

Part I

'Expresar, sólo expresar, eso queremos'.¹

In 1961 the Venezuelan artists and writers who formed the group *El Techo de la Ballena* (henceforth referred to as *El Techo*) made this initial statement of intent in the first of several manifestos written before they disbanded in 1968. Complaining of asphyxiation, caused by the mediocrity of Venezuela's cultural "atmosphere", the introduction to their exhibition *Homenaje a la cursilería y el lugar común* in 1961 describes their

franca protesta ante la permanente e indeclinable farsa cultural del país y el continuado desacierto político y económico que registra la democracia venezolana.²

Their motto 'Cambiar la vida, transformar la sociedad' provided the literal and ideological frame for all their publications and reveals the considerable influence of French Surrealism upon their project. In clear allusions to Rimbaud's imperative to 'changer la vie' and the European historical *avant-garde's* desire to 'organise a new life praxis from a basis in art', they presented their project as an artistic practice integrated into daily life and capable of structural transformations within it.³ *El Techo* was involved in a wide variety of activities, from exhibitions held in a garage in Caracas to an international seminar on cinema, whilst also producing multi-media publications, poetry, narrative, critical works, newspaper journalism and a short film.⁴ At its most active the group had approximately 60 members, not only from Venezuela but including contributors from Europe, North and Latin America, and many *balleneros*, such as Salvador Garmendia, Edmundo Aray, Juan Calzadilla, Caupolicán Ovalles and Adriano González León, went on to become prominent and celebrated figures both on the national and international cultural stages.

Sources/Materials/Questions

Critical approaches to *El Techo* have tended to follow Ángel Rama's equation of *El Techo's* *terrorismo en las artes* with the guerrilla activity fought out in 1960s Venezuela. This concept gains currency from the group's own stated aims, but also from their contemporaneity with *los años de la violencia*, described as 'el clima general de violencia que dominó la vida venezolana entre los años 1960 y 1964' that marked the turbulent transition from dictatorship to democracy after Marcos Pérez

¹ A full version of 'Las Instituciones de Cultura nos Roban el Oxígeno' by Caupolicán Ovalles, published in *La Esfera*, 25 March 1961, can be found (mis-titled) in Ángel Rama's *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), pp49-50

² Hector Brioso Santos describes the event as follows: 'los *balleneros* exhiben en ella libros de poesía, novelas, cuentos y otros escritos de firmas consagradas en el país con la intención de demostrar que la cursilería está íntimamente unida a la historia cultural de Venezuela'. Brioso Santos, Héctor, *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolano (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002), p313

³ Throughout this study, the term praxis will follow Peter Bürger's definition of it in relation to the historical *avant-garde*. Bürger, Peter, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p49

⁴ See Appendix I for some segments of the first two *Rayado Sobre el Techo* publications.

Jiménez's fall from power in 1958.⁵ Rama, himself, and more recently Hector Brioso Santos, both made considerable contributions to general overviews and inventories of *El Techo's* activities, which formed the basis for their critical appraisals; however, in this case a smaller number of sources will help to identify some precise compositional tropes that call into question dominant critical views about the group.⁶

Daniel González and Adriano González León's text *Asfalto-Infierno* (1963) provides the main focus for this study, and its combination of photographs and short texts on an urban theme illuminate its own and *El Techo's* aspired assault on the cultural world that surrounded them.⁷ Such an approach can move between particular motifs in *Asfalto-Infierno* and the broader premises of *El Techo*, whilst identifying problematic tensions present in the early stages of their project. Brioso Santos and Rama both suggest a periodisation which locates the peak of *El Techo's* cohesiveness between 1961 and 1964, from which time it suffered a partial splintering where key members, including Adriano González León, focused more on individual creative projects than collective activities.⁸ With this in mind, texts by *balleneros* and journalists used here will either pre-date or be concurrent with *Asfalto-Infierno's* original publication. This division lends a unity to the material used to comment on *Asfalto-Infierno* and allows us to consider its intertextual relationship to the manifestos and critical comments of the foundational period.

Principally, the co-existing dynamics of rupture and containment in *El Techo* and *Asfalto-Infierno's* stylistic and conceptual inversion generate tensions which call into question the degree of "violence" attributed to their attacks on certain cultural structures, where their unleashing of sense clashes with a containment of interpretation. Beyond an analysis of specific content, the question of *where* texts and articles by *El Techo* were published also signals their paradoxical and awkward participation in, and rejection of the cultural frame they wished to attack.⁹ Given

⁵ Speech marks will be used to distinguish the particular use of the term "violent", as a nexus of the violent social and political circumstances supposed to have produced a "violent" art. Orlando Araujo and Ángel Rama are two prominent critics who share this posture, describing *El Techo* as a reflection of the socio-political context of *los años de violencia*. Rama, Ángel, *Ensayos sobre literatura venezolana*, 2nd edn (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1991), p119. Rama expands on his concept of aesthetic terrorism in the introduction to his *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987).

⁶ Ángel Rama's *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987) provides a collection of key *ballenero* texts. For a general critical approach and full listing of the group's activities and publications see Héctor Brioso Santos' *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolano (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002).

⁷ It should be noted that the 1963 edition of *Asfalto-Infierno* is extremely scarce, mainly because 600 editions of the small print run of 1000 were seized by *Digepol*, the intelligence branch of the *Policía Metropolitana*. As such, the source here is the 1979 version *Asfalto-Infierno y otros relatos demoniacos* (Caracas: Libros de Hoy, El Diario de Caracas, 1979). With regards to content, this study has the same practical limits as those experienced by Hector Brioso Santos, because the 1979 edition, according to its prologue, is a slightly altered of the original, although it is not made apparent what exactly was changed.

⁸ Brioso Santos, Héctor, *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolano (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002), p184.

⁹ Interest in *El Techo* has grown significantly over the last five years and generated increasing publicity and academic activities. In 2002 a retrospective was held at the *Galería de Arte Nacional* in Caracas.

this tension and the failure of their early twentieth-century European predecessors to reintegrate art into life, we are prompted to question what sort of *avant-garde* movement *El Techo* were and to consider the extent to which parallels can be drawn between their aesthetic tactics and the political activities of urban guerrillas. Critics' guarantee of *El Techo's* aesthetic "violence" must be evaluated by reviewing the very scope of their logic to find out if the rupture they produced was a total, or negotiated and partial, one?

Peter Bürger's detailed definition of the historical *avant-garde* in Europe contrasts to critics' swift application of the label *vanguardista* onto *El Techo*, without fully considering the grey areas and paradoxes this might imply. Clearly, theories of European cultural activity, for reasons of periodisation alone, cannot be transposed onto a Latin American context, and this realisation in itself is crucial when we consider a Venezuelan vanguard's relationship with the 'desencuentros' of their particular experience of modernity.¹⁰ *El Techo's* desire for aesthetic 'progreso', bringing 'soluciones al arte nuevo en Venezuela' in order to combat cultural 'estancamiento' must be viewed in relation to the politico-economic trajectory of modernisation, in which Caracas was the protagonist and whose illusory nature *Asfalto-Infierno* attacks.¹¹ *El Techo's* status as "guerrillas" in the cultural world clashes with the suggestion that their "revolutionary" techniques were not only limited in reach, but in fact manifested a self-reflexive academicism and a desire for linear modernisation. This point conflicts with Ángel Rama's eagerness to brand the group *vanguardista*, reflecting the desire among critics to validate the group's radical status. The failure of Rama's hope for the seamless extension of artistic methods into the realm of social practice through a *terrorismo en las artes* is something he ultimately reveals by citing the co-opted members' move to 'vivir en la sociedad y en la cultura que intentaron derribar'.¹² Such an approach, however, allows *El Techo's* legacy to become a lost opportunity that, in protecting the project to 'transformar la sociedad' by lamenting rather than analysing its failure, ignores the group's inconsistency with their own project's aims. Furthermore, Luis Camnitzer's clarification of the 'total structure change' produced by the collision of aesthetic messages and guerrilla activities provides a counterpoint to Rama's view by clearly identifying the requisites for an uncompromising attack on culture.¹³ Within this debate, the way *El Techo* presented themselves and their negotiation of cultural forms such as exhibitions, books, articles and manifestos is key to understanding

and the group featured in the collective exhibition *Heterotopias* at the *Museo Reina Sofía* in Madrid in 2000. Interestingly, in an informal interview former *ballenero* and Art Historian Perán Ermíny stressed the lack of consensus among former *balleneros* concerning their involvement in officially-run cultural activity, such as exhibitions and conferences, in view of their previous stance regarding these types of institution and the political allegiances they emblematised.

¹⁰ Ramos, Julio, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989)

¹¹ These quotes are from an interview with Juan Calzadilla that, although without a date, must have closely followed the 1962 publication of his poems *Dictado por la jauría*. "Dictado por la jauría", poemas de Juan Calzadilla', *El Nacional* (no date or page no.)

¹² Rama, Ángel, *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), pp25-37

¹³ Camnitzer, Luis, 'Contemporary Colonial Art', in Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson, (Eds), *Conceptual Art* (London: MIT Press, 1999), p229

how the group participated in existing cultural systems of reference, and how the reception of their work informs our understanding of their relative “terrorism”.

Fernando Coronil’s interdisciplinary study on state power and the magic of oil in Venezuela helps to situate *El Techo* in the historical context their work constantly referenced, and helps to decipher the appropriated rhetoric of specific nation-building discourses in *Asfalto-Infierno*. Coronil’s discussion of the petrodollar-fuelled campaign of modernisation that spanned the two decades preceding *El Techo*’s activity provides the vital background to the hegemony of the economic developmentalism and cultural structures that shaped national life at that time. The motives for *Asfalto-Infierno*’s redeployment of nation-building discourses against the maxims of development in the text’s use of oil imagery must, therefore, be examined alongside the modernising project to “sembrar el petróleo”.¹⁴ Converted into wealth and reinvested into the national subsoil, oil provided the volatile foundations of the constructions designed to substantiate Venezuela’s modernity, but also highlighted the shakiness of this illusion of development and progress. As such, the collision provoked between imaginary and real worlds in Caracas, with their consequent representations of space, prompts an analysis of the denotative power of the capital constructed on oil. The harmony of Lefebvre’s trilateral construct of ‘perceived-conceived-lived’ space was subordinated to the dreamlike visions of national progress of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948-1958) when the city became the blank canvas for the (literal) concretisation of a vision of development, functionalism and progress, given much of its architectural vocabulary by Carlos Raúl Villanueva.¹⁵ The representative role of Caracas, understood as one of Lefebvre’s abstract spaces inseparable from state power, is vital to any understanding of the text because in its counter-hegemonic recreation of the urban environment it attempts to destabilise the heroic nation-building discourse of development.¹⁶

Part II

Unstable Foundations –Unleashing the *lava*

Just under two years before the publication of *Asfalto-Infierno*, *El Techo* published their first *Rayado Sobre el Techo*.¹⁷ The *Rayado* took the form of a *desplegable*, a double-sided fold out publication/exhibition catalogue that accompanied the *balleneros*’ first exhibition *Para restituir el magma*, and also set out some of the group’s fundamental premises in the texts ‘para la restitución de la magma’ and ‘el

¹⁴ It was the Minister of Education López Contreras who coined the phrase “sembrar el petróleo”, which inextricably links national progress and development to the exploitation of the national subsoil and its re-investment as a refined, “civilized” product to improve national infrastructure. Almandoz, Arturo, *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano II. De 1936 a los pequeños seres* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2004), p127

¹⁵ For an introduction to Villanueva’s role in modernising Caracas see Niño Aranque, William, ‘Villanueva. Momentos de lo moderno’, *Carlos Raúl Villanueva. Un moderno en sudamérica* (Caracas: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, 1999), pp23-53

¹⁶ Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), pp41-44

¹⁷ See Fig. 1, Appendix I

gran magma'.¹⁸ At this juncture, *El Techo* established their visual and verbal vocabulary in a hybrid signature style, merging the huge whale with a graphic and textual eruption that emblematised the group's creative energy, even imitating it through the *desplegable's* form.

Uninhibited by punctuation, the text of 'para la restitución de la magma' literally erupts (from the whale) into a chant-like invocation of *el magma, la lava, la materia, las texturas* and *los ritmos*, where it is suggested that texts and works of art are subsumed by a naturally occurring *estallido*. The function of merging text and graphic product here is two-fold, both describing the exhibition's paintings and introducing the *informalista* aesthetic that influenced *El Techo's* early activities, but from which they distanced themselves later in the decade. Venezuelan critic Félix Hernández clarifies *informalismo's* status as a

movimiento artístico que se inicia en los años cincuenta y que pretendía despojarse de toda figuración e incluso de la abstracción geométrica para centrarse en la exaltación de las propiedades de los materiales.¹⁹

As well as the considerable influence of *informalismo*, the spontaneous language of 'para la restitución del magma' is resonant of the carnivalesque 'suspension of all hierarchical precedence'.²⁰ The participatory status of all *materia* recalls the unique type of communication achieved during carnival, initiating a rupture with, and inversion of normative social, and artistic, forms. *El Techo's* particular style involved the recovery of materials exiled from artistic representation, thus positioning it in a confrontation with 'el excesivo racionalismo del arte abstracto oficializado y con el realismo al estilo socialista'.²¹ When *materia* is forced into the foreground, annihilating perspective, it transcends itself, to give way to something more primal – the creative emblems of natural rhythms and the juddering eruptions of the earth's smouldering lava. As such, the *informalista* aesthetic plays with the idea of an art that devours itself to the point of cannibalism, but which produces something else in the process, following the reproductive logic of recycling.²² Considering Venezuela's self-defined status as an oil nation, it follows that *lava* and *magma*, in this instance, read as doubles for the most emblematic national *materia*: oil. It is sufficient to indicate this relationship now, as it will be addressed later as a key organisational principle in *Asfalto-Infierno*, where oil is as ambivalent as *lava* and *magma* - simultaneously volatile and productive.

¹⁸ The typography of the publication was very relaxed and the group did not capitalise their article titles in the original nor use formal punctuation, replacing it instead with spacing. *Rayado sobre el Techo no. 1* (Caracas: Ediciones del Techo de la Ballena, 24 March 1961)

¹⁹ Hernández, Félix, *El Techo de la Ballena. Galería de Arte Nacional. Noviembre 2002 – Abril 2003* (Caracas: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, 2002), p15

²⁰ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (London: The M.I.T Press, 1968), p10

²¹ Hernández, Félix, *El Techo de la Ballena. Galería de Arte Nacional. Noviembre 2002 – Abril 2003* (Caracas: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, 2002), p8

²² This reference to cannibalism and those to follow, do not refer to any other movement which uses this motif as a fundamental principle. In this case it simply means the devouring of one element by another of a similar or the same type.

Strategies of Containment— a Move to Codify the Eruption

By participating in commentaries on their own work within the traditional boundaries of exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles and manifestos, *El Techo* legitimised the textual spaces available for the justification and tacit explanation of their work that consequently undermined their key premise of rupture. The collectively-penned text 'el gran magma', which also features in the first *Rayado*, introduces another of *El Techo's* major organisational principles, describing their awareness that all existing structures contain an internal instability, or 'germen de ruptura'. Registering a disappointment with systems created by humans with 'menos capacidad para organizar [...] que para vivir', they posit an excess of meaning through artistic rupture, which, in a metaphorical orgasm, bursts beyond the cultural containments of 'las liturgias del lenguaje' and 'los almanaques'. However, their claim to exceed theoretical commentaries paradoxically initiates a self-reflexive definition of their own aesthetics – originally posited as a *defiance* of interpretation. Rather than disappear over time, this self-reflexivity comes to typify the ambivalence inherent in *El Techo*, and calls into question the scope of their logic of rupture.

Para restituir el magma followed *Espacios Vivientes* (1960), one of the first *informalista* exhibitions to take place in Venezuela, which was organised in Maracaibo by *balleneros* Juan Calzadilla and Daniel González. A text from the exhibition symptomises a pre-*ballenero* anxiety concerning art's simultaneous engagement with social reality, and "elevated" cosmic factors.²³ Calzadilla abstrusely relates *informalismo* both to a grounded crisis in humanity *and* lofty, undefined cosmic elements and then, in a further tension, discards *and* validates a systematic understanding of art that apprehends it and plots it in a developmentalist trajectory, claiming that

esta situación no nace determinada por el desarrollo artístico, sino por circunstancias cósmicas que reflejan la crisis de la civilización contemporánea.²⁴

This extract reiterates the tension just mentioned, and again arises from an attempt to contain works whilst concurrently alleging to unleash representation. Pulling in two directions, there is both a refusal of a codification of *informalismo* and a tacit acknowledgement of its inevitability, and, perhaps, desirability. As such, by denying a (containing) theoretical response to their work, Calzadilla paradoxically pre-empts the move to codify it by beginning this task himself. Similarly, in a newspaper article 'Las Instituciones de Cultura nos Roban el Oxígeno', published two years later, Caupolicán Ovalles stated that even though they had taken into account the activities of Dada and the Surrealists, the *balleneros*

²³ The extract from *Espacios Vivientes* by Esteban Muro (a.k.a. Juan Calzadilla), appeared in the catalogue to a recent exhibition of *informalista* work. Guevara Ernesto J., *Relaciones Informales. Colección Galería de Arte Nacional* (Caracas: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, 2005)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

al fundar *El Techo de la Ballena* no pretendemos revivir actos ni resucitar gestos a los que el tiempo ha colocado en el justo sitio que les corresponde en la historia de la literatura y de las artes contemporáneas.²⁵

By temporalising styles and rooting them in specific locations, a sign of the very academicism *El Techo* derided, Ovalles ironically undoes the carnivalesque simultaneity suggested by the organic *magma/lava* images, anticipating the apprehension of *informalismo* as form, and positing the inevitable absorption of all that is inform into shapely cultural structures.

Likewise, *El Techo's* repeated use of manifestos cements their ambivalent approach to critique, where these texts attempt to legitimise works of art and literature (for we are still discussing “organic” works of art) and thus institutionalise, to a certain extent, responses to them.²⁶ In his introduction to the 13 key Venezuelan literary manifestos, critic Juan Carlos Santaella signals their fatality, a characteristic which can also be applied to the formal texts, such as prologues, catalogues and articles which either anticipate, accompany or follow the reception of *El Techo's* works, anaesthetising the viewer against their potential shock.²⁷ Despite *El Techo's* pretension to expression beyond sense and structure, when in ‘Las instituciones...’ Caupolicán Ovalles claimed that ‘Para lograr ese objeto primordialísimo [expresar, sólo expresar] renegamos de todo cliché que quiera atribuirsenos’, his vehement negation contained the tacit and limiting inevitability of a race between *El Techo* and critics, where the former’s creativity must outrun the latter’s interpretative skill. A statement of originality invites categorisation as such and necessarily invites and perpetuates a system of (academic) critique. It can be asserted, therefore, that rather than exceed sense *El Techo* defended a negotiated position, leading and inviting dialogues of interpretation. This foundational tension represents a simultaneous sensitivity to production and reception, because in their quest for *informalismo's* spontaneity the group show a desire for process-driven art, they always already had the finished product’s consumption in mind. These contradictory elements penetrate and shape, not only *El Techo*, but the apprehension of sense in *Asfalto-Infierno* too.

Part III

Asfalto-Infierno

The later narrative of Adriano González León, particularly his Seix Barral Prize-winning novel *País portátil* (1968), features prominently in broad discussions of Venezuelan narrative, whilst *Asfalto-Infierno* merits only brief comments that tend

²⁵ Rama, Ángel, *Antología de ‘El Techo de la Ballena’* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), p49

²⁶ Peter Bürger’s description of organic works as syntagmatic makes a useful distinction between organic and non-organic works of art. *Asfalto-Infierno*, for example, tends to fit within the organic description, where the individual parts coexist with the whole of the work and bear a coherent relation to it. Whilst each text is slightly different in subject matter, there is a clear set of thematic coordinates that they all share. Similarly, images are sometimes repeated throughout the text, and this again produces its internal cohesion. Bürger, Peter, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp79-80

²⁷ Santaella, Juan Carlos, *Manifiestos literarios venezolanos* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1992), p9

to note its genealogical links to the novel.²⁸ In a chapter dedicated to the work, Hector Brioso Santos labels *Asfalto-Infierno* 'Una obra maestra' and situates it firmly within an *avant-garde* tradition, but his approach is limited.²⁹ The critic restricts his analysis to the vehicular imagery that represents only a fragment of the text's content, ignoring the text's co-authorship and generic hybridity and placing it in a retrospective critique focusing on González León's short stories *Hombre que daba sed* (1967). Rather than view the book through the trajectory of González León's individual literary career, we will investigate the generic, stylistic and thematic detail of *Asfalto-Infierno* and its relation to *El Techo*'s project.

***Asfalto-Infierno* and the Structure of Inversion**

The structure of inversion is the fundamental compositional trope that governs *Asfalto-Infierno*'s style, content and treatment of thematic concerns. This means of attack represents the crystallisation of the rupture proposed by *El Techo* in the first *Rayado sobre el Techo* and extends the underlying carnivalesque dynamic of logic à l'envers. The persistent dominance of this structure allows us to plot the text's constituent inversions in a linear development which culminates in the definitive one suggested by the book's title: Caracas as terrestrial *inferno*. The ultimate topographical inversion of Heaven and Hell, and the subsequent apocalypse that this implies, forms the destination of *Asfalto-Infierno*'s narrative thread.

Inversion is first mooted in *Rayado Sobre el Techo no.1*, where the group posited a reconfiguration of cultural structures by asking *balleneros* '¿qué opina ud. sobre el salón oficial?', an officially-run painting competition established in the 1940s.³⁰ Caupolicán Ovalles' response to the mock-questionnaire is typically sardonic, where he answers that

más que la desaparición del salón, yo espero la desaparición de todos los salones, excepto, claro está, los salones de belleza.

The mixture of humorous irony and *gravitas* in the responses characterises how *El Techo* upturned the self-importance of what they considered the mediocre events that typified their contemporary cultural sphere.

A further, much more evident, reference to inversion tactics is found in 'Investigación de las basuras', Adriano González León's prologue to Caupolicán Ovalles' polemical poem '¿Duerme usted señor Presidente?'³¹ Principally, inversion

²⁸ See Orlando Araujo's *Narrativa venezolana contemporánea* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1988), Amarilis Hidalgo de Jesús's *La novela moderna en Venezuela* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) and José Napoleon Oropeza's *Para fijar un rostro: notas sobre la novelística venezolana actual* (Valencia: Vadel Hermanos Editores, 1984)

²⁹ Brioso Santos, Héctor, 'Una obra maestra: vanguardia, ciudad y automóvil en *Asfalto-Infierno* de Adriano González León', *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolano (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002), pp277-283

³⁰ Sullivan J., Edward, *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p144

³¹ It was this publication which aggravated further the political persecution suffered by both Adriano González León and Caupolicán Ovalles, as a result of which the former was imprisoned and the latter

justifies 'el hecho de escribir', converting writing into protest and renewal, from complicity and tradition. More specifically, González León signals its key role in the poem's style, stating that 'En tal orden de inversiones, funciona este libro'. The inversion spoken of is a rejection of 'el orden de los reglamentos santificados' of the Venezuelan literary world, and, in a binary structure, opposes the 'aplastante superficialidad' of 'consagrados escritores nacionales' with the 'resurrección' of new writing, led by *El Techo*.³² According to the prologue, the past is marked by

poética metafísica, tan perfumada de malabares [...] coja, ahíta de impotencia [...] por ansia de trascendencia, compromiso social, necesidad óptica o investigación filológica.

Old writing is deposed by its newly dominant underbelly, the new writing that extracts 'su materia de los fondos viscerales'. That it is predicated on a 'pestilencia gloriosa' would be paradoxical according to the old order, but inversion permits the transformation of the stench of rubbish-filled writing into a grotesque and positive sign. This structure of inversion is used in *Asfalto-Infierno* to disrupt values and traditions in a variety of ways, however whilst signalling how it functions we will also evaluate the limitations of the logic implied by its application.

The Status of the Author in *Asfalto-Infierno*

In the first *Rayado Sobre el Techo*, form and structure became the victims of a cannibalistic *materia* and it is this, drawing comparisons with the historical *avant-garde's* 'radical negation of the category of individual creation', that suggested *El Techo's* project would cause the creative, and bourgeois, notion of the artist/author to be consumed by a mass of content.³³ *Asfalto-Infierno* certainly demanded a transformation in the role of the author and artist and this is voiced explicitly in the text. In his prologue to the 1963 edition of *Asfalto-Infierno*, Pérez Perdomo designated its authors mobile, active *transeúntes*, distinct from the Venezuelan writers who when faced with 'el crecimiento impresionante de nuestra capital [se quedan] al margen de este hecho real y avasallante [...] desde sus escritorios de Caracas'. It is clear that the spatial contrast implied an inversion within writing that demanded an embodied engagement with the city, consumed physically, rather than just intellectually.

In another indictment of writers disengaged from their social context, Edmundo Aray attacked the complicity of 'el escritor de escritorio' who often became a 'funcionario de gobierno', either literally or by acting as spokesperson for certain political discourses.³⁴ It follows, therefore, that 'González León siente el peso y el acoso de la ciudad y se subleva gesticulando e insultando', as Pérez Perdomo writes. The text of

suffered death threats which led to his exile. See Edmundo Aray, 'El mordisco de la ballena', *Rayado Sobre el Techo no. 2*, (Caracas: Ediciones del Techo de la Ballena, 2 May 1963)

³² These accusations are from the 'Introducción' to the exhibition *Homenaje a la cursilería y el lugar común*, in Rama, Ángel, *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), p189

³³ Bürger, Peter, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p51.

³⁴ Brioso Santos, Héctor, *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolano (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002), p138

Asfalto-Infierno refers to corporal experience in an aggressive urban environment, where the smooth syntax and vocabulary of transit is disturbed so it becomes what Pérez Perdomo termed 'un lenguaje descontrolado'. The reinsertion of the body into writing destabilises the rational separation of the Cartesian mind-body binary by suggesting that writing should reflect the individual's problematic contact with the urban environment, rather than the distant conjecturing of omniscient, sense-making authors. The following passage from the first and most fragmented text in *Asfalto-Infierno* demonstrates, however, that the text is not devoid of a crafted narrative thread of sense that articulates a fragmented, but still coherent language:

Alzar la cara hacia donde se supone cielo abierto defrauda al primer toque de ojo. Desde allá le caen las luces de los autos, pasan las luces de los autos pájaros disparados como en la montaña rusa de los parques de diversiones.

Whilst the voice of a commanding author is absent in *Asfalto-Infierno*, it is still possible to orientate oneself through the text, picking up on repeated ideas that centre around the concept of 'la selva urbana', the inverted urban order where cars prey on humans. Similarly, despite the prologue's proposed inversion of the 'razonamientos profesoriales' of authorial distance that would force the author into contact with an urban *materia*, annihilating form and erasing nearly every trace of his activity, narrative coherence is not emptied of sense. Repositioned in a negotiated location, a "voice" still mediates the narrative, avoiding any legitimising *yo heroico*, but continuing to produce its own authorially-mediated logic. An unspoken celebration of individual creativity continues here, despite the relentless typography of these dense texts, which mimics the onslaught of *materia* mentioned above. Conversely, their apparent impenetrability can be unpacked so that the segments of *Asfalto-Infierno's* logical inversion are charted thematically. At the level of form, this logic hinges on the interaction between the visual and verbal texts in staged chance collisions designed to reflect the unpredictability and instability of the metropolis but that, in fact, invite and facilitate the exploration of a linear argument.

***Asfalto-Infierno's* Aesthetic Hybridity**

The combination of text and image in *Asfalto-Infierno* flirts with the inversion of an urban planned logic usurped by the irrationality of chance, and also calls into question the legitimising role of photographic representation. The text's hybridity generates a two-fold discussion, where parallels with Surrealist collage reiterate the need to assess what type of vanguard *El Techo* were, and where the inversion of the legitimising and glorifying role of photography in the visible construction of a nation must be examined.

In *Asfalto-Infierno*, the multi-media combination might seem, at first sight, to resemble the mutually incongruous elements of a Surrealist collage, where, for instance, in 'Fábrica de humo', a door painted with the words 'casa de familia' accompanies a text describing a brothel. According to Dawn Ades's definition of collage, this blend enables the text to invert normative sense-making logic by

removing the frame of reference and disorientating the viewer.³⁵ Ades quotes André Breton's description of collage as a form which conflated "two widely separate realities [...] drawing a spark from their contact", but when viewed in more detail it is clear that these texts have a more logical and complementary than illogical and incongruous relationship. In *Asfalto-Infierno*, their co-operation is predicated on the 'mediate production of chance' and the explanatory drive permeating González León's texts, rather than on the strange separateness of Surrealist collage.³⁶ *Asfalto-Infierno's* use of chance is not of the direct type, discussed by Bürger, but, rather, the 'subjective imagination' continues to shape the work and makes the 'the chance of construction' subservient to the authors' administration of certain socio-political themes arising from a very real historical moment. For instance, in 'Hierofania invertida', a photo of a grave with a painted sign saying 'terreno propio' extrapolates to a commentary on agnosticism via an inverted Christian spatial dynamic where 'Arriba, las nubes son solamente una emanación blanca o morada de las ciudades' so that, subsequently, this spatial rearrangement can recall the seizure of *latifundios* by rural guerrillas in Venezuela.³⁷ As such, the importance of the written texts' author as mediator of sense is maintained via his commentaries, and discreet dominance of the narrative frame. This intertextual relationship does not eliminate, but expands the frame of reference and invites responses to the immediate political context, so that the dark humour of a chance encounter between a roadside warning and a tribute to an accident victim in 'Bestia afiliada' recreates Caracas as an non-negotiable space, thus inverting the very *raison d'être* of the progressive *Plan de Vialidad Nacional*.

Even though the prologue claims the texts and photographs 'sutil y secretamente se relacionan sin supereditarse', alluding to a mystical element of chance at play in *Asfalto-Infierno*, the texts perform the more traditional function of captions to documentary photographs. Juan Carlos Palenzuela's distinction between varieties of *documentalismo* helps contextualise this trend and the status it confers onto photography in Venezuela.³⁸ According to Palenzuela, photography as an art or critical documentary form really only began with the fall of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958, previous to which its use met corporate or institutional needs, as exemplified by the officially archives photographs that legitimised nation-building discourses.³⁹ This cooperative logic regards written content as an extra justification

³⁵ Ades, Dawn, *Dada and Surrealism* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1974), pp30-31

³⁶ Bürger, Peter, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p67

³⁷ A fuller extract from the text helps to illustrate the point:

Lo alto ha quedado para provocar las lluvias, los fuegos de artificio y el rastro de los teledirigidos. Cadáveres que sobrepasan cualquier cifra elegible, incendios, alianzas, prontuarios ampliados de las policías rurales, perros amaestrados en los latifundios y grupos imperturbables que todavía disparan en los montes, prueban que los hombres han decidido repartirse la tierra. Se hace la inversión y es nuestro miserable abajo quien condiciona un cambio celestial. Arriba las nubes son solamente una emanación blanca o morada de las ciudades

³⁸ Palenzuela, Juan Carlos, *Fotografía en Venezuela. 1960-2000* (Caracas: Movilnet, 2001), p8

³⁹ *Op. Cit.*, p37 Additionally, see the photos by prominent photographer Leo Matiz, taken during Pérez Jiménez's rule that exemplify the presentation of state power and the developmentalist view of progress. Matiz took many photos of the dictator and his urban projects during the 1950s, a selection of which can be found in the catalogue to a 1998 exhibition *Imágenes de la Venezuela del siglo XX*:

for the image's message, so that the critique waged by *documentalismo* in *Asfalto-Infierno* is generically typical of its time, upturning the glorification of nation-building, rather than disturbing the inter-relationship of image and text. As such, the choice of photographic representation in a project of inversion is a judicious one precisely because of the loaded nature of its earlier uses, which Boris Kossoy points out are charged with the ideology of progress, relying on the alchemic mixture of the photograph that 'transforms into material "truth" mental images that are immaterial and ideological'.⁴⁰ A disruption in the circulation of photographs within the "visual economy" of 1960s Venezuela by critical, left-wing *documentalismo* alludes to photographs' use value in nation-building projects and, as such, endows them with the capacity for pointed critique from a position *within* the renovated generic frame of *documentalismo*.⁴¹

To clarify, *Asfalto-Infierno*'s generic hybridity does not replicate the Surrealists' endeavour to discover elements of the unpredictable in daily life, but is based on the inversion of an urban visual vocabulary which glorifies progress and development to facilitate a socio-political critique. Relative ease of interpretation and the discernible inter-relationship of text and image guarantee that reading remains a coherent practice experienced at the intersection of "real" and imagined visions of the city. At this photographic juncture, plural conceptualisations of the city meet to shatter the pretence of a stable and coherent city, as it fragments into the atomised doors, street signs and graffiti of *Asfalto-Infierno*'s convulsive visual syntax.

Caracas – Inventing the Promise of 'la ciudad fabulada'⁴²

That Caracas is the most central of *Asfalto-Infierno*'s themes is highly significant when we consider the discursive context of the mid-twentieth century in Venezuela. Whilst at the turn of the century dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-35) pioneered urban development by modelling Caracas on Paris, Fernando Coronil points out that it was with the policies of Marco Pérez Jiménez that 'the nation was turned into a visible construct, a [literally] concrete appearance'.⁴³ As such, *Asfalto-Infierno* responds to a key moment in nation-building, within which Venezuela had only relatively recently been consolidated as an oil-nation, when, according to Coronil, the Oil Law of 1943 officially recognised 'that the subsoil was national property and that the role of the state was to safeguard this property on behalf of the collectivity'.⁴⁴ Under Marcos Pérez Jiménez's leadership, national development pivoted on the state's mission to *sembrar el petróleo*, when it was sown, principally, into the urban soil of a capital designed to emblematisé Venezuelan modernity.

fotografías del Archivo Histórico de Miraflores. Marzo-Junio 1998 (Caracas: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, 1998), pp41-45

⁴⁰ Kossoy, Boris, 'Photography in Nineteenth Century Latin America', in Wendy Waitriss & Lois Parkinson Zamora (Eds) *Image and Memory: Photography from Latin America 1866-1994* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998), p45

⁴¹ Poole, Deborah, 'Introduction', in *Vision, Race, and Modernity. A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp3-24

⁴² González León, Adriano, 'Río igual ciudad', in Soledad Mendoza, *Así es Caracas* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1980), (without pagination).

⁴³ Coronil, Fernando, *The Magical State. Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p173

⁴⁴ *Op. Cit.*, p108

Written in 1955, Pérez Jiménez's *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* was the ideological touchstone of an affirmation of nationhood, stability and progress through urban development and sumptuous public works. Whilst there was considerable modernisation in the country's infrastructure, linking cities via a road network, it was Caracas that mainly hosted the "transformación racional del medio físico y de mejoramiento de las condiciones morales, intelectuales y materiales de los habitantes del país", deemed to secure the nation's symbolic "plena posesión de nuestro territorio".⁴⁵ The huge influx of poor migrants to Caracas, leading to what Ángel Rama termed *macrocefalia urbana*, were provided with housing in massive self-contained estates, equipped with supermarkets, churches and petrol stations and the functionalism of the *superbloques* designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva was causally linked to the amelioration of the quality of life and morality of Venezuelan citizens, who would enjoy this "primera liberación del hombre [...] de la miseria, del atraso, de la ignorancia".⁴⁶ The optimism of the future, as such, was already prophetically written into the urban developments taking place in the 1950s and generated a direct causality between the nation's development and its metropolitan panorama.

Advertising Venezuela – Branding the City

Arturo Almandoz reveals the drive to "sell" Venezuela to an international market of investors, thus confirming its position within modernity, when he discusses Pérez Jiménez's aspirations to transform Caracas into a city fit to host the 1964 Olympic Games.⁴⁷ The inscription of power within the urban environment recalls Henri Lefebvre's unitary theory of space, where the city is host to 'representations of the relations of production [which] occur in space: space contains them in the form of buildings, monuments and works of art'.⁴⁸ Given our earlier discussion of the use of photography to promote state and corporate activity, its redeployment to depict urban dystopia in *Asfalto-Infierno* takes on a biting critical edge. The critique becomes clearer, in addition, when Daniel González's images are contrasted to the commodified landscape produced in Caracas, where the monumentality of a limited number of buildings became the "brands" that exhibited its progress. A series of postcards reproducing some key sites designed to epitomise national identity and progress, built during the modernisation of Caracas, reveal the coherence posited by certain urban vistas.⁴⁹ The postcards' mix of text and image connote urban promise

⁴⁵ These are direct quotations from the *Nuevo Ideal Nacional*, cited by Arturo Almandoz in his study *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano II. De 1936 a los pequeños seres* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2004), p121

⁴⁶ Blanco Muñoz, Agustín, *Habla el General* (Caracas: Editorial José Martí, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1983), p334

⁴⁷ It was Tokyo, however, that played host to the 1964 Olympic Games. Almandoz, Arturo, *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano II. De 1936 a los pequeños seres* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2004), p121

⁴⁸ Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991) p33

⁴⁹ See Appendix II. The postcards used here bear no date but do have the advantage of being produced by the same photographic studio in Caracas. Bearing in mind the style of dress and cars in the images, the postcards were unlikely to be contemporaneous with the *pérezjimenista* era, but it is quite possible that they were in circulation either during or just after *El Techo*'s activity.

through the elision of an imagined and real Caracas, where optimism about the future co-exists with a celebration of the past through heritage - precisely the positivist temporal trajectory that is inverted by the dystopian, “regressive” imagery of *Asfalto-Infierno*.

The monumentality of the shots, which are mainly public works initiated by Pérez Jiménez, imitate the logic of his *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* by eliding the physical experience of the city with an emotional, nationalistic one. The postcards’s captions, inaccurately translated for a foreign market, epitomise this approach to producing sites of Lefebvre’s ‘consecrated space’ for ‘spiritual walking around Venezuela [sic] glories’.⁵⁰ The postcards, in fact, conflate spatial practice and representations of space which, when measured against a “real” experience, produce two conflictive vocabularies of urban representation. The captions suggest an idealised and mystical animism where ‘Plaza Altamira *lucen sus vías Elevadas*’ and ‘La arquitectura piramidal de La Previsora [the headquarters of a large insurance firm] *nos reconforta el espíritu*’.⁵¹ However, the postcards’ saturated colours and simplistic focus on light represent a schematic, aesthetic connotation of life, knowledge and time, and thus a ‘higher “reality”’ that undergoes a straightforward inversion in the predominant darkness and recurrent allusions to death of Daniel González’s photographs.⁵²

The prologue to the original edition of *Asfalto-Infierno* alludes quite frankly to photography as hegemonic discursive practice where Francisco Pérez Perdomo also distinguishes the book’s inversion of other photographic genres, stating that

No será éste uno de esos libros usuales [...] ilustradas con discursos patrióticos [...] de los grandes valores nacionales, para halago de turistas y otros desorientados [...] Tampoco desfilarán por estas páginas los fotografiados y consabidos aspectos de la vida nacional, exportables a menudo en tarjetas postales.⁵³

⁵⁰ I refer to Henri Lefebvre’s discussion of the state’s need to produce social spaces which present and represent a given society. These include political and religious ‘consecrated spaces’ which are inhabited by a ‘higher reality’. Lefebvre, Henri, *La production de l’espace*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p34 See also Fig. 1a, Appendix I

⁵¹ The emphasis is mine.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ It is worth reproducing this paragraph of the prologue in its entirety as it also refers to the ‘complacencia’ of photographic representation, which aligns itself with the appearance of development and capitalist success encapsulated in a ‘falso esplendor’:

No será éste uno de esos libros usuales, semejante a las recopilaciones fotográficas elaboradas por traficantes e ilustradas con discursos patrióticos, o artículos de encargo, de los grandes valores nacionales, para halago de turistas y otros desorientados; o los conjuntos de fotos preciosistas, de señaladas y pintorescas regiones del país, con leyendas explicativas de una complacencia de una pobreza lamentables, o como esos volúmenes oficiales, ricamente presentados, que se proponen exaltar un falso esplendor para seducir voluntades inestables. Tampoco desfilarán por estas páginas los fotografiados y consabidos aspectos de la vida nacional, exportables a menudo en tarjetas postales para amigos y familiares distantes, sino una cara menos conocida y más dramática de la ciudad.

That Pérez Perdomo devotes so much of his prologue to attacking ‘fotos preciosistas’, their ‘complacencia’, ‘falso esplendor’ and desire to ‘seducir voluntades inestables’ emphasises the particular ideological inversion at work in *Asfalto-Infierno*’s fragmentary views.⁵⁴ González’s limited thematic repertoire of ground level anonymous street views, graffiti with the words ‘el suicida’ and elderly, humble *caraqueños* inverts the monumental uniqueness of Caracas’s grandiose modernist buildings replacing them with quasi-anonymous, cloned spaces that defy navigation and suggest that the city is enslaved to the modern tempo of industrial and standardised production. This dynamic is replicated by an image accompanying ‘Bestia afilada’, where a close up shot simply enumerates the content of a typical, unexceptional *barrio*, filling this image of *ad hoc* spatial organisation with process, improvisation and *materia* so that its homogeneity contradicts the all-encompassing heroism and containment of the emblematic *pérezjimenista* residential projects. The recognisable landmarks which give sense to the city are also lost in the texts when they reproduce a mass of duplicate spaces, and ‘la avenida’ becomes just another clone of ‘las avenidas todas’. However, from this homogeneity *Asfalto-Infierno* extracts an abundance of aesthetic cross references in the visions of a plural Caracas, which is at once *re-produced* as an *informalista* city, a pop-art massified space and an urban planner’s nightmare that counter the text’s own darkness with the positive allusions to (its authors’s) creative imaginations. In a later essay ‘Río igual ciudad’ published in *Así es Caracas* (1981), a compilation of photographs and texts by prominent Latin American writers and thinkers, Adriano González León pinpoints the convergence of dreams and reality in Caracas, whose incompatibility leads to a confusing, but fruitful experience of the city where

A lo lejos, la ciudad envuelve singulares promesas. Campo de aventura, allí vamos, zigagueantes, hacia lugares que nunca encontraremos [...] Al márgen de todos los deseos, la opción es la ciudad fabulada. Quisiéramos quedarnos con la real, pero, ya ves, ni tiene rostro ni tiene compostura.⁵⁵

González León suggests Caracas’s plurality of form renders it an *informalista* city *par excellence*, a site of competing fictions and desires where its mass of *materia* produces the dual “real” and imagined cities. The author suggests that hegemonic groups attempt to harness competing visions to make Caracas coherent, but that the city resists this drive and retains its essentially ambivalent status as both regenerative *materia* and urban hell.

Contradictory Realities – the Conflict of Promise and Disenchantment

The paradigmatic duality of Venezuela was a concept developed by intellectual and novelist Uslar Pietri in his 1949 study *De una a otra Venezuela*. Arturo Almandoz situates Pietri’s ideas in a precursory position to the disillusionment felt in the 1960s

⁵⁴ The term ‘ideological’ here refers to the ‘system of illusory beliefs’ that Raymond Williams uses as one of many descriptions of Marxist notions of ideology. Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p55

⁵⁵ González León, Adriano, ‘Río igual ciudad’, in Soledad Mendoza, *Así es Caracas* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1980) (without pagination)

at the failure of the *Nuevo Ideal Nacional*'s project of 'la plena posesión y explotación del territorio nacional'.⁵⁶ The subsequent trajectory for Venezuela's nation-building is a continuum of social inequality, punctuated by sporadic renewals, redefinitions and repeated failures of the state's mission to *sembrar el petróleo*. Signalling such a trajectory allows us to locate *Asfalto-Infierno* in an aesthetic tradition that halts the temporal optimism of modernisation, influencing *la novela del petróleo* and, more specifically, the recent work of photographic artist Alexander Apóstol.⁵⁷ In a recent interview, Apóstol highlighted the performativity of development and modernity in Caracas during the 'periodo modernista' when he describes the degraded spectacle produced by contradictory coexisting realities, saying

Habíamos llegado a la apariencia de un país exitoso con ciudades, instituciones y familias exitosas. Eso era lo que queríamos ver. Al final no era sino un espejismo, que hoy en días es un espejo roto. El petróleo se nos volvió agua.

The clashing disparity of two visible Venezuelas, one "“fingida”" and the other "“real”", also structures Pietri's understanding of the deceptive façade of development epitomised by metropolitan consumer habits, where the 'artificiales actividades de importación o de servicios' provided the unstable foundations for the construction of the single-product economy of the oil nation.⁵⁸ For Pietri,

Las caras de ambas Venezuelas se encontraban ya frente a frente en las ciudades duales que emergían en las metrópolis beneficiarias del ingreso petrolero.⁵⁹

The city, as symbolic host to *rancho* and *rascacielo*, exacerbates this contradictory present and points towards an incongruity which can be clarified through its temporality. The vertiginous pace of modernity proposed to propel Caracas into the future through a superficial performance of architectural modernity, which caused the *ranchos* to be stigmatised with a rejected past and an implicit developmental tardiness. This structure of contradictory temporalities is mobilised in *Asfalto-Infierno* through the repeated cannibalisation of developmentalist discourses, which

⁵⁶ Almandoz, Arturo, *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano II. De 1936 a los pequeños seres* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2004), pp127-139

⁵⁷ In his solo exhibition "Caracas Suite" (Caracas, 2004), photographic artist Alexander Apóstol projected a film of the *helicoide* (an unfinished modernist construction which now houses the intelligence branch of the *Policía Metropolitana*) in which the building was slowly eroded by a super-imposed fountain to the tune of a classical suite. He summarises his vision of Caracas, inseparable from the failure of the *modernista* project, as follows: '«Caracas sólo se mueve para escapar de sí misma en todo momento y, al final, termina atrapada y perdida en su propio fracaso. No avanza. Caracas se ha hecho una suite de su propia modernidad en ruinas.»' Alfonso-Sierra, Edgar, '«Caracas se ha hecho una suite de su propia modernidad en ruinas.»', in 'Cultura y Espectáculos', *El Nacional*, 26 July 2004

⁵⁸ Almandoz, Arturo, *La ciudad en el imaginario venezolano II. De 1936 a los pequeños seres* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2004), pp128-129

⁵⁹ *Op. Cit.*, p131

are reproduced and systematically undercut by both contradictory dualities. 'Q.E.P.D' is not only the longest section in the book, but also the most extensive inversion of the language of nation-building and its economic developmentalism. The piece hinges on an incongruity of form and content which cannibalises, first of all, theatrical traditions such as Spanish *Zarzuela*, Plauto's jovial Roman theatre and the absurdist drama of Eugene Ionesco. Nevertheless, any aspirations to dramatic action suggested by the 'Dramatis personae' are immediately undercut by the contradictory assertion that 'La acción no se desarrolla en ninguna parte'.

In 'Q.E.P.D', the title's persistent, ominous allusion to death is pitted against each character's monologue, whose tone is typically of a radiant positivity. The "fingida" (verbal) monologue of the *Patrona* pivots on the central claim 'Soy bella, vigorosa, encantadora', where didactic claims, such as 'Mi sonrisa es esplendente' and 'tralalá...Esta es mi voz', dictate exactly what the reader is asked to believe. However, the "real" (visual) testimony of the protagonist revealed silently by the photograph establishes the incongruity between these co-existing "realities" and mocks the overblown performativity of the hegemonic verbal account. The image and text of *Ciente uno* presents a similar, but more specific critique achieved by the attempt to equate the (verbal) celebration of capitalist imperatives of generating wealth and consumption with the (visual) reality of a humble, subdued *señora* walking along an anonymous street. Bearing this image in mind, the following extract stages the cannibalisation of the verbal discourse by the visual one:

Todos vivimos por esa pasta. Igual que cuando sale el señor conferencista y nos advierte la amenaza contra la santa tradición. Yo comparto sus ideas. Hay que salvarla, con hojillas, mantequilla, enlatados, loterías, con papeles de envolver que no se mojan, los tornillos, periquitos amarillos, maratón, mueble-club, disco-club, perro-club. Me gusta el sol, la noche nunca.

The list of products points out another problematic temporality in the dual discourses of development by ironically voicing the contradictory imperative to protect tradition of the past through the perpetual consumption of innovative, but absurd, products manufactured in the blurry interstices of the present-future. *Asfalto-Infierno* attacks the manipulation of tradition as an apparatus of hegemony, used as 'an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present', where it tacitly refers to the *election* and naturalisation of tradition, rather than its predisposed, natural state.⁶⁰

The matrix of listed products, physical health, light, sunshine and media instruction proclaim the overwhelming positivity of the statement 'Esto es vida'. However, the alleged veneer of order and progressive democracy in the nation-building project is mocked when *Asfalto-Infierno* systematically mis-uses and inverts it, replacing the promise of the future with the counter-revolutionary *selva urbana*.

⁶⁰ Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p115

Foregrounding the Natural Body – the Tyranny of Oil in Daily Life

The co-existence of two contradictory Venezuelas explored in 'Q.E.P.D', through conflicting textual and visual testimonies, implicitly undermines the ability of oil to grant a spatial coherence to city and nation. Citing Ramón Santaella's study of "oil structure" as an organisational tool, Fernando Coronil outlines Santaella's claim that oil organised urban space through its conversion into petrodollars and subsequent investment as urban development and personal (capitalist) wealth.⁶¹ Coronil claims the dynamic of 'domesticating value', where oil shifts from being a 'commodity with specific physical properties [and] a use value' to 'an exchange value', is construed as a 'natural process'.⁶² Indeed, this conceptualisation of oil distances and refines the physical status of the raw material, to focus on its role in a tertiary sector where it is perceived in a tamed, monetary form. This (state) mediated relationship with the material is inverted by *Asfalto-Infierno* when the text foregrounds the molecular composition of oil and its threateningly physical presence on the surface of the city's *asfalto*, rather than sewing it deeply and invisibly into national infrastructure.

Oil's simultaneous and conflicting status as processed and invested wealth and raw matter, brings to mind a further conceptual duality, proposed by Fernando Coronil in his chapter 'The Nation's Two Bodies'.⁶³ In his analysis, Coronil explains the promise of a sovereign and democratic nation symbolised by the harmony of dual natural and social bodies, where

Only by uniting its body politic and its natural body would Venezuela be able to achieve full sovereignty; political independence without economic autonomy remained an insidious form of dependence.⁶⁴

Accordingly, the presence of oil in *Asfalto-Infierno* calls into question the project of democratisation. In 'Bestia afilada', González León reverts the promise of oil's sense-making spatial organisation (exhibited as road-networks), and turns back the clock of developmentalist narrative. Devoid of freedom, the city is experienced as entrapment, where calming spiritual configurations of space are impossible. An upwards gaze to 'cielo abierto' is obstructed when 'Desde allá le caen las luces de los autos', thus inhibiting spatial relief and positing an unbalanced relationship between Venezuela's natural and social bodies. Oil is unstably present both in the mediated form of cars (representing tertiary industry) and in the cruder form of petrol, where the former should connote the co-operative role of oil as wealth in Venezuelan modernity, but paradoxically signals its persistently untamed status. *Asfalto-Infierno* suggests an inverted spatial practice in the city's consecrated and ritualised spaces that host the 'spiritual walking' pivotal for national identity, and subordinates them to the degraded and brutal 'rito y devoción' of petrol-fuelled transit.⁶⁵ Unlike the spiritual comforts to be found walking in *Paseo de Los Próceres*, *Asfalto-Infierno's*

⁶¹ Coronil, Fernando, *The Magical State. Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p110

⁶² *Op. Cit.*, pp110-111

⁶³ *Op. Cit.*, pp67-121

⁶⁴ *Op. Cit.*, p102

⁶⁵ I refer, again, to the postcards of Appendix II.

pedestrians are alienated rather than united citizens, for whom the horizon of a promising future or nostalgic past are blocked by an immediately threatening present.

Asfalto-Infierno's linear narrative takes the city through a troubling metamorphosis, where the mission to *sembrar el petróleo* comes to a logical but horrific conclusion. Where oil was supposed to have a civilizing effect, the city as physical reflection of the nation's oil wealth is a chaos. With the body politic cannibalised by the natural body, the city reverts to a 'tetraetilo de plomo' and urban organisation is replaced with an unstable chemical volatility, at once 'íntegra' and 'al borde de una explosión'.

Black Gold as Cannibal and Apocalypse – Democracy Defeated

A vision of apocalypse concludes the trajectory of *Asfalto-Infierno's* logic à l'envers, in which the motif of cannibalism proves a key step towards the catastrophic inversion of the developmentalist logics of democracy and nation-building, and the effects on the body politic emerge as the most fatal of this symbolic reversal of the optimism of oil and democracy.

The promise of democracy re-emerged in Venezuela with the *Junta Patriótica's* removal of Marcos Pérez Jiménez from power on the 23rd of January 1958.⁶⁶ However, a democratic Venezuela based on 'the promotion of individual and collective welfare' and the celebration of 'collective unity' encapsulated by the expression "'the Spirit of 23 January'" is inverted in *Asfalto-Infierno* when individual protagonists are replaced by fragmented bodies and interchangeable identities that metaphorise the project's failure.⁶⁷ An increasingly desperate trajectory for political subjects and their bodies is plotted here, and culminates when the theme of death, latent in the whole text, is fully deployed. At its least sinister stage, González León's use of subjects is erratic and shifts constantly between *yo, él/ella* and *nosotros*, causing an irrelevance of individual subjectivity where citizens appear as indistinguishable 'gentes' who are 'usted o yo, cualquiera'. Further into this logic, however, subjects are dehumanised and transformed into 'animal' and 'monigote' or appear as metaphorical citizens represented by the one-legged mannequin on crutches in the image accompanying 'El sitio del paraíso'.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Fernando Coronil's chapter 'The Twenty-third of January of Democracy' provides a full outline to the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez and a description of the democratic project post-1958. Coronil, Fernando, *The Magical State. Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp201-230

⁶⁷ Coronil describes the perpetual elitism of politics, and also the exclusion of the *Partido Comunista* from post-1958 coalition activities, which, along with the radicalisation which came out of the Cuban Revolution, led to the Left's increasing disillusionment with president Rómulo Betancourt, and his move to impose sanctions against Cuba. It was under Betancourt's government that members of *El Techo* suffered political persecution. *Op. Cit.*, p215-228

⁶⁸ Hector Brioso Santos notes *El Techo's* interest in mannequins in several works by and discusses 'muñequización' as a recurrent trope in their work. Exploring the multiple allusions the mannequins have, Brioso Santos outlines one which is relevant here: 'Otro motivo más hondo, puesto que cualquier figura semihumana de este tipo nos introduce en un particular universo grotesco, de imitación fallida, de farsa imposible, de museo de cera, de *casi-persona*, de maniquí reconocible como tal.' Brioso Santos, Héctor, *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolano (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002), p218

Within the massification of individual subjects also comes the bodily fragmentation and categorisation of the prostitutes in 'La fábrica del humo'. Reduced to the categories of product, such as 'la francesa' and "'La Chinga'", the women's bodies are then commodified, grouped and transformed into the rationalised geometry of 'muslos en triángulo'. Their bodies are metaphorical wounds whose deformities and diseases add to the inventory of profanity and taboo subjects, where González León describes their 'camisones' as 'Costras de mujeres puestas a secar, hinchadas al sereno para que el cielo se lleve las suciedades venéreas'. This inversion recalls the co-opted role of female beauty in a nation-building project that advertised Venezuela on an international stage and reinforced its branding as a land of plenty, made visible by the 1952 foundation of the *Miss Venezuela* company by Panamerican Airways.⁶⁹

The democratic project makes another explicit appearance in 'Q.E.P.D', when individuals are reduced to robotic archetypes, with names such as *Cliente uno* and *Cliente dos*, whose programmatic speech is deliberately over-scripted and underlines their function as two-dimensional mouthpieces for its discourses. In a counter-hegemonic move, the incongruous socio-historical context of government repression of left-wing antagonists (including some *balleneros*), and the text's own internal contradictions, undercut the charade of Venezuelan democracy. Repeatedly, beauty, bodily health and vigour are linked to capitalist development, where *Cliente dos* extols 'las delicias de ser hijo de un país importador' saying 'Estos son músculos bien ganados en la zona petrolera'. However, the hyperbolic joyfulness of the chorus

Somos bellos, vigorosos, con muy sana alegría de vivir...comprendemos...los derechos ciudadanos...tralalá

that is sung by all three characters effectively satirises the coalition parties's pursuit of democracy in post-*pérezjimenista* Venezuela. The ending of 'Q.E.P.D' confirms democracy's failure through the total destruction of the human bodies in the 'Final de Gobernación' and the 'Final final', when the three characters suffer heart attacks. Democracy (the body politic) becomes the metaphorical victim of a failure protagonised by the aggressive appearance of 'agentes de policía', disquietingly present throughout *Asfalto-Infierno* in the repeated images of a military tank and soldiers.

⁶⁹ The *Organización Miss Venezuela* claim their objective remains constant, to 'seguir exaltando la belleza de la mujer venezolana y que el nombre del país siga destacando en todos los rincones del mundo.' 'Miss Venezuela', *Organización Miss Venezuela*, 2004,

<http://missvenezuela.com/2004/secciones.asp?pag=02> [accessed 22 July 2005]

See also the extract from a Time magazine article from 1953 cited by Fernando Coronil as a response to Pérez Jiménez's welcoming of foreign investors to Venezuela. Coronil, Fernando, *The Magical State. Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p183

Beyond the cannibalisation of the body politic by official parties, there is a second strain of apocalypse involving the total metamorphosis of the city into an embodiment of crude oil. This brings to a conclusion González León's cannibalisation of the concept of *sembrar el petróleo*, inverting the modern city into a Hell on Earth. In 'Lotería de vestido', Caracas teeters over the abyss of catastrophe when it is described as

el asfalto infierno: costra que humea al sol, residuo de la primera industria del país, orgullo, potencia básica de la nacionalidad por donde trota el orden constructivo de la democracia y la elección mayoritaria de las urnas.

The apocalypse intimated in the 'ciudad íntegra al borde de una explosión' at the end of 'Bestia afilada' reaches very near fruition in 'El sitio del paraíso', where exile and the threat of catastrophe appear as paradigms of Venezuelan identity cowering under 'la gran llama del petróleo'. 'El sitio del paraíso', and the recurrent image of *asfalto-infierno*, essentialise promise and damnation within Venezuela by establishing a third paradigmatic duality of the nation as a 'tierra de gracia' and 'infierno' intersected by oil.⁷⁰ The infernal, apocalyptic wave of oil, however, is paradoxically predicated on the excessive comfort and security of 'comidas muy higienizadas, pasteurizadas, sanforizadas, leyes de protección, rociados de D.D.T. por todas partes', which its production of wealth facilitates. Ambivalence underlies this structure, where the overly stable, hygienic showiness of development, is undercut by the ever-present volatility of the nation's subsoil. This structure, then, typifies the fundamental paradigm of unresolved dualities and the ambivalence of the nation's appearance in the text, where, like the destructive *magma/lava* endowed with the positive sign of creativity, apocalyptic hygiene functions as a double for the crude oil which holds for Venezuela the promise of abundant wealth undercut by a distribution that was, and is, in reality, brutally uneven.

Part IV

Dualities, Binaries and "derivative discourse" – *Asfalto-Infierno* and *El Techo* as Structure, not Rupture⁷¹

The problematic limitations of *Asfalto-Infierno's* composition via inversion, within a project determined to 'transformar la sociedad', identified so far suggest the group is better located within an aesthetic renovation, than a cultural-political revolution. The questionable "violence" of the book's attack hinges on its binary inversion, whose limitations inform the critique of Ángel Rama's insistence on *El Techo's* guerrilla tactics.

Asfalto-Infierno's logic lets down the pursuit of a new aesthetic life praxis simply because inversion can be just as easily re-inverted. The vehemence of this approach

⁷⁰ Uslar Pietri and Fernando Coronil's models form the two preceding simultaneities which take up coexist unstably in Venezuela.

⁷¹ Fernando Coronil usefully employs Chatterjee's term "derivative discourse" to describe the 'ambivalent Latin American discourse of modernity, in its rejection of European domination but its internalization of its civilizing mission' experienced as 'a process of self-colonization'. Coronil, Fernando, *The Magical State. Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p73

stumbles into tautology when an inverted order simply perpetuates the original logic and negates any possibility of permanent structural change. This dynamic operates in ‘El sitio del paraíso’ where national identity becomes a “derivative discourse”. Here, González León’s uncompromising alienation of North American investors through the homogenising figure of ‘mister All’ recalls the schematic binary of Rómulo Gallegos’ *Doña Bárbara* (1929), where characters such as ‘Míster Danger’ and ‘Doña Bárbara’ embody the evils of barbarism that prefigure civilization as the future result of an imperative inversion.⁷² ‘El sitio del paraíso’ suggests national identity is an internalised colonialist dream, degraded into the institutionalised uchrony of ‘la maestra tísica contándole a muchachos igualmente tísicos que pudo haber sido el sitio del paraíso’ where the paradoxical displacement of Venezuelans ‘exiliados acá mismo’ suggests the impossibility of a sovereign nation. González León’s inversion locks national discourse into a colonialist (now plotted as an economically imperialist) conflict that cannot shake off the powerful exoticism of ‘informes coloniales inflados de café y cacao’ that produced the spatial confusion of a nation always seen from the outside, as a land of opportunity on the horizon. Consequently, the internalisation of a binary, “othering” gaze necessarily produces only two possible outcomes; it must either generate a positivist solution to capture the promised bounty of this *sucursal del cielo*, as González León named it in *País portátil*, or degenerate into an implicit damnation of Venezuelans as ‘frutos del árbol inhabilitado, acecho de la serpiente’. The inversion of the powerful “othering” gaze by alienating foreign economic hegemony perpetuates the schematism discussed above, and provides, ironically, less opportunity for change than the forward-looking solutions of Gallegos’s text, simply replacing them with the fatalism of dark humour. The temporal structure of Venezuela’s suggested damnation leads to a time-locked essentialism in the present, with no developmentalist future horizon for Venezuela. National identity is reduced to the reproduction of a colonial power structure of ‘el mundo para ellos, y nosotros, aún en las escuelitas a medio techo’, which the dark humour of the text defuses the tone into one of acid resignation, painting Venezuela as the ineffectual ‘tierra de gracia que todavía sonríe’.

What is left of this text is hard to square with *El Techo*’s proposed social project and creates a difficult tension, combining ostensibly committed acts (under the *avant-garde* motto that framed everything *ballenero*) with the dark, apocalypse of the *asfalto-inferno*, the image of a nation cannibalised, where ‘la materia se trasciende, la materia se trasciende’, just as the first manifesto stated. What is left after self-destruction, along with the ‘tetraetilo de plomo’ that has devoured the nation, is the hollow laughter of sour despair, which, in its indictment of developmentalist optimism, seems to refuse any action except that of a rebellion within existing systems. With this in mind, we can stress again the ambivalence with which *Asfalto-Infierno* treats the magical promise of oil, which seems to offer a possible third coordinate, and way out of, the dualities that conceptualise Venezuela. Its appearance under simultaneously negative and positive signs represents both opportunity and instability which, acting as a double of the *lava/magma*, symbolises a fruitful source whose use is equally promising and problematic. This theoretical

⁷² Gallegos, Rómulo, *Doña Bárbara*. Edición de José Carlos González Boixo (Madrid: Editorial Espasa Calpe, 2000), p42

stance locks *Asfalto-Infierno* into a bi-polar structure that limits debate to an eternal dynamic of inversion-reinversion, rather than planting rhetorical dynamite in the discursive field. Its, at times, complex inversion can only produce the ambivalence that perpetuates existing systems, rather than radically creating new ones.

Reception and 'la guerra de los prólogos'⁷³

When *Asfalto-Infierno's* reception, and that of *El Techo's* work, is considered alongside their revolt against established cultural structures and their explosive aesthetic motif of *magma*, we are reminded of the strategies of containment that safeguard a degree of control over interpretation. Where the overall coherence of "organic" works of art facilitates interpretation, the *avant-garde*, "non-organic" work should problematise reception and annihilate the overall impressions that encourage interpretation.⁷⁴ But *El Techo's* participation in a relatively institutionalised production, reception and critique compromises its ability to effect the total change in structures that Luis Camnitzer specifies as a requisite for 'the integration of aesthetic creativity with all the systems of reference used in everyday life'.⁷⁵

Ángel Rama loosely defined *terrorismo en las artes* as a 'sistema de lucha', whose tactics are 'imprevistas, desconcertantes, incontenibles'.⁷⁶ Writing produced along such lines necessarily involves a troublesome and conflictive reception, but in the case of *Asfalto-Infierno*, despite its provocative content, its physical status as a book contradicts its attempt to be *incontenible*, or *imprevisto*. As there are no records of any form of mass reception, this factor, along with the seizure of 600 of the 1000 print-run, meant that the solitary 'contemplation' in the book's reception was almost certainly the norm.⁷⁷ In spite of *Asfalto-Infierno's* attacks on existing literary norms by foregrounding urban detritus and a social underworld, Rama's discussion of this 'basurología' unconsciously reveals the maintenance of a ritualised reception which prizes the literary product above real life experience.⁷⁸ Citing González León's 'Investigación de las basuras', Rama claims it proposes

la incorporación de pleno derecho a la creación poética de un universo [...] donde lo que se entendía como suciedades [...] habrían de ser *elevadas* a material propicio a la invención verbal.⁷⁹

⁷³ González León, Adriano, 'La Nube en Pantalones', *Clarín*, 29 March 1963 (no page no.)

⁷⁴ Again, these are Peter Bürger's terms cited above.

⁷⁵ Camnitzer, Luis, 'Contemporary Colonial Art', in Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson (Eds), *Conceptual Art* (London: MIT Press, 1999), p230

⁷⁶ Rama claimed only Carlos Contra maestre's exhibition *Homenaje a la necrofilia* and Caupolicán Ovalles's poem *¿Duerme usted señor presidente?* deserved the status of terrorist acts 'en estado puro', but also underlined the disturbing elements in other works. Rama, Ángel, *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), pp26-27

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin identified contemplation as the involved reception of a work of art, into which the concentrated viewer is absorbed. Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp232-233

⁷⁸ I owe the term 'basurología' to Hector Brioso Santos, who discusses it as a compositional principle in *Asfalto-Infierno* and links it genealogically to Dadaist *assemblages* and *collages*. Brioso Santos, Héctor, *Estridencia e ironía. El Techo de la Ballena: un grupo de vanguardia venezolana (1961-69)* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla Secretario de Publicaciones, 2002), pp210-202

⁷⁹ The emphasis is mine. Rama, Ángel, *Antología de 'El Techo de la Ballena'* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), p30

However, in revealing the move to ‘dignificar artísticamente’ the recovered flotsam and jetsam of city life to give it ‘un valor único’, Rama signals the reproduction of the bourgeois conception of art’s functionlessness. Only when literature floats above the social practice of objects’ use does it have the ability to endow them with dignity and it is within this privileged frame of reference, distinct from everyday life, that *Asfalto-Infierno* was to be received.

Any shock that the inclusion of such base materials might have provoked is also defused by the book itself. As has been mentioned before, the prologue is central to slowing down reception by priming the reader for a paradoxical *readiness* for shock. What is more, readers were likely to have become used to *El Techo*’s ‘institutionalised shock’ by the time *Asfalto-Infierno* was published in 1963, two years after their formation.⁸⁰ The individual and autonomous experience of reading also compounds the nullification of shock by the reader’s freedom to arrest the onslaught of *materia* by pausing and re-reading at will. The re-publication of the book sixteen years later further decreases its shock value where its reception is reframed by the success of González León’s literary career and confirms the failure of the group to pursue a radical ‘aesthetics of imbalance’.⁸¹ The prologue immediately mentions the author’s reception of the *Premio Nacional de Literatura* that same year, setting up a retrospective valorisation of the text according to a criterion of acceptance by a cultural establishment, whilst *Asfalto-Infierno*’s involvement in a vanguard movement is awarded mere parenthetical status. The recent creation of the *Premio Bial de Novela “Adriano González León”* serves to reinforce the author, and *El Techo*’s ongoing absorption into the structures they wished to attack and confirms further the group’s deferential attitude to the legitimate spaces of culture.⁸²

The reception of *El Techo*’s work by fellow intellectuals and journalists presents another argument for their participation in a discreet cultural world, despite their aspirations to intersect the borderlands of politics and aesthetics. The battle of interpretation bitterly waged between Adriano González León (on the side of *El Techo*) and Jesús Sanoja Hernández (a member of rival vanguard group *Tabla Redonda*) in the cultural pages of newspaper *El Clarín de los Viernes* in 1963 is a case in point.⁸³ The journalistic frame served as another legitimising and self-reflexive

⁸⁰ Bürger, Peter, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p81

⁸¹ Camnitzer, Luis, ‘Contemporary Colonial Art’, in Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson, (Eds), *Conceptual Art* (London: MIT Press, 1999), p230

⁸² ‘Premio Bial de Novela “Adriano González León” 2004’, *Diario El Tiempo.com.ve*, Valera, 6 July 2005 <http://www.diarioeltiempo.com.ve/secciones/secciones.php?num=39940&codigo=ncul&lve=dos> [accessed 22 July 2005]

⁸³ See Sanoja Hernández, Jesús, ‘No Basta la Iracundia’, *El Clarín de los Viernes*, 22 March 1963 and González León, Adriano, ‘La Nube en Pantalones’, *El Clarín de los Viernes*, 29 March 1963 The articles cited here appeared in March of 1963 and followed the publication of *Asfalto-Infierno* and Juan Calzadilla’s poems *Dictado por la jauría*. Sanoja Hernández was a member of the group that published the magazine *Tabla Redonda*, who were described by Ángel Rama as ‘Procedentes de una militancia partidista de izquierda y con una formación más desarrollada, renovaron las tesis de la responsabilidad intelectual peculiares del comunismo, poniendo en evidencia...la lucha de clases’.

space within the cultural establishment, where the authors could comment on their own work and retain some control over its interpretation, whilst seeming to defy its codification. Sanoja attacked the level of social engagement demonstrated by *balleneros* and *poesía nueva*, suggesting that their ‘iracundia’ was not a radical enough reaction to justify *El Techo*’s move to ‘prestar la poesía o la pintura a un servicio circunstancial’, and that ‘la violencia real traducida en la palabra adecuada’ was more appropriate. Sanoja’s response reveals further *El Techo*’s work’s predisposition to interpretation, despite González León’s response that *poesía nueva* represented ‘un aire nuevo que ya mañana podrán codificar’ and it is its ease of assimilation into pre-existing cultural debates which inhibits the transformation of society through aesthetic means. Significantly, despite his patronising avuncular tone, journalist Juan Pablo Peñaloza gave a prompt and bleak summary of the early stages *El Techo*’s aesthetic and social project, described as

pompa de jabón que crece y crece hasta reventar sin haber logrado transformar el medio, dejando todo igual que antes.⁸⁴

Whilst the journalist’s traditionalist protection of the ‘Alma Nacional’ against ‘estos jóvenes rebeldes’ may actually underline the seismic disturbances felt inside the frame of Venezuelan culture, it nevertheless sustains the view that *El Techo*’s tactic of inversion merely upturned the content of cultural products without questioning their inherent structure.

Conclusion: the Ambivalent Inversion of ‘una modernidad compensatoria’⁸⁵

When subject to analysis, the structure of inversion which governed *El Techo*’s cultural activities can be understood as the ultimate in reversible logic, flexibly worn both ways at the same time and denotative of an ambivalent attitude that suggests their status as a temperate, rather than deeply “violent” vanguard. The *ballena* comes to signify a paradoxical rejection *and* internalisation of the quest for modernisation, in the context of a Venezuela that ‘archiva su pasado’ and ‘se lanza a la conquista tumultuosa de la modernidad’.⁸⁶ Where *El Techo de la Ballena* suggested an inversion of developmentalist logic through the thematic content of their works, they simultaneously pursued their own modernising project in the literary and plastic arts. Whilst they gave the inherited tradition of aesthetic renovation a *ballenero* idiosyncrasy, they perpetuated and reinforced the forward-looking creative imperative to ‘ponerse al día, romper con el pasado insertando corrientes universalistas’, which shifted the tasks of progressive discourse from nation-building to the modernisation of an aesthetic context attacked for its cultural provincialism.⁸⁷

Rama, Ángel, *Ensayos sobre literatura venezolana*, 2nd edn (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1991), pp103-104

⁸⁴ Peñaloza, Juan Pablo, ‘El Techo de la Ballena’, *La Esfera*, 13 September 1962

⁸⁵ Ramos, Julio, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p12

⁸⁶ Rama, Ángel, *Antología de ‘El Techo de la Ballena’* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), p21

⁸⁷ *Sardío*, the vanguard group many *balleneros* left to form *El Techo*, were opposed to the excess of local colour in literature that they considered provincial, suggesting instead that “‘Es imperioso elevar a

Consequently, rather than produce a seamless convergence of aesthetic and social practice, *El Techo's* vehement call for artistic and literary renovation participated in a revalorisation of the role of the intellectual, whose status had languished in the background of Pérez Jiménez's military dictatorship. Whilst the group definitely contributed to an inversion in the predominance of lofty aesthetic content, this same tactic only made sense *within* existing systems of reference, and necessarily safeguarded the 'espacio excepcional' of culture as a privileged site for expressing the desire for (cultural) modernity.⁸⁸ Despite their pointed critique of a staged and uneven modernity in the architectural modernism of Caracas's *espacios excepcionales*, semi-discreet from everyday life, *El Techo's* preservation of the equivalent privileged and normative spaces of enunciation that let them legitimise their modernising project, lacked the same degree of self-awareness.

El Techo's "vanguard" project, paradoxically, takes on an "affirmative" posture, in Herbert Marcuse's use of the term, when their works retain a position in 'a higher, purer, non-prosaic world' of artistic modernisation, despite their characteristic *basurología*.⁸⁹ It is this tension that keeps them detached from daily life, neutralising *El Techo's* critique and safeguarding the bourgeois celebration of their spokesmen by their intellectual allies.⁹⁰ Far from the resonance of anarchic rupture that Rama suggested qualifies *El Techo's* opposition to 'todo orden establecido', the group spoke an ambivalent language of negotiation that staged a rebellion from a position *within* existing cultural systems of reference.⁹¹ In the particular case dealt with here, the apparent menace of the ruptures and inversions threatened at the beginning of *El Techo's* project are dissolved by *Asfalto-Infierno's* failure to implement structural change and upon analysis, the promise of inversion as a radical politico-aesthetic project dissolves into an aesthetic tactic caught up in the limitations of its own binary structure where, unable to get outside itself, it is thus confined to the inevitable defusion of dark and despairing laughter.

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perspectivas más universales los alucinantes temas de nuestra tierra". Rama, Ángel, *Ensayos sobre literatura venezolana*, 2nd edn (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1991), pp104-105

⁸⁸ Ramos, Julio, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p12

⁸⁹ Bürger, Peter, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p12

⁹⁰ *Op. Cit.*, p13

⁹¹ Ángel, *Ensayos sobre literatura venezolana*, 2nd edn (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1991), p127