

Before the Bubble Burst: The Artist and the *Cultura de la Transición* in Julio Llamazares's *El cielo de Madrid*

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Abstract

Julio Llamazares's novel, *El cielo de Madrid* (2005), stands out among the many other Spanish artist novels published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a portrait of the artist within the "culture bubble" that grew in the Transition and post-Transition years. Llamazares depicts an artist torn between an archaic, charismatic ideal of artistic activity and the desire to profit from Spanish society's renewed—if superficial—interest in culture in the post-Franco era. I explore the way the novel's four-part structure, in homage to Dante's *Inferno*, challenges two kinds of "radically individualistic" attitudes characteristic of "Cultura de la Transición" (represented by "Hell" and "Purgatory") through their juxtaposition with communal and relational interactions represented by "Limbo" and "Heaven." Llamazares suggests that if the contemporary artist can reconcile art with life, profiting materially from the "culture bubble" while retaining, and perhaps redefining, his artistic "authenticity."

In a 2012 article published in *El Diario*, author Rafael Reig humorously compares the "culture bubble" in Spain to the global financial one that burst in 2008. Just as the housing bubble grew as a result of both increased demand and exuberant, overzealous, and often avaricious speculation, the "culture bubble" in post-Franco Spain was driven by the public's desire for consumable culture, and the "speculators," in the form of editors, publishing houses, and critics, attempted to meet that demand by investing in riskier cultural products and producers, sometimes of dubious quality. The result was the creation of an illusion of demand that drove up their price, independent of an increase in the products' actual value. Reig satirically compares the "premios literarios" awarded to "locutores de la tele" to risky subprime mortgages, since those authors can rarely "pay back" in the form of consistently high-quality literary products the loans of cultural good faith extended to them. However, in his article, Reig refuses to fall into the polemicizing trap of placing blame exclusively on the "system" as a whole, but rather looks to contextualize these events and to consider the role of the artists themselves, not just as victims but as active agents in the bubble's growth and subsequent deflation.

Reig's inspiration comes from a rather unlikely source: the Roman poet Persius's *Satire I*. In this text, the stoic, born in the year 34, harshly critiques *other* poets for wanting fame and success, for following trends instead of innovating, and for their lack of political and social engagement. However, Reig contends that in his critique of the "others" in the *Satire*, Persius is actually engaging with and giving voice to two of his own contradictory desires: "[Persio] se desdobra para expresar sus dudas y sus temores. Se pide a los dos y así nos da un magnífico retrato psicológico de una burbuja vista desde dentro" (no pag). For Reig, both the ancient stoic and contemporary authors suffer from a tension that is difficult to resolve: namely, the desire to develop a charismatic artistic identity independent of public opinion and the opposing longing

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to take advantage of the public success that the “bubble” could afford them.¹ A nuanced and honest understanding of the culture bubble, especially as it grew in this particular post-dictatorial Spanish context, requires an exploration of three related elements: a *hunger* for culture among a public starved for it during the Franco era, the cultural industry’s response to that hunger, and finally, the ambivalent position of the artists themselves as they were offered, for the first time in many of their lives, the opportunity to profit materially and symbolically from their work in their own country.

Julio Llamazares’s *El cielo de Madrid* (2005) is a *Künstlerroman* narrated retrospectively in the first person that tells of a Spanish painter’s growth and development from inside that culture bubble as it grew and before it burst around the same time as the 2008 financial crisis.² Persius’s ancient *Satire* reveals the dual and contradictory desires of its author through the representation of two conflicting voices, but in *El cielo de Madrid*, those voices are condensed in the singular figure of Carlos, split between his younger self that was enamored with a romantically anti-capitalist and charismatic understanding of his artistic identity and his present self endowed with a more realistic and nuanced understanding of the artistic profession. *El cielo de Madrid* is a novel of memory, a retelling situated in the early twenty-first century of the protagonist Carlos’s artistic career in the 1980s and 1990s. In the face of increasing commercialization of the art world throughout the period narrated in the novel, the protagonist finds that to live embodying the charismatic myth of the artist is disingenuous at best, so the telling of his story represents a struggle to combat the dissolution of self provoked by the recognition that the myth \ on which he had based his identity is no longer viable.

In this essay, I explore the way the four-part structure of *El cielo de Madrid*— whose parts take their titles from Dante’s *Inferno*—depicts and challenges two kinds of “radical individualism” that Luis Moreno Caballud describes as characteristic of artistic production in the era of the so-called *Cultura de la Transición* (or *CT*), a cultural phenomenon contemporaneous with and partly responsible for the growth of the culture bubble (and a term to which I will return later) (*Cultures of Anyone*, 11). These different “individualisms,” which are represented by the two central sections of the text, “El Infierno” and “El Purgatorio,” stand out when compared with the communal or relational interactions in the two sections that bookend the novel, “El Limbo” and “El Cielo.” “El Infierno” takes as its target the hollow “culture of promotion” based on the “fame and name” paradigm characteristic of the *CT* (Moreno Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 13), while “El Purgatorio” challenges the concept of the modern “Ivory Tower” artist who can only find authenticity in isolation. The cumulative effects of these critiques would be less powerful without the contrast provided, first, by the naïve bohemian experience of Carlos and his group of artistic friends depicted idealistically in “El Limbo” and, second, by the new social space that Carlos carves out for himself as the father of a nuclear family in “El Cielo.” I posit that *El cielo de Madrid* can be read as a psychological portrait of the contemporary Spanish artist living within the “culture bubble” that grows in the Transition, torn between an archaic, charismatic notion of artistic activity and the desire to profit from Spanish society’s renewed—if superficial—interest in “culture” as a whole in the post-Franco era. Llamazares suggests through the novel’s brief con-

1 The notion of the “charismatic artist” comes from Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the cultural field, in which he speaks of the need to challenge the “glorification of ‘great individuals,’ unique creators irreducible to any condition of conditioning” (29). The charismatic myth of the artist can be described as the idea that artists are inherently extraordinary, destined for a different *kind* of life, carrying out their work “in a disinterested manner with a pure aesthetic vision as the only guiding light” (Røyseng, Mangset, and Spord Borgen 1).

2 Evy Varsamopoulou defines the *Künstlerroman* as the “narrative account of the formation, development, education [and] psychology of the artist as a *special* type of individual” (xi).

cluding section that if the artist of the Transition can be a critical consumer of the charismatic myth of the artist, a reconciliation of life and art is possible indeed.

El cielo de Madrid is one of a significant number of artist novels published in the 1990s and beyond in Spain, marking a resurgence of this genre that had fallen off during the Franco years after a boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ For centuries, authors have used the artist novel as a way to explore the tensions inherent in cultural work, but the cultural climate created in the years of the Transition began fundamentally to reshape the role of the artist in the “new” Spain and the proliferation of artist novels that runs parallel to it suggests the authors’ desires to explore the changing role of culture and artistic identity in the post-Franco years. This is seen in the artist novels named above, but also in novels that explore other facets of the field of cultural production: novels about art historians like Lourdes Ortiz’s *Las manos de Velázquez* (2008) and Eduardo Mendoza’s *Riña de gatos: Madrid 1936* (2010); novels about art dealers like Manuel Vicent’s *La novia de Matisse* (2000); and even novels about Spanish participation in contemporary international art exhibitions in Enrique Vila-Matas’s *Kassel no invita la lógica* (2014). *El cielo de Madrid* is unique among these novels, however, in its retrospective nature that allows for a reflexive evaluation of the career of an artist who accepted a new form of “compromise” with the State-sponsored cultural industry and benefitted (at least materially) from it. What is more, the conflicted painter protagonist in *El cielo de Madrid* can be read as a foil for the Spanish author’s experience in a changing literary world of the early twenty-first century.⁴

The rapid transformation and renewed vibrancy of the art scene in the 1980s and 1990s can be situated in the cultural climate that Guillem Martínez has termed the “*Cultura de la Transición*,” or simply “CT.” The CT originates from a symbiotic relationship developed between the Spanish intellectual and cultural establishment and the new socialist state in the early 1980s (15-16).⁵ Ignacio Echevarría understands the CT as a horizon of social and cultural possibility occasioned as the result of a dual move in which the politics of the Transition displaced history, and those politics, in turn, eventually were displaced by a deference to the “market” (36). In order to ensure the success of the political transition, it was agreed that the past should be left untouched and the slate cleared in a tacit “pacto de olvido” that refused to seek justice for the wrongs committed by the Franco regime in the name of moving forward. At the same time, in the seven short years between the dictator’s death and their electoral victory, the PSOE had begun charting what Carlos Prieto del Campo refers to as their “neoliberal assault,” having transformed from a grassroots political organization into a “an institutionally embedded and well-rewarded career structure for those espousing faintly progressive, liberal-capitalist views” (55). Leftist Spain’s shift towards a neoliberal model, and the artists’ and intellectuals’ full support of the State created the limits or horizons of possibility Martínez and Echevarría call the CT, limits that would not be challenged meaningfully until the financial crisis in 2008.

3 As early as 1983, Quim Monzó published his artist novel *Benzina*, and a wave of others followed. Some other examples of contemporary artist novels are Miguel Delibes’s *Señora de rojo sobre fondo gris* (1992), Ángeles Caso’s *El mundo visto desde el cielo* (1997), Almudena Grandes’s *Castillos de cartón* (2002), Clara Usón’s *Corazón de napalm* (2009), and Ricardo Menéndez Salmón’s *La luz es más antigua que el amor* (2010), to name a few.

4 In itself, this tension is neither new nor specific to *El cielo de Madrid*. A look at early twentieth-century artist novels like Emilia Pardo Bazán’s *La Quimera* (1905) or Vicente Blasco Ibáñez’s *La maja desnuda* (1906) reveals protagonists who must also reconcile the realities of material success in the art world of their day with a Romantic, mythified understanding of the artist’s identity. However, in both of these earlier texts, a duality is established in which the charismatic artistic identity always “wins out.”

5 Martínez explains that his work on the CT as a phenomenon grew out of the perceived new roles played by “el intelectual y la cultura, esos palabras” (13). It also served as a way to make sense of the disillusionment with and poor reception of many of the cultural products produced in Spain after 1975, despite the generalized optimism with which these projects had been undertaken after the dictator’s death (13).

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In this environment “culture” and the State’s alignment with it, became a way of signaling a clean break with the Franco era and a new incursion into a modern and cosmopolitan European community. As many middle-class Spaniards’ lives began to improve (something that already had begun in the last Franco years), they had more free time, more disposable income, and developed a greater appetite for “culture” broadly speaking, especially for novels. Cultural industries responded to this demand from the public for culture in a variety of ways, but as they expanded they faced growing charges of “consumerism,” a glaring indictment in the “economic world reversed” that is the cultural field. In the literary realm, as the largest publishing houses began to swallow up smaller ones in the 1980s and 1990s, their structural costs rose to the degree that they began to take fewer risks and were more likely to publish only those works that were guaranteed to sell (Martín Nogales 182). These guarantees were made in two important ways: the mass publication of “easy-reading” literature and direct promotion of authors’ *personalities*, sometimes even more than their products, that led to the creation of what Moreno Caballud identifies as a “‘fame and name’ paradigm” (*Cultures of Anyone*, 13). He notes that, as cultural industries consolidated, they used “proper nouns”—like the names of their best-selling authors—to create “a kind of cultural ‘star-system’ to stimulate sales” (13).

A parallel process, with even greater State involvement, was taking place in the world of visual arts in Spain at the same time. Jorge Luis Marzo and Tere Badia explain that the PSOE government continued to foment the same sort of “política promocional en detrimento a una política productiva” that the Franco regime had begun in the 1950s and 1960s with respect to the visual arts (4). Rather than invest resources in education and training of artists, the democratic governments of the 1980s and 1990s began to finance in the construction of museums and other cultural centers and events, in order to demonstrate their “espíritu ilustrado [que] intentaba acercar al ciudadano a las más recientes corrientes artísticas [...] sin asegurar una política educativa de base ni relaciones con la universidad” (Marzo and Badia 6). Impressively designed museum buildings like the IVAM in Valencia or the MACBA in Barcelona—conceived of as ways to draw tourists who would come for the architecture as much as for the art—sat nearly empty, as there were not enough Spanish artists producing work to fill them. The “hiperinflación cultural” produced in the realm of visual arts paralleled that produced by the literary one at the same time (Marzo and Badia 9). In *El cielo de Madrid*, the painter Carlos, finds himself at the center of marketing campaigns and promotional practices, and must reconcile this reality with the life he has imagined for himself as an artist. The majority of the novel’s plot is set in the 1980s, and depicts some of the consequences of the neoliberal shift under the PSOE and the culture bubble’s growth. Llamazares published the novel in 2005, in an era still defined by the CT, as evidenced by its ending that allows its protagonist to find a comfortable middle ground in the cultural industry, even though he decries important facets of it. In short, this novel criticizes elements of the art world defined by the CT, but the CT also provides the parameters that condition the novel’s own production. This can be observed in Llamazares’s reluctance to question the political or economic bases of the Transition itself that generated that art world’s growth.

I begin my analysis of Llamazares’s novel with a closer look at the first section of the text, “El Limbo,” which is important to Carlos’s reimagining of his artistic identity for several reasons, and ultimately leads to his critique of the “radical individualism” rampant in the era of the CT. This section of the text is unique in its temporal division, for even though it forms the earliest part of Carlos-narrator’s recollections and is oriented in the past, it is narrated as a memory of remembering. The section is a confluence of timelines: one night spent in the bar also called “El Limbo” in 1985 and flashbacks that sketch out the first thirty years of Carlos’s life, which largely

conform to the “charismatic” vision of artistic activity that has characterized artist novels for decades. It is important that the chapter is organized in this way because, even from his vantage point in 1985, Carlos looked back on his youth with the understanding that many of the dreams for his life and career were constructs with little basis in reality. The initial sense of nostalgia is derived from the loss of the comfort and safety that the charismatic myth of the artist once provided him and his friends while they lived in space of personal and professional indifferen-tiation (“Limbo”). This, in turn, leads him to understand that he is actually mourning the loss of a community united by its shared beliefs in “imagined” or mythified truths about the role of art and the artist that places him on the first threshold of radical individualism that he will critique in the second section, “El Infierno.”

The story that Carlos remembers about his own artistic trajectory that night in the bar fol-lows in miniature the plot of the traditional *Künstlerroman*, as he, in his youth, bears a close resemblance to the archetypal artist hero. He leaves his home and becomes an artist against his family’s wishes, and loses contact with them as he both struggles with and revels in the bohemi-an experience he creates for himself in Madrid. On the night in 1985 that serves as the temporal setting for “El Limbo,” Carlos has begun to experience the realization of some of his artistic dreams: a prestigious gallery has begun selling his work and his fame is growing. However, he recognizes painfully that accepting this new reality also means accepting the end of his Bohemi-an existence, marked in equal parts by precariousness and freedom, but also by a sense of com-munity among those who shared that experience. As Maurice Beebe notes in his seminal study on the artist novel, representations of the bohemian artistic experience depict it as “the most sociable of colonies” which “seems rooted in the romantic concept of art as experience” (77-78).⁶ This definition aligns with Carlos’s description of his youthful artistic rebellion, but it is narra-ted in the first chapter with two layers of temporal critical distance that suggest it is not rooted in reality. He remembers his arrival years earlier in Madrid and his connection with others who had come to the city seeking the same things, recalling that they all had “la maleta y el sueño auestas,” and he highlights the transitory nature of their gathering in their “buhardillas o en pisos de alquiler que cambiábamos cada poco en función de las circunstancias y de nuestras po-sibilidades, y pasábamos los días en una especie de larga fiesta” (28-29). The days he recalls were marked by a lack of commitment to anything but art and the raw experience of life, noting that he and his friends “anteponía[n] la vida y el arte a la política. Cuestión que provocaba no pocas ni pequeñas discusiones con los que habían hecho de ésta prácticamente una religión” (79).⁷ In every sense of the word, Carlos and his friends lived in limbo – economically, professionally, romantically, and even politically – as they revelled in a life lived for art and lived in the moment.

By 1985, the attitude that characterized Carlos and his friends’ enthusiastic celebration of art and freedom has dissipated. El Limbo, the bar, is nearly empty, populated sparsely by some of its most frequent regulars, the surly bartender and the tireless pianist, and Carlos sees them as “igual que los del Titanic, [esperando] el inminente naufragio” (50). On the one hand, this im-

6 For Beebe, three interrelated themes categorize most artist novels: the notion of the “divided self,” or the idea that the Artist and the Man are separable; the concept of the “Ivory Tower;” and the concept of the “Sacred Fount” (6-13). The division of the artist’s personality causes him to seek in turn the Ivory Tower—which “equates art with religion rather than experience” (13)—and the Sacred Fount—which “equates art with experience and assumes that the true artist is one who lives not less, but more fully and intensely than others” (13). Bohemia is the representation *per excellence* of the “Sacred Fount.”

7 This attitude is typical of the “new ‘moderns’ at the end of Francoism” that Moreno-Caballud describes (14). He notes that these intellectuals and cultural producers “would have disapproved of anything that smacked of collectivity, of aesthetics in service to a community, or even more generally, to ‘politics,’ and would identify these elements with the ‘backwardness’ that Francoism had imposed on aesthetic modernization” (14).

pending disaster comes from the recognition that the attitudes Carlos and his friends embodied are far from “innate” or “natural,” but rather postures consciously or unconsciously adopted in order to “play” the artist, something that has caused him to question not only his aptitude as an artist, but also the validity of art as profession. The sacrifices he made by leaving his home in Asturias were the things he thought he was supposed to do if he wanted to be a real artist, “con tal de poder vivir y pintar como yo quería: como un pintor de verdad” (67). The rejection of a stable romantic relationship with his ex-girlfriend Eva is motivated by these same desires to conform to certain notions of behaviour acceptable for an “authentic” artist. However, the critical distance offered by time and experience now leads to an explicit acknowledgement that this attitude was not authentic at all, but rather an enactment of the lifestyles lived by the artists they saw as models. Carlos declares that their rebellious attitude was actually:

un anarquismo teórico que bebía en las fuentes más radicales, las del romanticismo puro, pero que, en la mayoría de los casos, el mío, sin ir más lejos, se traducía simplemente en una actitud. Una actitud estudiada y adoptada muchas veces de propósito, pero que nosotros creíamos sincera todavía en aquel momento. (79)

Unlike the artist heroes of the classic *Künstlerroman* who are often depicted as living out the only life their “artistic disposition” would allow, moved by an unseen force of Art to act and create, Carlos admits that he and his friends actively adopted attitudes, aesthetics, and lifestyles borrowed from artists they admired in hopes of acquiring a similar position in the cultural field.

In short, by that night in El Limbo, reality has begun to permeate Carlos’s understanding and interpretation of his experience in a way that no longer allows for conspicuous self-delusion. The recognition of this reality is most clearly expressed in the image of the sky (el cielo de Madrid), which Llamazares invests in this text with the notion of success and happiness—artistic and otherwise. Llamazares himself has noted that the sky in the novel “simboliza los sueños y las ilusiones de Carlos y todos sus amigos” (Mahmoud and Llamazares 255). Carlos hesitates to leave as he looks around the empty bar that night, and he fixes his gaze on the ceiling, which is painted to look like a night sky: “negro en el fondo y grises las estrellas y la luna [...] [que] siempre estaba en menguante” (34). In contrast to the real, stormy sky outside, the artificial sky of the bar convinces him that he is protected and safe. Like the charismatic myth, it is comfortable and familiar, but it is a construct, an imitation of reality rather than reality itself.⁸ The Limbo—both the bar and the existential space marked by uncertain outcomes that Carlos inhabits—was comfortable because it was known. What is more, from that vantage point characterized by willful delusion, Carlos was able to imagine a future life as a painter conditioned by myth and imagination. The artificiality eventually becomes too much to bear, but until he truly finds his “cielo” in the final pages of the text, Carlos longs to return to this place and to this phase of his life where he felt like part of a larger collective, bound together under an artificial sky by their common beliefs in artistic exceptionalism and an antagonistic relationship towards the culture industry.

In the second section of *El cielo de Madrid*, set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Carlos has become a rising star painter and he has left behind many of the artistic dreams of his youth, but this success ultimately leads him to criticize the very system from which he benefits. He understands the difference between his former and current selves—between the Carlos of Limbo and the Carlos in Hell—rooted in a question of authenticity: “Durante años, yo había vivido en el

⁸ This assumption of reality is expressed pictorially in the strange leaves that fill Carlos’s paintings, those “hojas extrañas que pintaba últimamente sin saber por qué lo hacía, pero que se me imponía siempre” (38), which he later acknowledges represent “la realidad que se imponía siempre” (61).

limbo, en el paraíso de la juventud, y ahora, de pronto, me veía inmerso en un mundo nuevo en el que todo era muy distinto. Al contrario que en el limbo, donde nada era real, en la nueva vida que comenzaba, todo lo era” (108-09). As Paul Julian Smith explains, after the PSOE’s electoral victory in 1982, the Spanish art scene changed wildly. New museums and galleries opened their doors as Spain opened itself up again after years of repression and there was “feverish coverage of new Spanish artists in the press” (67). This coverage and the overt marketing of artists and their work “gave rise to charges of consumerism,” threatening the image of the artist as a disinterested cultural producer (67). Carlos experiences many of these changes firsthand—his career takes off in large part because of “un reportaje que publicó *El País* [titulado] ‘La nueva pintura española’” and an impressive showing of his work at the Madrid art fair ARCO in 1991 (127). As a result of these successes, Carlos is forced to negotiate a new identity in an art world that, in his country, has not been so ripe with possibility in decades. The reality of this new life as Llamazares depicts it, situated squarely within the burgeoning cultural industry (and growing culture bubble) in Transition-era Spain, is a hollow promotional system based on a marketing of personality that takes precedence over artistic quality. It is also marked by a “hyperinflation of culture,” to use Jorge Luis Marzo’s term, centered around the integration and normalization of art and culture through the building and promoting of new museums and other exhibition spaces that did not correspond to “la enorme cantidad de prácticas socio-artísticas que se producen en las diferentes comunidades del estado” (6-7). In short, it is depicted as a cultural world that devalues the artistic community that Carlos and his friends were able to create in Limbo in order to favor a more monolithic artistic world that sells the illusion of novelty.

It is no surprise then that Carlos, still steeped as he is in a charismatic understanding of artistic identity, describes this world that brings him his most significant economic success as “Hell.” The “hell” of being a professional artist derives from the “contamination” of Carlos’s work by money, but perhaps more importantly from a loss of community that has been replaced by the cultivation and promotion of individuality for profit.⁹ Carlos is surrounded by people—his dealers, other “star” artists at his gallery, the press, fans, and other hangers-on—but he is unable to recover the sense of belonging that he found in the undifferentiated space of Limbo. At this juncture, art and the life he lived before becoming successful cannot mix, as he now inhabits “círculos comunicados entre ellos pero aislados de la vida de la gente en general” (138-39). The closeness of the relationships even with his creative friends has been replaced by contact with the other most “important” painters at his gallery who are valued “no sólo porque vendían [...] sino por su personalidad” (119). The other painters—“un valenciano arrogante y egocéntrico” and “un andaluz cuyo único interés, aparte de sus modelos y de sus extravagancias (solía vestir de mujer), consistía en que pintaba los cuadros con anilinas”—exemplify the “*Superpollocks* españoles” of the 1980s and 90s whom Marzo describes, praised by critics for their personalities rather than for their work (192).¹⁰ Carlos’s dealer, Álvaro, continually stresses to Carlos the need to “cambiar de imagen,” and the painter acquiesces, if for no other reason than the fact that his “radicalidad extrema no había llegado aún al punto de faltarle respeto [a Álvaro]” (119). The problem with these charismatic descriptions used by the dealers in the novel (derived from those critics used in the real world) is, as Marzo suggests, that they make no reference to the

9 As Bourdieu explains, the charismatic artist’s recognition must always be postponed to the future as he or she rejects short-term fame and economic profits in order to gather symbolic capital in its place, which ultimately allows the artist “a means of deriving profits from disinterestedness” in the long run (75).

10 The words critics used to describe these painters affirms Marzo’s observation: “Las palabras que más utilizan esta serie de críticos son ‘fuerza específica,’ ‘personalidad afirmada,’ ‘disponibilidad creativa total,’ ‘leyenda viva,’ ‘modernidad reinventada,’ ‘personajes agitados’” (192).

network in which these individuals with dynamic personalities are given the space, support, and opportunity to work: “ni una alusión a la creación de contextos sociales de trabajo, a la formación de estructuras culturales o a la necesidad de considerar programas pedagógicos o laborales en el mundo artístico [...] Sólo cuenta el artista ensimismado” (192). Moreno Caballud describes just such a negation of the context in which artistic “individuality” such as this rose up as characteristic of the CT, noting that the success of individual artists “que consiguen ‘poner su nombre’” is the result of “procesos culturales necesariamente colectivos” (“Cuando cualquiera,” 20). Though they obviously form part of a network of cultural producers, they are celebrated as exceptional singularities. Carlos’s frustration with this system serves as the basis for Llamazares’s implicit criticism of the system.

However, even Carlos recognizes the ambivalence of his position in *El Infierno*, and it is here that the voice from within the culture bubble speaks. Carlos *wants* to be the independent painter he was in limbo, unconcerned with his public and even more unconcerned with the opinion of dealers and critics, but he is not, and the description of his experience in “Hell” highlights the incongruity. The narrator-Carlos speaking in the present cannot deny the real benefits he experienced as a result of his success that his dealers have helped him achieve: “Sabía que detrás de mí había gente esperando a que acabara cada uno de mis cuadros y dibujos [...] y eso, [...] me confortaba y me daba ánimos (por primera vez también sabía que no tendría que esperar a que la gente pudiera ver lo que hacía” (159). He sees the realization of his artistic ambitions as a “pacto con el diablo” (135) that has left him richer and more desirable (professionally as well as sexually), but his own impossible desire to return to the innocence of Limbo haunts him continually: “¿Cómo explicarles a los demás [...] que estabas harto de todo aquello y lo que tú querías era regresar al limbo ahora que, según todos, habías alcanzado el cielo?” (155). When he recognizes that the community of Limbo has been replaced by the hollow promotional system and degraded individualism of the cultural industry, Carlos flees to take refuge in yet another “myth” of even more radical individualism in what he deems “Purgatory.”

Carlos searches for the remedy for both his disillusionment with the culture industry and the loss of his Bohemian community in near-total isolation. He hopes that a retreat from the world, which takes shape for him in a rented chalet in the remote town of Miraflores in the *sier-ra* outside of Madrid, will allow him to recover the sense of authenticity that he had in Limbo. However, his attempted escape from the art world’s physical manifestations—his dealers, the gallery, the bourgeois buyers of his work, the journalists who hound him—does not have the effect he intends. For one thing, he finds that his ties with the art world cannot be fully severed, as he continues to depend on economic remittances from the sales of his work in the city, and his disappearance actually intensifies his commidifiable personality, leaving him with “un aureola de misterio que derivaba precisamente de [su] silencio” (211). His embrace of silence and solitude in Miraflores—which in the end is not “una vuelta al Limbo como creí [...] sino un duro purgatorio personal” (208)—leads to the critique of a second kind of radical individualism that, in effect, informs the one critiqued in “El Infierno.”¹¹ As Moreno Caballud has observed, borrowing terminology from Reinaldo Laddaga, the artists who came of age in the CT are conditioned by the “modern aesthetic,” which creates its basis for value on an individual artist’s capacity to produce aesthetic material that distances itself from “significados cotidianos” and presents itself as “una

11 As in Llamazares’s other rural novels, like *Luna de lobos* or *La lluvia amarilla*, the natural world is depicted in “El Purgatorio” as at once beautiful and inhospitable. The life Carlos builds for himself in Miraflores bears striking resemblances to that of Andrés in *La lluvia amarilla*. While Andrés, “paga con la muerte en soledad el apego al pasado y a la tierra,” as Silvia Cárcamo has noted, Carlos is able to let go (no pag).

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interrupción de lo común para que pueda aparecer lo ‘singular’” (“Cuando cualquiera,” 19). This can only be achieved through a physical distancing from the world—“un silencio y una soledad que requieren apartarse del flujo colectivo de significados en el que vivimos habitualmente” (“Cuando cualquiera,” 20).¹² Only in isolation will the artist be able to tap into that “fragmento sensible” that will reveal truths about him or herself and the world. Moreno Caballud goes on to note that the “degraded individualism” observable in the “fame-and-name paradigm” discussed above is often exacerbated by the artists themselves who exalted that “individualism latent in the tradition of modernity, to the detriment of its civic potential” (*Cultures of Anyone*, 14).

It actually takes this quasi-monastic retreat from the world for Carlos to realize not only that he needs others, but that his art cannot be complete without them on a material and spiritual level. As the isolation and solitude begin to weigh on him, Carlos laments his “triste destino, [...] siempre a medias entre el cielo y el infierno, entre la libertad y la necesidad de amor, entre la soledad y la búsqueda del éxito” (242). In the purgatory of Miraflores, Carlos must learn to accept his humanity, his need for contact with others, and his art’s dependence on others in the network of cultural production. Even though he believes that “lo único que al artista le debe interesar es su trabajo, y que la realización de éste es su verdadero éxito,” he has also learned that his work cannot exist in a vacuum, as he has attempted in Miraflores (243). The radical isolation and individualism he has learned to desire is proven to be woefully hollow. It is only when he tries to reject it entirely that Carlos realizes that he not only needs, but *wants* certain benefits derived from the culture bubble in which he is enmeshed, and this becomes increasingly clear in the novel’s final short section in which the protagonist finally finds his “cielo.”

Carlos’s disenchantment with the art world—a world which coexists uncomfortably with the charismatic myth—leads him to pursue a more authentic mode of being and creating, but he does not find it in the forests of Miraflores. What he does find there, however, leads him to seek fulfillment in a place unexpected for an artist hero in the traditional *Künstlerroman*: in family and domestic life. In the mere four pages that compose the novel’s final section, the reader meets the narrator-Carlos who writes the text we read for his newborn son. Upon his return from Miraflores, Carlos unexpectedly meets the woman who will become the mother of his child and finds what he did not know he had been searching for. When asked in an interview why he dedicated so few pages in the text to Carlos’s *cielo*, especially in light of the novel’s title, Llamazares responded:

Dedicar otras ochenta páginas a contar que regresa a Madrid y que vuelve a encontrarse con sus amigos ya no tiene interés; para mí Carlos había vuelto purificado por la soledad, sobre todo. Al encontrarse consigo mismo, había aprendido que el cielo no está en las grandes ilusiones y en el éxito, sino en encontrar un lugar propio en el mundo, tener una persona que te quiera, llevar una vida más o menos agradable. (Mahmoud and Llamazares 257)

In short, Carlos’s happiness is rooted in a reconciliation of art with life, something only achievable once the artistic profession has been divested of its mythic properties and their attendant concepts of individuality and exceptionalism. He still nominally rejects the culture industry, but continues to benefit economically, now in the early 2000s, from the growth of the culture bubble. It is a kind of “selling out” that he can justify as he steps out of one mythic, masculine role—that of charismatic Artist—and into another—that of Father, who now has the responsi-

¹² This idea exemplifies Beebe’s concept of the “Ivory Tower” artist, who “exalts art above life and insists that the artist can make use of life only if he stands aloof” (13).

bility to provide materially for his child. Suddenly, despite his profession, he is not so different from the ‘average’ man and his life, now characterized by a stable domestic partnership, begins to resemble that bourgeois life the artist-hero of literature traditionally has disdained.

What is more, reaching *el cielo* allows Carlos to relent in his quest to freeze time in “Limbo,” or to recapture it once it had slipped from his grasp in “Hell” and “Purgatory.” Rather, once he has found his personal *cielo*, which is “a la vez el infierno, el limbo, y el purgatorio, aunque haya tardado mucho en saberlo”, he accepts it as past, and determines to immortalize it—and himself—through words his child, whom he sees in some ways as his greatest “creation,” will preserve as the new bearer of the story (254). In Limbo, Carlos fears embracing reality because he anticipates that, when his life is no longer cloaked in the myth that gave it meaning, it will appear essentially meaningless, wasted or inconsequential. He expresses this fear through an image of his own father as a young boy, waiting anxiously for a soda water that his father had promised to buy him at a carnival. Once his grandfather handed his father the much anticipated treat, ‘entre la fuerza de la gaseosa y la emoción del momento, que tanto había esperado, se le fue toda por el suelo sin que le hubiese dado tiempo de probarla’ (59). Carlos is terrified that his own life will take much the same turn and be ‘derramada por el suelo y sin sentido y, lo que es mucho peor, sin la posibilidad de recuperarla’ (63). However, as he narrates his life to his infant son, Carlos gathers the parts of the story, to preserve and immortalize it. As Eva París Huesca observes, his past is composed of “una memoria subjetiva y fragmentada que sólo cobra sentido al ser escrita” and which, in the telling, serves as “la única vía contra la amnesia” (140-41).

París-Huesca interprets the end of *El cielo de Madrid* as a representation of the failure of the Transition’s ideals and an embrace of both emotional and economic stability that marks Spain’s capitalist society of the post-Franco era. Her disappointment with Llamazares’s choice to conclude this way is thinly veiled, as she notes that such an ending for Carlos makes impossible “cualquier posibilidad de que los valores que proyectaron en la Transición puedan triunfar en esta sociedad capitalista” (140). It is worth pointing out, however, that Carlos and his friends who got their start in the turbulent *Movida* years, never profess to represent the political ideals held by the older progressives who spearheaded the Transition to democracy. Politics aside, in the context of the artist novel, Carlos represents a contemporary variation on the artist protagonist, one for whom the dichotomy of the artistic soul is not soothed through creation alone as the charismatic myth would have him believe, but through both his artistic profession—embraced as a profession—and love for his partner and his child. It is significant to point out that though he rejects the materialistically individualist lifestyle of the culture industry that he lives in “El Infierno,” he does not reject the money he has made from it, which he uses to provide for his family and live comfortably. That the novel resolves in this still-individualistic way—one that allows for a personal “happy ending” for Carlos, but not for the recuperation of any sense of collective artistic identity of which he has been dreaming throughout the entire novel—reveals the effects of the CT on Llamazares and his work, even as he critiques it.¹³

In short, *El cielo de Madrid* represents a paradigm shift in the Spanish artist novel at the turn of the twenty-first century that cannot be divorced from the real changes experienced by artists and authors alike in the years of the transition to democracy and beyond. The renegotiation of artistic identities in this new cultural climate helps to explain the surge in artist novels in this pe-

13 Carlos (and, it could be ventured to say, Llamazares himself) never returns to any kind of artistic community or collective, and continues to profit from what Moreno-Caballud calls the “concepción jerárquica individualista de la producción cultural” and its accompanying “cadena de valor” (in this case, the artist, the dealer, the gallery owner, etc.) (14). For more on the way that younger artists are beginning to challenge the systems and processes of the CT, see Moreno Caballud (2014).

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riod, but Carlos's story that Llamazares tells here explores this from within the culture bubble in a very *human* way, one that forgives his "transgressive" desires and frees him from the need to be like Persius, critical of those who succeed with a wider audience. It is, at the same time, one that does not discount the artist's desire for some modicum of economic stability and even renown, even as it rejects certain idealized "radical individualisms," like the "fame and name" paradigm of the cultural industry and the artist's monastic retreat from the "real" world. Llamazares has called *El cielo de Madrid* "una novela contra el éxito," but it appears that it is really a novel that rejects a particular type of individualistic success (both superficial celebrity and the charismatic notion of success in isolation) while redefining and embracing another based on interactions with others (Rizzi, no pag). While it is true that Carlos does not wholeheartedly embrace the mercantile and marketing aspect of the art world, he also does not believe that being an artist means rejecting stability, love, family, and "normalcy." If the novel chronicles what Andrea Rizzi calls "una búsqueda de felicidad de una generación," then that generation is no longer one that believes the artist must be a tragic hero, condemned to suffer (no pag). The Spanish visual artist Ceesepe asserted in 1981, "el oficio [del artista] ya no conlleva estar jodido" (qtd. in Lechado, 206), and Llamazares makes clear that through the life of his protagonist, that he is inclined to agree.

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