

## Charting the Interzone: A Conference



On Thursday, January 20, 2011, something quite new happened: the members of a new EU-funded type of international doctoral school, professors, PhD students, and high-ranking members of the University of Bergamo who hosted this event met in order to discuss for a whole day, in a manner that would be both structured by the papers to be read and free to any and all ideas that might come to the fore, what it is we would find if we began to chart the Interzone.

In placing itself under the umbrella term of the “Interzone”, the new doctoral school chose term that was, and continues to be, entirely open to inscription and re-inscription in that while it suggests a number of immediate associations it is a term that has not as yet been codified and canonized for critical uses. At the same time, “Interzone” is a word that does tend to generate uses which show a noticeable consistency in explicit and implied meanings. To take just one example: roughly half-way through Roberto Bolaño’s gigantic, 1000-page novel *2666*, we encounter in a barely fictionalized depiction of the border region between Mexico and the USA a rather curious factory, the “maquiladora Interzone-Berny”.<sup>1</sup> At this point, we are not only almost mid-way through a long and fascinating reading experience, but we also find ourselves in the dark centre of the novel, Bolaño’s exploration of the “feminicidios”, the ongoing killing of by now probably thousands of women in the region of the city of Juárez, many of them workers in the maquiladoras of the region, those assembly lines where international capitalism finds some of its cheapest and least regulated working conditions. We have made it into the heart of the novel and as such into an Interzone of massive dimensions. A place where the rule of law, both criminal and economic, seems at least partially suspended, where the interests of various international economies meet, where the narrator can only adopt the language of stunned reportage in order to chart the strangeness of this place, and where the characters seem bewildered and helpless in the face of the inscrutable and at the same time darkly systemic forces they have been exposed to. A late capitalist wilderness of factories and highways, slums and nightspots, the desert itself and the hum of productivity assembled in uneasy alliance, where older and newer layers and traditions of human sociality intersect and merge to generate a rhythm in which it is the dispassionately catalogued dead women whose sufferings and violations structure the narrative and embody better than anything else the homicidal energies unleashed in this place. The victim of the day is Penélope Mendés Becerra, employee at the maquiladora Interzone-Berny.

Why Bolaño should have chosen Berny as one part of the name of the multinational concern at work here remains open to speculation. But there is no doubt that “Interzone” captures perfectly the spirit of the region which is being described here: spatially, economically, socially, psychologically, spiritually, and mentally. In calling Penélope’s workplace “Interzone”, Bolaño has recourse to no ordinary piece of vocabulary but a very suggestive one capable of evoking, even intuiting the very essence of the place he has focused his attention on, a place which is brought to us as nothing less than a metaphor for our own troubled and violent historical moment. In a way, one might also say that the word has finally come home, for William Burroughs, an American who took much of his artistic inspiration from his own uneasy travels around the world, specifically in South America and even more specifically in Mexico, may be credited with the original coinage of the term. Since then it has continued to

circulate and has finally found its way back to Mexico, to the complicated web of its most volatile border region. Interzone, here, seems a term located at the very nexus of intersecting lines of global interests, passions, energies and violent eruption.

It was the task of the first Interzones Workshop to fathom the possible reach and circumference of this suggestive term.

Professor Anil Bhatti from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, had the difficult task in his key-note address to provide for us a frame of relevant points of reference and discuss some of the key concerns and questions that would keep the assembled academics busy during the next day, interacting in interesting ways with the more specialized papers and the general contributions from the floor that would make up the debate. Anil Bhatti's main approach was the sounding out of the "Interzone" as a spatial metaphor designed to foreground mechanisms of exchange, fusion, and categorial shifting, whether it be in the question of how such spaces are differentiated and maintained, what may be the special quality of interactions in the interzone, and – maybe the most stimulating aspect of his talk – what is required on the part of scholarly debate so that the "interzone" may emerge and come into view. Here, the differentiation between "weak" and "strong" categories and the theories founded on them proved particularly inspirational because a "theory of the interzone" as the speakers were striving to develop it would of necessity have to be a theory working towards the "weak": academically as rigorous as it needed to be but nonetheless a theory what would facilitate categorial complexity and drift rather than the safety of "strong" categorial claims.

The papers presented on the following day were set up in a way that would allow us to investigate the Interzone from various different and pertinent angles. All contributions focused on the spatiality of the term and sought to explore its qualities as a spatial concept. In this, it quickly became clear that speaking about the "Interzone" was a new way of returning to very basic questions of the mechanisms by which spatial, conceptual, social or mental spaces are defined and delimited, and what would be the special qualities to be expected in "interzonal" conditions, whether they be thought in relation to other current terms (Franchi), as special conditions of demarcation (Pollock, Kimmich), as communication environments (Borras) or as specific mind-spaces (Hotz-Davies). We offer the papers here in the linguistic, stylistic, disciplinary and methodological variety in which they were delivered, explorative essays that were designed to stimulate debate in an emerging project of the Interzone. One exception is the article by Ingrid Hotz-Davies, who delivered her paper from notes and has taken the chance of their transfer into essay format in order to slightly elaborate the argument.

**1** Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009): 402.

## List of Contributions:

Laura **Borras** (University of Barcelona):

***The Internet as an Interzone*** (here link to Laura's paper).....1-8

Franca **Franchi** (University of Bergamo):

***Interzone comme h er otopie entre m moire et projet*** (here link to Franca's paper, ).....9-17 (translation, 18-27)

Ingrid **Hotz-Davies** ( University of T bingen):

***The "Interzone" as a Place of the Mind***(here link to Ingrid's paper)...28-41

Dorothee **Kimmich** ( University of T bingen):

***"Interzones"- Spaces of a Fuzzy Cultural Logic*** (here link to Dorothee's paper)  
.....42-49

Jonathan **Pollock** ( University of Perpignan): ***Le littoral, en tant qu'interzone*** (here link to Jonathan's paper).....50-58