World Creation between Collapse and Conviviality
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1. Introduction: Collapse, Conviviality, and Post-Globality in Latin America

Following the manifest exhaustion of the optimistic paradigm of globalisation, which has marked our world for the past thirty years, we are now contending with a conceptual vacuum that demands responses of new kinds. "Post-globality" denotes such a critical response framework that helps us understand the problematic economic, ecological, social, and technological dimensions of this current phase of globalisation, while also seeking out new forms of world creation. The thematic clusters of collapse and conviviality[1] emerge as two decisive pillars of current pan-societal challenges worldwide.

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[1] On the concept of conviviality see Costa, 2019, pp. 1-12.

The fact that these questions have been debated with particular intensity in recent Latin American literature is unsurprising, given that the region is notorious for having suffered from the consequences of globalisation with particular hardship. Ambivalence towards globalised experiences of the "world" is visible there in distilled form. Once again, the hopes for a new age of stability and prosperity, for sustainable economic development and improved social justice have gone unfulfilled over the past two decades. Even an era of intensified global interconnectedness has neither defeated nor prevented a myriad of problems: ongoing social inequality, economic instability, the continued destruction of ecosystems, the persistence of endemic violence, new surges of political and social polarisation, waves of migration, and failures of the state in several countries. In fact, many of these phenomena have been amplified —if not caused outright— by processes of globalisation whose negative side effects weigh particularly heavily and asymmetrically on Latin America (see García Canclini, 2014).[2]

Latin America, with its earlier experiences of the ambivalences and asymmetries of globalisation, is, in a manner of speaking, one step ahead of the rest of the world. The ecological and social problems that come with the region's incorporation into global economic cycles have become a central theme there in their contemporary, historical, and prospective dimensions. Clearly, during this phase of intense and multi-dimensional experiences of crisis, questions about conviviality are also being explored with particular frequency in literature. Hence, not only is the region practically predestined as a site for reflections on post-global conviviality, but it is also better equipped to handle global futures. The experience of global crises —and particularly the question of how to coexist in / with / after a cataclysm— is reflected in contemporary Latin American texts that

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[2] "The world, as a signifier that names the desire for an impossible but operative universal reconciliation, no longer exists", concludes Siskind in reference to the formative contemporary experience of the world (Siskind, 2019, p. 208).

often have a future-facing aspect of imagination or experimentation. These pithy reflections are breaking new ground for the worldwide repertoire of literary forms, as I hope to demonstrate in the following.

One specificity of the post-global aesthetic approach to globalised realities is the ambivalence of an unflinching, often very bleak look at the crises of our time; this is paired with a "world-creating force" (Cheah, 2016) inherent in literature, which opens up new imaginaries of globality. This ambivalence, which I wish to encapsulate in the concept of *Welt(er)schöpfung* ("world exhaustion / creation", "*agotamiento y creación del mundo*")[3] also reflects —on the aesthetic level— the entanglement and fluctuations of the categories of collapse and conviviality, which lie at the centre of this discourse. After all, the post-global aesthetics of *Welt(er)schöpfung*, which involve an increased reflection on the production, consequences, and asymmetries of globalisation, are deeply marked by constellations of conflict that shape human conviviality amidst collapsing living environments.

2. Aesthetics of *Welt(er)schöpfung*

With all this in mind, I would like to position the concept of *Welt(er)schöpfung* as a notion that is very characteristic of this current post-global phase, and yet deeply ambivalent, as I consider examples of Latin American literary texts that navigate the tensions between collapse and conviviality. The concept holds a multiplicity of meanings:

1. In one sense, it denotes the *exhaustion of globalisation practices* and the ways they are addressed in contemporary literary texts. Although the current phenomena of exhaustion

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[3] For more on the notion of world exhaustion/creation, see also Müller, 2023.

and disillusionment trace further back, the 2008 financial and economic crisis can be seen as the turning point of an "exhausted globalisation": the crisis "was interpreted simultaneously as a disaster of society and a distension of the political possibilities because its cause lay in an economic system that, moulded by globalisation, had fallen out of step with the standards of humanity" (Hüther, Diermeier and Goecke, 2019, p. 8). Seen through the lenses of economics and the social sciences, the notion of an exhaustion of the current phase of globalisation provides a unique entry point for envisioning a future form of globalisation that is truly inclusive. Within cultural studies, we can liken the concept of exhaustion to the exhaustion of globalisation postulated by economists: a dynamic within which to identify central sets of intersecting questions. This also implies that even with a (nearly) unabated outward velocity, or even in the absence of structural changes, processes of growth and / or entanglement can "run out". This "vacancy", which will require more precise elaboration, increasingly serves in literature and film as a void in which new (world) creations are emerging during an era lacking grand narratives. Ultimately, the impression that trends are changing course partly results from a sense that the various narratives about the increasingly overt global problems and asymmetries can no longer be strung together into a consistent story or systemic narrative (see Tally, 2019).

2. In a second, metalinguistic sense, the concept of *Welt(er)-schöpfung* also encompasses the exhaustion of theory about global processes, an exhaustion that goes hand in hand with real-world practices, as discussed above. The interplay between global development and theoretical production has developed to a point at which the notion of "world" is increasingly exhausted, although processes of "worlding" in

literature are still being assigned meaning. The aforementioned Pheng Cheah (2016) reframes world literature on two levels. On one level, he argues that the very model of a capitalist market that girdles the whole globe yet obstructs worldwide community is countered by a model of the world derived from the narrative literature of the post-colonial South. On another level, he famously asserts that literature should be understood as a worldmaking activity.

3. The third dimension of the exhaustion concept pertains to the exhaustion of the earth's resources, which conversely exposes the problems with the "world" concept, as regions are unevenly responsible for and affected by it. The Latin American region is prototypical of this starkly apparent asymmetry. That is especially true of the concept of "exhaustion", which could scarcely have been deployed in any non-negative sense given modernity's logics of acceleration and growth (see Rosa, 2015). Furthermore, this is an area where current trends in Latin American literary production come into play, as they envision alternative imaginaries of the global beyond an acceleration dogma that is no longer economically, ecologically, or socially sustainable. Meanwhile, recent reactionary anti-globalist currents have raised the question of how such alternative perceptions of the world and visions for the future can be characterised using a dialectic of exhaustion and new creation that might also be politically progressive.

With all this in mind, the concept of *Welt(er)schöpfung* is deliberately framed as ambivalent. The analytical perspective is not solely focused on the experience of crisis (on "the experience of losing the world"; Siskind, 2019, p. 208), but also on the creativity of world creation as situated in the tension between reflections on experiences of collapse, on the one hand, and new imaginaries of conviviality, on the other.

On a thematic level, we can identify three especially prominent areas, which also promise insights, particularly in light of their interconnections: 1) ecological issues around Anthropocene narratives, 2) the digital revolution, and 3) epidemic realities and fictions. Turning to the first area, in the Latin American context, Anthropocene narratives draw on an immense corpus of imaginaries and fictions that look back on a long history of (post)colonial resource extraction and the corresponding elimination of ecosystems, along with their human, zoological, and botanical diversity (see Beckman, 2013). These narratives rely on specific aesthetic techniques, such as critical depictions of spatio-temporal relationships (see Andermann, 2018) or "geo-poetics" and "cosmograms" (see Tresch, 2007). Apart from this, in the context of discussions around defining the Anthropocene as the latest geohistorical era, the implosion of traditional epistemological borders between humans and nature (Latour, 1999) has increasingly become a subject of aesthetic reflection.

The second major theme is the digital transformation, the revolutionary potential of which has had a radical impact worldwide. Over the past ten years, it has grown into a key aspect of a post-global writing practice, yet has remained at the margins of scholarship, as have new forms of expressly digital literature (see Gainza, 2018). Experiences of digitality are invariably and fundamentally shaped by the force with which technology penetrates virtually every aspect of human life, as well as by its ambiguous utility, which combines productive world creation with new phenomena of affective alienation and exploitation (see Staab, 2019; Nassehi, 2019). Latin American contemporary literatures focus mainly on the ambivalent experiences of the digital within the framework of post-global lifestyles, such as through science fiction that plays with both utopian and dystopian elements. What these texts have in common is their depiction of forms of digital *Welt(er)schöpfung* that oscillate between estrangement and the formation of new communities. On a broader level, they are perceived as similarly paradigmatic in their efforts to

explore the characteristics and ambivalences of digital life within an emotional subjectivity.

The third thematic cluster of post-global literature deals with contaminated worlds and epidemic fictions. These texts underline the connection between world creation and chains of infection. Globalised experiences of contamination present a crisis for imaginaries of an infinitely-extensible world that can be limitlessly connected. These epidemic fictions are not always based on factual history, although the AIDS pandemic did inspire an entire genre of such "viral" texts (see Meruane, 2014). Often, epidemics serve as allegorical pretexts for the representation of experiences of world exhaustion. Literary world creations that blend several of these thematic clusters are especially fascinating, of course. In terms of genre theory, experiences of utter insecurity caused by contaminated existence have sparked a renaissance of utopian, dystopian, and science fiction. These texts invariably also address the violation of established boundaries of the human in the domains of trans and post-humanism.

Let us presume that conviviality is negotiated on two levels in literary texts: first, at the level of forms of knowledge about conviviality (which I define as conveying certain literary content about conviviality, which can be explicitly or implicitly legible) and, second, at the level of knowledge norms (which I define as explicitly conveying an agenda for good or ideal conviviality). How does the literary potential of conviviality, as so defined, unfold in literary texts that convey experiences of *Welt(er)schöpfung*? In what way does the collapse or threat thereof influence the emergence of norms of knowledge regarding conviviality in the texts?

I would like to explore the aforementioned tension between collapse and conviviality through the novels *Los días de la peste* (2017) by the Bolivian author Edmundo Paz Soldán, *Mugre rosa* (2020) by the Uruguayan-born author Fernanda Trías, and *Distancia de rescate* (2014) by the Argentine author Samanta Schweblin. In very specific and disparate ways, all three authors address the threat

to conviviality posed by the collapse of a social and / or ecological system in the context of contamination experiences. Given the well-known questions about how to narrate a "catastrophe without an event" (see Horn, 2014, p. 111), the collapse already underway constitutes the central narrative element of our literary portrayals, while also determining the narrators' attitudes towards their narratives (and thus central elements of 'world creation' in the novel). In recent theory on conviviality, Sergio Costa and others have pointed out that the term often implies good and successful conviviality. In this context, Costa has famously emphasised the nexus between "inequality" and "conviviality" and also teased out the implicit power dimensions of "convivial figurations" (Costa, 2019, p. 15), which I will take into account in the following discussions.

3. Edmundo Paz Soldán: *Los días de la peste*

Edmundo Paz Soldán's 2017 novel, *Los días de la peste*, describes the effects of the outbreak of an epidemic on the microcosm of a prison —a place marked by violence, corruption, and religious ritual— which culminates in the prison's closure. Over the course of the novel, the Casona prison becomes a symbol of a permanent social catastrophe, within which the particular instances of collapse are embedded. These smaller collapses provide the occasion to play out various forms of conviviality and thereby shift the focus to convivial figurations.

Let us begin by considering the level of forms of knowledge about conviviality in the novel. The inmates of a prison on the periphery of an unspecified Latin American country can move freely, more or less, within its walls, and have family members living there with them. It is mostly the watchtowers around La Casona's perimeter that outwardly mark it is a prison. From the inside, the institution seems more like a small town. But only those with money can secure a somewhat comfortable life there or even purchase their freedom.

The institution is rife with corruption, violence, protection-money rackets, drug dealing, and prostitution. La Casona is subdivided into five courtyards that inevitably recall the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno* and render a hierarchical power structure visible. Daily life in the prison is described in fragmentary form through the perspectives of around thirty people.

Many of the prisoners have channelled their hopes and their dissatisfaction with the government into the cult of the "Innombrable" divinity, which, instead of promoting a better world, espouses retaliation and caters to figures on the margins of society. On the level of the narrated events, the dimension of forms of knowledge blends here with a normative aspect, but is directed towards the negative, and the destructive. The cult is banned for its politically explosive power. Meanwhile, an epidemic breaks out in La Casona, striking down not only inmates, but also family members of the institution's elite: "Everyone was equal before the virus" (Paz Soldán, 2017, p. 307; my translation). Under the pressure of the resulting protests and riots, worn down by political and ideological disagreements, the system sustaining La Casona collapses.

Regarding conviviality at La Casona, the prisoner Rigo serves as a vehicle for conveying a knowledge norm which once again extends beyond interpersonal conviviality and encompasses other living organisms. Rigo is a volunteer at the prison infirmary who devoutly believes that all living beings are equal. His religion partly involves dissolving the "I" of the self into a collective "we", which is why the episodes he relates are always written in the first-person plural as a kind of collective self —a "yo asambleario" (Mora, 2017). Martins de Vasconcellos (2019) sees this as a "micropolitical formula of resistance" in the sense of Roberto Espósito's (2017) "impersonal singularity" or "singular impersonality", which leaves behind forms of individuation of humans, plants, and animals in favour of an affirmative biopolitics directed toward the post-subjective and post-human. Rigo's plural self becomes a mirror for La Casona, as both are simultaneously collective and individual.

The book explores different possibilities of conviviality, including normative dimensions, but these always are embedded in a context of existential threat, violence, and collapse. The epidemic carries on relentlessly killing, following its internal logic of contamination, but it is not the only endless terror operating here. Although the prison is raided and shut down at the end of the novel, the primary response to this situation proposed by the character Dr. Achebi is disillusioning: "Close La Casona. [...] Move everyone to a new prison, built to solve the problem. That prison will be called La Casona" (Paz Soldán, 2017, p. 284; my translation). In the end, we see not only an exhausted world, but one that repeatedly exhausts itself, and lacks any future prospects besides identical self-reproduction.

4. Fernanda Trías: *Mugre rosa*

The motif of collapse is omnipresent in the novel *Mugre rosa* (2020) by Fernanda Trías. An ecological catastrophe causes the local ecosystem of an unnamed coastal town to collapse: a bloom of dark red algae in the water causes a die-off of the local fish population and contaminates the beaches. When the aquatic ecosystem reaches a tipping point, the entire region's climatic processes collapse. In the absence of rain, the dominant weather is a persistent, thick, wet fog, usually accompanied by a strong, red wind. At the level of forms of knowledge about conviviality, one central aspect here is that the climatic and ecological changes, along with a wind-borne, usually fatal disease, lead in turn to social collapse. However, a collapse that would fully envelop the lives of the region's inhabitants has yet to come and is only proclaimed at the end of the novel with the total —in some cases forced— evacuation of the region.

The few central characters in the novel open up a range of narrative variations on experiences of exhaustion. The first-person narrator, a woman in her forties, reports on an experience of profound exhaustion encompassing all realms of life (for which the

only counterpoint is the act of storytelling as literary creation). Her ex-husband is gravely ill at the hospital, and the child she professionally cares for suffers from an insatiable hunger, a symptom of Prader-Willi Syndrome. The text treats that hunger as another experience of exhaustion that annihilates any other life impulse. The narrator's mother lives in an outlying district. Despite their dysfunctional relationship, the daughter contacts her regularly during the escalating general emergency, but also regularly lies to her, claiming to be saving up for a (joint) escape when in fact she has had enough savings all along but has simply refrained from embarking on the journey. In terms of the network of relationships, the novel's title takes on symbolic power. At first, *Mugre rosa* ("pink filth") refers to a kind of meat paste produced at a new factory in order to feed the population during the crisis:

> We all hated the new factory, but we relied on it, and so we owed it gratitude. A good mother, a provider. [...] We are born like that: a clot of flesh gasping for a little oxygen; a ball of pink filth that, once expelled, has no choice but to cling to that other body, the mother's, to bite down hard on the teat of life. (Trías, 2021, p. 113; my translation)

Taking images of birth and the creation of new life as a starting point, conviviality seems like a hopelessly dependent relationship in which humans are no more than "balls of pink filth". Ultimately, all prospects of conviviality in the protagonist's reality are governed by destructive dependencies, and there is no normative approach to achieving "good" conviviality. Via the thematic cluster around questions of conviviality, the novel draws parallels between social developments and the desperation of ecological collapse, and it is precisely this parallel that highlights the perverseness of the relationship dynamics portrayed.

Critics have remarked on Fernanda Trías's breaching of genre boundaries. According to Ramiro Sanchiz (2021), for example, the novel incorporates elements from science fiction, dystopia, and eco-catastrophe. Such genre-blending is typical in the context of

post-global portrayals of *Welt(er)schöpfung* and their intertwined themes.

5. Samanta Schweblin: *Distancia de rescate*

The bond between mother and daughter is also a central theme in Argentine author Samanta Schweblin's 2014 debut novel, *Distancia de rescate* ("rescue distance", published in English as *Fever Dream*). The eponymous "distancia de rescate" represents the connection between Amanda and her young daughter Nina, imagined and perceived as a physical (umbilical) cord, which is meant to ensure that no matter the situation, the mother can anticipate possible dangers or at least ward them off in time. However, confronted with the danger at the centre of Schweblin's novel, the tried-and-true "rescue distance" mechanism ultimately fails. On a vacation "in the countryside", in a region marked by industrial soybean cultivation, Amanda and Nina are exposed to a highly toxic agrochemical compound, possibly the controversial herbicide glyphosate (Roundup). They soon develop symptoms of a life-threatening poisoning. Amanda dies at the village clinic, but Nina is saved by a mystical transmigration ritual.

The novel's plot unfolds through a dialogue between the dying Amanda, and David, her neighbour Carla's son, who also survived a poisoning in early childhood with the help of transmigration and has been considered "peculiar" ever since. Through a series of questions, David guides Amanda through the memory of the preceding days' events and helps her understand what has happened to her and her daughter. The dialogue between Amanda and David resembles a quest to determine the exact moment of the poisoning. The boy repeatedly directs the dying woman's fickle attention to that moment, which, as he repeatedly emphasises, is "the important thing". This is the tipping point in Amanda and Nina's story —the instant when the poison takes effect in their bodies and leads irreversibly to collapse.

David says: "The important thing already happened. What follows are only consequences" (Schweblin, 2017).

The same holds for the ecological catastrophe that furnishes the background to Schweblin's narrative and takes on ever clearer contours as the plot progresses. Life in the shadow of the soybean fields is contaminated and frequent acute poisonings kill people and animals alike, leaving survivors with disabilities. Miscarriages are common, and the water is polluted. Only the soybean fields glow an unnatural green in an environment that seems otherwise deserted: "Beyond the soy fields it looks green and bright under the dark clouds. But the ground they are walking on [...] is dry and hard" (Schweblin, 2017).

Bieke Willem's contribution to this volume illustrates the disastrous effects of export-oriented monoculture farming on Argentina, and specifically soy cultivation, summarizing the situation in one word: exhaustion.[4] Willem further explains how this exhaustion in Schweblin's novel is not only tangible on a biological and economic level, but also marks the end of a literary tradition. The Anthropocene has rendered the old clichéd distinction between city (civilisation) and country (nature) obsolete. On a narrative level, these phenomena of exhaustion correspond to the condition of the agonizing protagonist, who describes herself several times as tired, weak, and exhausted.

If we consider the modes of conviviality depicted in the face of this creeping, menacing ecological catastrophe, it strikes us that Schweblin has introduced multiple convivial figurations. On one side is the male-dominated, rational, and profit-oriented sphere, which includes not only the farmworkers but also Amanda and Carla's husbands. They appear as isolated individuals with nothing to say to each other, who turn a blind eye to the alarming circumstances around them and their interconnections.[5] When the two

[4] "Los efectos nefastos del monocultivo sobre el medio ambiente, la sociedad y la economía son bien conocidos, y pueden resumirse en una palabra: agotamiento".
[5] For Nicolás Campisi, this male sphere is a stand-in for the State: "Omar se niega a develar la red de contagio ecológico, como si haciéndolo violara el contrato que

husbands meet at the end of the novel, each scene speaks volumes about this helpless, blind isolation. Asked by Amanda's husband why his daughter's personality has changed after her recovery, Carla's husband replies: "You know there's nothing I can tell you" (Schweblin, 2017). They proceed to look at the soybean fields: "They are close together, close and at the same time alone in so much open land" (Schweblin, 2017). Amanda's husband does not recognise what is obvious to the reader, that a part of their daughter's soul has passed into David during the transmigration. Nor does he notice the signs of exhaustion or imminent collapse on his drive back to the city:

> He doesn't stop in town. He doesn't look back. He doesn't see the soy fields, the streams that crisscross the dry plots of land, the miles of open fields empty of livestock. [...] He doesn't notice that [...] there are too many cars, cars and more cars covering every asphalt nerve. [...] He doesn't see the important thing: the rope finally slack, like a lit fuse, somewhere; the motionless scourge about to erupt (Schweblin, 2017).

In the sphere of women and children, there are different norms of conviviality. The imperative here is to protect the children, symbolised by the titular "distancia de rescate", an imperative that becomes harder and harder to follow as they are powerless against the ubiquitous poison.[6] The women search for new forms of conviviality suitable for the changed conditions, forms that are often marked by ambivalence. During the day, the many affected children of the village are either sent away or cared for at the clinic, depending on one's perspective. In cases of acute poisoning, mothers seek help from an alternative healer, although the transmigration process which saves

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ha contraído con el sector agropecuario. En este contexto, la pasividad de los padres sirve como una metáfora de la ausencia del estado en el pueblo, un pueblo-clínica conducido por enfermeras madres" (Campisi, 2020, p. 175).

[6] Again quoting Campisi, Schweblin's novel explores "the limits of the notion of maternity in scenarios of agro-toxic contagion" (Campisi, 2020, p. 172).

the victims —and of which the men are (purposefully) ignorant—
causes personality changes.

While the connection between mother and child is central in the
mothers' sphere, relationships multiply in a third sphere, that of the
contaminated children. The concept of conviviality is expanded here
in various directions: primarily, of course, through the imagined
procedure of transmigration of souls that David and Nina undergo
and through the following conviviality of parts of two individuals
within in one person. In this sphere, conviviality encompasses not
only humans but also the animal world. David has a striking connec-
tion with contaminated animals: they come to him to die and he bur-
ies them with the utmost empathy. This level is incomprehensible
to those around him, and he is generally perceived as uncanny and
strange —even his mother finds him opaque and is inclined to blame
him for the animals' deaths. Furthermore, David also transcends the
physical laws of space and time when he enables Amanda at the mo-
ment of her death to see events that will not take place until weeks
later. The realisation that all things are connected is shown in David
/ Nina's habit (after the transmigration of Nina's soul into David's
body) of tying together everyday objects with rope, but this is a form
of communication that the fathers do not grasp. In the novel's nar-
ration, this network of ropes replaces the imaginary rope that con-
nected Amanda to Nina and determined the "distancia de rescate".
It thus extends, in some manner, the principle of protective love for
all things.

All three spheres demonstrate norms and forms of conviviality in
the face of human-made ecological disasters. In particular, the mod-
els of conviviality surrounding the contaminated children, which
transcend common notions of human togetherness, can be read as
attempts to unite collapse and conviviality creatively.

6. Conclusion

The novels we have seen here each depict exhausted worlds that present social, pandemic, and ecological dimensions as deeply and palpably intertwined. The focus on aspects of collapse proves central to the three literary examples, as it foregrounds the interdependence between natural and social systems. At the same time, the texts engage with the question of conviviality, of the remaining possibilities for conviviality as a highly distilled theme.

Normative aspects and the question of how to meaningfully reshape the future in the face of the twenty-first century's global crises come to the forefront in (core elements of) emergent theory on conviviality. Meanwhile, with regard to various levels of forms and norms of knowledge, the literary examples demonstrate how problematic the idea of good or ideal conviviality has become for the exhausted worlds of post-global Latin American literature. The ambivalent concept of *Welt(er)schöpfung* is precisely what allows us to conceptualise the entanglement of exhaustion motifs in tandem with the texts' own themes of creation. In these literary texts, we see portrayals of exhausted and deeply conflicting convivial figurations that are tightly intertwined with worlds in the throes of pandemic or ecological collapse, worlds marked by structures of power and dependency. The aspect of creation within the concept of *Welt(er)schöpfung* does not go along with norms of "good conviviality" in a future to be newly envisioned, but instead conveys the horror inherent in the new creation and reproduction of destroyed worlds.

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