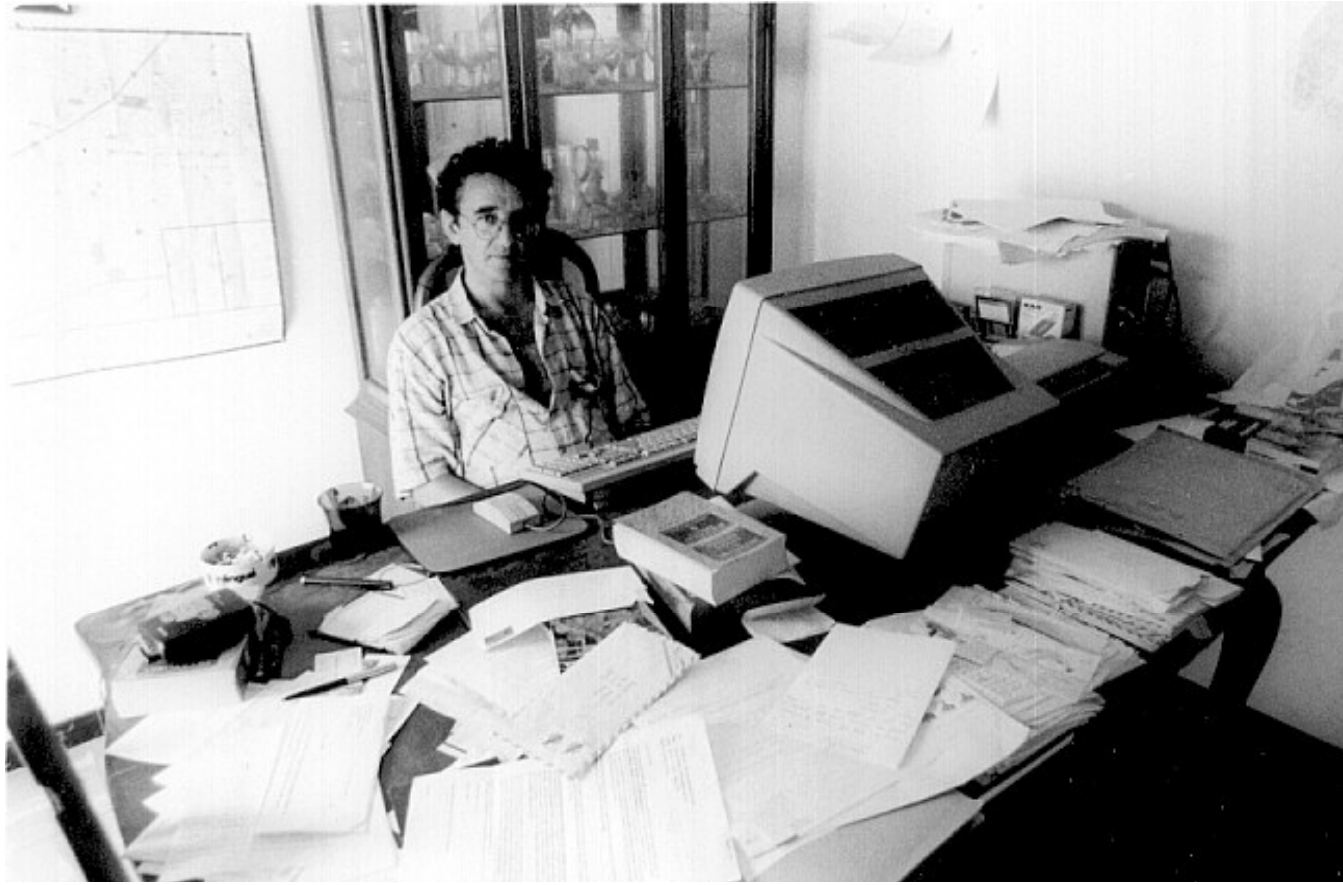


# A Dead Artist in Motion: Review of Roberto Bolaño's *The Third Reich*

"Today's events are still confused, but I'll try to set them down in orderly fashion so that I can perhaps discover in them something that has thus far eluded me, a difficult and possibly useless task, since there's no remedy for what's happened and little point in nurturing false hopes. But I have to do something to pass the time." This final sentiment appears to be the singular impulse driving Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel, *The Third Reich*, published this year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. In its unfortunately underdeveloped and abandoned state, *The Third Reich* often reads like an unwilling exercise—a chronicle of self-imposed isolation. Given the remarkably prolific sequence of publications since Bolaño's untimely death in 2003 (posthumous publications in



English include *Amulet*, *Monsieur Pain*, *By Night in Chile*, *Antwerp*, and the forthcoming *Woes of the True Policeman*), it is not entirely surprising that this abandoned novel often refuses to develop its primary elements. Yet if you read retroactively with *The Savage Detectives* and Bolaño's masterful *2666* in mind, you can see the emergence of many of the motifs that structure his finest work: e.g., geographic displacement, noir-inspired mystery, offstage violence, and journalistic documentation.

Udo Berger, the protagonist of *The Third Reich*, is a German war games champion vacationing on the beaches of Costa Brava with his considerably more outgoing girlfriend Ingeborg. Together they befriend Charly and Hanna, whose late-night excursions accelerate from light inebriation to irrevocable chaos. By day, Udo Berger consumes his time as a WWII strategist, repeatedly fighting the major battles with dice and an oversized board. His obsessive gaming is predominantly cryptic—Bolaño constructs his gaming passages as a stenographer might, which is to say without psychological embellishment or color. By night, Udo parties with Ingeborg, Charly, and Hanna as a loutish vacationer. His late outings seem only to aggravate his existentialized sense of isolation.

*The Third Reich* proceeds within three discursive spaces—in part it is a report of Udo's increasingly anxious nightlife, it is a direct record of his incessant war gaming, and it is also part diary and confession. It is within the impressionistic entries of Udo's diary that Bolaño achieves his most interesting literary device. This mode of transmission supplies a decisive layer of perspectival concealment—Udo's reflections often fail to identify his own

drives in a way that infuses his presence with an ineffable sense of coldness. Through his daily entries you witness the development of a friendship with a local man known as El Quemado. He is a burn victim and gradually acquires a role as Udo's opponent in gaming. El Quemado's background is shrouded in mystery—are his burns the result of war?

Bolaño refuses to provide an answer. Over time Charly's drunken antics escalate until he disappears one night windsurfing.

Just as it is the case in his later work, Bolaño's mystery in *The Third Reich* is only a mystery in appearance. Indeed, Bolaño is reported to have said that he would have "preferred to be a detective rather than a writer." While it is transparently clear that his work plays with the traditional elements of mystery (journalistic detachment, violence, infidelity, missing persons), Bolaño only employs such tropes in order to complicate them. *The Third Reich* is interesting insofar as Udo Berger backs away from the crisis that his life has become. He retreats into the world of strategic gaming, where historical violence is mediated through cheap, desensitized stimulation. As the characters of his life drift back into their proper place Udo insists upon his literal and emotional displacement. Unfortunately, *The Third Reich* was probably abandoned in 1989 because its formal success was predicated on the total withdrawal of its protagonist. Consequently, the narrative fails to elevate and synthesize its fragments into the densely textured mosaics that constitute Bolaño's more elaborate novels.

That is why Giles Harvey is probably correct when he writes in "The New Yorker" that *The Third Reich* should join the shelf marked "For Completists Only." I am less convinced however, in his assessment that you "have to go back to Balzac and Dostoevsky to find masters of the novel form who showed so little interest in the sentence." Bolaño's prose attained rare heights—both in the complexity of its formal structure as well as through the haunting defamiliarization of his lyricism.

There are extraordinarily accomplished moments in *2666* with respect to their formal properties. Take the following description of a conversation from the first book of *2666* as an example of the inventive way in which Bolaño fuses the strategies of compression and lyricism:

"The first conversation began awkwardly, although Espinoza had been expecting Pelletier's call, as if both men found it difficult to say what sooner or later they would have to say. The first twenty minutes were tragic in tone, with the word *fate* used ten times and the word *friendship* twenty-four times. Liz Norton's name was spoken fifty times, nine of them in vain. The word *Paris* was said seven times. *Madrid*, eight. The word *love* was spoken twice, once by each man. The word *horror* was spoken six times and the word *happiness* once (by Espinoza). The word *solution* was said twelve times. The word *category*, in the singular and the plural, nine times. The word *structuralism* once (Pelletier). The term *American literature* three times. The words *dinner* or *eating* or *breakfast* or *sandwich* nineteen times. The words *eyes* or *hands* or *hair* fourteen times. Then the conversation proceeded more smoothly. Pelletier told Espinoza a joke in German and Espinoza laughed. In fact, they both laughed, wrapped up in the waves or whatever it was that linked their voices and ears across the dark fields and the wind and the snow of the Pyrenees and the rivers and the lonely roads and the separate and interminable suburbs surrounding Paris and Madrid."

Such passages manage to short-circuit the clichéd and nevertheless expand and develop the minute particular in the same gesture. The seemingly limitless flexibility of Bolaño's narrative voice as well as the heterogeneity of its parts makes *2666* the immediately compelling and necessary book that it is. At his finest, his writing is fully in command of the disparate literary traditions he draws on, and his powers as an artist seem to transform his precursors—namely, they are transformed into the figurative architecture which animates and supports the landscape of his characters. It is unclear how the hurried frenzy of posthumous publications will ultimately affect Bolaño's legacy, though they are nevertheless contributing to a more complete representation of his (apparently) immense and ongoing corpus.

-Charles Prusik