

Softcover: UK

Roberto Bolano has ways of making you read

'Nazi Literature in the Americas' is an imaginative early work from a modern Latin American master

BY PHILIP HENSHER
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

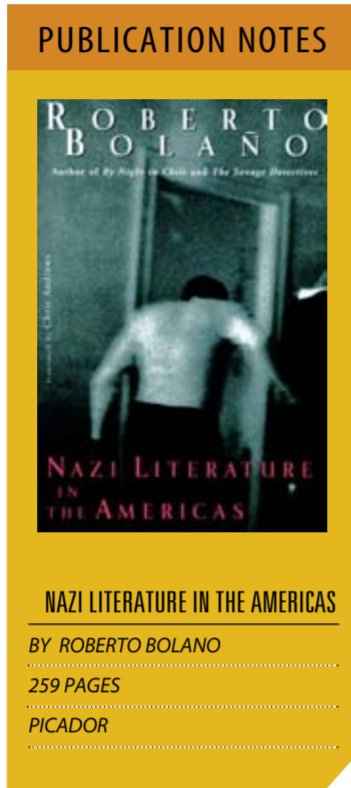
The cult success of the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolano's *The Savage Detectives* and the immense worldwide posthumous success of his final novel, *2666*, have encouraged his British publishers to delve into his substantial backlist. There are lots of interesting things there, most marked by the formal eccentricity that so defined *2666*.

By Night in Chile is told in two paragraphs, the second only a few words long. *Distant Star*, the most engaging of these earlier works, is a magic realist-tinged narrative of Pinochet's regime, containing a fascist poet who writes his work in vapor trails in the sky. *Nazi Literature in the Americas* is a real curiosity; it has a surface simplicity, but few readers will be able to pin down a general unease about the book's purpose and meaning. It was published more or less simultaneously with *Distant Star*, in 1996, and its last story — or entry — contains a short version of that novel.

It is structured as a sort of dictionary, with 30 or so short lives of various imaginary writers. They are all related, in different ways, to often extremely right-wing causes. They pay a pilgrimage to visit Hitler or are photographed in childhood being dangled on the Führer's knee. They promote anti-Semitic ideology among beat poets. They flee to South America after the war and live in enclosed Teutonic colonies. "Five feet [1.52m] tall [and] with a swarthy complexion" themselves, they write books with characters exclusively "tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed". They come to violent ends, either in the past or considerably in the future; their books are acclaimed within certain circles, or self-published and never noticed; they deal with each other in dense webs of literary association.

In description, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* sounds like satire, and it has a dryness about it that could easily be taken for ironic humor. In fact, Bolano's intentions are more sophisticated than that. Much of his personal experience was with writers passionately committed to extreme leftist causes, ceaselessly arguing about ideological purity in poetry and splitting up into smaller and smaller "groupuscules". (All this is described in *The Savage Detectives*.)

Nazi Literature in the Americas takes what Bolano knew very well, and sends it through the looking glass of the ideological divide. He imagines writers of extraordinary experimental verve, engaging with the most advanced literary theory. Some of them, indeed, sound a little like Bolano in *2666*, a novel as steeped in the excitements of brutal violence as



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any writer described here.

Other of these imaginary figures are naive science-fiction writers, or the creators of adventure stories, or, in the case of Argentinian Schiaffino, the poet of myth and epic for the thugs of the football terraces. In short, Bolano's imaginary writers cover the same breadth of ground as any selection of writers. Bolano, with his characteristic entranced fascination of tone, trembles on the verge of suggesting that some of them may have been terrible, but there is no reason to suppose others are not capable of greatness.

This is a heretical thought, but the ideological basis of writing has never had much to do with its merits; a novelist is not more or less likely to be a good novelist because he approves or disapproves of Pinochet, Bill Clinton, Stalin, Mao or Margaret Thatcher. In its unexpected and committedly affectless manner, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* testifies to the sheer power of literature; how it can emerge in an artless or sophisticated manner with a power that we would prefer to direct.

There was never any reason to think that the writers of literature were likely to be exclusively nice people. Only the most foolish reader ever considered that literature was something one would be at all likely to agree with. Bolano's impressive novel triumphs by displaying a power of imagination and a quiddity we are not inclined to allow any of his imaginary writers. It also, magnanimously, suggests that they too might be capable of writing a poem in the sky, whatever they did when they came back down to earth.



1976
Manic Pixie Dream Girl (不合時宜)
Sony BMG



Chthonic (閃靈)
Mirror of Retribution (十殿)
Spinefarm/Universal



Mr Why
Jeremy Liu (劉子千)
Warner Music



Aftertaste (回韻)
Karen Mok (莫文蔚)
Universal Music

CDs: Taiwan

To measure Brit-pop's influence on Taiwanese indie music, look no further than one of the scene's most beloved bands, 1976. The decade-old group has inspired a new generation of indie-pop bands and is seeing its own brand of new wave rock gain wider acceptance in the mainstream.

1976 stepped up its profile last year by signing with Sony BMG, and has been quick in releasing its second album with the label, *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (不合時宜), finishing it in less than a year.

The haste has not made waste here. While the band hasn't come up with new innovations in sound, *Manic* is a strong collection of songs that ought to please fans and will hold the attention of new listeners. 1976 has added polish to this production by working with several pop-oriented producers and singers, including label mate Deserts Chang (張懸) and Mando-pop singer Valen Hsu (許茹芸), who each lend their vocal talents to several tracks.

Lead singer Ah-kai (阿凱) sounds better than ever. His syrupy, effeminate voice, which grows on you, is well matched to the synth-pop of *Sail to Neverland* (世界盡頭) and The Smiths-influenced *A Friend of Mine* (我的電視朋友). He maintains a pitch-perfect delivery throughout one of the album's most dramatic tracks, *All Is for Love*, which ascends into an inspired frenzy.

Manic is more atmospheric than the band's last release, *Asteroid 1976* (1976這個星球). Synthesizers and electronic drums play a bigger role this time around, which are featured on danceable anthems like *Underworld* (地下社會), a tribute to the indie-rock club on Shida Road (師大路).

On the surface, 1976 sounds like just another throwback to the 80s and 90s. But the band's long-standing appeal runs beyond the Brit-pop beats and mod-rock hipster looks. Many of the band's lyrics tap into the thrill and confusion of youth. As another anthemic track, *A Clockwork Orange* (發條橘子), goes: "We are young and free/the me of tomorrow will perhaps not understand the me of today." (We are young and free/明天也許我自己也不了解今天的我). — DAVID CHEN

If there were a heavy metal group to convince you of the merits of the genre, that band might be Chthonic (閃靈). The group has attracted a cult following in two different worlds: metal buffs voted them as the second best band in UK magazine *Terraviva* (they placed ahead of their heroes Megadeth and Slayer). In Taiwan they are celebrated (and vilified) as champions of independence for the nation, with the articulate and charismatic lead singer Freddy Lim (林昶佐) playing an offstage role as a spokesman and high-profile activist.

But the metal is much heavier than the politics in *Mirror of Retribution*, the band's fifth album and first major label release. Drawing inspiration from Scandinavian black metal bands, Chthonic has been working toward creating what it calls "Taiwanese metal" by incorporating local mythology and history into its music. Lim, who is also the group's lyricist, weaved an elaborate background story for *Mirror*, which takes place at the time of the 228 Incident of 1947.

The album's hero, a young mystic named Tsing-guan, travels into the spirit world of hell to steal "The Book of Life and Death." The book holds the key to saving his friends in the material world, who have started an armed rebellion against Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) troops descending upon Taichung.

Although in a recent interview Chthonic said it had little interest in talking "politics" in its music, some will argue, and rightfully so, that setting the story around the 228 Incident is a political statement in itself.

That said, the lyrics, sung in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), or in English for the international version of the CD, mostly dwell more on what metal bands want to do: convey fear, dread and gore.

Lim concentrates his efforts on creating an "Oriental Hell," a spiritual underworld based on Taoist mythology. Many of the songs depict epic battles with evil wizards who torture, and "Ghost Kings" who oversee an "Ocean of Blood" where "the shores fill up with corpses." Beneath the gore and fantasy, Lim shows a keen and elegant sense of storytelling. *Mirror*, like most Chthonic albums, ends in tragedy. Tsing-guan fails in his mission and is banished to the border of hell, where he is condemned to watch the universe end through the Mirror of Retribution. "And, although there was nothing more to see in the mirror, he continued to gaze; eyes fixed on the void reflecting back at him."

As with all symphonic metal, Chthonic's music requires technical precision and clean execution from the band's five members, each of whom is up to the task. Chthonic adds a somewhat unique touch to its sound by using the *erhu* (二胡), which drives the melody on tracks like *Blooming Blades* (刀綻) and *1947*, a quiet and gloomy interlude.

The production was given a professional sheen by engineer and producer Rob Caggiano, who is the guitarist for Anthrax. He also helped Lim re-write the lyrics for the English-language version of the album.

Die-hard fans and critics will happily nitpick at Chthonic's stylistic nuances: one Internet reviewer lamented the band's shift to a "raw, almost grindcore sound"; another hailed them as "extreme metal's premier band."

On the other hand, the uninitiated will hear what one imagines "extreme metal" to be: lots of shrieking, howling and growling, noisy guitars and neck-breaking tempos. But *Mirror's* imaginative story might keep them listening. — DAVID CHEN

The son of the famed Taiwanese composer and movie director Liu Chia-chang (劉家昌), singer/songwriter/producer Jeremy Liu (劉子千) debut album *Mr Why* comes highly anticipated. He might be the most promising all-round musician since Jay Chou (周杰倫). *Mr Why* does not disappoint either, serving a rich array of musical styles handled with superb craftsmanship.

Having composed all 10 tracks and produced the whole album, Liu shows great self-assurance as a musician. The opening song *Occupying* (佔據) is an infectious folk ballad that celebrates the bliss of love with its stripped-down sounds. Taking a jibe at the complicated come-ons and rejections of romance, the title track *Mr Why* is a hip-hop-driven anthem with irresistible grooves and very credible rapping by Liu. *Rose* (玫瑰), a track featured in Jay Chou's adventure movie *The Treasure Hunter* (翻滾吧), is an effective ballad about eternal love elevated by its wise use of a whispering chorus. *Thinking* (想), a Brit-pop-flavored rouser with electrifying guitar riffs, is a memorable ballad about unrequited love. The climactic track is *Empty Scar* (空傷), a contagious ballad about frazzled love delivered in virtuosic R'n'B vocals with impressive melisma.

Because of Liu's inability to write in Chinese (he grew up in the US), all the lyrics penned by professional lyricists have been tailored to his grasp of the language. Some of the dumbed-down lyrics do not live up to the ambitious melodies, with whacked-out song titles such as *Who Is the Fox* (誰是狐狸) and *Living at the Zoo* (住在動物園).

Offering a refreshing take on the timeworn Mando-pop ballad genre, Liu blissfully strays from convention and verges more on world music (as seen in *Rose*) or folk rock (as witnessed in *Empty Scar*). *Mr Why* follows the by-now-standard formula of merging eclectic styles such as folk, R'n'B, hip-hop and rock, displaying Liu's versatility across the genres.

As the latest traveler on the well-trodden trail of Mando-pop singer/songwriter, Liu is definitely one to watch out for. — ANDREW C.C. HUANG

Karen Mok (莫文蔚) is in danger of becoming the next Faye Wong (王菲) — a performer who creates meticulously crafted tunes with little emotional resonance for the audience. Mok has even inherited Wong's former long-term producer/songwriter Zhang Yadong (張亞東) to boot.

Originally released as a digital album on a China-based music site, *Aftertaste* (回韻) takes what Mok started in her Golden-Melody winning album *Love Is... Karen Mok* (拉活...莫文蔚) and pushes further. Mok continues her daredevil sonic journey of mixing original compositions with classic songs both in Chinese and English. It's at once a cover album and a kaleidoscopic fusion of styles.

Mok's choices of classic tunes here run the gamut from Chinese folk and classic Mando-pop to Italian opera. With *Green Mountain* (青山在), her adventurous spirit misfires when she introduces thumping rock beats into a simple aboriginal folk song. Mok's coquettish voice is seen in flirtatious top form in *Full Moon and Blooming Flower* (花好月圓), a pop classic by 1940s Chinese songstress Zhou Xuan (周璇). The undisputed highlight is Mok's retake on *The World Outside* (外面的世界), originally a theme song sung by actress Zhou Xun (周迅) for the movie *Perhaps, Love* (如果·愛). With this song, Mok's voice reaches a haunting poignancy unheard in other tracks. With *Half a Moon Climbs Up* (半個月亮爬上來), Mok delivers surprising fireworks by merging folksy Chinese music with segments of Italian opera aria. She mostly uses her vocals as a musical instrument rather than as the purveyor of emotions that holds the songs on this album together. Mok thus fails to achieve the emotional resonance found in her earlier Mando-pop classics such as *Love* (愛情) or *If I Don't Have You* (如果沒有你).

A musical tapestry that manages to find unexpected sparks in its bravura fusion, *Aftertaste* is brilliantly imagined and immaculately executed. Many will admire its beauty, but few will be moved by it. There is no hint of heartbreak or remorse behind these tracks. Audiences would be wise to play the album once at a dance party and then shelve it. — ANDREW C.C. HUANG

Hardcover: US

'You Are Not a Gadget': fighting 'digital Maoism'

Artist and computer scientist Jaron Lanier worries that collectivism in cyberspace diminishes the importance and uniqueness of the individual voice

BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

In 2006, the artist and computer scientist Jaron Lanier published an incisive, groundbreaking and highly controversial essay about "digital Maoism" — about the downside of online collectivism, and the enshrinement by Web 2.0 enthusiasts of the "wisdom of the crowd." In that manifesto Lanier argued that design (or ratification) by committee often does not result in the best product, and that the new collectivist ethos — embodied by everything from Wikipedia to *American Idol* to Google searches — diminishes the importance and uniqueness of the individual voice, and that the "hive mind" can easily lead to mob rule.

In his impassioned new book *You Are Not a Gadget*, Lanier expands this thesis further, looking at the implications that digital Maoism or "cybernetic totalitarianism" have for our society at large. Although some of his suggestions for addressing these problems wander into technical thickets the lay reader will find difficult to follow, the bulk of the book is lucid, powerful and

persuasive. It is necessary reading for anyone interested in how the Web and the software we use every day are reshaping culture and the marketplace.

Lanier, a pioneer in the development of virtual reality and a Silicon Valley veteran, is hardly a Luddite, as some of his critics have suggested. Rather he is a digital-world insider who wants to make the case for "a new digital humanism" before software engineers' design decisions, which he says fundamentally shape users' behavior, become "frozen into place by a process known as lock-in." Just as decisions about the dimensions of railroad tracks determined the size and velocity of trains for decades to come, he argues, so choices made about software design now may yield "defining, unchangeable rules" for generations to come.

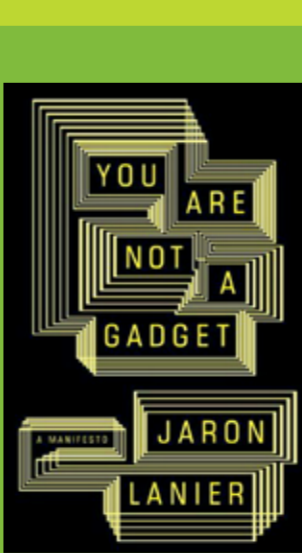
Decisions made in the formative years of computer networking, for instance, promoted online anonymity, and over the years, as millions upon millions of people began using the Web, Lanier says, anonymity has helped enable the dark side of human nature. Nasty, anonymous attacks on individuals

and institutions have flourished, and what Lanier calls a "culture of sadism" has gone mainstream. In some countries anonymity and mob behavior have resulted in actual witch hunts. "In 2007," Lanier reports, "a series of 'Scarlet Letter' postings in China incited online throngs to hunt down accused adulterers. In 2008, the focus shifted to Tibet sympathizers."

Lanier sensibly notes that the "wisdom of crowds" is a tool that should be used selectively, not glorified for its own sake. Of Wikipedia he writes that "it's great that we now enjoy a cooperative pop culture concordance" but argues that the site's ethos ratifies the notion that the individual voice — even the voice of an expert — is eminently dispensable, and "the idea that the collective is closer to the truth." He complains that Wikipedia suppresses the sound of individual voices, and similarly contends that the rigid format of Facebook turns individuals into "multiple-choice identities."

Like Andrew Keen in *The Cult of the Amateur*, Lanier is most eloquent on how intellectual property is threatened by the economics

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BY JARON LANIER
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ALFRED A. KNOPF

of free Internet content, crowd dynamics and the popularity of aggregator sites. "An impenetrable tone deafness rules Silicon Valley when it comes to the idea of authorship," he writes, recalling the *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly's 2006 prediction that the mass scanning of books would one day create a universal library in which no book would be an island — in effect, one humongous text, made searchable and remixable on the Web.

"It might start to happen in the next decade or so," Lanier writes. "Google and other companies are scanning library books into the cloud in a massive Manhattan Project of cultural digitization. What happens next is what's important. If the books in the cloud are accessed via user interfaces that encourage mashups of fragments that obscure the context and authorship of each fragment, there will be only one book. This is what happens today with a lot of content; often you don't know where a quoted fragment from a news story came from, who wrote a comment, or who shot a video."

While this development might sound like a good thing for

consumers — so much free stuff — it makes it difficult for people to discern the source, point of view and spin factor of any particular fragment they happen across on the Web, while at the same time encouraging content producers, in Lanier's words, "to treat the fruits of their intellects and imaginations as fragments to be given without pay to the hive mind." A few lucky people, he notes, can benefit from the configuration of the new system, spinning their lives into "still-novel marketing" narratives, as in the case, say, of Diablo Cody, "who worked as a stripper, can blog and receive enough attention to get a book contract, and then have the opportunity to have her script made into a movie — in this case, the widely acclaimed *Juno*." He fears, however, that "the vast majority of journalists, musicians, artists and filmmakers" are "staring into career oblivion because of our failed digital idealism."

Paradoxically enough, the same old media that is being destroyed by the Net drives an astonishing amount of online chatter. "Comments about TV shows, major movies, commercial

music releases, and video games must be responsible for almost as much bit traffic as porn," Lanier observes. "There is certainly nothing wrong with that, but since the Web is killing the old media, we face a situation in which culture is effectively eating its own seed stock."

In other passages in this provocative and sure-to-be-controversial book he goes even further, suggesting that "pop culture has entered into a nostalgic malaise," that "online culture is dominated by trivial mashups of the culture that existed before the onset of mashups, and by fandom responding to the dwindling outposts of centralized mass media."

Online culture, he goes on, "is a culture of reaction without action" and rationalizations that "we were entering a transitional lull before a creative storm" are just that — rationalizations. "The sad truth," he concludes, "is that we were not passing through a momentary lull before a storm. We had instead entered a persistent somnolence, and I have come to believe that we will only escape it when we kill the hive."