concepts they are often superfluous to the narrative—they denote connections between the works, establishing rhizomatic connections within and between texts that congeal into a body of works. I call this technique of symbolic connectivity micrometanarrative because it only functions (so far) at the level of the individual author’s textual network, with the specific objective of uniting the texts in a closed system.

Here, Jameson’s intuitions regarding the symptoms of postmodernism cannot be underestimated. He observes that “newer artists no longer ‘quote’ the materials, the fragments and motifs, of a mass or popular culture, as Flaubert began to do; they somehow incorporate them to the point where many of our older critical and evaluative categories . . . no longer seem functional” (1991, 64). One of these new styles of quotation is precisely the endless self-quotation of one’s own work, the proliferating technique in Bellatin’s fiction that leads Palaversich to assert that his work is “esencialmente antimimética y autorreferencial” (2003, 26). Seconding Jameson, Palaversich also diagnoses this self-referential bent as symptomatic of postmodernism:

[L]o que pasa con la narrativa postmoderna como aquella de Bellatin,” she writes, “es que parte de la premisa barthesiana de que todo texto es siempre copia de otros textos y de que la antiquamente llamada piratería textual,
ahora convertida en intra- e intertextualidad, es una de las características esenciales de esta[s] narrativas. (2003, 28)

The difference is that, unlike Barthes’s community of *writerly* texts, Bellatin’s textual network prepares its own primary material, which it then proceeds to pirate in secondary texts. *Perros héroes* (2003) and *Salón de belleza* (1994), for instance, function as “primary texts” in the sense that their participation in the cross-referential system of Bellatin’s writing is understated, covert, or otherwise subdued.” Consequently, these primary novels are Bellatin’s most popular, becoming the most common entryway into the textual network because they more easily stand on their own. By contrast, novels like *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* and *El gran vidrio* mine nearly all of their source material from the other novels, and from themselves.

The characteristics of what I call a closed literary system have been observed by critics that likewise intuit a broader coherence in Bellatin’s work. Diana Palaversich is keen on this point: “Se puede decir que Mario Bellatin hasta la fecha escribió no varias sino una misma novela que se lleva publicando en varias entregas” (2003, 27). To bolster her intuition, Palaversich cites Bellatin as claiming that his literary project is to invent “un sistema literario absurdo pero a la vez coherente” (27). Absurd, coherent: Bellatin insists that these two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Inside the closed system, what seems absurd to an outside observer (e.g., the blind photographer of *Lecciones*) corresponds to an interior logic that itself functions only by coherence; that is, connections are made in Bellatin’s work between the most diverse subjects and images, but their proliferation makes connections and juxtapositions of these “absurd” plot elements (luminous skin, the *golum*, a blind poet, prostheses) seem consistent and even, the more one reads Bellatin and understands his broader project, probable and logical.

Because he depends on the activities of his readers to arrive at the “coherence” he seeks in his work, Bellatin begins to reproduce a trend that Galloway describes: “The emergence of distributed networks is part of a larger shift in social life. The shift includes a movement away from central bureaucracies and vertical hierarchies toward a broad network of autonomous social actors” (2004, 32–33). Bellatin’s closed textual network resembles the diagram of the
distributed network because the connections are, as I mention, rhizomatic. His textual network corresponds to Galloway’s “borderless” diagram, not only because the number of connections will continue to increase until Bellatin stops publishing works that pertain to the system, but also because the number and arrangement of the connections depends on the reader’s behavior and familiarity with the other texts in the system. Each reader will only be aware that another work in the system is being referenced if she is already familiar with it, and will realize later that rereading the texts in a different order will produce a new and different aesthetic experience. But no matter in what order the reader proceeds through Bellatin’s textual network, the more seasoned she becomes, the more she will begin to understand the coherence of the works as a whole through the accumulation of signs that accrue meaning through repetition and codification in the symbolic system. Reinaldo Laddaga offers a persuasive analogy: he compares the experience of reading Bellatin to a video game, where the rules for players—and in this case, readers—are not clear from the outset:

para los jugadores, las reglas no están enteramente establecidas desde el comienzo . . . Las reglas de estos mundos en flujo se presentan, así, para el que los confronta, como misteriosas, de modo que la revelación de la regla del juego que en ellos se juega es, en parte, uno de los momentos de desarrollo del drama de aprendizaje. (2007, 144)

Others have noticed how these auto-citations allow the textual network to cohere as such (Laddaga 2007, 137). Palaversich asserts that whereas realist narrative employs intertextual citations to create Barthesian “reality effects” and to reinforce verisimilitude, postmodern texts use this technique parodically, “para socavar la referencialidad y para señalar la naturaleza artificial de lo narrado” (2003, 29). Here we must splice her judgment: although Bellatin’s intertextual adventures do signal artifice and the omnipresence of the creator’s hand, this is not intended as a parody. Instead, Bellatin tries to capture the mood of the historical moment, one pregnant with conspiracy theories and the individual’s feeling of helplessness in the face of totalizing systems of control.
Jameson asserts that attempts to explore this “demoralizing and depressing original new global space” must also “be considered as so many approaches to the representation of (a new) reality (to use a more antiquated language). As paradoxical as the terms may seem, they may thus . . . be read as peculiar new forms of realism” (1991, 49). In Bellatin, this new realism attempts to create an experience that mimics the new forms of protocological control that have evolved alongside the technologies of late capitalism.

III. Strategies of Micrometanarrative

Bellatin’s closed textual network can resemble a decentralized, distributed network all it wants, but the fact that it ultimately depends on an individual creator cannot be ignored. The reader, after all, is not free to make her own connections. How, then, is the rhizomatic and decentralized character of protocol achieved? Bellatin has navigated this problem with two principal strategies: contradiction and a procedure I call “narrative mutation.” I will illustrate both tactics by considering the novel *Lecciones para una liebre muerta*.

I begin with the latter strategy of mutation, as it is more readily observed. Though Reinaldo Laddaga also notices the mutative environments of Bellatin’s fiction (Laddaga 2007, 14–15, 141, 149), I borrow the essential framework of the concept of mutation as I use it here from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of contagion: “How can we conceive of a peopling, a propagation, a becoming that is without filiation or hereditary production? A multiplicity without the unity of an ancestor?” they wonder (1987, 241). They respond with the analogy of the vampire, who possesses a generative capability that is not hereditary but contagious. My concept of mutation functions in a similar manner, except that unlike Deleuze and Guattari’s example of the vampire, a mutation does not even require two subjects. Instead, an entity reacts with a catalyst, producing a new entity. As with the case of the vampire, contemporary pop culture is already rife with examples of this sort of transformative capability: the mutant, the superhero, the viral.

Conceptually and thematically, the idea of mutation is as integral to *Lecciones* as it is to Bellatin’s project as a whole. The fragments that form the
novel undergo mutations that allow them to practice the sort of nonhereditary generation that Deleuze and Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The text begins by alternating through a series of narrative threads, strands of nonconsecutive fragments connected by their respective protagonists. The threads appear to be separate at the novel’s outset, but begin to intersect, bifurcate, and combine as the reader continues through the text. For instance, the series of fragments that begins by narrating about the doings of an unnamed translator takes advantage of a reference to the translator’s “literary sister” by slowly morphing into a series of fragments that deal mostly with her. After the thread mentions the sister’s adoption of the Kuhn twins, the thread mutates again, abandoning the literary sister to describe the birth of the twins in another series of fragments. These twins, the reader learns, are themselves “mutants” suffering from birth defects caused by thalidomide. Later, the thread mutates back to the translator.

Meanwhile, in the fragments that intervene to separate the ones composing the *traductor–hermana literata–mellizos Kuhn* thread, other series of fragments form threads that undergo similar mutations. All the while, the machinery of the micrometanarrative is functioning. For instance, the “universal” man (*el universal*) that is mentioned in the first fragment—which belongs to the *poeta ciego* thread—later appears in the fragment dealing with the murder of Macaca’s Chinese lover (and here it is worth noting that *Poeta ciego* is the title of another Bellatin novel). The murder episode in this fragment is itself a mutation diverging from the *abuelo quechua* thread of fragments. The figure of “the universal” in *Lecciones* thus reproduces at the single-text level the procedure of symbolic pathways that I contend unify the work of Bellatin at large.

The aforementioned technique of self-citation across the textual network is also employed to achieve narrative mutations in *Lecciones*. By making direct, uncoded references to “the author of *salón de belleza*” and the transvestite who inspired that novel in one of the fragments about *el escritor*—who may or may not be Bellatin himself (or the protagonist of the thread about the man with the prosthetic arm, or both)—Bellatin blurs the lines between author, narrator, and character, as well as the generic lines that separate fiction from biography and autobiography.
Bellatin’s second strategy of decentralization involves counterbalancing the omnipresence of the creator’s hand with its disappearance. This is, of course, another layer in the continuous pun on Bellatin’s own missing hand—which itself recurs over and over again in Bellatin’s novels—but it achieves more than this winking humor. The omnipresence of “the writer Bellatin” cannot be overlooked by anyone who has read more than a few of Bellatin’s novels. In *Lecciones para una liebre muerta*, “mario bellatin” appears as a character, perhaps more than once, and the narrator of one of the novel’s many narrative threads (the real Bellatin? “mario bellatin” the character? another narrator?—subjectivities in *Lecciones* are deliberately murky) even offers an interpretation of Bellatin’s earlier novel *Salón de belleza*. But at other times, the narrator seems absent. Bellatin’s oblique, clinical style of narration (Palaversich 2003, 34) renders third-person novels like *Perros héroes* almost narratorless. And Bellatin’s technique of writing in fragments in some of his other novels is another strategy of simulating the dissipation of authorial control. As Reinaldo Laddaga has observed, the narrator of *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* at times appears to vanish (2007, 146). Thus, the fragments in *Lecciones* oscillate between hyperreferentiality and the absence of a narrator.

Together with Bellatin’s erasure of fine lines surrounding the distinction between fiction and autobiography and between author and narrator, this simultaneous omnipresence and disappearance of the narrative voice and the creator’s hand echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that these distinctions are actually *extinctions*:

> There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors of its subject. In short, we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name of an outside. The outside has no image, no signification, no subjectivity. (1987, 23)

We may thus conclude that Bellatin is engaging in what Deleuze and Guattari call “theoretical practice.” But the comparisons to Deleuzo-Guattarian
theory do not end there. Other recurrent themes in Bellatin’s work emphasize a connection to Deleuzo-Guattarian thought: references to Elias Canetti, psychiatric medications, and the figure of the nomad all appear in *Lecciones para una liebre muerta*. Most importantly, Bellatin is also a champion of “experience” as a method of artistic activity, one that need not always yield a consumable product or take place in any system of production. Of the school he founded for writers in Mexico City, Bellatin has commented that “desde un principio sabía que no quería enseñar técnicas narrativas ni hacer los ejercicios típicos de los talleres. El concepto es el de una escuela vacía donde los estudiantes durante dos años tengan la mayor cantidad posible de experiencias” (Laddaga 2007, 129). And of his fiction, Bellatin has stated, “El reto es buscar que el texto se convierta en una experiencia que transcurra a lo largo del tiempo” (Laddaga 2007, 141). This is exactly the sort of “recovered authority” conferred on experience that Jameson describes as a symptom of the postmodern (1991, xiii).

Bellatin’s advocacy for “experience” is also at hand in micrometanarrative, which rewards readers for increased participation in the closed symbolic system with the transitive freedom that accompanies greater connectivity. Laddaga cites Bellatin as stating, “lo que pretendo es que los lectores recorran los arcos narrativos que se le presentan” (2007, 141). That is, as the reader assists with the coherence of the micrometanarrative by identifying repeating symbols, the symbols’ value accrues by opening additional lines of flight across the textual network, lines which the reader may then traverse. When the reader hits on a symbol that opens multiple lines of flight—that is, one which the reader connects to two more other textual sites simultaneously—a readerly pleasure comparable to dizziness or delirium is awarded: the vertigo of instant transport and déjà vu. Here, the textual network finds an antecedent in the dimensionally interconnected later work of Marcel Duchamp, which involved an extended meditation on connectivity and the “instant.” As Lyotard observes, “Duchamp took as his subject-matter the imperceptibility of the instant, which he tried to represent by using spatial artifices” (1991, 82). With the “ready-made,” Duchamp calls attention to the imperceptibility of the instant through the instantaneous conversion of the object’s use-value into exchange-value. With the dimensionally interconnected body of works
that includes *Large Glass* and *Étant donnés*, the instant arrives in the form of a connection between works created at different moments, a metareferential link within the larger Work that transcends three-dimensional spatial contiguity. Bellatin nods to Duchamp’s work, most obviously in the title of his novel *El gran vidrio*. And similar to Duchamp’s large Work, Bellatin’s textual network derives its “spatial artifice” from the *implied architecture* of the network. Paths of traversal through the network are numerous, and multiply geometrically with every new connection Bellatin supplies, meaning that each reader’s path is his own *unique experience* of the network.

Deleuze and Guattari also celebrate pure experience as liberation from control, observing that the schizophrenic—likely the only person to be un-Oedipized or to have been de-Oedipized—has the most freedom of movement within the realm of possible experience. Indeed, the schizophrenic’s experience often oversteps the boundaries of what the rest of us delineate as “possible” experience. Bellatin’s writing follows in the Deleuzo-Guattarian mold: it is rhizomatic, shifting, nomadic, full of macro- and micromultiplicities. “Follow the plants,” Deleuze and Guattari urge their practitioners, “you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions” (1987, 11). This description of the rhizome provides instructions for participants in Bellatin’s textual network: the reader and the writer approach each new narrative as both a divergence and a convergence from the system. The cancer metaphor thus resurfaces as a heuristic for understanding the processes at work in Bellatin’s metastasizing Work, just as it does for the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari continue: “Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency” (1987, 11). By increasing the territory of the textual network through mutative and deterritorializing connections enabled by the abstract machine of the distributed network, Bellatin is able to reproduce a schizophrenic experience for the reader that follows the symbolically marked lines of flight in his narratives. The experience is all the more rhizomatic by virtue of the multiplicity of connections or lines of
flight that each symbol-pathway traces on the ever-shifting map of Bellatin’s textual territory.

Yet precisely because the rhizome is associated both with the (liberating) schizophrenic experience and with the (limiting) structure of control societies, it presents contradictory possibilities. This is, of course, in tune with Jameson’s observations about the “impure” and contradictory nature of theories of postmodernism. Nor is this tendency lost on Galloway, who observes that “contradictory logic is rampant throughout the apparatus of protocol” (2004, 9).12 What emerges from the tension of this contradiction is a politics of the possible.

IV. The Politics of the Possible

Bellatin’s textual network maintains its autonomy by expanding through mutative and deterritorializing tactics characteristic of the rhizome. For the reader-participant, it supplies experiences that illustrate the contradiction that constitutes its protocological design: the reader becomes a cooperative entity within the anarchic, schizophrenic, and decentered network. But this experience presupposes the reader’s complete submission to the system’s protocol, replicating the postmodern horror of a systematized, technologically controlled society. So, then, what are the political consequences of Bellatin’s simulation of the protocological diagram?

Jameson has observed that such descriptions of systemic control in postmodern literature can have adverse effects on progressive or alternative politics:

What happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic—the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example—the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself. (1991, 5–6)
Galloway detects this impulse, too, and so reminds his readers, “it’s not that protocol is bad but that protocol is dangerous” (2004, 16). Because of the contradiction inherent in protocol, it can be progressive and liberating as well as controlling and repressive: “protocol is based on a contradiction between two opposing machines: One machine radically distributes control into autonomous locales, the other machine focuses control into rigidly defined hierarchies” (2004, 8). The same contradiction is at work in Bellatin’s textual network. And the same dual political potentialities apply.

Bellatin’s avant-garde project is thus strategically both reactionary and progressive. Its reactionary quality resides in the formal demands of the closed symbolic system of the micrometanarrative. The set of elements that connect the textual network articulate a set of codified signs that, although they provide the reader with rhizomatic pathways within the system, are illustrative of a reactionary mechanism that Galloway calls “tactical standardization” (2004, 143). These elements are stripped of much or all of their potential to be interpreted by the reader as meaningful signs when she realizes they are intended to mark nodes of departure for the lines of flight that proliferate in the textual network. To gain access to more lines of flight, she must continue to assemble (rather than decipher) the symbolic system. The ability to do so, in turn, presupposes submission to protocological rules. Her thoughts constricted, her movements regulated, the reader becomes conscripted into a distributed network of control. But as Galloway observes, “The generative contradiction that lies at the very heart of protocol is that in order to be politically progressive, protocol must be partially reactionary,” referring to protocol’s need for standardization, universalization, and control in order to enable the “radically distributed communications between autonomous entities” that make it so attractive to the subjects it manages (2004, 142).

The politically progressive nature of Bellatin’s textual network derives from its hermetic literary terrain, which, although confining, is itself a new space that defies the jurisdiction of codified categorizations at work in the World Republic of Letters, hierarchies implied by the concept of a bourgeois “republic.” That is, rather than existing separately from politics or beyond the Republic’s spatial and conceptual collapse of literature-as-world, the textual network is immediately political as an anomaly and a disruption that occurs
within it: an internal exteriority, as it were. This derives not only from the iconoclasm and anarchism inherent to micrometanarrative and the closed symbolic system, but also from its radical technique of converting each reader into a rebellious subject: an active participant in acts of reimagining what constitutes art and artistic practice.

Whence the homage to Joseph Beuys in *Lecciones para una liebre muerta*: Beuys, like Bellatin, was a champion of experience and participation in art and politics. Beuys sought to disseminate experience with his art; the stated goal of social sculpture is to turn every citizen into a political actor. In an interview, Beuys states,

> This most modern art discipline—Social Sculpture / Social Architecture—will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism. . . . Only a conception of art revolutionized to this degree can turn into a politically productive force, coursing through each person, and shaping history. (1990, 21)

Beuys’s definition of revolutionary art does not necessarily preclude or exclude the “autonomous entities” of protocological networks. Bellatin’s textual network, for instance, allows his readers to be independent cocreators of a similar type of “sculpture,” a textual architecture that resembles a protocological system of control. Nevertheless, his project simultaneously demonstrates that there is always an alternative to any network in which a subject finds himself: the fiercely proclaimed autonomy of micrometanarrative.

In theory, rogue cells in the protocological organism are neither more nor less liberating because they are not necessarily antitotalizing; they too can aim to become a dominant protocol. In literary practice, however, Bellatin’s micrometanarrative cannot realize this level of universality. His textual network, after all, only simulates protocological control. Unlike other applications of the diagram, such as the emerging distributed network of global capitalism,¹⁴ it cannot actually incorporate and administrate physical bodies in its system. Furthermore, whereas protocol is designed to be fully independent from an individual creator, Bellatin’s textual network is authored literature, representation. It can never achieve this same level of self-perpetuation.
Rather than devolving into the kind of depressive, politically hamstrung vision of a totalizing postmodern system that Jameson might expect, Bellatin’s textual network remains literature. But as such, it is able to stake out a political position with respect to distributed forms of control. As Jacques Rancière instructs,

The aesthetic sovereignty of literature does not therefore amount to the reign of fiction. On the contrary, it is a regime in which the logic of descriptive and narrative arrangements in fiction becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangements used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world. (2004, 37)

In other words: literature describes the way we describe the world, and this is always political. I identify Bellatin’s literary-political intervention as progressive because the act of calling attention to protocological control by simulating its diagram with his textual network works to counteract the hegemony to which any protocol—the heir apparent to the metanarrative in an era of distributed control—might aspire. Beyond this, Bellatin’s textual network is an exercise in the postmodern activity of theorizing the existence of its own possibility. The mere act of reproducing an individual, hermetic protocol whose symbolic functions are unique to that system demonstrates that no apparatus of control, even rhizomatic ones, can totalize everything. There is always an alternative.

By insisting on the always available possibility of alternatives, Bellatin’s creative act resembles what Jameson calls “Utopian politics,” his name for “a politics [that] aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different from this one” (2005, xii), but with distinct and important differences. Unlike Utopian programs, Bellatin’s alternative exists at the micro level of the system rather than beyond it, a “molecular revolution” in the Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology used by Tiqqun (2010, 191). Consequently, it does not imagine a future different from the one that Deleuze, Jameson, and Galloway claim is already upon us. This is because Bellatin, like these theorists, is more concerned with the present than the future. The alternatives exist within the current system; they exist right now and need not await
its overthrow. These alternatives, therefore, are better termed “heterotopias” and are the project of “heterotopian politics” of resistance.

So how is this seemingly contradictory stance with respect to the new diagram of control a progressive one? As Rancière observes, “an aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms. The notion of ‘heterology’ refers to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed” (2004, 63). Bellatin’s textual network achieves this: a reconfiguration of the experience of literature by articulating the idea of a textual network that relies on distributed control for its realization. Rancière is suspicious of so-called “political” art, affirming that “artistic practices are not ‘exceptions’ to other practices” (45) and thus that “art and politics are contingent notions” (51). He sardonically suggests that “[t]he dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle” (63). Yet Bellatin’s system indicates that this disruption-without-the-message might not be the fantasy Rancière believes it to be, precisely because the textual network, simulating protocol, does not contain a message. It is a demonstration of structure, a making-visible and making-sayable of a new mode of control.

Nevertheless, Rancière writes:

political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an “awareness” of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. (2004, 63)

I will conclude by explaining why I think this assertion is made in error. Namely, I believe that Rancière’s idea is outdated, and does not address the progression toward distributed control first described by Deleuze in 1990 and later elaborated by Hardt and Negri in 2000. One of the more alarming observations that Galloway makes is that whereas protocol is “both poles of
[a] machinic movement, territorializing structure and anarchical distribution” (2004, 64), it expands and gathers strength by concealing mechanisms of hierarchical control that might be unpalatable to postmodern political subjects who are conditioned to appreciate democratic structures and institutions. After all, it functions through the willing incorporation and participation of these subjects. Borrowing from film theory, Galloway describes the self-presentation of protocol as one that strives for continuity, a process by which, following Marxist formal critique of commodity, protocol attempts “to conceal its own making” (2004, 64).

In Galloway’s example of the Internet, continuity means the implementation of mechanisms that facilitate seamless rhizomatic movement through the network and cloak the mechanisms of hierarchy, management, and control that actually enable this movement in the first place. The result is that people actually believe the Internet to be anarchic or at least radically democratic, rather than the bipolar protocological machine that Galloway exposes it to be. Extrapolating from the specific example of the Internet to the social, whenever a protocological diagram implements itself, it will aggressively police possible alternatives while masquerading as a democratizing structure.

Thus, it does become progressive merely to represent protocol for what it is, as Galloway and Bellatin both do. Bellatin’s work does not contradict the rising dominance of the rhizome as the diagram for control in contemporary society. In fact, he affirms and even celebrates rhizomatic design by using it as a platform for artistic innovation through the creation of a protocologically based textual network. This does not negate resistance to protocol. As Galloway notes, “Deleuze had the foresight to situate resistive action within the protocological field. . . . it is through protocol that one must guide one’s efforts, not against it” (2004, 17). This includes interfering with the way protocol attempts to represent itself. Bellatin creates for his readers an experience designed to reveal that although the rhizome may be liberating as a concept, anything structured on it depends as much on hierarchy and control as it does on distribution.

To conclude, Bellatin’s micrometanarrative technique accomplishes several moves: It reaffirms the artificiality of metanarrative by producing
one from scratch and hermetically sealing it off from the vast literary terrain that exists beyond it. This hermetic textual network resists being flattened by quantification or any other scientific mode of explanation because both the textual network and the individual texts resist interpretation. Instead, the textual network rewards participation on its own terms by providing the dual, contradictory experiences of anarchic schizophrenia and decentralized control. The textual network coheres as such through connections established by a closed symbolic system. This system is a demonstration of protocol, the management style favored by Empire to administrate control societies. By drawing attention to the dual mechanisms of control and anarchy that undergird his textual network, Bellatin achieves a critique of protocol’s duplicity. This critique in turn underscores the importance of the avant-garde gesture at the heart of Bellatin’s project, that is, the resurrection of a belief in heterotopia and ungovernable spaces that protocologically managed Empire attempts to stifle. Protocol cannot totalize. Galloway’s sobering point is that it doesn’t need to: subjects that resist incorporation into a hegemonic protocol will cease to matter. Bellatin’s position might not change Galloway’s diagnosis, but for him the glass is half full: it may be lonely on the outside, but at least there is one.

Which brings us back to the unmistakably political nature of Bellatin’s project. While Galloway limits his description and analysis of protocol to the materially immanent, his concepts are of use for understanding the strategic appropriation and critique of control-society mechanisms that Bellatin sustains in his fiction. As Manuel De Landa predicted in 1991, the distributed network has become what Deleuze and Guattari call an abstract machine: one that is “mechanism independent” and that “can be thought of independently of [its] specific physical embodiments” (1991, 142). Galloway’s claim that protocol is the management style of Empire is a corollary denotation of the capabilities of the distributed network as an abstract machine.

The political power of micrometanarrative resides not only in its ability to reveal Empire’s protocological tendency to “conceal its own making,” but also in its emphasis on interior alterity, those vesicles that remain exterior to
Empire by providing an escape from processes of “omnivorous immanentization” that seek to “make the world into continuous biopolitical tissue” (Tiqqun 2010, 132). Deleuze and Guattari remind us, “The law of the State is not the law of All or Nothing (State societies or counter-State societies) but that of interior and exterior. The State is sovereignty. But sovereignty only reigns over what it is capable of internalizing, of appropriating locally” (1987, 360). Their point is that even within the State’s putative boundaries, there exists that which it is unable to internalize; “the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of State power” (360). Just as this internal exteriority existed within the State, so it proliferates under Empire, which increasingly functions as the State’s protector. Empire stands guard over the moribund State, allowing it “to live on as a pure appearance, as a lifeless form” (Tiqqun 2010, 117) as it proceeds with its “regime of pan-inclusion” (126). Like Galloway, Tiqqun is explicit in delineating the managerial tactics of imperial control society as those of a distributed network: an abstract machine of decentralized cybernetic technologies first developed by the military. “Empire would gladly represent itself . . . as a network in which everyone would be a node” (150); in this network, it is norms that determine connectivity, and thereby, existence (155). These are the norms of an increasingly robust biopolitical protocol.

By creating literary heterotopia constituted and governed by processes that resemble those of Empire’s networks, Bellatin and other practitioners of micrometanarrative inaugurate a new radical aesthetic of anti-control-society literature that confronts Empire by impersonating it (that is, by situating resistance “within the protocological field”). The mimicry of the hermetic textual network is devious, amounting to a rebellion of the imagination against potentialities patrolled by what Tiqqun identifies as the twin regulators of imperial control society: “police” and “publicity.” Thus, micrometanarrative and the literary space that corresponds to its rogue domain represent acts of radical and unruly defiance, a literary corollary to the rise of literal communes and the restoration of our “ungovernability” advocated by The Invisible Committee’s anti-Imperial call to arms, The Coming Insurrection (2007). Ultimately, imagination will prove the most effective weapon against the imperial regime of biopolitical control: “The jurisdiction of the
imperial police, of Biopower is limitless,” writes Tiqqun, “since what it must circumscribe and put a stop to does not exist at the level of the actual but at the level of the possible” (2010, 152). It is here, at the level of the possible, that micrometanarrative intervenes from within: vindicating the individual, reinvigorating the imagination as a political force, and resisting control, with creation.

NOTES

1. Crucially, Jameson subsumes all of these things under the rubric of culture: “[W]e must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and yet untheorized sense” (1991, 48).

2. Here and throughout the essay, I want to be clear that a “textual network” is not a network, but a concept—specifically, a species of narrative—that mimics a network. I also regard this concept, and this essay, as building on certain insights offered by Reinaldo Laddaga’s chapter on Bellatin in Espectáculos de realidad (2007). Laddaga’s comparisons of Bellatin to an installation artist (139) and his preliminary considerations of Bellatin’s work in light of the cultural, technological, and pharmacological context of Deleuzean control society in the final pages of that book (143–51) have influenced this essay.

3. “The fundamental ideological task of the new concept [postmodernism], however, must remain that of coordinating new forms of practice and social and mental habits . . . with the new forms of economic production and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism—the new global division of labor—in recent years. . . . [J]ust as (for Weber) new inner-directed and more ascetic religious values gradually produced ‘new people’ capable of thriving in the delayed gratification of the emergent ‘modern’ labor process, so also the ‘postmodern’ is to be seen as the production of postmodern people capable of functioning in a very peculiar socioeconomic world” (Jameson 1991, xiv–xv).

4. Galloway does not impute a value judgment onto networks themselves, as the Invisible Committee does in The Coming Insurrection (2009), a pamphlet-length protest of life conditions under late-capitalism also heavily influenced by the thought of Deleuze and Guattari. More pessimistic of the network-as-metaphor for contemporary societal organization and interaction, the Invisible Committee
writes: "To call this population of strangers in the midst of which we live 'society' is such a usurpation that even sociologists wonder if they should abandon a concept that was, for a century, their bread and butter. Now they prefer the metaphor of a network to describe the connection of cybernetic solitudes, the intermeshing of weak interactions under names like 'colleague,' 'contact,' 'buddy,' 'acquaintance,' or 'date.' Such networks sometimes condense into a milieu, where nothing is shared but codes, and where nothing is played out except the incessant recomposition of identity" (2009, 40).


6. "[S]omething that should be of particular interest to critical theorists, is that protocol is against interpretation," Galloway claims, meaning that protocol is unconcerned with content, controlling only the category of existence. "The consequences of this," he continues, "are legion. It means that protocological analysis must focus not on the sciences of meaning (representation/interpretation/reading), but rather on the sciences of possibility (physics or logic). . . . Protocol is a circuit, not a sentence" (2004, 52–53). Put simply, protocol is what protocol does. This is what Galloway intends with the phrase "materially immanent": that "protocol does not follow a model of command and control that places the commanding agent outside of that which is being commanded" (2004, 50).

7. See Moretti (2005), to mention only the most lucid and well-known theorist of quantitative models for the study of literature.

8. Laddaga likewise observes what he calls "sujetos-en-viaje" in the work of Bellatin, Aira, and some of their contemporaries (2007, 149). He seems to be referring to the characters in their novels, whereas I am suggesting, following Bellatin's own explanation, that it is the reader who is transported.

9. Bellatin describes a similar method of constructing the novel Flores (2001), which he claims is based on "una antigua técnica sumeria, que para muchos es el antecedente de las naturalezas muertas, que permite la constucción de complicadas estructuras narrativas basándose sólo en la suma de determinados objetos que juntos conforman un todo. Es de este modo como se ha tratado de construir este relato, de alguna forma como se encuentra estructurado el poema de Gilgamesh" (9). Laddaga compares this total work to a mosaic, as opposed to a puzzle, which has only one configuration (2007, 139); I see it as a textual network.

10. This, too, is characteristic of protocol, which Galloway claims "does not interface with content, with semantic value" (2004, 139).

11. Others have noticed a different primary-secondary relationship in Bellatin's work. Laddaga cites Sergio Chejfek as explaining Perros héroes as the "texto secundario" and "residuo" of an installation artwork (Laddaga 2007, 140–41).

12. Basing his study on the Internet, Galloway observes: "Ironically, then, nearly all Web traffic must submit to a hierarchical structure (DNS) to gain access to the anarchic and radically horizontal structure of the Internet. . . . [T]his contradictory logic is rampant throughout the apparatus of protocol" (2004, 9).

13. Galloway bases this on Branden Hookway's insight that "[d]istributed systems require
for their operation a homogenous standard of interconnectivity” (qtd. in Galloway 2004, 12).

14. Galloway writes: “Protocological control mirrors the movements of Empire. In fact, one might go so far as to say that Empire is the social theory and protocol the technical” (2004, 26).

15. Tiqqun later continues in this vein: “From this point on, the State does not disappear, it is simply denoted beneath a transterritorial set of autonomous practices: Spectacle, Biopower” (2010, 118).

REFERENCES