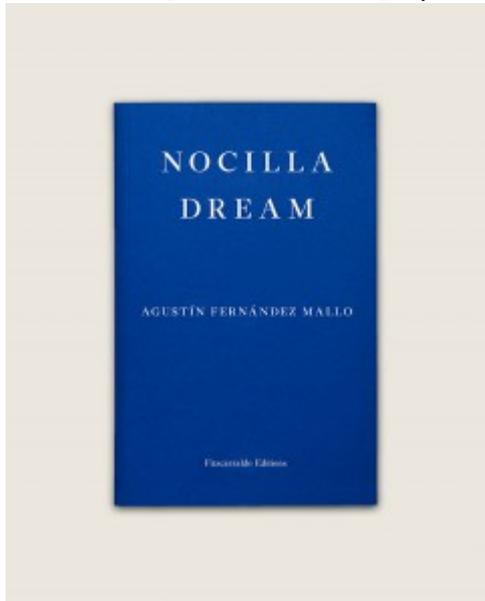


# A text after *Nocilla Dream* by Agustín Fernández Mallo

written by John Trefry | March 24, 2016



*Nocilla Dream* by Agustín Fernández Mallo

Translated by Thomas Bunstead

Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015

200 pages – [Fitzcarraldo](#) / [Amazon](#)

1

AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ MALLO: The film we saw recounts a tragedy that befell a group of five youngsters, and in particular Sally Hardesty and his brother Franklin, an invalid. It's all the more tragic for the involvement of youth. They could have lived a great many years longer and never have imagined witnessing such demented sadism as that they were faced with on that day. What had promised to be an idyllic summer afternoon turned into a nightmare. The events of that afternoon led to the discovery of one of the strangest and most bizarre crimes in the history of the USA: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

2

The representation of the United States by European intellectuals is a genre. Perhaps novels, Kafka's *The Missing Man*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, etcetera, are most exemplary of this, but it depends on your position about the productivity of fiction as a functional analog of its quarry. Perhaps treatises, de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Baudrillard's *America*, etcetera, are most exemplary, but it depends on your position about the usefulness of reading descriptions of what you already know.

3

On Google Earth: explore the birthplace of Michael Landon in Forest Hills, Queens, explore Machu Pichu, explore the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, explore the moon, explore Middle Earth, explore the Tour de France, explore Oklahoma, explore the ocean floor.

4

Because there always is one, what is the particular ethical dilemma in translating a book ostensibly about the United States and written by a Spaniard, from its original Spanish into English? Is the issue with *Nocilla Dream* in translation that it singularly represents Spanish views on the United States? Or is it that an English-speaking publisher has selected *Nocilla Dream* from one of many Spanish perceptions about the United States? The latter question is perhaps not structurally relevant, but only for the perceptions of *Nocilla Dream*'s readers in the United States, given that the publisher is in London. Does that then make *Nocilla Dream* the singular representation of the United States in contemporary Spanish literature as selected by the UK?

5

One must define the terms to know within from without. In the youth of generations prior to X, the term Earth gathered together a diverse panoply of civilizations and independent systems. The term universe was previously an all-encompassing end of scale, the totality of the known unknown, a vantage inherently within. However, contemporary particle physics and cosmology require either complete jettison of the term universe, or a more liberal shading of its aspects. The limits no longer hold. Dimensions are concurrent to our own four that we are not able to access due to their scale and their exclusivity to the quantities of energy humans have thus far evolved to harness. The potential involution of these dimensions within our own belie the long held and persisting perception that another universe would be like our own, just with different—or precisely the same—inhabitants. Ultimately these scenarios are as conceptually indescribable as the Z-axis to Flatlanders. It is not the white night sky and black stars of the Bizarro universe (as depicted on *Super Friends*). Similarly, the island of true vacuum that we've known, and know as our universe, is bound by a time that we can never reach, composing, from our vantage within, an infinitely boundless space, while the false vacuum beyond, ever inflating, ever giving rise to other pauses like our own, provides a vantage of enclosure, and never anything but an exclusive envelope.

6

FRANZ KAFKA: Rays of light streamed around the box, from all sides and also from above, the section of the box in the foreground was bathed in a white yet soft light, whereas deeper recesses, behind red velvet draped in folds of varying shades all along the perimeter of the box and held in check by cords, seemed like a dark red-shimmering void. So grandiose did everything look that one could scarcely imagine people in this box.

7

AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ MALLO: First it was steel, then glass, then came other metals and alloys, and today it's the more specialized types of glass. But each of these modern materials behaves totally differently and changes dimensions in response to thermal and mechanical actions in far more important ways than traditional materials. In a building comprising such heterogeneous elements these movements can be both varied and of great significance. Which means the relationship between (and union of) the various pieces is harder and harder to make work. Thirty years ago the answer to all these problems was silicon, synthetic sealants in general. All the joining elements would be sealed, even the jointing between structural elements. The immense confidence in sealants as a panacea led to their overuse in many areas: exterior sealants which, subject to ultraviolet rays, aged more quickly. After all these years of immense confidence in a product, people wished to make up for the deficiencies of the project as originally conceived, as silicone had had some high profile failures, and became a symbol of poor workmanship in construction. (Ignacio Paricio, High Construction) Or, 'On the Novel'.

8

Ethical dilemmas are inescapable in translation. At one scale the potential elision inherent in translation is no greater than what occurs in the filter of professional publication in terms of what works will be representative of a culture. However, the armature of translation is one of far more extreme focus and therefore ventures into more precarious ethical positions because its elision is necessarily systematic and the linguistic mechanisms that manifest the works are necessarily subjective. It is easy to assume that just because every novel written in the United States is not published professionally, that still, what is published professionally as a whole is indeed representative of the United States at any given time. What could be seen as the normal premiation of commerce in publishing takes on insidious ethical baggage when applied as a selective representational tool used to define other cultures. Translation even in its most sensitive and deferrent, must be read with awareness of the impossibility of cross-cultural fidelity, with consciousness of its othering.

9

A civilization of intelligent organisms has evolved with sensory organs receptive to electromagnetic waves within the radio frequencies rather than the frequencies characterized as visible to humans. This civilization understands its world via this sense. It constructs its structures to facilitate this understanding. The structural forms address defraction and reflection of the wide range of wavelengths specifically beneficial to their daily life (those being between 300GHz and 3kHz rather than 430 and 770 THz (and of course the notion of daily, the manner in which the sun's rays partition time would be a misnomer in a civilization whose perceptions operate on different orchestrations of the cosmos)). Through its scientific inquiries the civilization is aware of the spectrum of wavelengths we call visible. It has even developed devices that translate the spectrum into radio stimuli that it can appreciate. But the direct, native content of these waves, the manner in which these waves distinctly define the environment around them, is an unfathomable mystery. Their structures do not require windows and glass has not been invented for the purposes with which we are familiar.

10

Sired by one of the great actually American novels, *Moby Dick*, French writer Michel Butor published *Mobile: Study for a Representation of the United States* in 1962. This study constructs a mathematical field condition of fiction, observation, and quotation to cement the exemplar of the genre. It is a work of fact and fiction, a diffusion of myth with harsh reality, a sense of hope in distance. Based on his subsequent works, *Niagara* (whose title in French, *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde (étude stéréophonique)*, is vastly superior), and *Letters from the Antipodes*, it is clear that Butor's enthusiasm for these heterogenous undeclared texts, "books" as Joe Milazzo describes them, was not United States specific. But its birth from his time in the United States is not accidental, and the tone of *Mobile* differs from the others in a special way. *Mobile* is a lonely book. It is a book that gets lost in its space and functions because of its textual partitioning. "pitch dark in / CORDOVA, ALABAMA, the deep south," "The Europeans sliced up the Great Plains," "Thirsty? Drink Coca-Cola!" "Seneca Hotel, 600 rooms. / The trains coming from Des Moines. / Sheraton Hotel, 500 rooms, / The trains leaving for Saint Louis."

11

LAWRENCE VENUTI: A case in point is the translation of modern Japanese fiction into English. As Edward Fowler indicated, American publishers like Grove Press, Alfred Knopf, and New Directions, noted for their concern with literary as well as commercial ventures, issued many translations of Japanese novels and story collections during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet their choices were very selective, focusing on relatively few writers, mainly Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, Kawabata Yasunari, and Mishima Yukio. By the late 1980s a reviewer who is also a poet and translator could say that "for the average

Western reader, [Kawabata's novel] *Snow Country* is perhaps what we think of as typically 'Japanese': elusive, misty, inconclusive." The same cultural image was assumed by another, more self-conscious reviewer, who, when confronted with an English version of a comic Japanese novel, wondered skeptically: "Could it be that the novel of delicacy, taciturnity, elusiveness, and languishing melancholy—traits we have come to think of as characteristically Japanese—is less characteristic than we thought?" American publishers, Fowler argued, established a canon of Japanese fiction in English that was not only unrepresentative, but based on a well-defined stereotype that has determined reader expectations for roughly forty years.

12

It is immediately apparent that the appropriated prologue from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in Thomas Bunstead's English translation of Mallo's *Nocilla Dream* is not accurately transcribed from the movie. Who could forget the dulcet luxury of John Laroquette's voice intoning the word "macabre"? Yet here we find the alternate—though equally memorable—phrase, "demented sadism." Although the perspectival quality of all translation was born long ago in the rubble of Babel, the question remains: for a text that originally existed orally in English, that was translated and printed in Spanish, and then was translated back into English for publication in this book, why is the ultimate English text not faithful to the original prologue in the film? According to a conversation I had with Spanish writer Germán Sierra, Mallo appropriated from existing Spanish translations of the cited texts. Although with dialogue from a film, translation would either be in the form of subtitles or overdubbing, both of which would have been composed by the film's distributor. Sierra further noted that with American films in Spanish, the language is more often "adapted" rather than "actually translated". Although Tobe Hooper is not cited in the index following the text, he is credited in the body of the text. Certainly Bunstead would have checked the original English text and discussed the erroneous translation with Mallo. The ultimate resolution would have to be that Mallo asked him to preserve the discrepancy when translating the prologue back to English.

13

Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer sit in a sedan parked on a low trailer pulled behind a truck stopped at a traffic signal on Lincoln Boulevard in Los Angeles. In this moment they are between shots in the filming of *The Story of Us*, directed by Rob Reiner. Willis looks out the driver's side window attempting to ignore a young man in a red Honda Civic coupe. Pfeiffer adjusts her make-up in the mirror on the verso side of the sun visor. In this moment they both long for sweet death. The film receives a rating of 28% on review aggregating website Rotten Tomatoes, indicating a generally negative reception.

Loneliness pervades the European representations of the United States. This loneliness, this emptiness is the heir of a projection onto the United States that began with Kafka and flowed through Nabokov. Strange though, that these qualities, what we understand as Kafkaesque or Nabokovian, were not specific to these writers' works about the United States, but for me as a U.S. reader became most resonant in them.

*The Missing Man* was the first of Kafka's unfinished novels, begun in 1912. The book was brought to publication by Max Brod in 1927 as *Amerika*. It is easy to imagine the mystery at the time surrounding the United States for a young man in Prague and how his projections of endless disorientation onto that mythology might have, in some cyclical way, come to characterize the United States to its own readers through translation. The specific collision of spatial extent and isolation comes in the final fragment of text, "*Das Naturtheater von Oklahoma*," that describes our loser of a hero, Karl, disembarking a train at the recruiting center for the great theater. Here he is told about his ultimate destination (of course we never reach it with him) that promises to hire any and all. He hears of its fabulous extent: "'Is the entire outfit really that big?' Karl asked. 'It's the largest theater in the world,' Fanny repeated. 'Though I've never seen it myself, some of my coworkers who've already been to Oklahoma say it's almost limitless.'" Although akin to, and prefiguring, some works of Genet and Celine, even Beckett, irregardless of setting, here the doddering and drifting of the book's occupants is not a condition of their spirit, but a condition brought about by the listlessness of the place. As much as Kafka's losers possess a spirit of disillusionment, it is primarily because of the obstructionism of their context. "'But we've been waiting for an hour and have only heard those trumpets. There's no poster, no announcer, no one who can give us any information.'" The sense is that they are adrift across a disorienting terrain, not across their lives, across space rather than through time. Although they frequently make idiotic decisions (who doesn't?), there is the sense that but for what arises to halt them, they would continue in blissful flow until sweet death.

Juxtapose this with Nabokov, a precious loneliness of prose. *Lolita* is viewed most widely as Nabokov's great representation of the United States, with its idyllic suburbs and long laconic highways, its motor lodges. Although it is exemplary, as much as any other of Nabokov's mature works, of how fiction can reduce the human population to only those who appear at that moment on that page, it is *Ada, or Ardor* that has lastingly defined the greater ethos of the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup>, and with the same tonal disposition of isolation. The imagery and the delicacy of the prose remains to present its occupants with such fragility that they might break if breathed upon, thus they lie alone in space. Alone in the evening, Van indulges in a bit of "lucubratiuncula," which Vivian Darkbloom (the greatest anagram in the history of literature) describes as "writing in the lamplight" in her notes. He inscribes, "Does the ravage and outrage of age deplored by poets tell the naturalist of Time anything about Time's essence? Very little." *Ada*, although representing time, must be read for the manifestation of time as space. From

the gardens and terraces of Ardis Hall to the bizarre geopolitical structure of the vaguely familiar *Demonia*, *Ada* consistently utilizes the spaciousness of the U.S. landscape to decontextualize the odd positions from which we see one another, the impossibility of seeing one another without emotional bias, especially in our post-global present when there is no outside to look in from.

15

VLADIMIR NABOKOV: That night because of the bothersome blink of remote sheet lighting through the black hearts of his sleeping-arbor, Van had abandoned his two tulip trees and gone to bed in his room.

16

The narrative leitmotiv of *Nocilla Dream* is a poplar tree in the desert laden with hundreds of shoes hanging by their laces. This cannot not be a metaphor, although its positioning, its diffusion from various perspectives and presentations, strongly discourages its being read in that way. Each new person that approaches the tree who throws their shoes contributes indelibly to its composition, though not as an individual, and with the meaninglessness of their inherited impulse. It is a mark, but not their mark. The patina is of accretion, not of intention. All after the first will never be the first. All after the first, inherent in their doing so, is the fact they know not why they do so. Or, 'On the novel'.

17

Translated American movie titles in Spain: The Story of Us→The Story of Us; The Shining→The Glow; American Hustle→The Great American Swindle; I♥Huckabees→Strange Coincidences; I'm Gonna Git You Sucka!→Overdose of Gold; Die Hard 2: Die Harder→The Jungle 2: Red Alert; Dead Ringers→Inseparables; The Pacifier→A Supertough Kangaroo; The Texas Chainsaw Massacre→The Texas Massacre\*.

\*Google translator provides the full translation including "Chainsaw" even though the word "motosierra" is missing from the Spanish title.

18

AGUSTÍN FERNÁNDEZ MALLO: When Michael Landon arrived at Fox's studios, very late, he was tired; the house was cold, and a mess, and devoid of any character. A few hand-me-down pieces of furniture. The rubbish bin overflowing. Recording the fifth season of *Freeway to the Sky* had consumed his whole capacity for nomadism; the house now became the refuge that every

traveler, sooner or later, needs. He poured himself a whiskey, no ice, picking a pornographic video from the shelves at random. As the tape began to go round he heated up a sandwich he'd brought from catering.

19

TOBE HOOPER: The film which you are about to see is an account of the tragedy which befell a group of five youths, in particular Sally Hardesty and her invalid brother, Franklin. It is all the more tragic in that they were young. But, had they lived very, very long lives, they could not have expected nor would they have wished to see as much of the mad and macabre as they were to see that day. For them an idyllic summer afternoon drive became a nightmare. The events of that day were to lead to the discovery of one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history, The Texas Chain Saw Massacre.