

Mieke BAL

Independent scholar, filmmaker and curator

Mieke.G.Bal@gmail.com

TIMELY COMMITMENTS

Introduction: Ethical Art and the Present

Ethics, or the development and awareness of, and compliance with general norms of what is right or wrong, is with each of us at all times, in everything we do. It intervenes in all decisions. But story-telling, the presentation in whatever medium of a focalized series of events, has two properties that make the ethical aspect of it more specific: for one, it concerns others, and it is almost always, at least in part, fictional, even when, or perhaps especially when, it concerns difficult, painful, or extreme situations; and even when the events narrated are real. Story-telling, fictional as it may be, becomes an experiment, a testing ground for thought about ethics. It has these two features in common with most figurative literature and art. Knowing that Katica Kulavkova cares about this connection, in this paper I aim to bring together an old ethical question, first with the status of literature as moving, and second with story-telling as focalized. In the end, these two views join forces, or even melt together. But if, as I argue here, ethical decisions are with us all the time, then there is another issue that is hard to pin down, define, and theorize. This is time. For the lives within which we make those ethical decisions take place now, in the present. And there, time, with its connections to the past and the future, is there, as a Norwegian philosopher once wrote, *all the time*. Whereas time tends to be considered a formal, structural issue, its bond with memory and the need to consider the future cannot be separated from the ethical.¹

If I take ethics and temporality together in this chapter, it is an attempt to bring the old debate into the present, even in the here-and-now, since the novel that is central in it, is both contemporary (now) and Spanish (here).

¹ The witty phrase “time is there all the time” was coined by philosopher Kristin Gjesdal in her essay from 2017 on recent art by Norwegian artist Jeannette Christensen.

This is the brilliant novel *El dolor de los demás* by Miguel Ángel Hernández, from 2018. More reasons for this choice will become apparent during the analysis. For now, I return to the old debate. This concerns the ethics of that cultural, literary activity called “representation”; the artistic recall – mind the “re-” of (re)presentation as well as of recall, a sign of repetition – of something that, allegedly or really, happened before. If I have advanced my preference for “figuration” it is not only to accommodate the visual and the fictional, but also to avoid the inevitable pastness attached to the older term. Figuration places the past events into the present. A second reason is that representation as depiction, portrayal, rendering, has a synonym, which is acting or speaking for someone else, for others, either on their behalf or, if we get closer to the other meaning, pushing them aside and making them powerless. That ambiguity comes up more frequently than we realize. This is bound to the current demise of democracy and the rise of “democratically elected” dictators.

The ethics of representation has been largely determined by debates on the ethics of art and literature in the face of extreme circumstances. These have invariably taken two opposed positions as their starting-point – in short: yes or no; acceptable or not. The first, decades-old, comes from Adorno’s famous warning. As we know, since his 1949 indictment of making and enjoying poetry “after Auschwitz”, what I call *modesty* is a crucial issue in our relationship to representation. This is the opposite of voyeurism, an exploitative attitude to others; revelling in the pain and grief of others, which can be seen as sadistic; and curiosity, as an immodest intrusion compelled by a desire to know what others might prefer to keep confidential. Adorno’s statement has often served to provide a simplistic view that can only lead to iconophobia and censorship. In order to counter that quick fix, allow me to present the Adorno quote from his philosophical prose in the form of poetry:

Cultural criticism finds itself faced with
 the final stage of the dialectic of
 culture and barbarism.
 To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.
 And this corrodes even the knowledge of
 why it has become impossible to
 write poetry today.
 (2003, 162)

Instead of over-citing without engaging, the status of this fragment as poetry helps to “denaturalize” its usual exploitation for a simplistic, if meaningful, ethical guideline – to take it out of its self-evident? routine. The “verses” are bound by *enjambment*, the artful breaking up of words that normally belong together; here prepositions and their complements – *with*, *of*, *of*, and *to*. Writing the quote in verse form, I propose to stop for a moment after these prepositions. This allows us to not immediately fill in the next line, and think

about alternatives. It is also a modest attempt to approach one of the features of Hernández' literary work, for he writes not only both poetry and prose, and scholarly texts, but the novel analyzed in this chapter is poetic in many ways.

Poetry is a form of discourse one can learn by heart as well as complicate, and read aloud in musical cadence and tone. It has a temporality of its own. Reading poetry is usually slower and more detailed than reading narratives such as novels, with equal attention to every word. Poetry has this in common with other forms of art, such as visual art and films, if only we would take it as a guideline. We will see that Hernández's novel contains a poetic device in this sense. This is already one way in which this novel-turned-poetic binds temporality, here as rhythm, with ethics. I posit an equivalence between poetry and other art forms in view of this mode of reading. Also, the ethical concern is bound up with the rhythm of the sentence, hence, its temporality, which I consider important for Adorno's ethical commitment, even if the philosopher was perhaps not aware of this.²

In the context of Adorno's statement, our contemporary intellectual commitment requires we stop taking this famous statement out of its context. First of all, it also entails the need to consider its sequel, where the philosopher gives the reason for this severe indictment: he refuses to make sense of what doesn't make sense. Such sense-making is wrong because it would be honouring violence with semiotic access; and to take pleasure, in other words, in making a potentially pornographic use of the suffering of others. This possibility, even if remote, is something that Hernández's novel would go on to counter profoundly.³

The original context of the passage matters enormously, and is mostly neglected by those who invoke it. It is a devastating critique of what we now call cultural studies. My impertinent act of poeticizing it is also a militant plea for cultural analysis rather than cultural studies, as I put forward in the Introduction to this book. The passage comes at the end of Adorno's essay "Cultural Criticism and Society", the first essay in the volume *Prisms* (published in English in 1983). I speculate that this context is the reason for the sloppy citations that so abound in the academic milieu of cultural studies – a form of repression. For the context entails an awareness of complicity. When I first tried to locate the passage to find the context it took me a lot of time and effort; most critics who quoted it left the citation vague. I asked colleagues who quoted it, and they just shrugged: it must be in "After Auschwitz". But no one could give me the precise reference. This, I speculate, is because the contact with that essay shames us, and therefore it must be erased from memory. I think, in contrast, that this shame ought to incite us to do better, more significantly critical work, rather than repress what we fail to do.

² Although he may have been. Adorno was also a successful pianist and composer. He earned his PhD at age 21. See Müller-Doohm (2005) for a biography.

³ In 1997 Judith Butler put forward again and elaborated through the speech-act theory the idea that language can be violent.

For that repression expresses collusion with the violence of art, of words. In a different, later, text the philosopher wrote:

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the *positivity* of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. (2005, 361)

The violence in the word “squeezing” stipulates that semiotic behaviour can be as violent as actual violence. The verb intimates that language is material. This is so because it is performative: it has consequences in that its utterances affect the addressee. The verb “to squeeze” recurs when Adorno explains that his refusal to condone such renderings is its potential pornographic use: “The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be *squeezed* out from it” (2003, 252; emphasis added). It is this pleasure, the sheer possibility of it, that Adorno calls “barbaric”. Using the words “naked” and “physical” in this context foregrounds this aspect, as its figuration.⁴

However, the flipside of Adorno's compelling call for modesty is a forbidding taboo that makes the violence invisible. It is against this taboo that French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman spoke out in his short but influential treatise, which is a plea for attention to even the vaguest Auschwitz photographs: “in order to know, you must imagine,” as his opening sentence has it. And in order to relate to others we do need to know, and when full knowledge is impossible, we still must try to approximate, encircle, or *feel* it. That is what it means to imagine. That is why the imagination is so important and must be part of an ethical attitude toward the pain of others. Didi-Huberman presents imagination here as compelling because the knowledge requires it. It cannot be cast aside as fiction. This, in turn, is why art is important; offering the visual imagination something it *images*.⁵

And that imaging is what I call here figuration. The figural is that area where words and images are not each other's counterparts or different media, but are inherently one. In *El dolor de los demás*, the act of imaging takes many different forms, of which I will point out a few instances. They are bound to the imagination of the narrator who is desperately trying to get a grasp of the past. The imaging is positioned in the present in its relation to the past, and to the figuration in words, descriptions, and images. That imaging is positioned in time – old photographs are included – and in ethical consideration – they are hard to decipher and there is no representation of

⁴ I am treating Adorno's text again as poetry, with its specific metaphors and repetition. On the notion of “barbaric”, in critical, ambivalent, and occasionally positive contexts, see the indispensable book by Boletsi (2013).

⁵ The imagination was put forward in the framework of ethics by 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. See the very accessible and relevant introduction to Spinoza and his relevance for today by Gatens and Lloyd (1999), already mentioned.

either violence or emotional reactions to it, such as crying. We will see why this novel is so crucial for an understanding of the bond between ethics and temporality in literature.

Bringing Time to Ethics

Taking the element “image” of the imagination, turning it into an active verb that allows an intermediate position between the subject and object of representation, and thus bringing it to the viewer, both body and mind, is the material practice through which literature and art matter. The readers, viewers, visitors to exhibitions, and other addressees of artworks are in a position equivalent to the linguistic form, in Greek, of the “middle voice”. This verb form is neither active nor passive but comes close to reflexive, in the sense of mutuality – which, in turn, is close to reflective, in the sense of compelling thinking. The form opens up the empty middle between the comfortable but basically false, because never wholesale positions of either victim or perpetrator, and makes room for an awareness of complicity, and reflection on where to go from there: beyond yes or no.⁶

Indeed, this is not only a sensible position, but also one that gives art a vocation. Art can contribute to facilitating such exercise of the imagination in a way that binds the intellect to the affects, so that understanding implies both, and the two domains can no longer be separated. Adorno, in fact, had already written as much, in the same essay where he retracts his earlier prohibition:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence *it may have been wrong* to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. (1997, 362; emphasis added)

Also, this is not only the case in the extreme circumstances of concentration camps. We keep learning that extremes are still pervasive today, in war zones and other disaster areas. Moreover, this right to expression is also of crucial importance in the intercultural contact zones of the contemporary culture of mobility. There, which is our here-and-now, we need to be both modest and imaginative, in order to *know*, and to *know our place*. These concerns have been on my mind a lot throughout my working life, both in scholarship and in filmmaking. A commitment to these issues is what made Hernández and me cross paths.⁷

⁶ I recall Boletsi’s analysis of the middle voice, of significance for this chapter, in the contemporary area of the economic crisis.

⁷ It is no coincidence that Hernández in his work as a scholar of contemporary art also pays extensive attention to issues of interculturality. I have had the immense pleasure to work with him on a project about this issue. See Bal & Hernández Navarro (2008), a catalogue with a travelling exhibition we curated, and an edited volume (2012).

Still today, the question of an ethically informed political art sits right in the middle of these two positions: of the need for modesty and the need to (imagine in order to) know; not between, but immersed and mired in both. For, as I have argued in dialogue with the work of different artists, this is not the binary opposition it is usually taken to be; the middle is not empty. It is a very busy space. This includes borders, as I have discussed, through Boer, in the previous chapter. Modesty, and the need to speak and hear, show and see: both of these positions move, struggle and tangle in that middle. The cultural critic Andreas Huyssen phrased it as a question in his catalogue essay for Indian artist Nalini Malani's most recent shadow play, against the background of Adorno's position:

How can human pain and social suffering, past and present, be rendered visually in such a way that its representation nurtures and illuminates life, rather than indulging in aesthetic stylization, voyeuristic titillation, or succumbing to fatalism in the face of mythic cycles of violence? (2012, 52)

In order to make that argument in visual art, I have been guided by four keenly political visual artists who deploy different media and genres: Salcedo's sculptures, Ahtila's video installations, Janssens' abstractions and Malani's shadow plays. I have also been guided by the literary work of Hernández, along with some of the world's major writers from the past whose relevance for the present is ongoing, like Flaubert, Cervantes and Shakespeare.⁸

Working on and in the empty middle between modesty and the need to know is what *El dolor* proposes and this chapter analyzes. I attempt to break the binary through a reflection on the entwinement of memory and vision, and use the here-and-now – of reader, viewer, or artist – to give that reflection a space that includes the past. For this reason, I want to consider that this contemporary novel that complicates temporality to the point of the impossibility to retrieve chronology while entertaining the desire to do so for ethical reasons that are also standing in the way of fulfilling that desire. The title recycles that of a short book by Susan Sontag from 2003, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag's book reflects on the dilemma of ignorance and voyeurism in relation to the suffering of other people. The untranslatable English verb form "regarding" is meaningfully ambiguous, since it not only means "concerning" but also, visually, looking. It seems meaningful to choose that reference for a novel's title, even if we cannot assume the novel subscribes entirely to the essay. But clearly, it borrows, or recalls, the topic in question in the latter. It "has to do" with pain, grief, or even trauma, and places, or recognizes those emotions in others. But as Sontag argues and Hernández narrates, this placing is precisely the problem. It is impossible without putting the self on the line. This is the case because of time. Let me give an example

⁸ I am alluding here to my earlier work on four artists making such ethically informed political art (Bal 2010; 2013a; 2013b, 2016).

from a different artwork, a visual one, the ethics of which is closely related to our novel.

In addition to physical suffering, violence and its consequences, both poverty and sexual display are areas of life where modesty becomes a forceful problem area?. The artists who heed this paradoxical double caution all find new ways of making art on this ethical basis. For example, Malani, already mentioned, devoted drawings in artist books to Lohar Chawl, an area of Bombay where the artist lived and had a studio between 1977 and 2003. This neighbourhood was bristling with street life; filled with wholesale markets, including the ironsmiths after which the area was named. People living on the street, sleeping under handcarts while waiting for the next load, are part of the cityscape. How to deal with this environment when you work in the middle of it? Malani's *Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl* from 1991 is a series of artist books with drawings of people in the artist's immediate surroundings. These drawings are literally *retrospective* in a technical-artistic sense, as is Hernández's novel. Malani could have taken photographs of the people she wanted to draw. Out of modesty, and in order to avoid the kind of gazes usually cast on such areas, however, the artist drew them later, from memory. This was a much more difficult endeavor. Thus, this work is bound to the present-past relationship as much as to the self-other one. It brings to the fore the tangle of memory and visibility, the dilemma of voyeurism, and the conditions for the right and imperative to see – the key issue in the ethics of representation as outlined above.⁹

It also has a specific and relevant temporality, for it creates the capacity to *re-make* images that never existed before. This paradoxical temporality is key to Malani's work as a whole, but broader still, it can be considered as the way the imagination works. It stipulates that vision is always-already? steeped in memory, and that, conversely, memory relies on images to do its work. Even when first seen, the figure is bound to other figures. But Malani's endeavour was to make visible what had been erased from vision by the superficial, say, curious class or tourist gaze. This gaze is consumerist and exploitative, colonising, and paradoxically, it ignores its objects' status as subjects. Drawing from memory instead of sketching from live models addresses this issue. Avoiding what Adorno indicts, yet heeding Didi-Huberman's plea for making visible the invisible, she brought the area and its inhabitants to visibility from within her position of modesty.

Training to draw from memory produces a great skill. But more importantly, it stipulates that vision is always-already steeped in memory, and that, conversely, memory relies on images to do its work. Even when first seen, the figure is bound to other figures. The residents of Lohar Chawl were/are people who fall into the theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's category of "sub-

⁹ This example comes from the Introduction to my 2016 book on Malani. I consider Malani's work, both its ethics and its relation to temporality, as deeply congenial with Hernández's work.

alters” who cannot speak – with “can” being determined by the power of others. Spivak’s essay indicts a cultural, semiotic violence that gags people in certain social positions, making them unable to speak. Physically, they may speak, but they will not be heard. This undercuts the very notion of speaking as communicative, which should entail an exchange between first and second person. They are also invisible, simply because “we” refuse to look them in the eye. They are present, in the middle of the social buzz, but they remain unseen. Drawing the residents of her neighbourhood from memory, then, is also a way of heeding the warnings in both Adorno’s and Didi-Huberman’s positions, at the same time. This is how the artist seeks a visual solution to a persistent philosophical dilemma; this is how visual philosophy happens. We will see the relevance of this reflection of *El dolor*. There, the subaltern status of women – the victim of a killing, but also the narrator’s mother – is figured very persuasively, without falling into the trap of voyeurism.¹⁰

Materiality participates in this endeavour. In accordance with the modesty of means of which the area disposed economically, Malani had thirty sets of photocopies made of her initial memory-drawings in the local copy shop. These she bound into thirty books, and developed each sheet in these books further. The result is an integration of cheap reproduction technology and unique art that pays homage to the people so frequently denied visibility while challenging our unreflective assumptions about our right to see, as well as a prudish puritanism that *de facto* maintains the invisibility of subaltern subjects. This integration can be seen as standing, materially as well as intellectually, in the middle ground between “high art” and “popular culture” — another opposition the artist and the novelist both contest. The highly original production also bridges the gap between fiction and reality, declaring the former indispensable to even get to the latter. This, too, is an important aspect of *El dolor*. The old photographs included in the novel emanate the sense of a cheap, home-made snapshot photography, which is visually comparable to Malani’s basic reproductions in the local copy shop.¹¹

Memory as Ethical

How does the fact that the drawings were made from memory have a political impact? The act occurs in the middle of Adorno’s first position and his later one, in the visually nuanced by Didi-Huberman’s practice of probing, vague, barely readable photographs. First, it complies with Adorno’s insistence on modesty. We can easily imagine how awfully indiscreet an artist would feel, witnessing the extreme poverty and hardship of her neighbours and then using that view to make art on the spot, or even take photographs

¹⁰ Spivak’s famous essay is now most readily accessible and framed by commentaries in Morris (ed.) 2010.

¹¹ The invisibility of subaltern people can sometimes be a source of their agency. See Peeren (2014) for this argument.

of them. This would amount to using people we refuse to look into the eye to make images of them; deriving vision from the refusal to look. This is the usual behaviour of tourists, who hide behind their cameras and iPhones. Drawing them from memory, that is, retro-spectively, after the fact of seeing, in contrast, avoids such visual callousness. This procedure also compels Malani to exercise and rehearse a painstakingly difficult craft. The effort is part of the political meaning. For she must make an effort, in solidarity with the workers she has seen, and whose images stayed imprinted in her memory. This is also an intricate binding of past and present.

In line with this, the balance between the two positions – yes or no – must be sought, not in some intermediate position of compromise, but in a rethinking of the feature of art that can help us to consider the ethical issue from a new angle. To put it simply: *art moves*, and that movement inherent in images is where we can both learn to “imagine” and to avoid even the slightest voyeurism and explaining-away of the suffering of others. The profoundly ambiguous qualifier “moving” helps probe the objections of Adorno *with* the encouragement of Didi-Huberman. Mobility is one of the meanings of “moving”, and mobility, in turn, is the hallmark of globalization. In this inquiry with a focus on movement, migrants are the exemplary subjects instead of the exceptional ones. I will probe some of the meanings of the qualifier “moving” a bit further, and keep in view the one that is indispensable for an input specific to the humanities: the aesthetical and affective sense of moving as relating. Story-telling is moving by definition, in many different ways. And this moving quality enables a less boundary-driven, more fluid approach to the ethics of story-telling.

Hernández’s novel experiments with many of the narratological concepts and issues at stake in my early but ongoing work on narratology. Here, I focus first on temporality and the problem, as well as the yield, of considering it. The narrative begins as follows:

They went into Rosario’s house, says your father from the next room, they killed Rosi and they abducted Nicolás.

This is the first you hear. The voice that wakes you. The sentence that you will never be able to forget.

For a moment you prefer to think that it is part of a dream and you stay immobile under the sheets. It is five in the morning and you have barely been able to sleep. You didn’t feel well on Christmas Eve, and you have been tossing and turning for several hours.

They have killed Rosi and abducted Nicolás, you hear your father say with utter clarity.

When you open your eyes and, while still not hearing anything, you jump out of bed, you dress with the first thing you see, and run out into the living room.

[Han entrado en la casa de la Rosario, dice tu padre desde la habitación de al lado, han matado a la Rosi y se han llevado al Nicolás.

Es lo primero que oyes. La voz que te despierta. La frase que ya nunca podrás olvidar.

Por un momento, prefieres pensar que forma parte de un sueño y permaneces inmóvil bajo las sábanas. Son las cinco de la madrugada y apenas has conseguido dormir. Le cena de Nochebuena no te sentó bien y llevas varias horas dando vueltas en la cama.

Han matado a la Rosi y se han llevado al Nicolás, escuchas ahora a tu padre decir con total claridad.

Es entonces cuando abres los ojos y, sin entender todavía nada, saltas de la cama, te vistes con lo primero que encuentras y sales corriendo hacia la sala de estar.]

Here, the page did not need my intervention to turn it into poetry. This beginning announces the complex narrativity. First, it posits a second-person narration, a rare form that, when successful, posits the communicative nature of narration forward. That move entails an awareness that the narrator, from the first line on, relinquishes the monologic power usually taken for granted. For this puts the subject of narrating, the narrator, on the line, as not a single one-voice author. That first line is not uttered by the primary narrator; it is something he hears. And then follows the statement that the “you” will never be able to forget the sentence, so that time cannot be neatly ordered into past, present and future. The future of possible forgetting is already in the past of the telling in the present (“says your father”). It will turn out, in the future, that it had been impossible in the past. Yet, the discourse is in the present tense. Is this a classic case of what is called a “historical present” – the use of the present tense in a framework of pastness, to enliven the narration? Given the un-classical mode of narration in the entire novel, this seems unlikely.

In addition, also in view of the title, we must consider the potential plurality of that “you”. This is the more intriguing as Spanish, unlike English, differentiates between two distinctions: the familiar and the polite form, more or less as in French; and the singular and the plural, in Spanish both in distinct pronouns and verb forms. These distinctions are very important to further understand who the “demás” are, the others of the novel’s title. The form of these initial sentences suggests the possibility that the person who will soon become the “first-person narrator”, the “yo”, might be striving to be included in the plural “demás”. In view of the rest of the novel, I interpret this as the fundamental ethics of this novel: his concern for others, “demás”, with whom he will constantly attempt to empathize. These demás are plural in more than one sense: as individuals and as groups. Not only is the novel set in a small, suburban neighborhood the inhabitants of which all suffered from the shattering event, and many of whom are intimate acquaintances of the “I”/ “you”. This is the creation of a community, which will be thematized all through the narrative. But also, there is the wider circle of others, the plural “you” that also enlists the readers.

This complication of tense and person already makes it impossible to put down a clear structural set-up. I called the book a novel, – but is it? That remains to be seen. A double crime in the first sentence, a sentence that, with the elision of the mention of the father-speaker, is repeated every now and then, quite frequently, in fact. After every chapter “in the first-person” told by the “you”, there is a short chapter, of about one page, in the form just quoted. These passages are in the second person, but they are just as narrative. This turns the potential thriller into a possible poem, where a refrain is formally repeated, although the words are different and the narrativity remains present. Sánchez Zapatero (2019) also calls it a refrain, and his in-depth search for a genre leads to a pluralization of generic affiliations. And he is right; when everything keeps shifting, no genre label fits anymore. Or they all do. For convenience sake I will continue to refer to the literary work as a novel, but do keep the impossibility of coming up with a fitting genre label in mind.

With a back-and-forth between times and tenses, characters and grammatical persons, literal and metaphorical uses of the same words; allusions to other novels, investigations that morph into attempts to establish contact with others, it is hard to know what genre label would apply. And yet, we can label it not as a genre but as a mode, a semiotic one: from the first sentence on, we know this is indeed a narrative, with events, a narrator, and all that ensues. The narrator is both internal, a character-bound one, and since the writing, in this fragment, is in the second person, the intimacy between narrator and character is still subject to doubt. As a turning point that undermines the genre of the thriller, later a shift in attention from the perpetrator to the victim occurs; from man to woman; from the narrator’s own grief to that of the woman who had been the best friend of the victim, and more. This shift has been called, by Pozuelo Yvancos, *el punto ciego*. It is the point where the recognition of the woman victim as so-far invisible leads to the abandon of the search for the “truth” the novel had been pursuing all along, in favor of the act of seeing the victim and thus saving her, albeit posthumously, from her subaltern status. Pozuelo rightly says that this *punto ciego* also brings the profoundly feminist commitment of the novel to the fore. This commitment is apparent at several junctures of the novel. In addition to the pledge to make the invisible visible, of which the photographs that fail in that task are a most poignant figuration, I was particularly moved – here that emotional sense of moving plays up – by the description of the narrator’s mother in her subalternity.

In line with earlier feminist discussions of the life, even the fate, of housewives, what we have called “housewife melancholia is figured in great depth, especially in the pages 122-126. The word “melancolía” is present. There, the problem of memory is introduced in extreme finesse when the narrator-focalizer describes what he sees, years later, when he visits the house where he grew up. He inherited the house after his mother’s death, but he let it go to ruin. At the moment he visits, it is falling apart by neglect. The

passage is proposed for us to read like a film, of his own past. Only a film can make it possible to see the past, “me hizo contemplar directamente el pasado.” What he sees he calls “una escenografía sin personajes. El cuerpo de las cosas.” (122) This is one of many examples where the visual figuration and the poetic words collaborate. It is where we see

My mother sitting on the chair, moving back and forth in slow motion, with her gaze lost and her arms falling on her lap. The black sun of illness spread out through the entire house.

[mi madre sentada en el sillón, balanceándose a cámara lenta, con la mirada perdida y los brazos caídos sobre su regazo. El sol negro de la enfermedad expandiéndose por toda la casa.] (122)

This novel does not need to be turned into a film; it already is one. A brilliant instance of cinematic figuration.

But the film slowly turns into a political activist discourse. On the following page, the narrator’s father appeals to his wife to shed her depression. He seems to get even angry, saying she has nothing to complain about. “No lo sé, Juan Antonio. No sé lo que me pasa.” And the narrator comments: “Y seguramente no lo supiese. Ni ella ni nadie.” (123) An address to the family as a group. This reflection on the depressed state of his mother whose life has been a “confinamiento en aquel espacio” continues for a while, with the ethical dilemma – was she, are the depressed, unconsciously trying to get attention? Or are “we” all guilty of it? – becoming more prominent. In the end, the self- and group-indictment becomes more pronounced:

Some time has already passed since then, and I am every time more convinced that we were guilty. My brothers and I. Guilty of what happened to my mother. We continued a long tradition of servitude. We have used her until she couldn’t do it anymore. We left her alone with her burden and that fell with her.

[Ha pasado ya algún tiempo de aquello, y cada vez estoy más convencido de que fuimos culpables. Mis hermanos y yo. Culpables de lo que sucedió con mi madre. Continuadores de una larga tradición de servidumbre. La utilizamos hasta que ya no pudo más. La dejamos sola con su carga heredada y eso acabó con ella.](125)

The direct contemplation of the past of this one individual turns into an indictment of the tenacious persistence of the patriarchal tradition, of the past in the present. It becomes almost a feminist manifesto, but because it remains attached to the “yo” and his brothers, its ethics of compassion is not overruled by activism.

Commitment to Temporal Failure for the Sake of Ethics

Nothing matches our expectations in this text. The most likely genres are left behind as well: although utterly personal, this novel does not quite belong to the genre of autobiography, nor of autofiction, although it has affiliations with both. It is also a chronicle, but of the research, hence, not of the central event of the murder and suicide. It can also be seen as a reversed Bildungsroman, the report on the protagonist's attempt to learn who he is, and how the others (los demás) are part of that identity; this in addition to learning how to be a writer. It creates a new genre: one that touches life. Manuel Alberca, who wrote an excellent article about the three novels by Hernández as “el tríptico del arte o la vida”, in an exploration of the evolving modes in which the ambiguities of the “self” in the novels are figured, begins his analysis with the statement that Hernández

Has created a literary world of his own, centered in the always controversial relations between ethics and aesthetics, between life and art. The cycle of novels, which I call, for its coherence and interrelations, “the triptych of art and life”, offers an original reflection of these issues.

[ha creado un mundo literario propio, centrado en las siempre controvertidas relaciones entre ética y estética, entre vida y arte. El ciclo novelístico, que denomino, por su coherencia e interrelación, “el tríptico del arte o la vida”, representa una original reflexión sobre estos asuntos.] (2020)

What Alberca calls “original” is for me, indeed, the creation of a new (non-)genre; let's say, the genre of the rejection of genres. *El dolor* does this by means of passing through all attempts to label it, on the way engaging many theoretical problems. This creation uses words we all know but as if cured from habit, in a “word hospital”. I allude with this phrase to Azriel Bibliowicz's brilliant novel *Migas de pan*, where the traumatized and absent main character has devoted a room in his house to serve as a word hospital. This room only releases the words when they have retrieved their shining health of crystalline language. Not yet.¹²

As I mentioned, the beginning I quoted is reiterated many times, in an almost formulaic way, within the short refrain-like, in-between-chapters passages. It is as if the “you” and the “I”, who will soon manifest themselves as the same individual, must remain split. The combination of formulaic repetition and self-reflection blurs the temporality, especially the chronology. The alternation between narrative chapters where the character-bound narrator self-identifies as a “yo” and where past and present alternate, and the invocation of that moment of the past told in the second person and present tense, seems inevitably full of repetitions. The repetitive nature of those fragments

¹² The main character of *Migas de pan* is a concentration camp survivor who is now in the hand of the Colombian terrorists who have abducted him. I wrote about this fabulous novel in several places in *Narratology* (2017, 81, 87, 128, 147, 148).

points to an issue that forbids the development of memory over time. I am speaking of trauma, subtly figured by these repetitions.

There is no chronology, other than the red thread of trying, and failing, to write the novel that will clarify why his best friend has killed his sister and then committed suicide. The entire narration is an act of memory; or rather, a desperate attempt to achieve such an act, which is doomed to remain inadequate. But it is impossible to place that memory in the past. At some point, in what seems to me a crucial passage, the narrator in his “yo”-identity is explicit about his attempt to remember the past, and his incapacity to do so:

I had been going there like a kind of *flâneur* of time, a stroller through memory, drawing the past into the present, silently, in slow motion. But the past seemed like a still image, without sound, at most a kind of murmur in movement.

[Había ido allí como una especie de *flâneur* del tiempo, un paseante de la memoria, a traer el pasado al presente, en silencio, la cámara lenta. Pero el pasado no se apareció como una imagen fija, sin sonido, sino como un murmullo en movimiento.] (62)

This passage is a jewel of the figural. It offers a figuration of everything that matters in temporality, in a most beautiful literary artwork that is neither intimidated by, nor does it simplify unduly, all the theoretical problems of time, intertwined with narrativity, viscosity, and ethics. It recalls Hernández’s earlier micro-narratives. Movement, but no progress. This evocative passage implies a theory of narrative time, against the odds of trauma, literally seen as odds.

The passage also “theorizes” or rather, figures, time in relation to memory and to different media, such as the cinematic, in turn invoking, but not quite reaching, the still image. And the evocation of the viscosity of memory is also remarkable. For those who know, the allusion to Walter Benjamin’s unfinished *The Arcades Project*, written in interaction with Baudelaire, will add to the philosophical depth of the novel, but such allusions are carefully integrated to avoid jargon-led imposition and the resulting intimidation. The beauty of it is that the word “flâneur”, with or without activating the allusion to Benjamin, lingers in its sonic slowness and its metaphorical inappropriateness to time. But this author makes the two fit, and hereby gives all the theories of time, as for example, usefully summed up by Wyller (2020) more depth and coherence.

The entire novel narrates the failure of understanding, knowing, and coming to terms with the key event that tore the protagonist-narrator’s life and that of the others around him – los demás – to pieces. Not, as we assume, into two halves: a peaceful and a horror-riddled one. For the tragic feature of time is that it will not stop on the threshold between past and present. It keeps shifting, and carrying along the difficulty of memory.

In Search of Lost Truth

The narrator's search for what happened that ominous day of the beginning, presents his way of trying to get back his sanity; to get over what we can indeed only call trauma. The traumatic state betrays itself in the temporal messiness and repetitiveness. The narrator's remedy is research, as a process, but with the unattainable result given up voluntarily. He sets out, twenty years after the facts, on the research endeavour of the events, the people involved, including himself. This research project carries along the fiction-fact tension that subtends the entire novel. The temporal tension, in this novel, is presented as the ongoing con-fusion (mark the hyphen) of past and present, with only incidental moments of clarity. For example, the narrator repetitively mentions that twenty years have gone by since the horrible event that the refrain-chapters keep mentioning. But this alternates between "they have", assuming anonymous strangers as the murderers, and "my best friend has", when a life-long affection turns out to have been bestowed on "a monster".

After an unspecified while, it turns out that the "true fact" is that his best friend killed his sister and then threw himself into an abyss. This turning out, however, comes completely out of the blue. There is never a precise moment that the version of the beginning – that the friend had been abducted and the murder committed by outside thugs – transforms into the later one. That key moment that the entire novel is devoted to discovering must stay out of time. This is part of Hernández's profound analysis of time, as he has conducted it in many previous publications. His 2020 book *El arte a contratiempo* is entirely devoted to the issues (plural) that temporalities (plural) bring with them. In this book he lays out how the ethical and the temporal are intertwined. A statement from the first page makes this already clear. In this book he studies, theorizes and analyzes:

A series of practises – and that is, to formulate it briefly, one of the theses of this book – that, beyond the differences among them, their specific contexts and properties, meet from beginning to end in a common impulse: a resistance against capitalist time, against a chronological regime the beginning of which is situated at the dawn of modernity, and the effects of which continue into our present, multiplied, accelerated and expanded.

[una serie de prácticas – y esta es, enunciada de modo rápido, una de las tesis de este libro – que, más allá de sus diferencias, contextos específicos y particularidades, se encuentran atravesadas de principio a fin por un impulso común: una resistencia ante la experiencia del tiempo capitalista, un régimen cronológico cuyo origen puede buscarse en los albores de la modernidad y cuyos efectos llegan hasta nuestro presente, multiplicados, acelerados y expandidos.]

Here, he not only demonstrates his intellectual commitment to modern and contemporary art, of which he is a professor, but also the political commitment in the resistance he mentions against "capitalistic time".

The fact that he devotes an extensive study to the art of others, means that he attempts to create a community of such resistances. But the temporalities are much more complex and “forking” (Borges) than that. Summing it up as contemporaneity, heterochrony, anachronism and obsolescence is a simplification. Time, which governs our everyday lives, does not have a form. It can be used in rhythm, which can sometimes create the illusion of form, something we take from music and rhythmic poetry, and in Hernández’s novel, from sentences such as the micro-narrative quoted above, as well as the repeated refrains. But it is not time that has that form; it is the music, verse, prose, or even the rhythmic breathing that espouses time, that has a form. Formlessness does not entail invisibility, however. Instead of an arrow, the traditional figuration of time, with the many tentacles Hernández examines, I am rather inclined to see time as an octopus.

The choice is not to either see fully shaped forms or to see nothing, but, as Silverman puts it, to learn to practice a “visual habitus” that enables us to see what, by lack of recognisable form, seems invisible. She argues for this in the introduction to her 1996 book. Although she proposes this not in the context of time but of an “ethics of vision”, the idea of a visual habitus can be brought to bear on time, precisely because ethics and time are so intensely connected, if we follow Hernández. In general, as time passes in the everyday, “all the time”, time is so self-evident that one would not wonder about its potential form. It only accedes to awareness when its apparent flow is interrupted. This can be due to nature or man-made disasters, traumatogenic events, which change the course of time, in one way or another, or to an exceptionally intense experience. Something similar holds for ethics. It is there all the time, but accedes to visibility when the self-evidence of trying to live life decently is interrupted by violence that is perpetrated by others that affects us, or our own.¹³

The thought-image of the octopus is not only characterised by the many different but equally important tentacles that sprawl from its body. The real animal has eight limbs, hence its name; but for the thought-image, it is the sur-numerousness that counts, not the actual number. Each tentacle, in addition, possesses many suction cups, small organs that serve to attach the animal to other things or creatures, but more crucially, to suck up, incorporate, food: in the thought-image, the food is the cultural nourishment called attention, engagement, dialogue.¹⁴

¹³ For a solid multi-disciplinary reflection on what time “is”, see Wyller (2020), already mentioned. For the concept of formlessness, I refer to the follow-up on Bataille’s view by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1997).

¹⁴ The three narratological categories of time, order, duration, and frequency, have been systematically laid out and analysed, in dialogue with Proust, by Gérard Genette (1980 [1972]), a book that has been deeply formative for my thinking. Much as I have also felt compelled to criticise elements of it, without this book my work on narratology would not have happened at all. My own version of the temporal categories is presented in Bal 2017, 67-103.

It is therefore, very significant that, as I foregrounded above, the beginning is a direct discourse uttered by the “you”’s father, not by that second person himself. The narrator turns to the “yo” form after each short second-person intermission. We see that the “yo” may be identified as the primary narrator, but there remains a haze of unclarity, such as in the sixth chapter. For even then, the embedded speeches by his brother and the brother of the victim(s?), who invite the protagonist to a fiesta he wants to weasel out of, are not attributed with quotation marks nor attributive verbs, so the “you” there remains ambiguous. (57) As Isabel Verdú Arnal argues in an article on the investigative genre in three contemporary Spanish novels, *El dolor* explores alternatives to the insidious ideology of the “post-truth” [“posverdad”].

I have pleaded many times for the full recognition of focalisation as a “layer” in narrative subjectivity. A special case of focalisation and perhaps the best justification for the distinction I am making is memory. Memory is an act of vision, hence, a focalisation of the past. But, as an act, it is situated in the present of the memory. As is looking. It is most often sense-based: an image, a cinematic-like sequence, sounds, smells, all pertain to memory. But frequently, it is also a narrative act: elements come to cohere into a story, so that they can be remembered and possibly told. But as is well known, memories are untrustworthy, in relation to the “truth” of the fabula. And when put into words, they are elaborated. Only then can they connect to an audience, for example, a therapist, a judge, a political gathering, or los demás who suffer(ed) from the traumatic event. Hernández’s metaphor of himself as a “*flâneur* of time” quoted above, is a gripping evocation of memory. This points to a memory without a fabula, just focalisation as such, as well as of the way visuality and time are connected to it. The sentence on how a slow-down of the video camera does not lead to a still image, further complicates this musing on memory and time. That passage can be seen as a theory of memory.

Focalization for the Restoration of Subjectivity

Both Proust and Malani can be said to offer reflections, in their own medium, of narrativity in their closest “other” medium. Both artists integrate reflections about that intermediality in a work that makes? the ideas they think. Thus, both artists behave as narratologists practicing their own and that other art. This is a form which is currently called with a problematic term, “artistic research”. But as mentioned, I prefer to call it “image-thinking”, a practice that leads to thought images. I don’t mean to reduce these artists’ products to philosophical texts. Instead, I consider the theoretical underside of the images constructed as enrichments of their powerful artworks. These are enriched with culturally relevant layers of meaning, which occur when the addresses, readers or spectators, open themselves up to their performances. This is a practice. In view of this integration of image-thinking, thinking through fig-

uration, and intermediality, *El dolor* can now be considered an elaboration of the mutuality between making and thinking, words and images, past and present, and more. Indeed, *El dolor* integrates, merges and mixes, everything that can be fused.

This novel is written in a minimalist style that creates the space, the environment, in which the events took place, and where the people lived who suffered from them: a neighborhood of a simple village in the countryside, called *la huerta*. The style has short sentences, concrete evocations, personal encounters, elision of verbs, repetitions. Nevertheless, it is highly theoretical in effect, rich in intertextual and interdiscursive allusions, and encouraging stylistic devices, such as the time games, of which repetition, sometimes literal/exact?, sometimes with a difference, is the most prominent one. One repetition of the beginning sentence, but with a difference, is that misty event that is not quite true, as we already know by now, occurs on page 91.

The paragraph begins with a theoretical statement on memory: “Hice memoria, e intenté recordar esa noche” which, thanks to the differentiation in Spanish between two past tenses, is most adequately translated into English as “I performed an act of memory, and made an attempt to remember that night”, if we wish to catch its theoretical tenor. For the literary effect only, this translation is a bit heavy-handed, and thus fails to render the Spanish conciseness of “hice memoria”. Both verbs are in the form of the *pretérito*. This verb form insists on the act, as a one-time event in the past, of which the exact moment is not specified but the momentariness itself is. The rest of the short paragraph described the content of the act of memory, which is visual (“obscurity”), tactile (feeling the fabric of the curtain), auditive, but as a question: what was the first thing I heard?

Then begins the very short following paragraph: “Fue entonces cuando oí la voz de mi padre. Grave y profunda.” Compared to the first sentence of the novel, quoted above, there are three important shifts. One is from the second-person to the first-person discourse. This can be seen as a shift from the dissociative “you” form, which can now also be interpreted as a sign of the traumatic state, to the “cured” state of grief; the grief he seeks, as the title suggests, to share with others.

He was talking to my mother. I paid attention and managed to distinguish his words:

- They have entered into Roario's house, they killed Rosi and abducted Nicolás.

[Le hablaba a mi madre. Presté atención y conseguí distinguir sus palabras:

- Han entrado en la casa de la Rosario, han matado a la Rosi y se han llevado al Nicolás.

Así empezaba todo. Así debía comenzar este libro.

It is a bit strange that it takes up to page 91 to begin the book; but not stranger than Proust's statement, in the middle of his novel, that he decided

to “have his novel” with that one girl he had singled out in the group of girls at the beach.

What seems theoretically relevant and, for readers willing to slow down and reflect, is the “must”, “debía”, a verb of which the subject is the book, not the author. That the verb is in the past tense, the imperfecto, implies the duration that the late intervention of this “beginning” stipulates. It is also remarkable that the “empezaba” that precedes, the conclusion from the refrain-sentence, is an imperfecto, not a pretérito as we could expect from this key event. Preceding this passage, several moments have already occurred when the decision to write the novel is made, then abandoned again. And in fact, the hesitation lasts until the final paragraph. The entire novel, it turns out, is about how to put the words together: those you say out loud and those you write up, those you keep all your life in your soul and those that take half a lifetime to arrive – to paraphrase the ending. This is the narration. Within it, its content is about how to remember, as an attempt to be specific with the focalisation. But most importantly, the narrator incarnating the author realizes that he can only write this novel – stage the acts of narration, focalisation, and action – once he manages to share, truly participate in, the pain of the others.

This process begins from the start and is elaborated at several moments, such as a year after the event when he is incapable of reaching out to the brother of the victims, and later, when, already steeped in his doomed attempts to do the adequate research, he spends an afternoon with the murdered woman’s best friend and feels that he is beginning to do what he set out to do: to feel the pain of others. This is also when the victim, Rosi, who, he now realizes, has always been the object, never the subject of the action (245), a shadow who, as he is now determined, must accede to visibility. For this act of emancipating her from her subaltern state of invisibility, the feminist moment, the entire novel had to be written, as an act, a durational event. This activist act becomes possible through the concentrated look at a photograph in which Rosi stands, small and in the back, but at the centre of the image. What was earlier called the mist of memory, its vagueness, is finally, thanks to the best friend of Rosi’s with whom the narrator talks, a clear and defined image, with a history. This is also a moment of intermediality, where the figural roars its head. “In some way, everything my cousin Loles had told me was projected in the photograph”. [De alguna manera, todo lo que me había contado mi prima Loles se proyectó sobre la foto.] (291)

The last short chapter in the second-person is a memory of the day of the funeral of twenty years ago. In it, the text describes the reality of grief, and figures compassion in the act. The mother who lost her two children and the protagonist look at each other. It is a moment that is extremely moving and ends on a theoretical definition of empathy as mutual. The second-person, here, becomes very concrete.

Rosario looks at you, and in her destroyed face you see a gesture of affection. [...] Her look and yours suffer at the same moment. You feel pain. And you perceive clearly how she feels yours.

Compassion. To feel with the other. To feel at a distance.

[Te mira la Rosario y en su rostro destruido percibes un gesto de cariño. [...] Su mirada y la tuya duelen al mismo tiempo. Sientes u dolor. Y percibes claramente cómo ella siente el tuyo.

Compasión. Sentir con el otro. Sentir en la distancia.] (288-9)

Feeling with, not feeling as, which would be identification, but with, as in empathy. The difference is important, as we have learned from holocaust scholars such as Dominick LaCapra (2004). There is a fine line between empathy and identification. This distinction is crucial in the ethics of vision (Sliverman) but more in general, in the ethics of contemporary art, including, as Hernández has explained, in curating. Jill Bennett discusses LaCapra's and other reflections in a subtle and accessible manner (2005).

The photographic imagination increases in density as we move towards the end. When the "yo" visits the graves of Rosi and Nicolás, the theory of visuality that makes profound sense of the included photographs as well as of the visual descriptions, and it is through intense looking at the small photographs on the tomb stones that he manages to grasp the complexity of the memory. The photo is also a moving image ("imposible de fijar", 292) and a shadow, when the image fades to black. When he sees his own reflection on the photo of Nicolás, while still trying to come to terms with the question if his best friend is a friend or a monster, he takes a sideward step. The passage is worth quoting, because it is a true *mise-en-abyme* of the entire novel, in all its aspects, with all its tentacles:

I stayed a moment looking at the photo of Nicolás and I tried to make him who was not there to appear. Suddenly, my reflection in the glass fused with the marble stone and for a few moments I saw myself inside it, buried, limited to an image. And at the same time, I discovered how Nicolás' face introduced itself in mine. Two worlds intertwined. That vision was disconcerting, and I admit that, without thinking, I shifted slightly to the side, trying to eliminate my reflection from the photograph of Nicolás, so that he was removed from me.

[Permanecí un momento contemplando la foto de Nicolás y traté de hacer comparecer eso que aún no estaba ahí. De repente, mi reflejo en el cristal se fusionó con la lápida de mármoly por unos instantes me vi allí dentro, enterrado, confinado en una imagen. Y al mismo tiempo descubrí el rostro de Nicolás introduciéndose en el mío. Dos mundos entrelazados. Esa visión me deconcertó, y confieso que, sin pensarlo, me desplacé levemente hacia un lado tratando de expulsar de mi reflejo la fotografía de Nicolás, alejándole de mí.] (292)

On the next page he calls what goes through him during that visit, a home video, of which he briefly tells the content, in images. Images of all kinds. In

the end, the reflection on memory, in visual thought, offers a “thought image” about photography and film as the indispensable tools to reach a memory. But these are no longer just media. They, too, are impacted by the reflection, in both senses of the word. In this way, the novel as a whole, of which the central fabula event remains multi-layered, is about this figural theory of memory, vision, and the search to achieve it.

The practice that this novel stages, performs, achieves, and tells about, is undefinable. Although it is fundamentally a text, a linguistic narration, the generous reflections on vision, memory, language, places and all this, towards understanding and feeling the pain of others, make it difficult to pin down the linguistic object as literature – unless we dare follow this narrator and accept that literature is a royal road towards an art that encompasses all the senses, as well as the ethical dimension of social existence. Not only does the text mention the tactility of memory, for example, but the words, so auditive that you can actually hear the narration, also arouse a tactile experience of them. When the protagonist tries to trace the itinerary of Nicolás towards the abyss in which he will throw himself, then, he feels, now a drawing will appear – there is no less clumsy way of saying this. “Afterwards, the image of the itinerary on the map formed a drawing”, [Después, la imagen del camino sobre el mapa formaría un dibujo]. (231) All through this novel we participate in a failed historical enactment, the fiasco of which opens up possibilities of cultural participation that will begin when the novel is finished. “... to repeat the past, to let it vibrate in the present” [... repetir el pasado, dejarla vibrar en el presente] (232), finally, is the novel’s lesson in historical awareness. But if I try to pin down the events that constitute this novel’s fabula, I utterly fail.

The practices of which this novel is composed all engage the artform or medium of their own product, and connecting or integrating those with other forms or media. This engagement is the artistic shape of “intership”. The artist-author whose work I have discussed here, is clearly intrigued by literature’s “others”. But don’t go and ask to check if this is truly the case. The author may not even be aware of that specific form of intership he is practicing. For, as I have frequently argued, it is the work of the author or artist to make the cultural object; the job of critics, analysts, students and scholars is to mediate between the resulting work and the public, readers, spectators, or other users or “engagers”, so that they can benefit more profoundly, on more levels than one, of the complexities and subtleties and incentives to integrate enjoyment with thought.

The lingering question that *El dolor de los demás* put on the table is the issue of events. There is a single, central event: the family drama of murder and suicide. But as I have argued, all along the novel, the narration concerns many other, different events, whereas that central one remains elusive. Acting either like a traumatized, narratively incapacitated co-victim of a bad detective, the narrator and the “I” and “you” that are his pronouns, is searching but never really gets to grasp what happened there. Meanwhile, though, his

search, the search for who his friend was, who he is, how to empathize with the demás, and the exploration of the nature of memory, of images, and of story-telling: this multiple search constitutes a string of reflections that are in themselves events. In all importance, they over-shadow the trips to the US, the excursions to archives and other resources, conversation with friends and colleagues. After all, in spite of the deceptive title of the last part, *Le temps retrouvé*, Proust didn't manage either, in his four thousand pages, to find that lost time.

In the discussion just mentioned, LaCapra proposes the useful term “empathic unsettlement” to solve the problem of the temptation of identification as a form of emotional appropriation. I see *El dolor de los demás* as precisely that: a long, durational experience and exercise, experiment and practice, of *empathic unsettlement*. That is the commitment where temporality and ethics come together in the transformation of the first person into a you (plural).

Mieke BAL

TIMELY COMMITMENTS

Story-telling is a testing ground for thought about ethics. In this paper, I aim to bring together an old ethical question, first with the status of literature as moving, and second with story-telling as focalized. These two views join forces, or even melt together. But if, as I argue here, ethical decisions are with us all the time, then there is another issue that is hard to theorize. This is time. For the lives within which we make those ethical decisions take place now, in the present. Whereas time tends to be considered a formal, structural issue, its bond with memory and the need to consider the future cannot be separated from the ethical. If I take ethics and temporality together in this chapter, it is an attempt to bring the old debate into the present, even in the here-and-now, since the novel that is central in it, is both contemporary (now) and Spanish (here). This is the brilliant novel *El dolor de los demás* by Miguel Ángel Hernández, from 2018.

Keywords: ethics, temporality, literature as moving, story-telling as focalized, empathic unsettlement, novel, Miguel Ángel Hernández.