Globalization and Collapse

If we want to consider the dark underside or double of the globalization project, one of the possible starting points would be to study its notion of time. Whether we are talking about cultural or economic globalization; the enthusiastic rhetoric of the global vision has been underpinned, from the beginning, by a narrative of progress and the specific temporality connected to it. At least since the second half of the 20th century, globalization’s proponents have argued that the free exchange of commercial and cultural goods will lead to an equalization of living standards between societies, universal well-being, democracy, and a dissolution of the old nation states. In this decentered network of free societies, cultures and economies will deal productively with one another, while cosmopolitan subjects engage in liberal-minded, non-dogmatic interaction. We could call this conception of time not linear, but utopian: with time, things will get better. The current realization that the necessary ground for things to “get better” in this particular way does not exist on this Earth produces materialist anguish, as Bruno Latour writes: “The soil of globalization’s dreams is beginning to slip away” (Latour 2018 [2017]: 4). Utopia, seen from this perspective, is not a non-place in space or time, but the possibility of continuous development itself.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the global transformation of the ways we imagine the future has had a disastrous effect on discourses of globalization. The increasing impossibility of thinking about the future in terms of progress severs our connection to globalization’s utopian foundation. In her seminal study The Future as Catastrophe, Eva Horn has described this general turn in expectations as a pessimistic reinterpretation of how we think of what is to come: she diagnoses the “disintegration of a temporal order in the modern age

---

1 For a short discussion of discourses and cultural theories of globalization since the 1990s, see Heise (2008: 4–9) or Reati (2006: 20–31), as well as the extensive work of Gesine Müller on global processes of cultural circulation (e.g. Müller/Siskind 2019).
in which the future was still an ‘auratic key concept,’ a space of hope and planning, a locus of utopia” (Horn 2018 [2014]: 5). Pessimist outlooks, one might object, have existed throughout cultural history (they might even constitute the normal case). What is new in the era of climate catastrophe is the robustness of the scientific data – the measurements, models, and instrumentation on which fears about the future are based – as well as the fact that many of the actions that bring about this future have already been done (Latour 2017 [2015]: 9–10, 24–33, 41–74). Underlying the current sense of impending catastrophe, then, is a new, data-driven grand récit shaping the present: the narrative of an imminent collapse, linked to the Anthropocene, the destruction of the environment, the extinction of species and the dismantling of the conditions that make life on Earth possible. The intimate connection between the time order of globalization, the destruction of ecosystems, and what Laura Barbas-Rhoden has termed “ecoapocalypse” has been reflected in Latin American fiction at least since the 1990s (Barbas-Rhoden 2011: 139–168). Contrary to the utopian time of globalization, the conception of time inherent in the narrative of collapse is apocalyptic or, in more secular terms, cataclysmic: collapse describes a radical break in time at which linearity is broken off, with no or almost no transition.

While global warming and the climate catastrophe are increasingly seen as planet-wide dangers (Chakrabarty 2015: 153–156), their perception differs locally and seems to be rooted in a strong “sense of place” (Heise 2008). These varying degrees of how catastrophic we imagine the future to be are not always coherent with the distribution of local vulnerabilities. A look at Europe, for example, shows that – according to a study published in 2019 – 71% of Italians and 65% of French citizens agree with the belief that civilization as we know it will collapse in the coming years, while only 39% of Germans agreed when asked the same question (Ifop 2019). In Latin America, young people, when asked in 2013, were rather optimistic about the future, while questions of climate and ecology did not play a major role (Observatorio de la Juventud en Iberoamérica 2013). However, if we take fiction as an indicator, a different picture of the cultural sensibilities

---

2 Collapse, understood as the sudden breakdown of societies, civilizations, species populations, and ecosystems, has been studied from a variety of disciplinary angles. While early archaeological approaches link it to complexity (Tainter 1990), more recent investigations from the realm of philosophy (Dupuy 2002), cultural history (Diamond 2005) or cultural studies (Citton/Rasmi 2020) stress the connection to environmental destruction and climate change. More activist approaches (Servigne/Stevens 2015) use the term to create a sense of urgency in their readers. In the context of this essay, it refers to a secular form of apocalypse, one without empire or revelation.
related to temporalities of the future emerges. In the last decades, commentators have noted a post-apocalyptist turn in certain strands of Latin American fiction (Logie 2008, Fabry 2012: 20, Salvioni 2013). In view of the multiple crises and downfalls that characterize the region, these theorists argue, fear of the future has often been replaced by the feeling that collapse has already happened, that one is living after the event. From the point of view of these imagined futures, the present appears as a landscape of trauma, riddled with signs and symptoms to be decoded (Berger 1998). In Los rituales del caos, a collection of crónicas and parables describing daily life in Ciudad de Mexico published in 1995, Carlos Monsiváis notes:

Y éste es el resultado: México, ciudad post-apocalíptica. Lo peor ya ocurrió (y lo peor es la población monstruosa cuyo crecimiento nada detiene), y sin embargo la ciudad funciona de modo que a la mayoría le parece inexplicable, y cada quien extrae del caos las recompensas que en algo equilibran las sensaciones de vida invivible. (Monsiváis 1995: 21)

For Monsiváis, the postapocalyptic condition of Mexico City is not so much linked to a catastrophic event or an imagery of destroyed landscapes but is entrenched in the socio-economic realities of everyday life. The end is “immanent rather than imminent” (Kermode 1967: 101), the temporal mode is not so much apocalyptic as it is post-apocalyptic. The worst has already happened, and the mystery is continuity itself (i.e. why Mexicans keep on living in and moving into “la ciudad más contaminada del planeta”, and why this apocalyptic mode of dwelling can be the source of a festive, paradoxical joy). Another post-cataclysmic case could be made for Venezuela (see Gustavo Guerrero’s article in this volume) or for Argentina, a country that went from being one of the richest nations in the world in the 1920s to completely disintegrating economically by the end of the century. It may seem almost too banal to note, but it was precisely during the period of intensified globalization that the country saw some of its biggest economic and political crises (notably that of 2001). As Fernando Reati has shown, there is a clear link between the neoliberal policies of the years from 1985 to 1999 and the surge in the publication of dystopian novels, a genre that had until then been unusual in Argentina’s narrative tradition. Already during the 80s and 90s, expectations of the future tended to shift toward

3 The question how actors and collectives from Latin America imagine the future has recently received increasing scholarly attention, see for example the program of the International Research Training Group “Temporalities of Future” at the Free University of Berlin, the Heidelberg Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Postapocalyptic Studies (CAPAS), or the museum of imagined futures at Futuros imaginados, [https://2084futurosimaginados.org](https://2084futurosimaginados.org) (last visit: 12/11/2021).
the negative (Reati 2006: 32–34), the predominant feeling being the possibility of an abrupt ending at any moment. This became true for example for the so-called “nuevos pobres”, former members of the middle class who suddenly lost everything during the years of hyperinflation. The peak of this development was reached during the crisis of 2001, with damage to the social fabric at an unprecedented scale, unemployment rates above 20%, and more than half of the population living in poverty (Novaro 2010: 279–287).

For Argentina during the mid 2000s, the worst, in the words of Monsiváis, had thus already happened. Defining the relationship between globalization and collapse from this point of view is insightful: what at first glance seems a simple opposition – that is, that the breakdown of natural and social systems radically questions the progressivist narrative on which globalization depends – becomes a dialectical relationship upon closer inspection. If we follow through with globalization, it always already carries within itself the event of collapse. Collapse, then, has to be read as the Aufhebung of globalization in a truly Hegelian sense, meaning its negation, but also its conservation and its elevation to another level of being. What form this new being takes is one of the most pressing questions of today’s debate around the Anthropocene.

Scaling Time: History and Narration in the Work of Pedro Mairal

A novel that puts into action or plots this dialectical relationship between progress and collapse in the Argentinian context is Pedro Mairal’s El año del desierto (2012 [2005]). In the novel, the reverse side of the globalizing dynamic is incarnated by the so called “intemperie”, a devastating disaster that hurts Argentina back into pre-modern conditions. While it remains unclear whether the disaster is ecological, socio-economic, or fantastic in nature, what is certain is that here, the global paradigm of development and growth is confronted with its negative, inverted double. Within just one year, the so-called desierto of the pampas reclaims Argentina as a whole, dissolving all urban structures and retaking the land. The systems formerly guaranteeing stability – commerce, food supply, transport, electricity, policing, agriculture, money, financial and healthcare

4 Zac Zimmer’s (2013) eloquent interpretation of Mairal’s “dialectical image” mainly refers to the ending of the novel, revealing the arrival of the colonizers as the originary American apocalypse.
systems, democratic institutions – collapse into chaos and brutality. Global integration is reversed as the country breaks up into small communities and groups at war with each other. The exchange of goods and information between different regions, as well as with the outside world, comes to a halt.

Published one year before *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy’s international bestseller, *El año*’s depiction of collapse departs from a less global, more specifically Argentinian context: the 2001 economic crisis, and, more broadly, the perceived decline of the country from 1930 to 2003. Yet the novel continues still further back in time. The narrator-protagonist María, who survived the collapse, lives through a regression or “involución” (Hallstead/Dabove 2012: xxiv), going backwards on “a return journey through Argentina’s history, told in reverse chronological order” (Zimmer 2013: 374). From the neoliberal years of the 90s, Argentina develops into a situation that closely resembles the social struggles of the first half of the 20th century, including the years of mass immigration from Europe. Supra-communal forms of organization crumble, as María moves on to work on an *estancia* in a 19th-century setting, where she is captured by the braucos, a tribe of modern city-dwellers turned nomadic. After finally “going native” with the premodern “Ú” tribe, in an inverted depiction of colonization, María leaves the country on a ship to return to Europe (probably Ireland, where her European ancestors had come from). Time progressing in the novel, then, is also the time of historic regression (Zimmer 2013: 376). The reverse image of progress and globalization is an inversion of the opposition between so-called *civilización* and *barbarie*, a dichotomy that shaped the Argentinian national project of *desarrollo* since Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. The cannibalistic practices that María finds her boss Suárez engaged in when, at the end of the novel, she returns to her old workplace at the Torre Garay, an office tower in the center of Buenos Aires, demonstrate that the *barbarie* is not actually emerging from the pampas to haunt the civilized world of the city or resulting from its reclamation, but that it was inherently present, located right at modernity’s center (Zimmer 2013, Bonacic 2015).

While the narrative device of accelerated time in reverse (or “rewind”, as Zimmer calls it) has often been read as a powerful tool for producing national allegory (Drucaroff 2010, Hallstead/Dabove 2012: xii–xviii, Bonacic 2015, Campisi 2019), it also constitutes a solution for a crucial problem of representation.

---

5 There is a whole tradition of texts that link writing about the *desierto* to the reversal, contestation or playful parody of Sarmiento’s famous categories, probably starting from Sarmiento’s own complications of the opposition in *Facundo* to José Hernandez’ *Martín Fierro* to certain cuentos of Borges (e.g. “Historias de jinetes” or “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva”) to César Aira’s aestheticist inversion in *Ema, la cautiva*. 
As Timothy Clark (2012), Jörg Dünne (2019), Eva Horn (2019), and other theorists have argued, some of the most pressing questions of literary representation in the Anthropocene concern incompatibilities of scale: spatial scales are disturbed by the fact that climate change ties local actions to global responsibilities. Temporal scales are superimposed in ways that create deranging effects, for example when human time suddenly collides with the geological frames of deep time, or when human history becomes a factor in natural history (Chakrabarty 2009). Processes of collapse, even if they are not “hyperobjects” (Morton 2013), entail their own set of scalar distortions. Representing them means connecting the scale of national history – in the Argentinian case more or less 500 years, with an ecosystem that has a history of tens of thousands of years – to the scale of individual history and plot time (the time of representable action in the narrated world). To this end, Mairal uses two devices. First, he inscribes the temporality of decay into the space of the narrated world, a topography in constant, supernaturally rapid decomposition (buildings disintegrate quickly, city districts disappear, plants grow and rot faster). At one point in the novel, this acceleration is symbolized by the change of an orange: “Si la miraba constantece, no notaba ningún cambio, pero si la miraba cada diez minutos, notaba que se iba achicarrando” (Mairal 2012: 24). Second, the arrangement of historical references indicates the backward progression of time. As María advances through the space of the diegesis, references to national history, but also brand names, places, cultural elements, and historical trivia point towards an epoch further away from the present. While not strictly chronological, Chapter II (“Suárez & Baitos”) starts in the present, Chapter III (“Como un fuerte”) reaches back into the 1940s, 50s and 60s, and Chapter IV (“Un mismo cuerpo”) assembles references to the beginning of the 20th as well as to the end of the 19th century. The historical time of the nation is plotted onto the time-space of narration. Narrating time and narrated time are brought into great tension. It is this acceleration that allows the novel to condense the long process of dissolution and collapse into one year. By downsizing collapse in this way, the novel makes tangible what would otherwise remain outside the scope of human perception. What we see before our eyes is a process of radical degrowth that would otherwise take at least decades to happen. The invisible “slow violence” of collapse, to use Rob Nixon’s term (Nixon 2011), becomes visible in fast-forward.

As Buenos Aires is eaten up street by street by the intemperie, the city repopulizes. Where building blocks have been swept away, informal settlements arise. Advancing in concentric circles, the intemperie operates as a force of horizontalization: all vertical, human built structures break down, leaving only dust, weeds, and ombú trees behind. Urban verticality becomes horizontal desierto (Mairal 2012: 170). Only when this process reaches the central areas of Buenos Aires do
the inhabitants of the capital envision the possibility that they too might be concerned. Mairal’s novel thereby illustrates how social inequality influences the perception of the temporality of collapse: the urban elites do not (want to) believe in the reality of the coming catastrophe until their own lifeworld is directly affected by it. In the face of power outages, Suárez, the head of an international investment firm, buys electricity generators to keep the elevators and the air conditioning running. These partial measures to keep up the façade of business as usual appear as social forms of denial. “—Quedate tranquilo, de acá no nos movemos. ¿Qué puede pasar? ¿Cortan todas las rutas? Compramos diez helicópteros. ¿Aumenta la temperatura de la tierra? Compramos el aire acondicionado más grosso que exista” (Mairal 2012: 28). Something similar is true for the public demonstrations: the “marcha contra la intemperie” (Mairal 2012: 5) is nostalgic because it holds on to the logic of political struggle in a world that has decoupled itself from human engagement. Illusions of stability (Hallstead/Dabove 2012: xx), fantasies of agency; both are symptoms of what Jean-Pierre Dupuy has termed the “time of catastrophes”— an inversed temporality in which catastrophe is an intrusion of the possible into the impossible, retrospectively creating its own possibility (Dupuy 2002: 9–13) [my translation]. Catastrophe seems impossible before it happens, while after the event, it appears necessary, as if it could not have happened otherwise.

Mairal’s narrative acceleration moreover permits us to observe the processuality of collapse. An example of this is María’s work in the hospital in chapter IV. María, until then a classic office worker, has to learn practical skills suitable for a decomplexifying economy in order to obtain food and a place to sleep. The disintegration of the hospital mirrors the disastrous effects of neoliberal cost-cutting policies: in just a couple of weeks, the building structure of the hospital falls apart. Power cuts endanger the lives of patients, certain medications begin to run out, and complex medical practices can no longer be performed. In the novel, this causes stress and disbelief in certain doctors who have trouble adjusting to the new realities. Old routines, forged during decades of relative material wealth, continue to exercise power over people’s actions, even though the conditions that made them possible have been eliminated. While medical standards fall, anachronistic methods of treatment return. Many patients die. In a powerful image, Mairal connects this process of erosion to the Argentinian politics of the 20th century:

Los múltiples arreglos del piso habían dejado un mapa de la desidia y la falta de continuidad en los programas de salud pública. Según donde se tropezara, la jefa insultaba al gobierno responsable de la reparación. Así fui entendiendo que las baldosas ajedrezadas eran originales de los tiempos del presidente Roca; las celestes, de los tiempos de Perón; las de cerámica, de la Revolución Libertadora; unas medio beige, del final de la dictadura; las de vinilo simil madera curvadas por la humedad, del tiempo del segundo
One could interpret the passage as a rewriting of the Apocalypse as described in the book of Daniel (Dan. 2) where, in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the progressive decay of kingdoms is symbolized by the body parts of a statue: its head made of gold, its torso made of silver, the feet made of clay. However, the passage also illustrates the intimate doubling of utopian and catastrophic time. The declining quality of the floor tiles progresses in parallel with the advance of the national project; globalization and progress, in the accelerated time of the novel, can indeed be seen as indistinguishable from cataclysmic temporality.

At this point, it seems legitimate to ask about the reasons for collapse in the novel. *El año’s* relationship to the climate crisis is hard to pin down, as it is not clear if the *intemperie* is a human-made natural disaster (even if it does seem to have effects on climate and the environment, from increased heat and light (20) to floods (153) and the melting of glaciers (126), to epidemics (Mairal 2012: 161)). What is clear, though, is that the *intemperie* incarnates the massive agency of the Earth system, while at the same time successively shrinking the agency of the human characters in the novel. As Bruno Latour (2017) has argued, what we used to consider the backdrop or *décor* of human actions enters the stage in the Anthropocene to become a powerful actor in and of itself, limiting the possibilities of human action. The novel stages this animation of the setting: *intemperie* is nothing but the name for the increasing agency of the *desierto* itself. Consequently, it is the expansion of the *desierto* that drives the backward evolution of the country, successively depriving humans of the possibility to act and limiting them to modes of reaction, dependency, and acceptance. When towards the end of the novel, María’s freedom depends on a match of an archaic, brutal version of football (“ful”) between the *braucos* and a group of visitors, this loss of agency is symbolized by an image of absence:

Me quedé así largo rato, entregada a esa voluntad que me era ajena y que me seguía arrastrando de acá para allá, esa fuerza que era algo parecido a Dios, pero también era la desintegración, y lo invisible, y también la intemperie y el viento, la soledad de ese lugar vacío, el dios del mundo sin gente. No sé cómo explicarlo. Un yuyo seco doblándose en el viento, algo que nadie ve, un lugar igual a cualquier otro en ese desierto donde hasta los bichos ciegos escaraban sus cuevas para huir del desamparo del cielo. (Mairal 2012: 262)

The force before which humans disappear as a *quantité négligeable* is unsayable. It is a figure of the sacred as much as it is the eternal force of becoming that is nature, but also emptiness, the strangeness of the planet itself. It is important to note the almost total absence of animate, organic matter in this description of the *desierto*, except for the weed and the blind animal. In an image of the...
mathematically sublime (the subject disappears before the vastness of the object), Mairal, following authors like Echeverría, Sarmiento or Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, transforms the emptiness of the pampas into a figure of human insignificance and dependence on planetary forces. Only, where in classic theories of the sublime from Burke to Kant to Schopenhauer the moment of intimidation of the subject is cancelled out by an opposing movement of empowerment by way of reason, the body, or contemplation, here, María’s shrinking into passivity in the face of a disintegrated “mundo sin gente” seems complete.

**Zooming In: Organizing Collapse**

Recent studies have suggested that fictions of the future do not exclusively consist of projections derived from past and present tendencies, but that they can also operate as a form of fictional anticipation, imagining possible futures that, despite being fictive, format the field of the possible (Bayard 2016, Horn 2018 [2014], Citton/Rasmi 2020: 129–152). Reading novels as *scenarios* in this way means focusing on the “*margins* and *backgrounds* of the fictional world[]”, its “*conditions of possibility*” (Horn 2018 [2014]: 18). Scenario-based readings treat the diegesis not as a symbolic or allegorical space, but as though it exists in the material sense, allowing us to heuristically explore “the strange universes of fiction as *possibilities* for our real environment” (Horn 2018 [2014]: 19). In the present context, this implies scaling down our reading by means of a negation or suspension of the allegorical interpretation of the novel, instead “zooming in” (Heise 2008: 66) on its concrete, present elements.

*El año* seems particularly suitable for such a reading. This is because the processuality of the unfolding scenario permits it to critically portray different stages of political, social, and economic organization during and after the collapse. Allegorical readings pass over these thick textures all too quickly. European discourses on societal collapse – so-called French “*collapsology*”, for example – often argue that survival in a catastrophic future will depend on the cultivation of “*local resilience*”, meaning the strengthening of the local social ties in order to limit the physical and psychological damages associated with the breakdown (Servigne/Chapelle 2017). According to this vision, informal and non-democratic networks of mutual aid will pop up, as solidarity between neighbors replaces the nation state. It is surprising to see how some of these thinkers, skeptical and darkly pessimistic when it comes to national politics,

---

6 On the transformation of the sublime in the Anthropocene see Latour (2017: 40).
adopt a light, enthusiastic, almost utopian tone when they sketch out possibili-
ties for local initiatives. Within the local realm, they argue, ethics and coopera-
tion between survivors come about naturally. After the collapse, politics end.
This naïve, harmonic vision of the local has been criticized by commentators as
apolitical, unethical, and naturalist. As Pierre Charbonnier puts it:

Playing to quite genuine and legitimate fears, [the collapsologists] have unwittingly promul-
gated a survivalist discourse that is fundamentally apolitical in nature. This discourse main-
tains that tomorrow’s survivors will be those most able to adapt to a post-technological
world. It espouses a form of purifying disintegration, addressing a community of the enlight-
ened. (Charbonnier 2019: 2)

To return to the Argentinian context, in Pedro Mairal’s novel, if the intemperie
does break up the country into small communities and groups at war with each
other, this does not bring about the end of politics. Two chapters are especially
illuminating on this subject: Chapters III and VII, with the former modelling
post-cataclysmic forms of local organization in the urban space, and the latter
doing the same in a rural context. In both chapters, local forms of survival in-
tensify power relations instead of abolishing them, further increasing inequality
instead of softening it.

In Chapter III, entitled “Como un fuerte”, urban survivors entrench them-
selves in their houses. Every block of buildings, shielded against the outside
world but connected by an inner patio, becomes a fortress, harboring a local
community with its own micro-society, economy, and politics. While these for-
tresses constitute protected inner spaces, the streets become their exteriors,
filled with provincial revolutionaries and people who did not make it into
houses. Significantly, then, after some deliberation, the middle-class occupants
of the houses choose to close and defend the buildings rather than seeing those
who wander the streets as potential allies or refugees: “Al final, en toda nuestra
manzana, el miedo y la desconfianza tuvieron más poder. La idea de abrir la
puerta de calle se descartó” (Mairal 2012: 51). It is important to note that there
is no determinism here, but the representation of a political decision process:
under external pressure, the small communities choose a Schmittian logic of
enmity, opting for closure over solidarity. (This closure, as María Semilla Durán
notes, is illusionary because the inhabitants of the buildings are forced to
adopt the practices of the villas miserias themselves, Semilla Durán 2010: 331).
The identity of those in the streets is unknown, but the mere fact of finding one-
self inside or outside determines group affiliation.

Later in the chapter, the fortresses of the manzanas are connected by an
intricate system of tunnels and bridges, making it possible to circulate between
blocks without setting foot on the street. The city space is transformed to mirror
the new two-class society. Yet political, economic, and sexual power inequalities also become prominent inside the buildings. Leaders are elected for each “censo” (1200 people), where food, jobs, and water are distributed centrally, a provisional system of healthcare is set up, and defense is organized. One of the main problems identified by the novel is that the old logic of individualism, central to the market economy, is still present, as inhabitants keep the best food for themselves, hide things, or refuse to accept the tasks assigned to them. María, who has almost no practical skills, is forced to do laundry – physically painful and repetitive labor. No new collective subjectivity can emerge here, precisely because there is no recognizable class structure left that could act as the motor force of history, as Marx would have called it: “Era todo muy confuso y arbitrario” (Mairal 2012: 76). The utopian horizon of development which had been an integral part of leftist emancipatory politics has collapsed along with the old order. Instead, cooperation and participation are now demanded under threat of punishment by the new leaders. Mairal demonstrates the difficulty of switching to collectivist, local thinking after being socialized in a globalized market economy. Neither does the replacement of money with barter lead to more fairness or altruism, as when María must pay “cuatro turnos de lavar ropa” (Mairal 2012: 74) for a pair of old shoes. While at first, a new form of solidarity between the inhabitants seems to replace the anonymity of previous urban life (Mairal 2012: 53), with increasingly scarce supplies of food and water, the logic of egotism, corruption, and violence takes hold. As apartments are requisitioned for collective purposes, displacement sets in, and private space becomes public. Without privacy, María feels more and more confined and sexually vulnerable. The two parties in the building, the “puentistas” and the “tuneleros”, struggle for control, weapons, power, and privilege. Democratic mechanisms of deliberation fail, as there are no institutions to guarantee them. Mairal’s Argentinian scenario, it seems, deconstructs the idea that the problems of the old world might not transfer into life after collapse. And it is precisely the rhetoric of harmony and mutual aid that obscures the underlying politics, as the case of the murdered Presidente de Consorcios shows:

A pesar de todo, algunos en la manzana insistían con que había sido gente de afuera. No podían aceptar que hubiera pasado puertas adentro, donde se suponía que habían quedado los “vecinos respetables”, los que nos ayudábamos entre nosotros y compartíamos todo. Ahora se susurraba en los pasillos, se confabulaba en los balcones. Teníamos miedo cuando andábamos solas por las escaleras. (Mairal 2012: 63)

In the urban space, then, Mairal does not present a functioning new model of political organization in conditions of scarcity. Instead, the novel represents the lack of a guiding utopian horizon by demonstrating the absence of the new.
fictional future, trauma is not resolved, but repeated (Berger 1998). What returns are the well-known problems of corruption, impunity, inequality, authoritarianism, and general distrust that plagued Argentinian 20th century politics.

In Chapter VII (“La Peregrina”), rural space comes into view. Still in Buenos Aires, a customer at Ocean Bar describes the joys of rural life in fantastic terms:

—Ustedes, chicas, tienen que irse a Luján. Arriendan tierra por unos pesos. Se puede vivir bien. Tiran dos semillas y a la mañana siguiente ya asoma el tallo. Se ve la caña del maíz subir y crecer. En unos días, tienen tomates, lechuga, papas... No hay que obedecer a un patrón y con remover la tierra un poco cada día y regar, ya está. (Mairal 2012: 165)

It is striking to see how Mairal’s novel deconstructs this rural promise. The first part of the statement, which sounds the most fantastical, proves to be true, as the intemperie not only accelerates processes of decay, but also makes plants grow faster. Instead, what turns out to be the stuff of fantasy is the last sentence, in which the abolition of power and the end of hard work are promised: “No hay que obedecer a un patron”.

Upon arriving in Luján, María and her three companions try to rent some land. By now, the intemperie has dissolved large chunks of Buenos Aires. The dissolution of the city into desierto, as well as a circulating epidemic, have triggered a massive migration out into the countryside. Fertile soil has become the most valuable good, while money, an institution based on interpersonal trust, has lost most of its value (Mairal 2012: 198). Nevertheless, there seems to be plenty of land on offer: “Al parecer, todos eran dueños de tierras” (Mairal 2012: 205). After persuading an owner to rent out an inundated pasture, María and her companions find out that their business partner did not really own what he claimed was in his possession. After the collapse, land division and ownership rights have become unclear. With the breakdown of authority, land markers have ceased to exist. Again, reversed globalization does not engender local utopia or functioning counter-communities (be they Marxist, socialist, localist or naturalist), but an intensification of the tensions already in place. The results are bad for everyone, as land lies fallow instead of being used for food production. As María puts it: “La tierra ya no era ni del que la pudiera comprar ni del que la pudiera sembrar, la tierra era del que la pudiera defender” (Mairal 2012: 208). The Hobbesian undertones of Mairal’s vision of the rural are further accentuated when María’s group returns the favor by stealing from the man who stole from them. The collapse of the globalized economy does not

7 More precisely, the novel outlines two phases of migration: first, people flee towards the center of Buenos Aires as the orillas of the city are destroyed; then, when the center comes under attack, mass migration turns towards the countryside.
lead to reterritorialization, understood as the “attempt to realign culture with place” (Heise 2008: 53), but to the local distribution of goods by force.

This local dynamic of inclusion and exclusion continues at the second chronotope of the chapter: the estancia “La Peregrina”, a large, centrally organized farm that offers a place to stay and food in exchange for hard, manual labor. Having almost no knowledge in practical matters, the arrivals from the city are violently exploited on the estancia, where slavery and absolute dependency on their bosses are the rules of the day. References to slavery and its post-slavery substitute, peonaje por deudas (Mairal 2012: 216), merge with modern forms of neoliberal exploitation and cheap labor. While the chapter is clearly a reverse rewriting of national history, concerned with the first half of the 19th century (citing a range of topoi from the caudillo to the frontera, the cautiva, and the malones, evoking the fight between indigenous people and settlers under Juan Manuel de Rosas), it can also be read as a gloomily realist imagination of the consequences of degrowth. In rural zones where food is produced, survival is possible, but the rapidly shrinking economy brings about a hardening of living conditions, heavy physical work, economic and sexual dependence, and submission to the mercy of land-owners. Degrowth also puts into place a re-hierarchization of knowledge: city residents like María, who has a literary education, lack practical knowledge, for example in handling horses (193, 198, 200), sowing grain (205) or milking cows (Mairal 2012: 211). Even if María does progress (later in the novel, she benefits from having learned how to gut animals and uses the basic medical skills she picked up at the hospital), she and her companions regularly find themselves in the lower ranks of the group because their areas of expertise have lost their relevance.

In the rural space, then, after collapse, local communities gather around monopolies of land ownership, connecting resilience and survival not to harmony, but to antisocial and undemocratic models of resource exploitation. In the novel, it is the centralization of power on the farm that permits the production of food, while in Luján, fields lay bare. Mairal draws on the historical experience of Argentina to demonstrate this pessimist point. What the novel seems to suggest is that the process of degrowth must be completed if the traces of old power distribution are to be eliminated. Even the braucos, a hybrid tribe of modern people turned nomad, are an unequal, patriarchal society that excludes weaker members, perpetuating the history of violence and domination. Only the “Ú”, pre-modern indígenas untouched by Western thought, transcend the ego. Their members do not bear proper names but are named according to their oficios, which change every few days – a practice that results not only in non-alienated forms of work, but also in a temporal, collective, non-essentialist conception of the subject (Mairal 2012: 280–290). Time in this context is not a linear
succession of events pointing towards a telos, but an oscillation between repetition and change that can be inhabited: “Nadie me molestaba. Nadie me quería mal. Si un trabajo me resultaba difícil, bastaba con esperar dos o tres días para que me tocara rotar. El tiempo se dejaba habitar. El pasado no dolía. Podía vivir en esa especie de eternidad” (Mairal 2012: 290, my emphasis).

Even if the novel seems to fall prey to a certain Neo-Rousseauist idealization here, the idea that the past must be destroyed to quit the cycle of trauma and repetition appears as the consequent, albeit radical, conclusion of the rural experience. It is no coincidence that María’s self-imposed obligation to remember the streets, places and facades of the destroyed city ceases precisely when she enters the desierto: “Entrar en el campo me libraba de ese mandato, lo borraba todo de una vez, al menos, en mi cabeza” (Mairal 2012: 192). As we know from the first chapter, speaking, remembering, and writing the past will only become possible once María has returned to Europe, in the timeless space of the library where maps help imagine what has been lost: “Acá las cosas no cambian” (Mairal 2012: 2).

**Zooming Out: Towards a Planetary Reading of the Argentinian Scenario**

After zooming in on the concrete aspects of the novel in the last section (analyzing the scenario on the scale of individuals and local communities), the following section will take the opposite approach of zooming out. Departing from Ursula Heise’s claim that environmental consciousness in a globalized world entails grounding local knowledge in “an environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism” (Heise 2008: 59), the question arises as to what can be said about the relationship between the local and the global, or the local and the planetary scale, for that matter. I would like to propose three possible readings.

First, the novel can be seen as a scenario very much grounded in the local – local national history, local literary and intertextual tradition, the local imaginary of the urban and the rural desierto. This reading starts out from the perspective of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the “homo”, meaning “humanity as a divided political subject” (Chakrabarty 2015: 173). El año del desierto, then, appears as a story about the damages and inequalities created by globalization, the Capitalocene (Jason Moore), and postcolonial politics. From this perspective, Mairal articulates a very national sense of perpetual crisis and dissolution of social cohesion. While the Argentinian novela de anticipación of the 90s projects the fears and obsessions of the década menemista into a
dystopic future to produce an ironic commentary about the present (Reati 2006: 15), Mairal, writing after the crisis of 2001, paints a future that consists in the collision of the present with the past (Campisi 2019). We can see how this allegorical mode of reading privileges an archeological rather than a futurological interpretation: it frames María’s trajectory as an exploration of the historical roots of the Argentinian crisis.

A second possible reading of the novel would be set on a radically different scale. It is grounded in the perspective of humanity as *anthropos*, or what Chakrabarty has called the “zoecentric view” (Chakrabarty 2015: 154). As Chakrabarty has argued, if we want to make sense of the current epoch of anthropogenic global warming, we must accompany the history of capital with a history of life on the planet. In this non-homocentric view, humans appear as “collective and unintended forms of existence of the human, as a geological force, as a species” (Chakrabarty 2015: 173–174). The history of political, economic, and social systems is embedded into the history of the Earth system. Zooming out in this way also means distancing ourselves from the assumption that we are the central actors in this story: “The idea of anthropos decenters the human by subordinating human history to the geological and evolutionary histories of the planet” (Chakrabarty 2015: 173). Reading the novel from this perspective provides us with a much broader and, in a sense, universal insight about the increasingly conflictual interaction between human and non-human agents. What is important to note here is that this reading does not cancel out the first one, but remains problematic, in permanent suspense, precisely because of the possibility of the first reading. In the context of this second reading, zooming out from the national scale converts Argentina into a symbol of planetary anticipation, a place with seismographic relevance in terms of the experience of progressive loss that humanity faces. It is by its local specificity that the national becomes indicative of the planetary. The act of reading operates as a double allegorical upscaling: individual experience (María) stands as an allegory for national history, but the national in turn becomes an allegory for the planetary. If we read the novel through this lens, the central protagonist is not María, but the intemperie itself, the effects of which are indicated or mirrored by María’s behavior and emotions. The fact that the consequences of the intemperie are represented while its processes remain largely invisible or inexplicit in the novel is itself a scale effect. From the perspective of the human as *Being-in-the-world* (Heidegger), the spatiotemporal order of the intemperie as a geological force is not immediately perceptible. Instead of being the driver of the plot, María’s central function consists in the visualization of the invisible.

Rather than highlighting the actions of the protagonist, then, we should focus on the reactions, the forced inactivity, the passive modes of dependency, acceptance and nostalgic refusal that define the human characters in the novel.
Often, this can be seen at the fringes of the diegesis – for example through María’s father, who retreats into the world of television. Another instance is when the destruction of the outer city space forces the inhabitants to migrate to the center of Buenos Aires where, in turn, other inhabitants react by locking themselves up in their houses. This process mirrors the reactive politics of wealthy states like the USA or members of the European Union towards displaced people who, more and more frequently, flee due to weather-related disasters or food shortages triggered by climate change (UNHCR 2020: 9). Here, too, the human-altered, non-human world is the driving agent, compelling humans to a chain of reactions (which is not to say that the possibility that governments could change their policies does not exist – what I want to highlight is the redistribution of agency).

Another important aspect of this process in the novel is the unequally rapidly shrinking agency of women. Towards the end of her trajectory, María reflects on the connection between collapse, agency, and gender: “No era tanto el miedo que tenía sino el hartazgo de estar a merced de los hombres, así fueran cafishos, patrones, braucos, revolucionarios o caníbales. Quería poder decidir qué hacer y qué no hacer. Todos estos hombres me estaban llevando y arreando hacía meses” (Mairal 2012: 274). A final example of how to read the intemperie as the novel’s main character would be to analyze how Mairal represents the increased workload that is necessary to guarantee subsistence. On the farm, work is the only activity left: “No había siesta, ni domingo, ni feriado” (Mairal 2012: 211). The link between the intensification of work and the agency of the intemperie is further accentuated by the acceleration of the process of desertification: “Había que desmalezar todos los días [. . .]; había que arrancarlas [las malezas, J.K.] de raíz, rebrotaban constantemente” (Mairal 2012: 211). Plants become so animated that they create fear among humans who try to control them: “Daba un poco de miedo la huerta. Parecía que respiraba. Las guías de los tomates se me enredaban en el pelo, como agarrándome, cuando las acomodaba” (Mairal 2012: 211–212). The geological force causing collapse is the negative protagonist of the novel, an active absence that negates human civilization and is only visible in its consequences and further limitations on human capacities to act.

However, this planetary reading is not an obvious one. Mairal, like many Latin American authors of literatura de anticipación (Reati), places national allegory in the foreground. This is why the planetary reading must be a reading against the grain, as the novel does not easily lend itself to it (making such a reading an all the more possible one). The operation of scaling is thus mostly one of reading, not of the text itself (Clark 2012). This is not only the case on the thematic and plot levels, but also on the level of syntax: regarding María’s actions, the reader has to imagine an inversion of active sentences into passive ones and vice-versa. This operation is the grammatical counterpart to what new-materialist
environmental historians propose when they claim that plants, animals, and minerals must be recognized as historical “actors whose agency rivals that of the human players” (Miller 2007: 2). Moreover, the resistance that the novel puts up against this move, actively felt by the reader, is a symptom that holds its own potential for recognition. It is precisely the resistance that our human-centered, politically-shaped perception of the world mounts against the decentering perspective of the anthroposes. Resistance is an indicator of how the world of the New Climate Regime (Latour) negates our humanocentric attempts to make sense of it. Finally, this reading also restores the novel’s futuristic aspect: we are not exclusively revisiting episodes of the past but also witnessing a projected future in which human history will be tightly limited by the growing agency of the non-human.

Naturally, the objections that postcolonial thinkers have brought forward against such a reading (namely that it conceals the politics of inequality by means of a false universalism) cannot simply be rejected outright. A third reading of El año comes into focus precisely when we meditate on the relationship between the first and second ones. The reciprocal negation or bracketing of interpretations uncovers their respective blind spots and repressions. From the horizon of each reading, we can see what the other one refuses to think or omits. The local is negated by the planetary dimension of the climate crisis, while the planetary is negated by the social critique of false universalism. This third reading brings forward, reflects on, and “inhabit[s] the tension” (Chakrabarty 2015: 181) between the homocentric and the zoocentric, the visible and the invisible protagonist, histories of capital and the history of life – without ever resolving any of them. Making this tension inhabitable, Chakrabarty suggests, has something to do with the conversion of the colorless, placeless narrative of climate change into a “mood”; an affective experience, tied to the concreteness of place, in this case an experience of Heideggerian thrownness – “the recognition of the otherness of the planet itself” (Chakrabarty 2015: 183). If making available to us what escapes perception necessitates constant shifting between interdependent scales by routing the experience of the “more-than-human planet [. . .] through our all-too-human communities” (Nugent 2020: 456), then Mairal’s novel permits us to playfully operate this shifting by reading the text against the grain.

Works Cited


