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Authors	Garrido Castellano, Carlos
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Ryder Meets Bourriaud. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and the Contradictions of "Creative Capitalism"

Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995) has been interpreted from multiple perspectives, with some critics highlighting the psychoanalytical and oneiric side of the novel while others focusing on the spatial and social background of the novel. Engaging with these approaches without dismissing any of them, in this article I argue that Ishiguro's fourth novel is eloquent of the main shifts in 1990s aesthetics and cultural production. More specifically, in Ryder, the main character of *The Unconsoled*, it is possible to identify a relational creative, an artist investing in dialogical exchange and social collaboration as creative strategies. From this perspective, I relate *The Unconsoled* with the emergence of relational aesthetics and the so-called "social turn" in contemporary art. At the same time, however, I identify in *The Unconsoled* an interest for questioning the principles of contemporary collaborative artistic practices, defining consolation and social engagement as the complex yet unavoidable horizon of contemporary cultural production.

Keywords: Collaborative Aesthetics; Cultural Production; Ishiguro, Kazuo; Relational Art; Welfare State [Literary Story of]; Visual Arts.

Word Count: 8359

Ryder Meets Bourriaud. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and the Contradictions of "Creative Capitalism"

Introduction

In an interview given in 1995, the year his fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, was published, Kazuo Ishiguro explained why Ryder, the main character in the story, plays in the general conceptualization of the narrative:

> Here, although he's a musician, music doesn't function in a realistic way. It doesn't play the role in this world that it plays in the real world. Music seems to have taken the role of politics: the question of which kinds of musicians should be celebrated and which demoted is rather like who should be prime minister or president. So *yes*, he's a musician, and he's not a musician. (Jaggi 168)

The first critical reviews interpreting *The Unconsoled* read it as a major break with the realistic tone of Ishiguro's previous writing and stressed the psychoanalytic and dream-like tone of the novel[1]. The writer himself reinforced that interpretation by highlighting that he needed to experiment with a less controlled creative process (Jaggi 162). It is somehow telling that, after finishing *The remains of the day*, Ishiguro found the degree of complexity he was looking for by approaching the ever-shifting field of contemporary creativity. In fact, it could be possible to call into question Ishiguro's own words when he argues that *The Unconsoled* is not realistic because (among other reasons) music works in the novel as a substitute of politics. Ishiguro's ambivalent depiction of Ryder ("he's a musician, and he's not a musician") and his characterization of *The Unconsoled* as "something pretty strange and weird" (Iyer) allude to something more than to a deliberated literary strategy. It is in this sense that Matthew Beedham argues that those who simply categorize *The Unconsoled* as dreamlike ultimately fail to grasp the complex articulation between reality and unreality at play in it. "The novel", he adds, "requires the reader to accept a different kind of logic, a different kind of realism." (113)

By locating that "different kind of realism" in the field of cultural production, I believe that *The Unconsoled* x-rays a decisive period in the history of the aesthecization of politics that Martin Jay so aptly described already in 1992 (41-61). It would simultaneously stand as a precocious diagnosis of the socially transformative value of cultural production, as a prophetic musing on the appropriation of cultural creativity by capitalism in the age of European cultural capitals and the supposed end of history that the 1990s were, and finally as a forensic take on the distress and disorientation deriving from the flexibilization of cultural creativity and human interrelations.

The Unconsoled has been rightfully related to the consolidation of memory and trauma studies within the 1990s, was somehow reflected in the Freudian and Kafkaesque analysis the novel received (see, for example, Mead 2014; Teo 2014; Coughlan 2016). The novel has also been read in line with Ishiguro's previous interest in visual arts and aesthetics, its narrative compared with Daliesque Surrealism,

[1] A detailed analysis of *The Unconsoled*'s early critical reception can be found in Beedham (103-105).

Picasso's cubism, and its spatial politics with Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical urban settings (see Tomkinson 59-69, Brandabur 69-79, Mathews 77-87). Being equally relevant to understand the novel, the connection it bears with broader transformations undergoing at the heart of contemporary creativity around the same period, and more specifically with the participative turn in contemporary aesthetics, has not been explored with similar attention[2]. As *The Unconsoled* was first published when relational and collaborative creative practices became ubiquitous and art was somehow losing its autonomy in favor of a deeper entanglement with "real life", an interpretation attentive to these transformations seems equally plausible. Exploring this possibility is the main objective of this article.

The Unconsoled and Neoliberalism's "Creative Turn"

Out of Kazuo Ishiguro's five published novels, *The Unconsoled* undoubtedly stands as the most complex and convoluted one. Going through the more than 600 pages composing the book, it is hard for the reader to lose the sense of dizziness that surrounds the itinerary of Ryder, a world famous piano player and the novel's enigmatic main character, across the unnamed Central European city that serves as scenario for *The Unconsoled.* In fact, the novel can be easily described as a rumination on professionalism and nomadism, or more exactly on the traumatic ways in which the confluence of both might affect interpersonal relations. Dislocated to the point of not knowing if the city where he is playing at is indeed *his* own city, Ryder wonders around since his arrival, helping strangers in small tasks and waiting for a final performance that will never take place, just to jump into another plane that will take him to the next scenario afterwards.

Dealing with this complexity, in one of the most "socially driven" interpretations of *The Unconsoled* thus far Bruce Robbins establishes a parallel between cosmopolitanism and professionalism as a way of addressing Ryder and the role music plays in the novel. For Robbins, *The Unconsoled* voices a critical warn against overproduction and the professionalization of humanitarianism in globalized times. Under his view, Ryder suffers and feels confused because he is incapable of coping with "a stretching of the human sensibility to accommodate the unaccustomed rhythms and ranges of sympathy that are demanded of us all in the oft-described age of global flows." (435) It is from this perspective that Robbins challenges the interpretation of those critics that characterize *The Unconsoled* as lacking sociohistorical "determinants" (see, for example, Chaudhury 30-31). Instead, he interprets the lack of time affecting Ryder and all the characters in the novel as an ideological construct rather than as a purely temporal and absolute need: "the harriedness in *The Unconsoled* could also be seen as a temporal metaphor representing a dilemma that is not itself wholly or even primarily temporal: the dilemma of conflicting and uncertain demands for sympathy and solidarity." (436)

Sympathy and solidarity becoming uncertain: is not this a perfect way of describing the fall of the Welfare State, the degradation of the public sphere and the emotional landscape associated to late twentieth century cultural capitalism? Would not

[2] An important exception is Brian Shaffer (91), who understands *The Unconsoled* as "concern[ed with] the problematic position of the artist in society."

this scenario also fit a time when the weight of artistic specialization and "talent" become less relevant than social networking and entrepreneurial skills? It is symptomatic that Robbins (435) identifies Ryder as "a figure for one phase in the long-term project of refashioning ethics to suit our transnational condition."

Ultimately, we could add, this refashioning has to do with redefining civility and producing a "reinvention of the public" in the turbulent times when capitalism borrowed the flexibility and labor structure of creative industries to serve its own interests. Under this view, Ryder would personify the contradictions of what Luc Boltanksi and Eve Chiapello deemed the new spirit of capitalism, including the introduction of management discourse within cultural production and the adoption of creative flexibility in economic management, the proliferation of a transnational creative class and the use of this class in processes of urban gentrification and "artwashing." (see especially 57-103; see also Pasquinelli 2008). For cultural workers (and more specifically artists) were not only good examples of the crucial transformations related to the flexibilization of labor in late 20th century capitalism; one could say that they were at the forefront of this process, providing the model that broader socioeconomic transformations followed by the book.

If we accept this hypothesis, the fact of Ryder being a pianist acquires a new dimension. The history of Ryder, the world-famous pianist visiting a city that may or may not be his and whose destiny is pending on his performance, then, could be far more realistic than what the psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel (and Ishiguro's own comment on the ambivalent role of music in it) suggested. Instead, as Emily Horton points out, the criticism of cosmopolitanism at play in *The Unconsoled* would be grounded on, and in fact a product of, the evolution of "European *cultural* administration." (191, my emphasis) In such case, Ryder's sense of loss would have to do not only with personal traumas but rather with his incapacity and/or willingness to adjust to a phase in which cultural creativity became the ordinary coin of flexible capitalism. Similarly, the lack of cultural specificity that many critics identified in the novel (see, for example, Chaudhury, Menand or Passano) would appear to Horton more as a strategic resource mobilized to address the tropes of the creativity-driven, "homogeneising and claustrophobic present of global late capitalism." (193)

A great deal of the dreamlike structure of *The Unconsoled* has to do with the disproportion between Ryder's sense of dislocation and the city's expectations towards his persona. It is because everyone expects everything from Ryder than his sense of being loss (and his indifference to that disorientation) remains all the more paradoxical. If we agree in this, one is tempted to say that Ryder as a character is not as oneiric as many critics of the novel had him to be, and that he stands as a perfect example of the transformations and the divisions of labor that cultural creativity underwent by the end of the 20th century. If that is the case, we will be facing here a more complicated relation between creativity and politics, one far more nuanced than that of music replacing politics. it might be, after all, that the relation between music and politics in the novel becomes a much complex one. Ryder's disorientation would act in this case as a preamble announcing many of the contradictions surrounding cultural capitalism in our present.

In Ryder, it is easy to agree with Robbins, it is possible to identify the hasted transnational worker that epitomized globalization during the 1990. His figure would also evoke the transient and convoluted existence of someone who "seems both within and without his element." (Robbins 68) As Cynthia Wong (69) points out, "the complexity of [Ishiguro's] fourth novel is in proportion to the deepening of crises that affect contemporary people whose status grows more nomadic the greater their duties and obligations to matters other than the self." However, there is more. Ryder is not just busy and dislocated in the way a globalized businessman could be. He is a creative (more exactly, a creative that doesn't create anything.) In the novel, Ryder spends the time before the great event of the Thursday by helping other people and caressing for the needs of each member of the unnamed community in whose city *The Unconsoled* takes place. It is because those favors take all his time that he ends up not performing ultimately. His creative abilities are, then, repurposed as social work, as interpersonal mediation. Despite ending up not fulfilling his main objective in the novel, Ryder's superior capacity to overcome the crisis the unnamed city of the novel is going through is associated to his artistic expertise. So it might be that Ryder's profession is not accessory after all.

Ryder's recognition and position of privilege in the community derive from his virtuoso talent to play the piano. His activity in the novel, nevertheless, includes everything but playing that instrument. Indeed, Ryder's creative genius is put to the service of fulfilling the inexhaustible demands of his fellow citizens. His condition of world-class pianist, which we can imagine to result from the combination of patient training and inborn talent, does not have anything to do with the myriad of small tasks he is dragged to do. These range from joining the porter Gustav in local dance spectacles to helping him in reconciling with her daughter and could-be Ryder's wife, from attending uncountable civic meetings to popping up in a funeral, from mediating in conversations on music to cheer Stephan and Brodsky. There is hardly any character in *The Unconsoled* who does not relate to Ryder in such kind of way. All these tasks would fall outside the scope of any renowned musician (or of any other creative genius for that matter.) At the same time, however, the same tasks will be all too familiar for any creator immersed in participatory creativity.

Ryder Meets Bourriaud

In *The Unconsoled* we find a loud group of people playing cards in a cinema while watching *2001 Space Oddisey;* Ryder's family car lying in front of a gallery space; pianos and studios placed in the most unexpected locations; international musicians popping up at a funeral and interacting with the grievers; a peephole at the top of the city's main cultural venue. At first it would be easy to identify those scenarios as being eloquent of the uncanny, dreamlike tone of the novel. Under this interpretation, those would be disruptive acts challenging the normality of scripted, supposedly "normal" cultural acts. However, a second glance would reveal another possibility: for any gallery-goer in the 1990s, and more specifically for anyone familiarized with relational and participatory aesthetics, they would appear perfectly ordinary, even predictable.

Following these leads, a good model to understand *The Unconsoled* lies in exploring how relational skills became a central part of contemporary aesthetics by the time the novel was written. When the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term "Relational Aesthetics" in 1998, a large number of artistic practices based on dialogical and cooperative skills was already undergoing. For Bourriaud (43), "the artwork of the

1990s turns the beholder into a neighbor, a direct interlocutor." He provides two explanations for this phenomenon: the first alludes to the omnipresence of relationality within the globalized arena of human interrelations in that decade. Bourriaud (43) relates the second to a return of 1970s "'poor' and experimental" aesthetics. Central to both phenomena is the idea of artistic relations taking place within a space that constitutes a (partial) relapse from the very much commoditized fields of mass communication and mass consumerism. Hence the idea of relational art as a laboratory of alternative, improved forms of conviviality: "These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments." (45) And because "the space of current relations is thus the space most severely affected by general reification" (9) the retreatment into the secured space of the art institution provides Bourriaud a much-needed experimental platform. In this context, the space of the art gallery and the relational artwork produced within it are presented as *social interstices* (16) within which new "'life possibilities' appear to be possible." (45)

Under this key, it is possible to identify in Ryder the creative worker whose activity was undergoing a process of dematerialization and immersion into the social fabric of everyday exchanges, someone investing in "social interrelations" in detriment of his "modernist appeal" as virtuoso piano player. However, I believe that Ishiguro provided us with a somehow more complex and ambivalent approach to this shifting aesthetic landscape, one well aware of the limitations of the "micro-utopian" social transformations predicated by Bourriaud.

The consolidation of participatory practices during the 1990s in what Claire Bishop (178-183) called "the social turn" of contemporary art marked a profound shift in the way cultural creativity was produced, displayed and thought of. A direct consequence of the spread of artistic participation in 1990s artistic practices was the adoption of a certain degree of familiarity, of proximity, between the artist and the audience. Both seem to be engulfed into the same situations, as to, for example, share the same meal or exchange practical services. Quite often, the artist adopted the role of the service provider, undertaking small, "minor" acts for the spectator.

Looking backwards, we can identify the main contradiction affecting relational aesthetics in the fact that the inclusion of relational practices within the gallery space did not imply a greater insertion of that space into the realm of everyday politics. If anything, relational aesthetics worked as a laboratory of the very same practices employed in the gentrification of urban centers and the precariousness of cultural labor. In truth, economic privatization was predicated on the basis of locating a public sphere in consumerism and interpersonal exchange while leaving the pillars of that economy unquestioned and untouched. Bourriaud's eagerness to relinquish utopia in favor of actions taking place at in the safeguarded space of the gallery ("the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realties, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.") forgets that the boom of dialogical and participatory acts within artistic contemporaneity derives from art's informal economy supplanting the cracks of the welfare state. He does not either take into account the myriad of ways in which neoliberal capitalism appropriated the "user-friendlyness" of art. In fact, the most likely form in which the flexibilization of social relations manifests itself within the gallery space comes in the form of precarious labor. If you are a relational artist, it may well be that all the maintenance work, all the activities that have artists resembling (but not being) social workers, could be recognized as art. But it will be always dependent of the special status of the *mainstream* artist to claim those situations as art. If you are not a relational artist, the same kind of activities may well fall into your day to day (badly paid or not paid at

all) activity. Indeed, the 1990s saw the consolidation of unpaid internships in art galleries and biennials. In this sense, by imagining relational art to be "well removed from the administrative rationality that underpins it", (Bourriaud 47) Bourriaud's theorization ignores that flexibility became a central tool for administrators of all sort (including those working in the artistic and cultural sector) to push reification and precariousness forward. It is all the more paradoxical that this process took place at the same time that participatory art acquired a recognized status to the degree of shaping the aesthetics debates of the decade.

There are multiple elements in *The Unconsoled* allowing an interpretation of the novel in key of these aesthetic and social debates. Perhaps the most obvious one has to do with the multiple "uncanny" cultural scenarios through which the characters of the novel pullulate, and the way public and private spaces are conflated. When "formal" cultural institutions appear, their original function as containers of artistic performance is always deferred and confounded with more private spaces: the city's theatre acquires a farcical tone when contemplated through a peephole or a cinema becomes the perfect place for a conversation on aesthetics. When Sophie, Boris and Ryder visit an art gallery, all the attention is centered in each character's social fears and anxieties: Sophie is afraid of not meeting Ryder's expectations, and Ryder finds his own bubble in the form of the old family car, which has been magically "installed" at the entrance of the exhibition. The artworks or the actual exhibitions, in any case, remain unimportant throughout the scene, and when it is over, the characters will find a magic way out that somehow takes them in an out of the building in a second. Much has been said about the spatial dislocation at play in *The Unconsoled;* it is worth adding here that in this case dislocation collapses the distance between "cultural" and public spaces, on one hand, and private ones on the other. Similarly, Mr. Hoffmann's hotel becomes the most "artistic" place of the entire novel, the scenario where Brodsky performs. On a similar way, the only way that Ryder gets to play the piano, he will do so from a space not unlike a latrine. On this occasion, his performance is directed towards a one-person audience, Brodsky, and the music serves as a private accompaniment to the conductor's grief against his dead dog.

The conflation of "cultural" and private spaces closely resembles a similar process taking place in 1990s collaborative and "biopolitical" artistic actions. The acts of consolation and interpersonal communication that shape *The Unconsoled* are not far from artistic actions from that period. For instance, Rirkrit Tiravanija's cooking in gallery spaces is not very different from the scene that closes *The Unconsoled,* where food is served in a tramway. The walls blocking the entrance to concert halls and the labyrinth-like gallery spaces featured in the novel resemble Maurizio Cattelan's acts of irreverent disobedience against the art system, as for example in the case of his first solo exhibition, when he closed the gallery space and placed a "torno subito" [I'll be right back] sign. Similarly, Bourriaud (31) refers to Angela Bulloch sitting down on a caffe and having conversations with strangers, not unlike Ryder[3]. Even the uncanniness of

[3] It is interesting to note that Enrique Vila-Matas's collaboration with *documenta 13* in 2012 consisted on a similar convivial act, on this occasion performed in a Chinese restaurant at the outskirts of Kassel. Vila-Matas turned this participation into a novel first published in 2014, *The Illogic of Kassel*, which somehow continues Ishiguro's exploration of convivial and participatory cultural practices. It would be worth asking, then, what are the consequences of approaching *The Unsoncoled* and *The Illogic of Kassel* as part of a literary genealogy of art within an expanded field. This genealogy would feature key texts by a broad

Ryder's relationship with Sophie and Boris (who could and could not be Ryder's family), can be compared with actions by Tanja Ostojić, who married a German man as a way of obtaining an EU passport as part of an art project (*Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport* (2000-2005)). If Ostojić's project shifts from representational to biopolitical interaction ("the artwork *was* the transaction", in Angela Dimitrikaki's words (310), something similar can be said of Ryder's troubled relationship with Sophia and Boris, whose bond seems to be equally constructed through transient and conditional interactions sought to end when the performance (in this case Ryder's magnum performance scheduled for Thursday evening) concludes.

A second element of *The Unconsoled* that resembles the atmosphere of relational practices is represented by the figure of Mrs. Stratmann, which surprisingly has received little or no attention in all the literature on Ishiguro's novel. We see her first in the oft-commented initial scene of the elevator, where Ryder joins Gustav in his never-ending disquisition on the social value of hotel concierges. All of a sudden, Mrs. Stratmann appears at a corner of the elevator. Her presence in this scene is all the more relevant as she will be the person responsible for configuring Ryder's extenuating agenda. The first words she directs at Ryder are used to explain her role and to confirm that "I've been given the task of ensuring everything goes smoothly while you're here with us." When Ryder complains at the tight agenda he has, Stratmann replies that "We've tried to keep it strictly to the essential things. Inevitably we were inundated, by so many of our societies, the local media, everybody." Crucially enough, as a result of this simple conversation, Ryder starts realizing that "this city was expecting of me something more than a simple recital."

Something more than a simple recital. Already from this early scene, we learn that all the burdensome tasks Ryder has to perform, all the conversations and meetings, are actually part of his professional duty with the city. The sense of disorientation that comes from following Ryder's journey looks differently when we know that it is somehow programmed. It is symptomatic that Stratmann appears again in the final pages of the novel, reminding Ryder that the failure in committing is only due to his incapacity to follow his schedule. In Stratmann we can identify another kind of professionalism, one that has nothing to do with virtuoso creativity, but rather with managerial capacity. Stratmann is one of the few figures of the novel that clearly escapes from the iterations and projections of Ryder's psychological and familiar drama (on this, see Adelman 2011). Stratmann emerges as a professional committed to the task of *curating* Ryder's presence in the city. To some extent, then, the many dialogical interactions that Ryder undertakes within his stay among the unnamed community of *The Unconsoled* appear less as a fruit of Ryder's disorientation and more as a carefully choreographed itinerary. If Stratmann is curating and controlling Ryder's journey, then that journey could be seen as the public duty of every renowned itinerant creator. In fact, Stratmann's role is not too different from the one of a chief curator of an international art biennial or that of the CEO of a cultural festival. This interpretation is reinforced by the emotion-less personality of Stratmann. Unlike any other character,

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range of authors, including Michael Cunningham, Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, Orham Pamuk, Roberto Bolaño or Rita Indiana Hernández. Dealing with this literary history of the flexibilization of creativity is the main objective of the new monograph I am preparing.

Stratmann remains practical and efficient until her last appearance, without giving herself to any kind of aesthetic speculation. Her role, rather, has to do with the practical task of getting things accomplished.

A second feature of Ryder that evokes the contradictions of participatory aesthetics has to do with the ways in which the character maintains an aura of artistic geniality while embarking in situations of social engagement. In the novel, Ryder keeps embracing the idea that his role as a creator has only to do with performing. Ryder is not a somnambulistic walker errand among people he may or may not know; nor is him a "failed" artist incapable to play. On the contrary, his willingness to accept uncanny situations and deal with the "private" needs of fellow citizens resembles the indetermination surrounding the work of collaborative creators around the time the novel was written. His sense of being always too busy derives from his incapacity to accept that the many tasks programmed by Stratmann *may* also be a central part of the collective expectations derived from his artistic expertise. Ryder does not fail because of wasting time caring and making favors; he fails because of his obstinacy to preserve the image of Ryder the genius, and also because he constantly misleads the time he wants to allocate to each person and each task (which per se are not about being harried but rather about being bad managing an agenda) with tasks falling out of his professional duties. We can read Ryder's complains in this sense:

> It's the same as everywhere else. They expect everything from me. They'll probably turn on me tonight, it wouldn't surprise me. When they get unhappy about my answers, they'll turn on me, and then where will I be? I might not even get as far as the piano. Or my parents might leave, the moment they start to turn on me… (Ishiguro 444)

In this fragment as in many others, Ryder remains incapable of assuming that there is no longer such place for that geniality, and this imbalance between own and external expectations causes him anxiety. Ryder cannot understand that what is expected from him is not the perfect performance we could expect from the virtuoso Ryder is, but rather the myriad of small acts of caressing and communicating so absent in the community. His failure, consequently, is not the failure of music or cultural creativity per se, but rather the result of the lack of adjustment between two different aesthetic modes.

This does not impede Ryder from keeping an image of himself as a gifted, modernist creator, thus keeping intact the reification of individual authorship not unlike relational aesthetics. If the multiple encounters with acquaintances Ryder painstakingly endures throughout *The Unconsoled* are the result of a scripted and regulated collaboration (ultimately, the reason why Ryder was called into the city in the first place), then those dialogical events would be much more than a *detour* in Ryder's career as a pianist: they will stand for a subtle but irreversible transformation in the criteria measuring aesthetic excellence. Looking backwards into the 1990s, it becomes quite easy to describe that transformation: as cultural creativity became being mobilized as a capitalist value, artists had to become flexible and multifaceted agents, (partially) relinquishing their specialization to undertake actions into the realm of the everyday, acquiring interpersonal and emotional abilities while leaving the aura associated to individual authorship very much untouched. When Ryder faces the chaotic events of previous days, it is the modernist professional, the piano specialist, who speaks in these terms:

> "I am unhappy with everything, Miss Stratmann. I have not had important information when I've needed it. I have not been told of last-minute changes to my schedule. I haven't been supported or assisted at crucial points. As a result, I have not been able to prepare myself for my tasks in the way I would have liked. Nevertheless, for all that, I intend shortly to go on stage where I'll endeavour to salvage something from what is turning out to be a disastrous evening for you all." (Ishiguro 511)

The figure of Stratmann also points to a minor but relevant detail: Ryder is paid to visit the city. His commitment is part of his contract, which in this case involves emotional and communicational abilities. Although embarked in a myriad of minor, insignificant tasks, Ryder never gives up his aura of world-famous virtuoso. What Ryder "sells", then, are tailored answers to ordinary needs through social and emotional engagement instead of virtuoso performances. He is appraised for "how much importance you place on meeting the ordinary people affected…" (Ishiguro 254) Ryder's mediation in the cultural economy of the city, then, is linked to the world-class creative aura he bears. At the same time, however, that aura is not limited to his capacity to perform in musical terms. Ultimately, the clash between both forms of artistic appreciation will determine the failure of the so awaited final performance.

The Unconsoled and the Contradictions of Relational Aesthetics

If we can recognize in Ryder some of the features of the artist who invests in affection and community interaction to build up a renewed idea of authorship, then the question we should ask next is: which interpretation does Ishiguro give of that kind of artist? The distance between Ryder's narcissistic self-perception as socially relevant, and his incapacity to alter any substantial element in the novel, opens up a space where the contradictions of relational and participatory aesthetics can be criticized[4]. In this sense, when Cynthia Wong identifies in the novel's protagonist "the possibility of a resolution for [the community], although he remains unaware of the agenda for such a social reform" (76), we can read more than an individual emotional shortage. Wong is here aptly describing broader contradictions at the heart of participatory aesthetics. In her words we can also identify signs of a broader process of appropriation of cultural industries by neoliberalism. By the end of the 20th century, "creativity" (including its most progressive forms) was retooled and mobilized to provide economic growth (Mould 11). A certain "creativity rhetoric" was thus applied to all sectors of human life (15), repurposing its transformative potential for the sake of profit. As Gregory Sholette points out (185), "If art and life have finally fused, then the life that art has merged with is as corrupt as it is appalling." After we acknowledge these contradictions, statements such as Gary Adelman's, who identifies Ryder as "an artist who has no spiritual involvement with his art and whose only interest in his audience is that they do not discover him to be a fraud" (169), should be read as something else than a symbol of cynicism. Borrowing from the previous debates on the role of culture for social

[4] In this line, although limiting his focus to the individual figure of the artist, can we interpret Brian Shaffer's argument (114) that "at bottom, *The Unconsoled* suggests that narcissism and masochism a self-absorbed, self-enclosed, self-hating addiction to pain and vanity rule the contemporary artist's passions."

transformation *and* its appropriation by "creative capitalism", we can understand *The Unconsoled*'s main character more accurately as someone retooling his own social position and aesthetic radar while trying to cope with a shifting economy of attention. Ryder would be, then, an individual whose "retrospective and abstracted understanding of culture, tied to a 'lost' but irrecoverable cultural heritage, threatens to undermine an attention to present and local difficulties." (Horton 192)

The non-representational turn in the visual arts, which brought about the adoption of dialogical and relational skills by side of the artists, also implied the establishment of an alternative system of aesthetic judgement based on a complex equilibrium between the artistic and the political, between the ethical and the aesthetical. The emergence of participative forms of cultural creativity urged for the redefinition of art criticism and aesthetic thought. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that participatory and dialogical art did not overturned individual authorship. As art theorist Grant Kester explains (2014, 82-124), collaborative creative relations run the risk of reifying and further deepen situations of socioeconomic dependence even when claiming to do the opposite. Under this logic, collaborative artists become "aesthetic evangelists" (1995), individuals moved by the belief in the out of the ordinary salvific capacity of artists and cultural producers in contraposition to the passivity of audiences and socially disenfranchised groups.

The contradictions of "aesthetic evangelism" are evident, for example, in the way in which the unknown city receives Ryder. On one hand, the pianist is welcomed as the savior of the city. On the other, he is accused of lacking enough knowledge of the local cultural community, which also means "not belonging" to that community. Ryder's "salvific" role is confirmed when Ryder meets Christoff and other "local notables" at the cinema. In that scene, one of the men taking part in the conversation claims that "we're at a turning point, an important turning point. *Mr Ryder has come here to tell us that*." (Ishiguro 107, italics mine) Few pages later, the same character stresses further his argument by saying that "the people will listen to you in a way they would never listen to one of us. In fact, sir, I can tell you, the mood in this town has altered simply at the news of your arrival." (Ishiguro 114)

It is noteworthy that in both occasions, Ryder is more than eager to embrace those expectations. This becomes evident in a later conversation with Christoff, when Ryder feels proud of himself for "making a striking impression on the company with my easy authority over the range of local issues." (Ishiguro 115)

Ryder's aura as an artist depends on an economy of exchange based on the recognition of his expertise as acclaimed performer (even though he does not perform) instead on pure talent. In fact, Ryder's collective image is very much dependent on the valorization of his "extra-artistic capacities." He is recognized, for example, as someone who is "a very decent sort, as different as you could get from these prima donna types", someone who "had a reputation for being very concerned about the ordinary citizen." (Ishiguro 295) At the same time, however, he will be criticized for "not belonging" and not having enough knowledge of local circumstances, as it becomes evident, for example, when Mrs. Collins ask Ryder "why do you take it upon yourself to pronounce like this, as though you're blessed with some extra sense the rest of us lack?" (Ishiguro 133)

Crucially, Ryder's lack of awareness of local concerns and the unimportance of his failure can be crucially linked to the ways in which the inhabitants of the city wish to mobilize his position of authority in favor of different causes. This is best

exemplified in the scene portraying the dispute on the monument to Sattler, a local cultural beacon now publicly disgraced.

As Cynthia Quarrie notes (146), Sattler emerges in the novel as the symbol of the unnamed city inhabitants' incapacity of coming to terms with their past or what is the same, with the "hauntological" legacy of modernity. In this case, Ryder emerges paradoxically as a foreigner, an international cultural worker whose voice is heard and taken into account by the citizens relentlessly seeking consolation from their historically-located wounds. In the Sattler controversy, what appears to be a critical discussion among specialists on divergent cultural models ends up being mediated by photographic journalists as Ryder is manipulated to stand in front of the monument (apparently without his knowledge of the implications of such action.) In the process of taking these photographs, the monument becomes an ideologically-charged landscape standing for certain cultural values. What matters in this scene is that it is not Ryder's opinion what is sought; the image of change that his photographs project become a statement enough on its own. Ryder's expertise and singularity as an internationally-claimed performer is here mobilized as a way of channeling affections towards a specific cultural (but also, apparently, political) position. In this way, the scene parodies and undermines the authority of transnational relational artists moving from one conflict to the next one, exposing the cracks of the system yet from a safe distance, addressing "social" causes without taking the time of engaging them in detail, researching on these causes in order to circulate the results within a global biennial scene, privileging the outputs over the process of collaboration and engagement (see Kester 2013).

In the Sattler controversy, Ryder (as well as the rest of the community) are granted the possibility of choosing and position themselves, yet those acts are limited by the narrow scope of options left available. As we are never explained what the Sattler monument stands for, being "pro" or "against" it remains very much the same in cultural terms. Despite belonging to the past, his figure polarizes the community, the main elements in which each option diverges from the other are never clear, nor do they seem to matter. Instead, Sattler's figure emerges as a controversial empty referent that seems to condensate a lost progressive cultural paradigm. Indeed, Sattler himself seems to represent the only truly radical option, albeit remaining unattainable. As one of the characters of *The Unconsoled* explains,

> [Sattler] holds an attraction for certain people *precisely because* he's so distant, a piece of local myth. Reintroduce him as a serious prospect…then frankly, sir, people here will panic. They will recoil. They will suddenly find themselves clinging to what they know, never mind what misery it has already brought them. (Ishiguro 375)

The Sattler controversy also makes evident how cultural debates can work in order to silence more radical possibilities of sociopolitical transformation. In fact, the global success of collaborative artistic practices can be seen as a response to the erosion of more institutional platforms of solidarity and civic support, including the state. For Kester (2014), collaborative art would compensate the lacunae left aside by the demise of the Welfare State and other structures of public support, adopting a kind of "compensatory" role akin to Ryder's in his own journey. Similarly, in Ryder we can glimpse the limit of the compensatory role that collaborative aesthetics adopted in the 1990s. Every "consoling" social act performed by Ryder can be seen as the result of a lack of public support by side of the state or public institution. For example, when

Brodsky, one of the conducers, loses his prosthetic leg, Ryder wonders, “aren’t there proper resources in this town for eventualities like this? (Ishiguro 443) Against those situations, the characters in the novel seem engulfed in abstract cultural searches that impede them to act politically. Under Ryder’s eyes, they are “too obsessed, obsessed with the little internal disorders of this thing you call your community, too obsessed to display even the minimum level of good manners to us.” (Ishiguro 271) Similarly, the profound emotional shortfalls felt by Ryder and all his projections can be also related to the dislocation of the private space brought about by each character’s professional self-demands. The orphanage felt by Ryder, Stephen or Boris is well described when the first claims: “perhaps you’re simply doing it because you’re high-spirited, because you come from broken homes and you know no better.” (Ishiguro 221) The tiresome demands Ryder is subjected to do not impede that he is faulted for being socially inefficient, his “consolation” role remaining insufficient throughout the novel. For the pianist, his own dialogical interactions are as tiresome as they are dispensable: “That all your wood work, for which I don’t doubt the people of this town will always be grateful, you nevertheless looked on it essentially as something to be getting on with while you waited.” (Ishiguro 276)

This fragment epitomizes one of the main debates over relational aesthetics: no matter how “collaborative” gallery-based projects are; in many cases, they leave the aura of the individual artists who moves from place to place untouched. From this perspective, Ryder’s interest for other citizens would only be a creative strategy, an artistic form amongst many others mobilized in order to develop an individual artistic career. In fact, Ryder’s immersion into the community is largely unimportant throughout the novel. Every time he turns out the corner, the “hard work” is done by others. Dealing with this facet of the character, Cynthia Wong explains that “while he [Ryder] seems completely unaware of his circumstances in the city where he is to present an important and major performance, he also seems to exert a powerful—if at times indirect—influence on everything that occurs in the novel.” (Wong 68) David Coughlan (102), on his part, identifies in Ryder the fate of Oedipus, someone who interprets reality but cannot alter its course, who reads and understand events, but is condemned to repetition: “even when he sometimes fails in the function ascribed to him by the people of the city, the story continues.” This literary strategy partially explains why the fact that Ryder ends up not playing seems not to affect the impression that the rest of the characters have of him. Cleverly, Ishiguro made Ryder being only partially aware of his own shortcomings, as if he were unconsciously avoiding to confront his personal situation by relying only in the transformative capacity of his artistic role. In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder remains a professional (a worldly acclaimed one) throughout the novel. His failure is not perceived as such, not by himself neither by the audience. It is telling that Ryder himself does not have a clear idea of his main duty within this journey: although he is obsessed with the concert that will take place on Thursday, in many occasions he forgets about the performance and worries instead about the speech he will have to give that day.

In *The Unconsoled*, the lack of cultural consolation that the inhabitants of the unnamed city experience derives from the precarization of cultural labor. This is evident in all the characters of the novel, which see in their personal sacrifices necessary actions to recover the lost cultural predominance of the city. This process also affects artists such as Ryder, who is forced to sacrifice his sleeping hours and his affective bonds in order to keep his image of prestige intact. When he forgets that he has a familiar relationship with Sophie and Boris, we can identify in this not only a symptom of

Ryder's incapacity to deal with his own childhood traumas; it derives also from the multiplication of affective demands within a globalized scenario where the private and the public seem interchangeable. In this scenario, dialogical creativity appears to be incomplete, incapable of standing for the social bonds it seeks to recover. Ultimately, Ryder's do-good cycle fails because it remains reduced to the time set of cultural action. No matter how intense and well-intentioned, the comforting role played by Ryder is limited to the five days he spends in the unnamed city of the novel. After this, the next awaits. No matter how committed, Ryder's role as "aesthetic evangelist" is subjected to the tight schedule of artistic stardom.

Conclusion

What are the consequences of reading *The Unconsoled* as part of a broader debate on the flexibilization of creativity and the collaborative turn that took place in the 1990s? More importantly, if the relational and participative aesthetic forms that emerged in that period are now object of critical scrutiny, being the transformative potential implicit in relational aesthetics questionable, why should we look back at Ishiguro's fourth novel once again? What can we learn from *The Unconsoled* in the present, when the emancipative potential of many of the aesthetic forms described in this article has been limited through its appropriation for managerial or gentrifying purposes? To conclude, I will be briefly paying attention at these questions, bearing in mind that the unspecified nature of *The Unconsoled* will always urge for a multiplicity of interpretations, making at the same time difficult and ultimately pointless to carry out with a detective-like task of identifying one of them as true and the rest as false (see Robinson 2009, 67-79).

The moment in which *The Unconsoled* was published favored the multiplication of reviews and points of view about the novel. The reception of *The Unconsoled*, therefore, should not only be linked to the—now common place of—differences with Ishiguro's three previous novels. It was also shaped by the consolidation of internet and an exchange economy linked to the socioeconomic expectations of 1990s networked society. In this article, I tried to demonstrate that artistic creativity plays an essential role to modulate Ishiguro's critical view on these expectations present in *The Unconsoled.* It is through an attentive engagement with the conditions of cultural creativity at play by the time the novel was written that Ishiguro achieves to confront the contradictions of transnational mobility and cultural globalization. Far from accessory, then, both Ryder's professional aspirations and his incapacity to materialize them provide a vantage point to observe the driving force of "the new spirit of capitalism", the cultural engine fueling both progressive social action and its reverse. In *The Unconsoled*, I argue, Ishiguro articulates a valid system of aesthetic appreciation that allows us to value artistic collaboration and dialogical engagement while also remaining attentive to the manifold dangers lying behind the same creative practices.

Acknowledging that there is room for social consolation within dialogical cultural creativity has important consequences. After all, Ryder's personal trajectory in *The Unconsoled* does more than simply emulating the "collaborative turn" undergoing by the time when the novel was published. His journey within the unnamed city also reveals a critical insight that remains attentive to the multiple ways in which creative labor can be appropriated and repurposed by public and private instances, but also to the transformative potential of consolation and social communication. In this sense, the

novel's ability to parody the dialogical turn of cultural production while leaving enough space for hope can be linked to Ishiguro's own background as social worker (Wong 5). If we understand the novel in these terms, *The Unconsoled* would occupy a central place in any literary genealogy of late-20th century creativity, because it proposes the idea of consolation as a positive and unavoidable (yet forcefully incomplete) collective endeavor, as something that cannot be reduced to professionalism no matter how professionalized and institutionalized it becomes. *The Unconsoled* emerges, then, as pioneer in recognizing cultural production as a precarious yet productive field of collective consoling/counseling/comforting intervened and intercrossed by multiple agencies, both amateurs and professionals, or more exactly in between amateurism and professionalism. In engaging *The Unconsoled* as an early intervention in the expanded field of cultural production, we learn that artistic collaboration is more than an aesthetic form; rather, it emerges as the ongoing task we are all immersed into.

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