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# POST 9/11 FEARS AND THE LATIN AMERICAN FANTASTIC

*Enemies Within, Scapegoats and Political Ideology in Samantha Schweblin's Distancia de Rescate*

**ABSTRACT:** The relationship between fantastic narrative and ideology has rarely and obliquely been the subject of the ever-growing literature on the genre. In this paper, I read the New Weird in Latin America (Sanchiz & Bizzarri 2020) as a site uniquely able to register – but also actively engage in – epochal shifts that are having a profound impact on our relationship to ideology. Žižek’s reading of the era-defining changes produced by the 9/11 terror attacks is mobilized to explore three key elements of Samanta Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate*: first, its Weird treatment of the “enemy within” and its reconfiguration of the Cortazarian trope of the “casa tomada”; second, its use of a very particular double-first-person narrator who refuse(s) or fail(s) to identify a real (political) enemy and instead scapegoat(s) multiple (female) Others; third, the impact of this same hallucinatory narrative voice on the perception of the shocking ecological catastrophe which, though central to the plot, undergoes what Žižek terms “derealization.” In turn, these readings offer new perspectives on how the Argentine and Latin American New Weird are opening up new forms of the fantastic that are able to better account for the impacts of contemporary (un)realities on gendered subjectivities; and might, ultimately, be able to offer ways of narrating ourselves out of ecosystem collapse.

**KEYWORDS:** Argentine Literature; Fantastic; Weird; 9/11; Other; Feminism; Ecology.

We are sleepwalking towards the edge of a cliff  
Mike Barrett, WWF, in *This Is Not A Drill*

Las mujeres locas son las suicidas, las santas, las  
históricas, las solteronas, las brujas y las  
embrujadas, las monjas, las posesas, [...], las  
malas madres, las madrastras, las filicidas, [...]  
las lesbianas, las menopáusicas, las estériles, las  
abandonadas, las políticas, las sabias, las artistas,  
las intelectuales, las mujeres solas, las feministas.  
Marcela Lagarde, *Cautiverios de la mujer*

## Prequel on post-9/11 ideolog(ies) and fantastic literature with Héctor Hernández Montecinos, Slavoj Žižek and David Higgins

Chilean poet Héctor Hernández Montecinos, during a roundtable discussion at the University of Costa Rica in July 2023, made a powerful statement: following the terror attack that led to the collapse of the Twin Towers in 2001, poetry – and literature – has been reduced to ruins. Ruin, ruined, ruination, ruinous, ruining... For Hernández Montecinos, this lexical field and its conceptual derivatives – from decay and dissolution to destruction and extinction – has become the only unifying thread of the ensuing literature produced in the twenty-first century in the Americas and elsewhere. From a poetic angle, Hernández Montecinos thus registered a broader ideological shift that political scientists have associated with the fall of the Twin Towers in a way rivalled only by another radically epochal collapse, that of the Berlin Wall in 1989: “world order”, historian Andrew Heywood summarizes, “has been significantly changed as a result of the end of the Cold War, brought about by the collapse of communism in the Eastern European revolutions of 1989–91, and, more recently, by the advent of global terrorism” (2012, 17).

In order to better understand the relationship between fantastic literature and ideology in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we must first understand some of the broader societal transformations produced by the 9/11 terror attacks, which might be summarized through three key phenomena: the collapse of previous beliefs around the boundedness, security and supremacy of capitalist Western and sovereign states; the consequent identification, invention or indeed creation of a whole host of threatening – terrifying – Others expressed, perpetuated and deepened by so-called culture wars; and the blurring of the boundaries between fiction, especially science fiction, and reality.

The first and most obvious impact of the 9/11 attacks was a collective, globalized psychology of deep-rooted fear: if the national borders of the US superpower could be shattered so abruptly, anything could happen; but moreover, it could always have happened. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), Slavoj Žižek famously reconsiders Samuel P. Huntington’s notion of the “clash of civilizations” (1993) in the light of these earth-shattering terror attacks: in the global conflict that would ensue, George W. Bush’s war on terror, “every feature attributed to the Other is already present at the very heart of the USA” (2002: 43). As many books and disaster movies would later dramatize, the enemy was already within, not least because the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were products of a CIA-sponsored anti-Soviet guerilla movement in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Following a brief “post-ideological” period some had diagnosed in post-Cold War politics, the collapse of the

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<sup>1</sup> The same would later be said about ISIS as a direct result of the US-led “anti-terrorist operation” in Iraq.

Twin Towers produced what David Higgins, in an essay on American science fiction since 9/11, terms a return to ideology, but with a crucial twist:

Cold War-style conflict between America and an external enemy again becomes possible. The location and identity of this enemy, however, is always radically uncertain, and in the context of ubiquitous globalizing information and technology advancements directed by the needs of late capitalism, distinctions between inside and outside seem to evaporate. (2015, 45)

The second impact of 9/11 is a knock-on effect of this “radical uncertainty” around who or what the enemy might be, and the resulting indistinction between inside and outside: the identification, creation or reinvention of a multitude of Others, old and new; ever wider and vaster categories from Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda and terrorists to Muslims, migrants, racialized (Brown and Black) people, trans people and – as we argue in this paper – women.

These Others have multiplied and taken new forms in the twenty-first century, forms that notably defy the boundaries between human and other-than-human, from the dehumanization of the Other following 9/11 (Butler 2004) to the emergence of new threats in the form of viruses in the global Covid-19 pandemic and Artificial Intelligence following the controversial release of Chat-GTP as posing a “risk of extinction” (Roose 2023). As a consequence, new ideological wars – or so-called culture wars – have proliferated. These take as their target a variety of declared enemies, from overt, declared and military wars – George W. Bush’s War of Terror and Felipe Calderón’s War on Drugs – to more silent, but no less deadly wars that have spiraled since the turn of the century: the “war on migrants” (Meyerson 2006), the “war on women” (Segato 2016) and the “war on the poor” (Rodríguez Rejas 2019); in a multiplication of ideological – and often identitarian – wars that converge along the lines of what anthropologists Ruben Andersson and David Keen (2023), in relation to contemporary global politics and policy-making, term *Wreckonomics*: the contemporary addiction to “waging war on everything”, leading to the widespread proliferation of wars and pseudo-wars that feed upon their own failure and self-destructiveness.

The third impact of 9/11 is perhaps that explored most artfully by Žižek, who compares the World Trade Centre attacks to Hollywood disaster movies without always placing the former before the latter: “the unthinkable which has happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise” (2002, 16). Sci-fi, with the fall of the Twin Towers, entered the realm of reality; some cinematic fictions – like Edward Zwick’s *The Siege* (1998) – even anticipated it. The paradoxical effect of this blending of reality and fiction, for Žižek, is that “we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity” (11). In the endless replaying of the catastrophe on TV and later in films and books, the event and the story became commodified like any other product of the culture industry, and global citizens were

asked to consume this event as a spectacle. And this “derealization” of horror narratives, Žižek argues, went on long after the event itself (13), perpetuating and entrenching what might be read as a collapse of – principally fantastic or sci-fi – fiction into everyday reality.

These interrelated social, political and ideological impacts make their marks on science fiction, Higgins suggests, in two principal ways: a new form of “the alien invasion trope” and, in parallel, “a pervasive feeling that contemporary life under globalized capitalism itself feel science fictional” (2015, 51). To these we might add a very fundamental “sense of dread” (Garner 2021), and particularly a sense of the threat coming from within that is – forgive the pun – home territory for fantastic narrative. Yet the exploration of these ideological shifts and their relationship to literature and film – from science fiction and fantastic literature to post-9/11 disaster movies – has largely been focused on cultural production in Anglosaxon, American and European contexts. In line with the special issue of which this article is part, and inspired by Hernández Montecinos’s explicit linking of a radical shift in Latin American cultural production to the global impacts of 9/11, I ask whether and how new forms of the fantastic in twenty-first-century Latin America might be considered in relation to the violent return and transformation of ideology ushered in by these and other epochal events.

### *Distancia de rescate* and its uncomfortable questions

In order to address this over-arching question, I offer new readings of Samanta Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate* (2014), and explore the intersection between fantastic literature, ideology and culture wars from an Argentine and feminist perspective. As suggested by the relatively large number of academic articles the novel has inspired in just under a decade (Audran 2015, de Leone 2017, Forttes 2018, Mutis 2019, Sanchiz 2020, Salva 2021, Rubino & Sánchez 2021, Vázquez–Medina 2022, O’Rawe 2023), this is a particularly productive text through which to explore contemporary Latin American literature in relation to pressing global issues. As I argue in dialogue with the aforementioned critics, the novella plays on widespread terrors including those perhaps most emblematic of the twenty-first century: the climate emergency, impending ecosystems collapse, and the widespread fear of extinction – the end of humanity – itself. But beyond this fear of societal *collapse* represented most emblematically by the World Trade Center attacks, Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate* (2014) also forces the reader to grapple with that which lies distinctly outside their comfort zone; engaging the reader with a series of ethical/ideological questions about where the greatest threats (to human life) currently lie, about cultures of scapegoating and about the dangers of derealizing very real dangers (like ecological catastrophes) through (fake) culture wars.

In this way, Schweblin's novella serves as a fruitful point of entry to address the following questions: What is the relationship between ideology and the fantastic in Latin American literature? And how has this relationship shifted in the aftermath of 9/11? These overarching questions will be addressed through more specific ones: To what extent can Schweblin's fantastic fiction be regarded as political, or even ideological? Where does her work lie between the feminine and the feminist, between the ecological and the environmentalist? Should her work be considered in relation to broader feminist or ecological movements that have emerged in Argentina and elsewhere since the turn of the century?

In dialogue with existing theories of the fantastic – from Rosemary Jackson and Mark Fisher in European and Anglosaxon cultures to Ramiro Sanchiz, Gabriele Bizzarri, Carlos Gamerro, Anna Boccuti and Sandra Gasparini in Latin American literature – I offer new readings of Schweblin's novella as a feminist expression of post-9/11 Weird Argentine literature: first, in its Weird treatment of the “enemy within” and its reconfiguration of the Cortazarian trope of the “casa tomada”; second, in its use of a very particular plural first person narrator who refuse(s) or fail(s) to identify a real (political) enemy and instead scapegoat multiple (feminine) Others; third, the impact of this same hallucinatory narrative voice on the perception of the shocking events of the plot, which undergoes what Žižek terms “derealization”.

### A slippery thing called ideology: from fantasies to the fantastic

In order to understand the relationship between ideology and the fantastic in Schweblin's novella, we first need to pin down what is meant by ideology, both before and after 9/11. Below, I read ideology with Slavoj Žižek as a set of ideas and ideals – beliefs or in Žižek's terms, fantasies – that motivate groups of people, often as a result of hegemonic mediations in the form of mainstream media or politics, to act in certain ways. These ideologies are powerful agential structures in which individual belief – the cornerstone of ideology – is not merely an internal, mental state but is materialized in our collective, social and political life: it has tangible impacts on our lives. Žižek himself brings examples from fantastic literature to substantiate his argument about ideology. Kafka's hellish novellas, for example, are used to illustrate Žižek's point about the merging of the fantastic and the real in authoritarian bureaucratic technocracies: “Kafka's universe' is not a 'fantasy-image of social reality' but, on the contrary, the *mise-en-scène* of the fantasy which is at work in the midst of social reality itself” (Žižek 1989: 34). The (material) real is always already the result of the (ideological) fantasy.

Key to Žižek's conception of ideology as “fantasy” is Lacan's theory of subjectification as a process of moving from the slippery, ambiguous, pre-linguistic “Real” order to a

Symbolic order dictated by linguistic and discursive rules and prohibitions: what he terms the Law (Žižek: 2002). As a result, for Žižek as for Lacan, human subjects and societies make sense of their ultimately chaotic, language-bound and therefore ungraspable reality (like the very real disaster, in our contemporary reality, of the climate emergency), through the construction of the Law. The Law in Žižek’s Lacanian terms imposes prohibitions on desire that, through complex sets of narratives, become ideologies: language-bound structures that regulate social behaviour and trace the slippery lines between what is culturally acceptable and what is not; between social/anti-social; included/excluded; what belongs/what does not. One of the functions of the ideological fantasy, in this context, is that of justifying violence, excess and wars waged to “maintain” the social order. “Faced with problems like war, economic failures, or terrorism, ideologies externalise these problems’ causes: it’s not us, it’s them, or forces beyond our control, so we cannot be blamed – if only these external or disloyal sources of disorder can be removed, all will be well” (Sharpe 2023).

In Argentina as elsewhere, this rise of externalized blame (ergo culture wars) lies beyond the trauma of the 9/11 attacks and the shattered fantasy of global order based on a comfortable and impossibly simple dialectics of West vs. not-West; Capitalist vs. Communist; us vs. them; liberal democracy vs. authoritarianism (Žižek 2003). Arguably, indeed, the rise of a culture of hate and suspicion can be traced back to the decline in the twenty-first century of a politics of inclusion that in the 1980s and 1990s had been ushered in by the second wave feminist movement, indigenous movements, political identity movements, and black movements that “challenged racism, entrenched inequalities, and the ways that national ideologies of mixture hid, and diluted, Afrodescendant identity” (Htun, 2016), and in the early 2000s by the first Pink Tide.

Historians and cultural scholars alike are just catching up on the fact that contemporary Latin America – with Argentina as a prime example – is a point of epochal rupture from these Pink Tides and their politics of inclusion.<sup>2</sup> This is seen in a rise of the new populist ultra-right leaders, symbolized today by the Presidencies of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-23) and Javier Gerardo Milei in Argentina (2023-), whose “politics of hatred” is characterized by a highly theatrical – performative and *cultural* – “gestuality of hatred” (Kiffer & Giorgi 2019). At the same time, though, we are witnessing multiple, historically-rooted currents of resistance, most notably in Argentina the movement for the right to abortion, which has become known as the Green Wave (Marea Verde) (Artazo, Ramia & Menoyo 2021) and has emerged from earlier feminist “Armies of Love” and “from the political militancy of working-class women responding to the

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<sup>2</sup> See the 2024 Call for Papers of Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies. “The New Right and Latin America: Affects, Discourse, Media, Performance.” <http://jlacs-travesia.online/en/2024/02/07/call-for-papers-the-new-right-and-latin-america-affects-discourse-media-performance/>

economic violence of the 1990s neoliberal reforms and the nation's financial collapse in 2001" (Green Rioja 2024, 69). Yet these resistance movements, in an ideologically-heightened moment of "wars of everything", also fuel counter-attacks: women, including Schweblin's women characters, become the new scapegoats who are blamed (*scapegoated*) for the collapse of the social order; and in order to carry that blame, they are represented – narrated, constructed, and ideologized – as "bad mothers", "mad women", and much more.

In exploring Schweblin's narrative through these ideological/narrative lenses, I aim to understand, at a broader level, the relationship between her particular eerie narrative form and the complex forms of political ideology emerging in the twenty-first century. As we shall see, the primary ideological strand of the novella – its narrative of ecological catastrophe upon which several critics have commented (de Leone 2017, Mutis 2019) – gets displaced time and again by a series of other(ed) narratives; stories protagonized by scapegoats that, I argue, reveal how, in the wake of 9/11, a culture of "wreckonomics" has emerged in which populist, ideological fantasies (stories) revive old monsters – mad women, bad mothers, among many others – that in turn disguise society's real "excesses" (authoritarian governments, capitalist ventures, corporate culture) and lead to spirals of (self-)destruction; fantasies in which the spread of the narrative *becomes* the disease, the poison that lies at the heart of Schweblin's narrative; the fantastic poison that multiplies, spreads, and ultimately kills.

### *Casas tomadas*: from Cortázar's fantastic to Schweblin's weird

For Bizzarri, Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* is "perfectamente leíble como continuación (tal vez disruptiva) del fantástico rioplatense más culto" (2020, vi), yet also has Weird elements like the treatment of the changeling as analyzed by Sanchiz (2020). In this section, I delve deeper into this double relationship with the South American fantastic tradition on the one hand, and an emerging Weird literature, on the other. The term "Weird", here as in Bizzarri and Sanchiz, is borrowed from cultural theorist Mark Fisher, who uses it to make a distinction between different forms of fantastic literature. Unlike the Freudian *Unheimlich*, Fisher argues,

The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). [...] The sense of *wrongness* associated with the weird — the conviction that this does not belong — is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new. The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete. (2017)

The Weird element might therefore be interpreted as the Lacanian excess – or the Žižekian symptom – that cannot be accounted for within our current language, discourse or symbolic order; and that therefore necessarily appears out of place, out of time or other-than-human. Below, I examine the shift between Cortázar’s classic short story, “Casa tomada”, published in *Bestiario* in 1951 and Schweblin’s *Distancia de rescate*,<sup>3</sup> along the lines of “the alien invasion trope” identified by Higgins (2015), and a “sense of wrongness associated with the weird” by Fisher (2017). The aim here is very specific: to interrogate how the trope of home invasion is refashioned by Schweblin, and what this says about the representation of ideology in her post-9/11 novella.

The moment in *Distancia de rescate* in which the home invasion trope is employed most explicitly – and in which readers of Argentine literature may well be reminded of Cortázar’s iconic *cuento* – is when Carla tells Amanda, “David está en tu casa”:

—¿Cómo que en mi casa?

Carla me señala la ventana del cuarto de mi hija, en el primer piso. [...] Nina aparece sonriente [...] y por un momento agradezco que sentimiento de fatalidad no funcione correctamente, que todo haya sido una falsa alarma.

*Pero no lo es.*

No. (47)

This home invasion is related to another occupation: that of the narrative voice by other voices, a distinctly Schweblinian narrative trick which allows for a double dialogue: one voiced between the narrator and Carla (in regular font); another *murmured* between the narrator and David (in italics); a double dialogue that brings two temporalities and subjectivities onto a single plane. Already the scenario is different to Cortázar’s: whereas in “Casa tomada” the strange voices have an unknown origin, here the reader is aware of the identity of the home invader (or at least that of his body: his soul, the reader knows, has been “migrated”). What we do not know is why his presence in the home is so terrifying, why the narrator’s sense of doom was “not a false alarm.” As the female protagonists run towards the house, the narrator reflects,

Tengo que alejarme de esta mujer, me digo mientras logro sacar las llaves. Abro la puerta y la dejo entrar detrás de mí, siguiéndome muy de cerca. Esto es el mismísimo terror, entrar a una casa que apenas conozco buscando a mi hija con tanto miedo que no puedo siquiera pronunciar su nombre. Subo las escaleras y Carla sube detrás. Qué tan terrible será lo que sea que esté pasando como para que tu madre se anime al fin a entrar a la casa.

—Rápido, rápido —dice.

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<sup>3</sup> The connection between Schweblin and Cortázar is concrete. In a recent interview, Schweblin discusses how her work has been influenced by “la tradición del fantástico rioplatense, de Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar, Antonio di Benedetto, Felisberto Hernández” (Schweblin 2018).



Tengo que sacar a esta mujer ya mismo de mi casa. (48)

What is most disturbing here is that, as Higgins puts it in relation to post-9/11 sci-fi, “the location and identity” of the enemy is “radically uncertain” (2015, 45). David “es solo un chico” (48), as Amanda tells herself, and therefore nothing to fear. If so, is the enemy actually Carla? Or is it the narrator herself? Schweblin achieves this through a characteristic ambiguity – a feature of the feminine fantastic as argued by Boccuti (2020a, 2020b) – achieved by means of a narrow, and therefore unreliable narrative perspective. As Schweblin insists in a 2018 interview, “Cuando el narrador es personaje hay que desconfiar de todo lo que se lee, no sabemos realmente la verdad. Uno como lector juzga mucho más, pero también conecta mucho más con esos personajes.” Less knowledge, more uncertainty, more judgment, more connection. The reader connects with the narrator only to be faced with the same uncertainty; yet the uncertainty also leads to judgments beyond the author’s control, ideological judgments about where the threat lies, who it lies in and why.

This undiscernible threat is, in many ways, similar to that of the “unknown enemy” of Cortázar’s “Casa tomada.” As Jaime Alazraki notes, and as the large and diverse body of criticism on the short story demonstrates, Cortázar’s short story – and one of his most famous for this very reason – “admite una multiplicidad de interpretaciones según el sentido que atribuyamos a los enigmáticos ruidos: masa peronistas, chismes de vecinos o dolores del parto” (1990, 30). In this way, its ideological ambiguity foreshadows that of *Distancia de rescate*.

A number of important details set the stories apart from one another, though. First, unlike Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” which refers to the ancestral home in which the sibling protagonists have always lived, Amanda’s is a new, rented house, one that she “barely knows” (48). This shift in residential status is not a coincidence: it is a key feature of Weird literature, which as Bizzarri notes forces the reader to face “la inaudita actualidad de un mundo ‘sin casas’.” This world, in turn, is arguably connected to a wholesale ideological shift produced by the 9/11 attacks and subsequent events that have threatened (are threatening) to overturn the world order; events that in Žižek’s terms have revealed that “every feature attributed to the Other is already present” within our own countries, communities, homes and indeed selves (1993, 43). Whereas in Cortázar’s “Casa tomada”, there was a generational sense of familial safety linked to the home of the protagonists (who are, incidentally, brother and sister), the invaded home in *Distancia de rescate* is unknown from the start; and if the home (the familiar) is already strange, there is, in a very real sense, no possibility of distinguishing the strange from the normal, the terrifying from the odd. In Schweblin’s post-9/11 fantastic fiction, the Other is already within.

Second, the threat in Schweblin's novella takes on an embodied form: it is the "veneno" that infects David, then Nina, then Amanda. The novella begins with this sensation of alien invasion:

Son como gusanos.  
¿Qué tipo de gusanos?  
Como gusanos, en todas partes.  
El chico es el que habla, me dice las palabras al oído. Yo soy la que pregunta.  
¿Gusanos en el cuerpo?  
Sí, en el cuerpo. (2014, 11)

The worms are a recurrent motif throughout the narrative, an attempt – by the narrator and her interlocutor – to make sense of the sensation produced by the "poison." What is also recurrent is the notion that these worms are "everywhere", inescapable, inextinguishable, incurable, untreatable: "Me pica mucho el cuerpo. ¿Son los gusanos? *Se sienten como gusanos, gusanos minúsculos en todo el cuerpo*" (2014, 106). As Vázquez-Medina points out, Schweblin's narrative is imbued from the start by what scholar Stacy Alaimo terms transcorporeality, the idea that "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world," and "the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2008, 238). Such intermeshings, as Alaimo makes plain, are a fact of worldly existence that predate the twenty-first century; but an ever more pressing issue in our "numerous late-twentieth-century/early-twenty-first-century realities" in which issues that defy the borders between human and other-than-human abound: "environmental health, environmental justice, the traffic in toxins, and genetic engineering, to name a few" (2008, 238), and we could add in response to more recent developments, the rise of AI represented most emblematically by ChatGPT.

To return to Fisher's (2017) conceptual framework for reading contemporary fantastic literature, Schweblin's readers are forced to face this disturbing, Weird interconnection between human and other-than-human elements that do (not) belong (within their bodies) not because they are not there but because we lack the linguistic, moral, ethical or legal frameworks to make sense of them. In *Distancia de rescate*, these transcorporeal interconnections are represented *weirdly* by the "worms" felt within the body of the infected characters; "worms" which are in fact a natural euphemism (a cover-up, in political terms) for a far-less-natural agent: "¿Gusanos de tierra? *No, otro tipo de gusanos*" (2014, 11). This "otro tipo de gusanos" is the man-made chemical, glyphosate, which (in reality) since the 1990s has led – and is leading to this day – to increasing sickness, death, reproductive disorders, and congenital deformities in the affected areas of Argentina (Avila-Vazquez, Difilippo, Lean, Maturano & Etchegoyen 2018).

In turn, this chemical invasion leads to a horror worse than death itself: the idea, as Sanchiz argues following Scisione (2012), of a “paranecrotic” substance that lives within and feeds off other life forms, living by killing. In turn, this hints at the “horrorification” of capitalist modernity: the idea that the Other – both as a physical Other and as a harbinger of the death of the Self – could attack us at any time, from any place, and from *within*. The human body, then, becomes another “casa tomada”, another invaded home, another precarious site of unknown, unfathomable Otherness. This, then, is another way in which Schweblin’s Weird imaginary differs from Cortázar’s fantastic fiction: whereas in Cortázar, the bodies and identities of the protagonists remain intact at the end of the story, this is not the case in Schweblin: following Fisher, *Distancia de rescate* forces the reader to step out from the bounded self and to view events from the outside (which is already within).

In this way, between Cortázar and Schweblin the reader witnesses the shift in the very form of the invaded home: the ultimate invaded home in *Distancia de rescate* is that of the (un)contained self. Throughout the novella, the reader is party to scenes in which human bodies and identities get mixed up, most blatant in the changeling trope mobilized by Schweblin as part of her strategy of horror (Sanchiz 2020), which occurs most overtly in the “migration” of David’s and later Nina’s souls to different bodies at the hands of a local healer. Later, in an oneiric scene of somnambulism that has much of the demonic possession trope of horror fiction, Amanda sees her daughter asleep, sitting at the kitchen table, telling her that “it is an experiment”: “—No soy Nina—” she affirms; “—Soy David—dice Nina, y me sonrío” (2014, 54-56). At this stage in the narrative, Amanda is still able to wake up from her fever dream. Yet by the end, the hallucinating, dying woman, through her husband’s gaze, sees David getting into their family car:

Erguido contra el asiento, lo mirás a los ojos, como rogándole. Veo a través de mi marido, veo en tus ojos esos otros ojos. El cinturón puesto, las piernas cruzadas sobre el asiento. Una mano estirada apenas hacia el topo de Nina, disimuladamente, los dedos sucios apoyados sobre las patas de peluche, como si intentaran retenerlo. (Schweblin 2014, 123)

In O’Rawe’s reading (2023), this is an eerie echo of previous descriptions of the narrator’s daughter Nina: “Tiene puesto su cinturón, las piernas cruzadas como indio sobre el asiento, como siempre, y abraza a su topo”; or later, “tiene las piernas cruzadas como indio, igual que siempre, y como siempre tiene el cinturón puesto” (Schweblin 2014, 60, 91). These narrative reverberations – which we read as weird rather than eerie because they begin in the distinctly banal realm of the bourgeois home<sup>4</sup> open up the

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<sup>4</sup> O’Rawe reads the novel as eerie (“espeluznante”) because “se apoya en una economía afectiva que circula en un juego desorientador de ausencia y presencia” (2023, 4). I read it as a combination of the eerie and the weird, following Mark Fisher’s notion that “a sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed

possibility that the narrator's fever dream has come true: that Nina has *become* David. Though the scene of Nina's "migration" is not witnessed by the reader directly, but rather hinted at through multiple levels of mediation – via Amanda via Carla – what we do see through Amanda's dying eyes is the following:

Veo las manos de Nina, por un momento. No está acá pero las veo con toda claridad. Sus manos pequeñas están sucias con barro.

*O son mis manos sucias cuando me asomé a la cocina y, sin soltarme de la pared, busqué a Carla desde el umbral.*

No es verdad, son las manos de Nina, las puedo ver. (2014, 114)

Amanda's own body – her hands – becomes other as it is confused with that of her daughter Nina and the changeling David. The human body, in this eerily transcorporeal narrative, is thus deindividuated. Through the material and narrative effects of the ubiquitous poison, all bodies become connected to one another: worm to soil, soil to water, water to duck, duck to horse, horse to human.

In this fluid and ever-shifting landscape, there is no such thing as safety: Schweblin's "veneno" is a bodily manifestation of the "enemy within" that, according to Higgins, has permeated twenty-first century consciousness since 9/11. The "safety distance" that gives the novella its title was taught to Amanda by her mother in an altogether different historical moment, a different century: "Es algo heredado de mi madre. 'Te quiero cerca', me decía. 'Mantengamos la distancia de rescate'" (2014, 44). Yet as suggested by the child David's dismissal – "*Tu madre no importa, segui*" (44) –, the concept loses all its meaning in this twenty-first century fictionalized reality of ecological catastrophe:

Sobre mi mano, la mano de Nina todavía parece querer retenerme. Es una mano pálida y sucia. El rocío está seco y las líneas de barro cruzan su piel de lado a lado. No es rocío, claro, pero ya no me corregís. Estoy tan triste, David. David. (96)

Nina seeks proximity to her mother to feel safe; the same sensation of safety that the "distancia de rescate" is meant to afford the mother Amanda. Yet Amanda feels no such comfort: instead, she feels great sadness. Her safety mechanism has failed: she cannot protect her daughter from a toxin that is already within her body (where "her" refers simultaneously to Amanda's and Nina's bodies). Faced with this failure, this monumental collapse of generational wisdom and the mother's historical responsibility

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and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human" (2017). Yet the novella certainly has eerie elements: the absence/presence that characterizes the eerie, in Fisher's theory, or the notion of an operation happening behind the scenes of the normal order, is perceptible through Schweblin's treatment of the unseen yet perceptible and palpable effects of the glyphosate.

to protect her children, her only option is denial, the creation of a post-truth reality: she knows it is not dew, but she carries on calling it dew, because “ya no me corregís.” In entering this post-truth reality, she creates a new reality in which nothing is as it seems, one constructed upon what Audran terms a “despojo identitario”, and the negation of representable reality: the fantastic reality or real fantasy “de unos cuerpos que no son cuerpos propios sino contaminados y ocupados” (Audran 2015).

Whereas in Cortázar’s “Casa tomada”, then, it is the home itself that is invaded by alien forces, in *Distancia de rescate* is it the home, the body, and the mind; the *campo* and the *jardín*; the river and the swimming pool; all of these things simultaneously and without clear points of entry and exit. As Higgins suggests in his essay on post-9/11 narrative fiction, the “distinctions between inside and outside seem to evaporate as space seemingly collapses into perpetual locality and time seemingly collapses into perpetual immediacy” (Higgins 2015, 45). In Schweblin’s novella, this (invaded) space is the sick or dying female body; this (suspended) time is the moment immediately preceding her death.

This brings us to the third most notable difference between “Casa tomada” and *Distancia de rescate*: the ending. Whereas in the Cortazarian classic, the two protagonists escape without their belongings, dispossessed, but unharmed, in Schweblin’s “remake” there is no possibility of escape. Amanda has been infected, is on the verge of death, and has no prospect of “going back home” in a dual sense (literal and physical, home/house and home/body): all have been irredeemably contaminated and are on the verge of implosion. The classic escape scene – a trope of disaster narratives before and after 9/11 and the final scene of Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” – thus takes on a distinct hue in Schweblin’s finale, the attempted escape of the husband from the site of the catastrophe:

No se detiene en el pueblo. No mira hacia atrás. No ve los campos de soja, los riachuelos entretejiendo las tierras secas, los kilómetros de campo abierto sin ganado, las villas y las fábricas, llegando a la ciudad. No repara en que el viaje de vuelta se ha ido haciendo más y más lento. Que hay demasiados coches, coches y más coches cubriendo cada nervadura de asfalto. Y que el tránsito está estancado, paralizado desde hace horas, humeando efervescente. No ve lo importante: el hilo finalmente suelto, como una mecha encendida en algún lugar; la plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse. (2014, 124)

The fatality of Cortázar’s ending – where the narrator-protagonist throws away the keys, knowing that he will never be able to return – is replaced by eerie ambiguity in Schweblin’s dénouement as the husband *fails to see the important thing*, the loose thread and the “plaga inmóvil” that appears on the verge of attack; a subtle, invisible invasion expressed by the physical sensation of “irritation” rather than any identifiable enemy. The end, then, is the beginning; but it also the refusal to begin, a refusal to tell the story. In this way Schweblin’s narrative embodies a Weird literature in which:

se desatan las políticas subterráneas que, como un escalofrío febril, atraviesan y sacuden un corpus que avizora (o, quizás, sencillamente, observa) la inaudita actualidad de un mundo ‘sin casas’, ambiguamente despojado de la posibilidad de ‘traerlo de vuelta todo a la casa’, de reconciliar, sin amañar la mano, lo innombrable que cotidianamente vivimos con un sentido del orden, o con el orden del sentido, del significado. (Bizzarri 2020, vii)

*Distancia de rescate* ends by unleashing a distinctly twenty-first-century set of “políticas subterráneas” (Bizzarri 2020), or “susurros” (Gamerro 2023); an itch or irritation that tells us that it is always-already too late to go home. Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” does not constitute an ending for any fiction written post-9/11 because, in this new “orden del sentido”, the trope of the invaded home could only ever be the starting point.

### Seeking scapegoats: mad/bad mothers, guilty others

If the violently invaded home/body is only the starting point, the reader’s work is to find out who/what the enemy is. Critics have often identified the culprit as the glyphosate (Mutis 2019, Salva 2021), and of course, this is the reading that the author points us towards. Yet Rubino and Sánchez (2021) have offered a brilliant alternative reading of the novel as a reflection on the “monsters” of heteronormativity and the homophobic discourse of “reproductive futurity” (Edelman 2020): in this view, the fantastic flight of the novel is one in which the queer desire between the female protagonists is a form of escape from “los imperativos de la maternidad y el cuidado, que deviene fantástico desde la perspectiva heteropatriarcal” (107). Building on this gendered analysis of Schweblin’s novella, I propose in the following section that, read in the context of the contemporary addiction to “waging war on everything” that characterizes post-9/11 politics (Andersson & Keen 2023), the guilty culprit – the ideological scapegoat – becomes pluralized in *Distancia de rescate* in a series of political/politicized identities: as per Rubino and Sánchez (2021), the scapegoat is the queer woman; but it is also the failing mother, the mad woman and even the disabled child.

In *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), a philosophical exploration of the ritual role of sacrifice, René Girard analyzes the way in which many cultures characterize violence in relation to tropes of contagion, infection and contamination: in societies without strong political and legal systems, justice is equated with vengeance; as a consequence, violence begets more violence, and spreads like a plague or, in more contemporary terms, a pandemic. Sacrificial rituals, in this context, serve a specific role: “to polarize the community’s aggressive impulses and redirect them toward victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate, but that are always incapable of propagating further

vengeance” (Girard 1977, 18). Sacrifice is a means of directing violence towards surrogate victims: vulnerable ones that cannot retaliate.

As historian of philosophy Alexander Douglas points out, “Girard’s insights can also be applied to modern society” (2016), whether in racist and anti-migrant scapegoating in populist politics in Latin America and the US (Mardones 2009, Oehmichen 2018) or in the rise of femicide in the context of a “war on women” identified by Argentine feminist Rita Segato (2016). Such sacrificial politics, Hassan (2020) explains, rely on ideologies of difference and diverse mechanisms of self-preservation and subversive mobilization that, “as Freud would have said, [ ... ] lurk in society and can always recreate a victimizing mechanism”: that is, impulses that were always-already within our societies, waiting for the moment and the motivation to reawaken. Following Girard, Colombian philosopher Alejandro Granados-García argues that scapegoating plays a large part in contemporary Latin American identity politics, even in societies defined as democratic: “esta tendencia a configurar chivos expiatorios, nos garantizaría una zona de seguridad, una zona de paz, un orden restablecido que se erige sobre las ruinas sacrificiales” (Granados-García 2012, 11). What scapegoating does, in times when dangers are increasingly within the confines of the state but beyond its control, is to restore an illusion of safety, of boundaries, of a “safe space.” In this section, I explore how Schweblin’s *Weird* novella demonstrates the way that these scapegoats are created and multiplied in the light of the “radical uncertainty” that characterizes post-9/11 political systems.

To understand the role that scapegoats play in Schweblin’s narrative, it is important to note the intersection between the predominant racist bent of political scapegoating in postcolonial societies (the principal focus in Mardones 2009, Oehmichen 2018 and Hassan 2020) with multiple other forms of scapegoating based on sex, gender, class, socioeconomic status, and profession. In *Cautiverios de la mujer*, Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde shows how women have been historically constructed – especially through Christian ideology – according to different stereotypes: mother-spouses, nuns, whores, prisoners and madwomen; different “forms of captivity” that revolve around dominant norms of femininity, “tanto de la buena y aceptada, positiva y saludable, como de la oculta, negada, enferma y delictiva” (2005, 40). As Lagarde demonstrates, each of these female types is defined and confined to her own space: the home, the convent, the brothel, the prison and the lunatic asylum (or, in contemporary terms, the psychiatric unit). Society and culture, Lagarde argues, “compulsivamente hacen a cada mujer ocupar uno de estos espacios y, en ocasiones, más de uno a la vez” (40). Any transgression of those spaces of containment (incarceration) leads to the possibility of evil, danger and contamination (798).

These different forms of Otherness – whether mad women, bad mothers, witches, or lesbians – come to the surface in Schweblin’s narrative and propel its plot towards its

dramatic end; Weird Others that, we argue, are the sacrificial victims that ultimately protect the main “guilty party” around which the plot revolves in *Distancia de rescate*: the agrochemical industry responsible for the manufacture of glyphosate, represented by the company named Sotomayor, a soy farm in the Pampas. In her skillfully unmoralistic novella, though, Schweblin, instead of pointing the (narrative) finger at Sotomayor – and thus avoiding, in O’Rawe’s terms, the temptation to “apuntar explícitamente al gobierno y a los organismos empresariales responsables del uso no regulado de herbicidas de glifosato que empapan los campos argentinos” (2023) – weaves multiple stories, beliefs and ideologies into her narrative, leading to a political textual ecology in which political responsibility (like that which might be taken by a government, institution or organization for an ecological disaster) appears to be replaced with *multiple (individual) scapegoats* that are in turn traversed by different vulnerabilities linked to gender and sexuality.

Following the order in which these Others are presented in the plot – and blamed, in different ways, for the catastrophe – the first is the stereotype analysed in depth by Lagarde: the mad woman. The principal moments of madness in the plot revolve around Carla and Amanda, and come to a head in the scene when the “changeling” David has entered Amanda’s home:

Nina duda, pero quizá es porque me ve furiosa, indignada con Carla y con toda la locura de Carla.  
—Esto es una locura —le digo a tu madre—, estás completamente loca. Nina se suelta.  
Estás sola, me digo, es mejor sacar a esta mujer cuanto antes de la casa.  
—Esto siempre termina así con David. —A Carla los ojos se le llenan de lágrimas.  
—¡David no hizo nada! —y ahora sí grito, ahora soy yo la que parezco una loca. Sos vos la que nos asustás a todos con tu delirio de ... (2014, 50)

The two women protagonists turn into a hall of mirrors, in which the perceived madness of the one reflects onto that of the other, and vice versa. In turn, this “madness” morphs into what Lagarde terms an “ideology of guilt” (2005, 705). Clara tells Amanda that faced with the dilemma over whether to submit her son to the magic of the “mujer de la casa verde”, “Mi cabeza era una maraña de culpa y terror y el cuerpo entero me temblaba” (2014, 27). Later, Amanda blames herself and questions whether she is to blame for everything:

Yo soy culpable también [...] Yo confirmo, para tu madre, su propia locura. (2014, 58)

[...]

¿Se trata del veneno? Está en todas partes, ¿no, David?

*Siempre estuvo el veneno.*

¿Se trata entonces de otra cosa? ¿Es porque hice algo mal? ¿Fui una mala madre? ¿Es algo que yo provoqué?. (116)



What are these two women guilty of, though? What could a “mala madre” mean in the context of the glyphosate catastrophe around which *Distancia de rescate* revolves? Following Lagarde, one could say: failing to live up to social expectations of the “good mother” (2005, 702); that is, trying but failing to keep their children safe from a threat that invades the home – the site of the *madresposa* par excellence. This threat comes rushing in at a pace in the narrative: “¿Pero cómo pude dejar que se metieran tan rápidamente entre nosotras? ¿Cómo puede ser que dejar a Nina unos minutos sola, durmiendo, implique tal grado de peligro y de locura?” (2014, 51) The (real) danger – the glyphosate – is thus morphed, through the “ideology of guilt”, into the (perceived) danger, the scapegoat: the mad woman. It is only through David’s narrative intervention towards the end of the novella that the reader is afforded an alternative perspective on this maternal guilt:

Carla cree que todo es culpa suya, que cambiándose esa tarde de un cuerpo a otro cuerpo ha cambiado algo más. Algo pequeño e invisible, que lo ha ido arruinando todo.  
¿Y es verdad?  
Esto no es culpa de ella. Se trata de algo mucho peor. (2014, 110)

Madness, hysteria, hallucination and delirium, however, hold sway in the narrative, one principally voiced through the perspective of a dying woman: Amanda. These forms of “madness” are not restricted to Carla and Amanda, though, and manifest in other characters and types other than the “bad mother.” Notably, the healer of the mysterious “casa verde”, who performs the “migration” of David’s (and later Nina’s) soul to another body, has all the features of the witch of horror fiction: she lives alone in an eerie isolated house; she performs magical “migration” rituals with no rational explanation; she does so in secret and in the dark. There are also implications of violence in the “gran ovillo de hilo sisal” (2014, 30) with which, presumably, she ties her “victims” to a chair: “parece cruel”, says the healer, “pero hay que asegurarse de que solo se vaya el espíritu” (33). Her dark magic combined with her cruelty make her another possible target to distract the reader away from the real one: the glyphosate, or rather the Argentine government that has allowed for its deregulated use.

### Derealization: what’s behind the dream of *Fever Dream*?

In this final section, I turn to derealization, the third feature of post-9/11 terror to which I attend in this paper, and which pertains both to contemporary (post-truth) reality and its corresponding fictions and literatures. As Žižek (2002) and Higgins (2015) have argued, in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers, we (readers, viewers and consumers) have experienced an effect of “derealization”, whereby we

experience “‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity” (2002, 11). Below, I ask whether and how this derealization manifests in Schweblin’s novella, and how it impacts on the novel’s text ideological implications.

Jazmín G. Tapia Vázquez argues that many contemporary Latin American women fantastic writers – Mariana Enríquez, Samanta Schweblin, Mónica Ojeda, Liliana Colanzi, Giovanna Rivero, María Fernanda Ampuero – have something very important in common: their shared decade of birth, the seventies, “*décadas convulsas en términos sociales y políticos para Hispanoamérica*” (2023, 1). The consequence is that “*la literatura de irrealidad se vuelca, principalmente, en la conformación de una crítica sobre la historia social y política de sus países mediada, sobre todo, por el cuerpo, la marginalidad y la violencia*” (1). Schweblin’s interviews seem to confirm this idea, as she takes pains to emphasize the social “reality” and critique contained in the pages of her book:

En México la novela fue leída como un capricho fantástico mío para construir escenas de terror. Pero no es eso. Se trata de la terrible situación medioambiental y de salud humana que causa el glifosato en el campo argentino. En comunidades de 1.200 personas hay 200 chicos que nacieron con deformaciones. La mayoría de los embarazos terminan con abortos espontáneos. La gente toca el glifosato y se muere a las 48 horas. Los animales caen muertos a los costados del camino. Eso no es literatura fantástica, es algo que está pasando en el campo argentino hoy. (Schweblin 2015)

The prevailing ideological intention, judging by this interview, appears to be an ecological one: the novella seeks to communicate a “real-life” albeit invisible terror to the reader and to condemn the hegemonic neoliberal capitalism that has placed production, efficiency and profit above the lives of citizens in Argentina since the 1990s. Yet the treatment of this environmental politics is far from ideological in this novella. Glyphosate – and the broader ideological implications for capitalism and its toxic environmental effects – are never acknowledged up front by the narrator, nor any other character. As José Fernando Salva notes, *Distancia de rescate* narrates one of Argentina’s worst agro-industrial disasters through the literary technique of ellipsis, “*realizando una operación tropológica desde lo elidido*” (Salva 2021, 293). The word glyphosate is never mentioned, and is replaced by a series of more ambiguous terms: “*el veneno*”, “*la intoxicación*”, and the oft-repeated metaphor of the “*gusanos*” entering the body. In this way, yet again, we appear to be close to what Alazraki writes about Cortázar’s “*Casa tomada*” and the multiple interpretations mentioned above: “*estas interpretaciones son ajenas al relato mismo. El texto se calla, pero ese silencio o ausencia es, frecuentemente, su más poderosa declaración*” (1990). What literary-ideological, or “paraliterary” (Bizzarri 2020) shift, then, can be discerned from the Cortazarian fantastic to Schweblin’s Weirid?

In *Distancia de rescate*, Jackson's reading of the subversive potential of fantastic literature – its ability to “[tell] of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence” (Jackson 1981) – no longer seems to hold sway. In Fisher's terms, we have slipped into the territory of the eerie, where the “real” plot is observed from *the other side*, the place where the laws of everyday no longer seem to apply or to matter, which also “entails a disengagement from our current attachments” and releases characters and readers alike “from the mundane, this escape from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality, which goes some way to account for the peculiar appeal that the eerie possesses” (Fisher 2017, 13). This “peculiar appeal”, I argue following Žižek (2002) and Higgins (2015), is linked to the very same draw of derealization that Western citizen-consumers have experienced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In *Distancia de rescate*, this eerie disengagement from shocking everyday reality is especially noticeable in relation to the agrochemicals that have poisoned Amanda, Nina and David, and in the impact of this contamination. As Amanda tells the story of the fateful day at the Sotomayor soy farm, her disengagement is palpable:

Escucho que un camión se detiene. Los dos hombres que tomaban mate se ponen guantes largos, de plástico, y salen. Hay otra voz masculina afuera, quizá es la del conductor del camión. [...] Y entonces hay un ruido. Algo se cae, algo plástico y pesado, que sin embargo no se rompe. Dejamos a Carla y salimos. Afuera los hombres bajan bidones, son grandes y apenas pueden con uno en cada mano. Hay muchos, todo el camión está lleno de bidones. (2014, 62)

The short factual sentences, focusing exclusively on the sensory realm – the sound of the lorry approaching, the male voices, and the bump as a heavy barrel hits the ground, the sight of the long, plastic gloves and the large, plastic barrels – emphasize the narrator's cognitive detachment from her situation and produce a blinkering effect that restrict the information communicated to the reader. “Literature can't be informative” (2017), Schweblin insists, and with this novella she adheres strictly to her own maxim.

The narrator's eerie detachment from her own story even extends to the imminent prospect of death. O'Rawe (2023) notes her “extraña y calma resignación frente a la inminencia de su muerte”:

Voy a morir en pocas horas, va a pasar eso, ¿no? Es extraño que esté tan tranquila. Porque aunque no me lo digas, yo ya lo sé, y sin embargo es algo imposible de decirse a uno mismo. (Schweblin 2014, 13)

What does this derealization tell us about the relationship between the Weird and the realm of twenty-first-century political ideology? What does Amanda's narrative voice tell us about Schweblin's particular brand of the fantastic, one in which the tension and terror experienced by the reader are counterposed by the serenity of the narrator-protagonist?

The clue, I would argue, lies in the above passage: “Es extraño que esté tan tranquila.” The self-conscious element of the novella, here, extends to a reflection by the narrator on the narrative mode itself: while the glyphosate – the “real” protagonist – goes unmentioned throughout the narrative, the *strange* – the literary, fictional technique of Weird fiction – is acknowledged (though never understood) by the narrator, who tells the story *as if from outside herself*. As Amanda continually reflects on the strangeness of the events and the meaning of this strangeness, she becomes a reader in/of her own story: “lo extraño”, she states, “siempre me parece una advertencia” (2014, 46); and indeed, as I will elaborate in the (in)conclusion, the strange in this novella is certainly a warning; one that has a heavy political charge.

What is less clear than the metafictional aspect of this novel, though, is the political impact of its self-conscious derealization and eerie detachment. Perhaps Amanda’s dizzy detachment constitutes a warning in itself: one around the “*incomprensión del mal radical o absoluto, cuando aparece encarnado [...] en el terror político*” (Gamerro 2023). Yet I would argue that it is by structuring the novella as a conversation, from Amanda’s death bed, between two *infected* characters (Amanda and David) – and therefore inescapably *from the other side* – that Schweblin succeeds in opening up “other structures of thought” (Castillo & Colanzi 2018, 2). As Anna Boccuti notes in relation to a range of feminine fantastic fiction from Latin America, the use of the personal ironic narrator ushers in “new margins of ambiguity” with respect to the ideological content of the narrative (2020b, 12). It forces us, in Bizzarri’s terms, to “abandonarse a lo weird”, to unlearn our habits of “familiarization” and to “prepararse a un nuevo tipo de residencia” (2020, vii); to think beyond what we already know; to wake up and realize that we are in the realm of the unreal; a realm in which there is no safe home, and there was never any *distancia de rescate*. This new “residence” – the one in which culture war narratives have created fake scapegoats and alternative versions of reality – is always-already a “casa tomada”, a hellish holiday home of the kind encountered by Amanda in *Distancia de rescate*; a home in which she can never be safe, and to which she can never return.

Acting before it’s too late or the meaning(lessness) of a safety distance

Faced with all this confusion, this slipperiness, this homelessness, it seems fit to get back to basics: the title. What does this “*distancia de rescate*” mean within the novel? And what does it mean for the reader? Specifically, what does it mean in relation to our reading of the novel in relation to post-9/11 fantastic cultural production? Curiously, the “*distancia de rescate*” is lost in the English and German translations: *Fever Dream* and *Das Gift*. The resulting three titles transmit very different ideological foci to their

respective readers: maternal responsibility (in the original); the oneiric and the virtual (in the English); and the material and environmental (in the German). Arguably, though, none of these single, ideological lines sum up the book, whose Weirdness lies in its ambiguous hesitation between different possibilities, realities, causes, terrors.

Each of the certainties expressed in the novella – Carla’s insistence that her changeling son is a “monster”, Amanda’s certainty that Carla is “mad”, and even David’s repeated insistence that this or that particular detail “is not important” – are undermined by the dialogical narrative voice, which has such a hold in Schweblin’s novella that no dogmatic views can stand without them being questioned, debated or overturned by *the Other*. And this Other is sometimes the self, as in Amanda’s realization of her own contribution to Carla’s “madness”, and thus, implicitly, Amanda’s own madness. This ever-shifting identitarian landscape is accentuated through a Derridean sense of linguistic non-identity identified by Audran (2015), whereby Schweblin’s reader is met with “un campo que ya no es campo, de una Argentina que ya no es argentina, de una semilla que ya no es semilla.” Equally, the “distancia de rescate” is not the same for the narrator’s mother as it is for her, or for the reader. Time and space change the meaning of things and words.

So, following Bizzarri: yes, Schweblin’s text invites its readers to “abandonarse a lo weird”, to see themselves from the outside just as the narrators do. But simultaneously, it asks us to forge our own “distancia de rescate”, a safer distance from some of the stigmas and stereotypes under whose spell, I have argued, the protagonists find themselves, leading to perverse forms of (self-)scapegoating and deflection. Derealization, in this context, is both a curse and a cure: it leads Amanda to see her own life as a “fever dream”, but it also helps the reader to find distance from some of the troubling ideas – and ideologies – expressed in the text.

In “Propaganda and the Web 3.0: Truth and ideology in the digital age”, Aaron Hyzen argues:

The January 6 [United States Capitol attack] can be propagandistically (re)described as a rally, protest, riot, or revolt. Through the sustained repetition of such ideological redescrptions, values + beliefs can be codified into an opinion favourable to the ideological goals of a larger strategy or complex doctrine. (Hyzen 2023)

As we have seen, glyphosate is never mentioned in the novella. Nor are the words herbicides or agrochemicals. Instead, the words repeated most often are ones charged with a weightier ideological baggage: “el veneno”, “la intoxicación”, for example, or “la casa” and derivatives of “extraño” and “locura.” Read literally, through the lens of Amanda’s narrow narrative stance, the ideological implication of the novel would be perplexing: the home/child has been contaminated, and since we (women) are responsible for the home, we (women) are in turn responsible for the contamination, the

deformed children, and our own madness. Yet Schweblin's narrative refuses such a (single, singular) reading, through a skillful plural(istic) narrator, whose self-conscious and ironic reflections warn against any such judgments. Instead, what we are left with are *susurros*, murmurs that pull our attention towards other meanings, other interpretations, other politics or politics of the Other.

To conclude, let's return to Žižek who, in an afterword to the English translation of Rancière's *Politics of Aesthetics* (2009), portrays twenty-first century ideology thus:

Recall how, a decade ago, in the UK, the figure of the unemployed single mother was elevated by the conservative media into the cause of all social evils: there is a budget deficit because too much money is spent on supporting single mothers; there is juvenile delinquency because single mothers do not properly educate their offspring... Or recall how the anti-abortion campaigns as a rule put forward the image of a rich career woman neglecting her maternal mission – in blatant contrast to the fact that many more abortions are performed on working-class women who already have many children. / These poetic displacements and condensations are not just secondary illustrations of an underlying ideological struggle, but the very terrain of this struggle. (Žižek 2009, 76-77)

Žižek thus invites us to consider the many “poetic displacements and condensations” that propagate in Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* – the multiple ways in which the responsibility for the environmental catastrophe that underlies the plot is displaced onto other figures: the queer woman (Rubino & Sánchez 2021), the mad woman, the bad mother and even the dangerous witch. Following Žižek: yes, the *distancing effect* of *Distancia de rescate* – a Weird, transfeminist version of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* – certainly allows Schweblin not only to trace a clear line between her eerie narrative and the toxic chatter of far-right (social) media and politics. But she also uses narrative urgency, in the form of a dying narrator, to whisper a dire warning into the reader's ear: to *susurrar* this warning (Gammero 2023), especially in the other-worldly, *italicized* interventions of the “transmigrated” David that appear to come from a different realm of reality where the *worst has already happened*. This warning is one that Matthew Todd expresses in his (terrified and terrifying) reflection on the climate emergency from a queer perspective:

When Sir David Attenborough talks of the collapse of civilizations, this is what it means: violence that most of us in the privileged West cannot even comprehend. Our relatively new societal values will be threatened. Those who have had to fight hardest for their rights – gay men and lesbians, trans people, people of colour, women, and those who have traditionally taken up their fight – will inevitably once again become prominent targets. (2019)

I conclude, then, by agreeing, partly, with Vázquez-Medina's praise of *Distancia de rescate*: “Schweblin masterfully constructs a plot that interweaves contemporary anxieties around ecological disaster and environmental toxicity with a feeling of unremitting

maternal dread” (2022, 1-2). I would add, though, that through a particular political aesthetics of the New Weird, achieved through a complex narrative voice interwoven with multiple threads of experiences of (transfeminist) unbelonging, Schweblin’s narrative captures a particular moment in time – the 2010s – in which the world is on the verge of “five catastrophic climate tipping points” (Niranjan 2023), each of which implies as-yet-unknown catastrophes in which women, the LGBTQI+ community, and racialized communities could/would/will pay a terrifying price: a price that is already known, because as Todd points out, the politics and practices of scapegoating have been repeated with chilling and unutterable consequences throughout modern history.

Could this explain David’s constant “susurro” – to repeat Gamarro’s term one last time – in the background of the story, the changeling’s urgent call to get to the truth or what he refers to repeatedly as “*el punto exacto*”?

No pierdas tiempo (43) [...] No es el punto exacto. No perdamos tiempo en esto. ¿Por qué hay que ir tan rápido, David? ¿Tan poco tiempo queda? Muy poco. (51) [...] Todo eso no es importante, y ya casi no nos queda tiempo. Necesito volver a verlo todo. Lo importante ya pasó. Lo que sigue son solo consecuencias. (92) [...] Ahora queda muy poco tiempo. (117)

Could this pressing urgency, following Gasparini (2022), constitute a broader imperative, a call to action, an alarm to wake us up from the “fever dream” of our twenty-first century existence, our virtual(ized) reality in which, through a politics of gendered scapegoating and derealization, we are – to use Mike Barrett’s aptly eerie phrase – “sleepwalking towards the edge of a cliff”? And could narratives like Schweblin’s be considered as ways of narrating ourselves out of ecosystem collapse?

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