

# Mediations

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## Editors’ Note

Each of the essays in this issue is concerned with figuration, comparison, and combination — about how, by reformulating even familiar tropes, we can begin to see differently. Amanda Armstrong, for instance, returns to a familiar image, that of Marx’s dancing tables, to explain the different ways *Capital* and capital can each be understood as a “splintered text.” Marx, she reminds us, situated the figure of the dancing table historically. In 1853 Marx wrote a piece for the *New York Daily Tribune* on the Taiping Rebellion; he had hoped that the rebellion might encourage a Europe that appeared to be “standing still.” Alas, it did not and by 1867, capital seemed as intractable as ever. Armstrong suggests that the figure of the dancing table and its footnote, when situated historically, suggest that Marx’s anatomy of capital is a way of describing a system that seemed for the time being secure. Armstrong also notes, however, that “the figure of the table also indicates that Marx does not take capitalism’s apparent triumph for granted. Fourteen years later, the table still appears to rattle.” Returning to this moment in the history capital through the figure of the table, Armstrong’s immanent analysis of *Capital* highlights how we might witness Marx grappling to recast an apparent moment of triumph for capital as a moment freighted with political possibility.

In the next essay comparison once again takes center stage, this time as a concept itself to be interrogated. Shaoling Ma analyzes “what it means for comparison, as a specific application of an intellectual approach or method, to work *like* capital.” She proceeds to analyze the intellectual link between comparison and the value-form. If, in other words, comparative literary studies can appear to reproduce the logic of global capitalism, she explores a way comparison might be thought differently and produce something like a critique of capital. To compare otherwise is, for Ma, to advocate for a kind of comparison that “evaluates its own conceptual position in relation to and outside of its object.” Ultimately, Ma, like Armstrong, proposes a way of reading immanently to work against capital’s inexhaustible reach, writing “if capitalism is the ultimate comparative machine, there is no better place for comparative literature scholars to work through the relation between their own work and the capitalist logic of equivalence and exchange than from the representation of this dialectical relation in literary, cultural, and theoretical texts.”

The broad historical comparisons of the first two essays find more local footing in Tamas Nagypal’s piece on three films — *Zombi 2*, *Year of the Gun*, and *Arrivederci*

*amore, ciao* — each of which deal with the political turmoil in Italy in the 1970s. Nagypal returns to the late-seventies to historicize a promising political moment that ultimately ended in a disappointing political failure as the Communist Party of Italy was unable to mobilize its base toward any lasting political ends. The death of the revolution is figured by the living dead in these films over a period of three decades when neoliberal capitalism had apparently buried it. Ultimately though Nagypal hopes that these films might point the way forward to restoring the imaginative capacity of the Italian Left through what he describes as an act of mourning.

In the final two essays, Tavid Mulder and Jensen Suther tighten the analysis of capital's international dimension further to examine how particular works can produce or activate political imagination in the reader or beholder. Mulder focuses on the importance of montage in Roberto Arlt's *The Seven Madmen* (1929) and *The Flamethrowers* (1931), describing how montage functions as a conceptual map of uneven development attendant with global modernity. Suther's comparison between Theodor Adorno's and Martin Heidegger's conceptions of "truth" in the work of art, similarly interrogates the relation between the work of art and forces of production. His essay, however, is focused on the experience of "dissonance" rather than montage as the mechanism through which the contradictions of social life brought on by capitalist modes of production are realized by the beholder.

Errata: In issue 28.1, *Mediations* misattributed the authorship of an essay, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," from *Endnotes*. Those citations have been corrected throughout the site. The correct citation is: Aaron Benanav and John Clegg, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes* 2 (27 June 2012).

Davis Smith-Brecheisen, for the *Mediations* editors

## The Wooden Brain: Organizing Untimeliness in Marx's *Capital*

Amanda Armstrong

While Marx's *Capital* begins at a high level of conceptual abstraction, at times the opening section of the text drops into a concrete illustration, or refers to a specific historical situation. One of these better known early moments of illustration takes place in the text's opening chapter on the commodity, when Marx brings into view an oddly animated wooden table. In the midst of his introductory demonstration of the dual nature of commodities – the disjunction between their concrete utility as things that can be consumed, on the one hand, and their force as agents of abstract value, on the other hand – Marx lifts the curtain on an overturned table:

The form of wood [*Die Form des Holzes*], for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing on its own free will.<sup>1</sup>

Marx attaches the following historicizing footnote to this passage:

One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still – *pour encourager les autres* [in order to encourage the others].<sup>2</sup>

With this crucial footnote, Marx situates the figure of the dancing table in a specific historical moment. Sometime around 1853, tables began to dance in Keighley, a West Yorkshire textile town, home to the first significant grouping of English spiritualists, whose séances featured rattling tables.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, Marx composed an essay for

the *New York Daily Tribune* on the Taiping Rebellion, which had broken forth a couple of years earlier and would extend into the mid-1860s. In this essay, Marx wrongly predicted that the rebellion in southern China would further disrupt trade relations and spur a crisis of overproduction in the West:

At this period of the year it is usual to begin making arrangements for the new teas, whereas at present nothing is talked of but the means of protecting person and property, *all transactions being at a stand*. Under these circumstances, . . . it may be safely augured that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the Continent.<sup>4</sup>

This is the sense in which, during the reactionary 1850s, when Europe “appeared to be standing still,” Marx hoped that the uprising in China might “encourage the others.” But by 1867, when he was completing his first volume of *Capital*, Marx would have known that his hopeful predictions of midcentury crisis and revolution – of economic stasis and political movement – had not come to pass. Nevertheless, at this later date, he chose to footnote a false augur, to evoke an unrealized possibility of revolution.

The figure of the wooden table, along with its accompanying footnote, helps position *Capital* historically. In referencing an unrealized revolutionary possibility from fourteen years prior, the text situates itself *afterwards*, in the midst of a moment of historical closure or failure. In pulling the curtain on a dancing table that couldn’t quite “encourage the others,” *Capital* suggests that it will be pursuing an anatomy of a capitalist system that, despite midcentury crises, had recently found new footing.<sup>5</sup> But the figure of the table also indicates that Marx does not take capitalism’s apparent triumph for granted. Fourteen years later, the table still appears to rattle.<sup>6</sup> *Capital* thus seems, however subtly, to hold open the possibility not only that everything could have turned out differently, but also, *a la* Walter Benjamin, that what looks like a midcentury moment of closure might yet retroactively be recast.<sup>7</sup> The text sets up this ambiguous relation to its recent past by evoking a figure that seems to occupy space in two ways at once: a wooden table that “stands with its feet on the ground,” while also “stand[ing] on its head.”

The essay to follow breaks apart this unsettled table. The strange wooden table Marx brings on stage in his opening chapter is a figure into which various associations, or latent streams of thought, have been compressed.<sup>8</sup> For one, as Jacques Derrida demonstrates in *Specters of Marx*, the wooden table calls to mind a history of philosophical reflection on the relations of substance and form, of matter and spirit. In philosophical discourse beginning with Aristotle, the Greek term for



wood – ὕλη [hulē] – has stood in for matter in general,<sup>9</sup> making the wooden table particularly apt for philosophical illustration.<sup>10</sup> But Marx’s wooden table carries more than simply a philosophical lineage. It also roots itself in the mid-nineteenth century, rattling like the tables of the early spiritualists, and bristling at a moment of political reaction. These and other associations that crowd around the wooden table situate *Capital* in its historical conjuncture. They also indicate something about Marx’s critical project. Marx’s allusions to spiritualism and to the Taiping rebellion suggest a melancholic relation to the recent past, characterized by an attachment to dashed hopes. Melancholia is defined by a refusal to dispense with the lost object, to “let the dead bury their dead.”<sup>11</sup> By foregrounding a rattling table – an object burdened by the recent past – Marx indicates that he is stepping beyond the conceptual parameters of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, which had insisted that proletarian movements look solely to the poetry of the future. The table tells us that *Capital*, while certainly preoccupied with emergent social conditions, will also concern itself with temporal unevenness, anachronism, and with the problem of *organizing untimeliness* – a problem that confronted labor and capital alike after 1848. As we will see, emergent social-historical conditions of the 1850s and ’60s made questions of temporal unevenness urgent – an urgency that Marx’s *Capital* registered, even if the text did not consistently work through the implications of its evident interest in untimely things. By reading the various historical associations that assemble around the wooden table in light of Marx’s mature work as a whole, we will gain some purchase on the overdetermined problem of organizing untimeliness, and will see how this problem forced a splintering of Marx’s theoretical project.

### **The Times of *Capital***

Marx’s *Capital* sought to elucidate contemporaneous mutations in the social dynamics of time and labor. As Moishe Postone has shown, *Capital* organized itself around a series of dialectical reversals, one of which occurs in Chapter Fifteen’s section on The Factory. Here, Marx demonstrates how the modern factory system, which found its footing in the mid-nineteenth century, ruins any romantic view of the labor process as the scene wherein humanity consciously mediates its relations with nature, intentionally drawing together tools and raw materials. Rather, in the modern, steam-driven factory, “the automaton is itself the subject, and the workers are merely conscious organs, coordinated with the unconscious organs of the automaton, and together with the latter subordinated to the central moving force.”<sup>12</sup> Marx understood this reversal with respect to agency to be coordinated with a host of other mutations. Factory work apparently brought about a general diminution of workers’ skills, a lessening of workers’ interest in labor, and an increase in the dangers employees faced on the job. Rather than molding objects then, factory workers were compelled to mold their bodies to the accelerated rhythms of massive machines, which were capable of taking their lives or limbs with little forewarning. In this way, steam-

driven machinery made tangible the quantitative imperatives of capitalist relations, subordinating workers' bodies to a normative pace and scale of production – always a bit quicker and grander than before – a pace and scale that would allow those managing capital to realize adequate returns on investment, while also, “with the regularity of the seasons, issu[ing] its list of the killed and wounded in the industrial battle.”

In his reading of *Capital*, Moishe Postone sees in the factory system the reconstruction of labor according to the imperatives of the abstract, exchange-value dimension of the commodity.<sup>13</sup> According to this reading, the factory system realizes a new abstraction of time and labor: steam-driven labor processes internalize the quantitative imperatives characteristic of the exchange value dimension of capitalist relations, excising any variability or lag from production, while also “equaliz[ing] and reduc[ing] to one and the same level every kind of work that has to be done by the minders of the machines.”<sup>14</sup> In such a system, the concrete, use-value dimension of labor is thinned out; labor is reduced to a common state of one-dimensionality. Even as Marx is describing the homogenization or abstraction of labor under the factory system, however, he identifies distinctions between workers that become newly salient under this system, from those of gender and age, as the wives and children of male textile workers enter the factories as “feeders” of raw materials; to those dividing “a superior class of workmen – [engineers, mechanics, joiners, &c.] – some of them scientifically educated... from the factory operative class” in general. While noting such distinctions, Marx generally avoids grappling with the trouble such cases might present to an account of labor's homogenization, suggesting that the “superior class” of labor aristocrats will remain numerically small, and that, with factory regulation, the industrial employment of women and children will be curtailed.<sup>15</sup> But of course, we are not obligated to follow Marx in casting aside such complications, which his own text poses for us.

The case of textile feeders, in particular, hints at a significant complication to the narrative of labor's abstraction in the era of steam. As factories industrialized over the nineteenth century, they took in an ever-increasing volume of raw materials – materials managed in part by hyper-exploited “feeders.” Factories thus stimulated demand for commodities, the production and circulation of which tended to rely on less capital-intensive methods. Cotton, for example, was cultivated by enslaved or indentured workers on labor-intensive plantations, where embodied violence served as the primary means of labor discipline. Along similar lines, the early growth of railway transit in Britain resulted in a significant expansion of the horse-drawn carriage transport industry. The railways' massive increase in carrying capacity relative to existing road systems translated into an economy-wide spike in demand for connecting trips between railway stations and other sites.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the nineteenth-century industrialization of production and distribution processes was linked inextricably to the expansion of technologies and labor processes that, from

the perspective of stage-based theories, appeared to be “out-of-date.” Industrialization involved the grafting of these seemingly anachronistic processes and technologies onto capital’s supply chains. And Marx was more than conscious of such bricolage – the third volume of *Capital* was devoted in part to analyzing the complex flows of investment into unevenly capitalized industries. Such unevenness notwithstanding, however, Marx generally saw an industry- and economy-wide tendency toward capitalization, or toward the replacement of living with dead labor. In Chapter Twenty-five of *Capital*, Marx notes that, “The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing.”<sup>17</sup>

While Marx thus was inclined to fold unevenness into a narrative of capitalization and abstraction, there is one moment where Marx takes seriously the possibility of de-capitalization, of consequential eddies in the history of capitalism. Marx considers the possibility that mechanization might run out of steam in *Volume 3*, toward the end of his chapter on the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, under the subheading: “Supplementary Remarks.” (These “supplementary remarks,” contained within an extended parenthesis, are situated in a remarkably marginal location within the overall project of *Capital*):

Since the development of labour productivity is far from uniform in the various branches of industry and, besides being uneven in degree, often takes place in opposite directions, it so happens that the mass of average profit (= surplus-value) is necessarily very far below the level one would expect simply from the development of productivity in the most advanced branches. And if the development of productivity in different branches of industry does not just proceed in very different proportions but often also in opposite directions, this does not arise simply from the anarchy of competition and the specific features of the bourgeois mode of production. The productivity of labour is also tied up with natural conditions, which are often less favourable as productivity rises.... We thus have a contrary movement in these different spheres: progress here, regression there. We need only consider the influence of the seasons, for example, on which the greater part of raw materials depend for their quantity, as well as the exhaustion of forests, coal and iron mines, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

What is particularly noteworthy about this passage is how it associates the unevenness and even reversibility of mechanization with the fact of production processes’ embeddedness in natural conditions.<sup>19</sup> As forests and mines can be picked dry, the tendency toward mechanization that preoccupies Marx in *Capital* can also be exhausted. But, as Raphael Samuel has shown, mechanization’s vulnerability to natural conditions is more than simply a matter of seasonal variation or of natural

resource exhaustion; this vulnerability also follows from the recalcitrant qualities of natural materials themselves. Various production processes in mid-nineteenth century Britain, notably including furniture making, relied heavily on handicraft methods, in large part because of the resistances posed by the particular materials being fed through production processes. Due to the irregularity of wood's texture and grain, as well as the varied shapes of cut wood and the detail work required for most domestic items, hand production of furniture remained the norm throughout the nineteenth century:

Saw mills did not abolish the need for the hand-saw... nor planing-machines the plane. They could supply the rougher classes of deal, such as flooring boards, railway sleepers, and ships' timbers. But their action was too crude for many hard woods and too indiscriminate for the different lengths, breadths and thicknesses required in, say, the making of a writing desk, the framing of a roof, or the fitting of a steam-ship cabin. What such machinery did do was to provide a much broader base for handicraft activity by cheapening the raw materials of the trade.<sup>20</sup>

The irregularity of wood grain, its irreducible singularity, posed a limit to the mechanization of the furniture industry in the nineteenth century. Wood's graininess helped prevent furniture making industries from being reconstructed according to the imperatives of abstract time: each item of furniture required an individual, temporally non-identical work process. The substance of this material would seem then to put a spanner in the works of Marx's implicitly stage-based approach to industrialization. If, as Moishe Postone argues, Marx attempts to show over the course of *Capital* how the "concrete" dimensions of labor processes have tended to be reconstructed along lines prescribed by the "abstract," exchange value dimension (esp. in the shift from manufacture to large-scale industry), cases such as the furniture making industry would put in question the general purchase of this account. They suggest the recalcitrance of the concrete, the frustration of abstraction, and thus the continuing salience of irregularity and untimeliness. But then, it is *Capital* itself that gestures toward the limits of abstraction, pointing us in the direction of the furniture industry in part by introducing us in its opening lines to an ostentatious wooden table. The table, to which the following section will turn, suggests a counter-current in *Capital* - a back-flow that can be understood as a sometimes submerged or under-realized aspect of Marx's historical materialism. Echoing the sensuous materialism of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx's play with metaphor here suggests that, as much as he is interested in tracking the force of abstraction in an era dominated by capital, he also inclines to show how the bodies and materials upon which capital accumulation depends set limits to capitalization and its attendant abstraction of labor. Marx cannot but register in his work the recalcitrance of the concrete, the injury of abstraction.

### The Wooden Brain

It is perhaps not incidental that this counter-tendency in *Capital* is signaled through the text's deployment of a figure – the wooden table – that can be characterized as a complex jumble of metaphor, metonymy, and prosopopoeia. As Marx brings the wooden table into view, metaphor turns back on itself, the form of the text becomes knotted.

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing on its own free will.<sup>21</sup>

Marx begins here by illustrating, through the table, a general principle of how, independent of commodity relations, labor can convert matter into different forms. Wood retains its substance as wood even when converted into the form of the table. (This is an allusion as well to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.) While an illustration of a general principle, we can also read this moment in Marx's discussion of the table as a metaphor, where the coexistence of the substance of wood with its table form is metaphorically parallel to the commodity's dual existence as at once concretely useful and a bearer of abstract value. But then, through the figure of prosopopoeia, he actually draws this example more directly into the field of commodity relations, noting that "as soon as [the table] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness." Marx describes the table as a being that generates grotesque ideas from its wooden brain. This fantastical, animated object is then compared with a dancing table. Marx's flights of fantasy here are properly read as prosopopoeia: he is of course not suggesting that tables, when commodities, dance and have wooden brains, but rather is depicting the table as an animated thing to say something about how commodities carry social relations and forces.

The play across different rhetorical devices here gestures toward the sundered quality of Marx's critical project. We can begin to understand this play, and ultimately the multi-sidedness of Marx's analysis, by thinking of a ladder, in which the bottom rung is the substance of wood, the second rung is the form of the table, and the third rung is the commodity form. In the passage from *Capital's* Introduction at issue here, Marx walks us up the ladder, beginning with a reflection on the relations of the first and second rungs. Initially, what is at issue is the persistence of the matter of wood even as it is converted, via labor, into different "forms" (i.e. the ship's hull, the railway sleeper, or the table). Marx then moves from this commonplace philosophical illustration up one rung of the ladder, as it were. In what is ultimately a metaphorical

operation, the table as concretely useful object takes the place of the woodenness of the wooden table, while the commodity form takes the place of the table form (rung 1 is substituted for rung 2, while rung 2 is substituted for rung 3). What Marx wants to say is that, insofar as the table is a commodity, it remains concretely useful to its individual consumers (it “stands with its feet on the ground”), even as it participates in supersensible dynamics, organized by exchange value, that are relatively indifferent to a given commodity’s concrete utility. This notion of indifference is important. Just as the table form can be thought of as relatively indifferent to the matter of which it is composed – a table is equally a table whether it is made of wood, steel, or plastic – the value form of the commodity is relatively indifferent to the particular uses enabled by a given commodity’s form. The form of value does its work regardless of which concretely useful things are being exchanged. Once Marx gets to the third rung of the ladder though, a different rhetorical operation commences. In order to illustrate the supersensible quality of value, Marx personifies the table as a being that “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.” Here Marx sets in motion a novel figural operation, defined above all by prosopopoeia. But just as he seems to be casting off into a new figural sequence, the bottom rung of his original metaphor returns: the table as commodity is depicted as possessing a *wooden* brain. Through this figure of the wooden brain, Marx short-circuits the metaphorical and conceptual grid he had wired in the immediately preceding sentences. The first rung (woodenness) leaps over the second (the table) to link up directly with the third (the supersensible commodity).

There are multiple ways to read this return of the table’s woodenness in the figure of the wooden brain, which, when considered together, get at the splintered quality of Marx’s materialism. First, in keeping with the above discussion of the barrier that wood grain posed to mechanization, we might say that Marx registers here – in an operation resonant with new materialist approaches – how commodity relations are conditioned by the particular bodies and materials that underlie such relations. Even as Marx’s metaphorical work with the figure of the table seems to involve a step-like process of supersession – perhaps suggestive of his argument for the subsumption of use to exchange, concretion to abstraction – the matter of wood sticks around, and in this way implies a kind of sensuous or concrete materiality that frustrates dynamics of abstraction in the history of capitalism. The wood of the table can be read along these lines as a kind of concreteness that dwells *below* the use value dimension of the commodity. It is a sensuous materiality that warps commodity relations, troubling any attempt at abstract theorizing about the structural dynamics of capitalism. Marx suggests this alternate register of the concrete through a sequential figural operation that ultimately doubles back on itself.

But there are other ways to read Marx’s wooden brain that suggest different sides of his materialism. Rather than seeing the return of woodenness as registering a concern with sensuous materiality, we might see this moment as revealing Marx’s

interest in spectral phenomena. According to this reading, what is significant in the reiteration of the table's woodenness is not how this move gestures toward recalcitrant materials, but rather how it marks the return of something otherwise forgotten. Like the table itself, which Marx brands with the year 1853, the table's woodenness returns unexpectedly, arriving after its time to commingle with seemingly incommensurable grey matter. In this, it is resonant with exploited living labor, which congeals in the commodity and persists as a spectral presence, animating this object of exchange. Marx's interest in thinking with spectral phenomena, and specifically with specters of labor, suggests a very different sort of materialism than that proposed by those who recently have been calling us to think again about the material qualities of things and about how these qualities impinge upon social relations.<sup>22</sup> In his discussion of how labor congeals within the commodity, Marx's concern is rather with grasping the social *relations* of class that tend to be obscured insofar as they appear initially as *things*. In this vein, Marx's materialism requires a critical movement through particular commodities to the social relations – including especially relations of exploitation – that are realized in the production and exchange of such commodities.

To supplement this rather canonical reading of Marx's theory of the commodity, we can add a final reading of the wooden brain – a reading that emphasizes the tension between the phrase's adjective and noun. Marx's closing reference to the wooden brain can be seen in this light as surrealist *avant la lettre*. Marx juxtaposes seemingly incommensurable things – wood grain and grey matter – resulting in a composite phrase without earthly referent. The force of this juxtaposition, when read against the preceding section of this essay, lies in the “temporal” discontinuity between wood – an object of handicraft production – and the brain, which represents the cognitive apparatus captured by capital in the factory system. For Marx, the factory system is alienating in part because the knowledge required to make and maintain the automatons that animate this system exist at some remove from the workers tasked with overseeing such machines. Capital realizes itself via the factory system in part by drawing science under its aegis.<sup>23</sup> So, when Marx conjures a wooden brain, evoking at once handicraft and factory production, he suggests the sort of bricolage mentioned above – that is, the grafting together of labor processes and technologies associated with radically different degrees of capitalization. To realize itself as self-valorizing value, capital must set in motion production processes that appear, within a teleological frame, to be out of date, or to be lagging behind the advanced sectors of the economy.

Just as capital must orchestrate different phases and temporalities of production, Marx's mature work identifies the need for communists to assemble proletarians engaged in wildly divergent forms of labor, and thus also to organize untimeliness. As we will see in the following section, Marx understood the need to draw together workers stationed at factories, in mines, on fields, and all along capital's supply chains, and to bridge the interests of such workers with those of surplus populations,

including individuals who had been thrown by injury from the factory system. Juxtaposition thus serves as a formal model for communist praxis; the wooden brain points toward an unrealized political project – a project attentive to the explosive potentials of untimely things.

We have just entertained three different readings of Marx's wooden brain – an image the significance of which appears only insofar as Marx's formally knotted discussion of the dancing table is read against his mature writings as a whole. Marx's reference to the grotesquerie of a wooden brain condenses a critical project that itself is splintered, like a table occupying space in multiple ways at once. In his mature writings, Marx attempts not only to reveal the social relations of class congealed in commodities or to trace the prevailing trajectories of capitalist society; he also attempts, if only fleetingly or allusively, to show how particular bodies and materials frustrate tendencies toward abstraction in the history of capital, and to suggest how temporally non-identical phenomena might be juxtaposed to produce historically effective forces, whether such forces incline toward the interests of capital or labor. In what follows, I want to draw out some of the implications of this final critical strain, showing how, in Marx's *Capital*, the problem of articulating temporally non-identical forces opens onto unresolved questions of gender relations within working class movements.

### **Gendering Surplus Labor**

We will recall that, for Marx, the factory system carried a set of structural imperatives that reconfigured in crucial ways the prevailing conditions of labor. Within the factory system, work was degraded to a common measure, temporally standardized, and subjected to the imperatives of an ever-accelerating, and ever-more-dangerous, machinic apparatus. And, notwithstanding the factory system's persistent linkages with labor-intensive production processes, this system purportedly brought in its train ever-growing surplus labor populations, as the mechanization of production and circulation rendered living labor ever more superfluous to the process of capital accumulation. Marx went so far as to suggest that superfluity constituted a shared condition of proletarian life in the era of factory production, as workers on the job were increasingly expendable and exposed to physical injury, while those cast out of production processes formed an ever growing mass body, forced to survive through informal, criminalized, or otherwise insecure means. In his economic manuscripts of the early 1860s, Marx actually uses the same term – surplus labor – to describe these two “sides” of proletarian life, each in its own way expendable and exposed to harm.<sup>24</sup> The manuscripts of the early 1860s, in their novel use of the concept of surplus labor, anticipate the political program sketched out in “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation,” the concluding chapter of *Capital*,<sup>25</sup> wherein Marx argues for the necessity of forms of organization able to articulate the shared interests of waged and unwaged proletarian populations:



Thus as soon as the workers learn the secret of why it happens that the more they work, the more alien wealth they produce, and that the more the productivity of their labour increases, the more does their very function as a means for the valorization of capital become precarious; as soon as they discover that the degree of intensity of the competition amongst themselves depends wholly on the pressure of the relative surplus population; as soon as, by setting up trade unions, etc., they try to organize planned co-operation between the employed and the unemployed in order to obviate or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalist production on their class, so soon does capital and its sycophant, political economy, cry out at the infringement of the 'eternal' and so to speak 'sacred' law of supply and demand. Every combination between employed and unemployed disturbs the 'pure' action of this law.<sup>26</sup>

Marx leaves unspecified the aims of such combination, only characterizing them in the following way: "to obviate or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalist production on their class." As we will see, much turns on the interpretation of this ambiguous formulation, just as much turns on the degree to which we take Marx here to be *describing* a historical emergence of trade union politics defined by the "combination between employed and unemployed" populations, versus *prescribing* a class politics that was relatively absent, or at least merely in embryonic form, at the moment of his writing. In any case, we can note initially that this passage carries echoes of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, posing explicitly the question of how structurally distinct populations might be articulated politically in order to pose a threat to ruling class power. Marx suggests that such a political articulation is necessary if fractured proletarian populations are to contest the conditions of injury and immiseration that define their lives under the sway of the factory system. In this way, *Capital* can be read as proposing, and demonstrating the necessity for, a new politics of association capable of intervening in the post-1848 conjuncture in class relations. The waged industrial worker might be strategically situated in relation to capital-intensive infrastructures or relatively secure in relation to the unemployed, Marx suggests, but ultimately their position is insecure to the extent that the reserve army of the unemployed is reproduced as such, and for this reason the interests of these two sides of *surplus labor* are potentially shared. The task for communists would then be to realize forms of organization that could activate and effectively advance such shared interests.

In carving out a central role in class struggle for the unemployed, Marx seems to depart in at least one significant way from the analysis he had issued in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.<sup>27</sup> In this earlier text on midcentury France, the political agency of unemployed or marginal urban populations was figured in a largely negative way,

through the category of the *lumpenproletariat*, the “rabble” conscripted to support Louis Napoleon’s lawful coup.<sup>28</sup> In *Capital*, however, Marx is more sympathetic to the structurally unemployed, imagining for them a central role in class struggle. Even so, at least one passing reference to the lumpenproletariat does appear in this later work. In presenting the most fully realized “type” of surplus labor – pauperism – Marx begins by distinguishing this type from “vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat.”<sup>29</sup> Then, in the passage that immediately follows, Marx polarizes the lumpenproletariat and the pauper class in part on the basis of a normative judgment of women’s sexuality. If the lumpenproletariat includes “prostitutes,” the pauper class notably consists of “widows”:

Third [in the list of types of pauper], the demoralized, the ragged, and those unable to work, chiefly people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation, an incapacity which results from the division of labour; people who have lived beyond the worker’s average life-span; and the victims of industry, whose number increases with the growth of dangerous machinery, of mines, chemical works, etc., the mutilated, the sickly, the widows, etc. Pauperism is the hospital of the active labour-army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army.<sup>30</sup>

There is something anomalous in the inclusion of widows in the list of industry’s victims. Certainly, women whose husbands were killed in railway, mining, and other workplace accidents were indirect victims of industry, and were understood as such in midcentury British culture. I do not mean to suggest otherwise in noting their anomalous inclusion here. Rather, what strikes me is that the category of *the widows* is the only category in Marx’s extended discussion of pauperism seemingly not defined by a direct – if also blocked or ruptured – relation to waged employment. On one level, Marx’s somewhat curious inclusion of widows in his list of paupers can be read in terms of how such an inclusion, set against the reference to prostitutes in the list of the lumpenproletariat, works to establish the moral quality of the pauper class. But there is more than the moralization of a class subject at stake here. Marx’s inclusion of widows in the list quoted above can also be read as an anomalous gesture that reveals a systemic under-theorization of gender in his critical analysis of surplus labor, and of labor under capitalism more generally.

To begin thinking through the gendering of labor under the factory system, we can return again to the wooden table – an object that, beginning at the midcentury, came to play new roles in the lives of British working class subjects. Midcentury penny periodicals presented shelving units and family tables as surfaces upon which workers should undertake new kinds of record keeping, from maintaining a family budget to marking deposits in benefit funds, savings accounts, or insurance plans.<sup>31</sup> These practices of record keeping and savings were central to an idealized project

of working class moral improvement, which at once promised workers a partial escape from the insecurities of their lives while acclimating them to the abstract, machinic temporalities characteristic of their increasingly dangerous workplaces.<sup>32</sup> Improvement also carried with it particular norms of gendered domestic life, in which women's domestic labor was emphasized at the expense both of their wage-earning role and of their responsibility to manage household budgets; while men's waged industrial labor, management of savings, and leadership in promoting their own and their family members' education were foregrounded. Men were encouraged to keep financial records on household tables, women were enjoined to prepare meals upon, and to maintain the cleanliness of, these surfaces. This presumed gender division in the use of wooden household tables indicates the stark gender differentiation of the working class, which intensified during and after the second industrial revolution, while also gesturing toward the shared material conditions upon and through which these divisions were lived.<sup>33</sup>

While I have presented here an account of the relationship between industrialization and gender relations that aligns with the consensus view amongst social historians, *Capital* presents a rather different account of industrialization's effects upon working class gender relations – an account that we must grapple with in order to grasp what Marx meant in referring to the “combination between employed and unemployed.” On at least two occasions, Marx extrapolates from the case of the early British textile and mining industries to posit a general rule for the relation of gender and age divisions to the process of industrialization. He writes:

We have seen that the development of the capitalist mode of production, and of the productivity of labour – which is at once the cause and the effect of accumulation – enables the capitalist, with the same outlay of variable capital, to set in motion more labour by greater exploitation (extensive or intensive) of each individual labour-power. We have further seen that the capitalist buys with the same capital a greater mass of labour-power, as he progressively replaces skilled workers by less skilled, mature labour-power by immature, male by female, that of adults by that of young persons or children.<sup>34</sup>

And then, later, in a similar vein:

We saw in Part IV, when analysing the production of relative surplus-value, that within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of

a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine... and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital.<sup>35</sup>

In each of these two passages, a specific historical situation – the early industrial period when textile factory owners and, to a lesser extent, mine owners turned to the employment of women – is converted into the raw material for a general law of capitalist development. This conceptual extrapolation requires Marx to write out of history the extent of women's remunerated employment prior to the turn to factory-based production, to gloss over the complex historical processes that hemmed in factory and mine owners' capacity to employ women and children, and to ignore those sectors where the partial turn to the employment of women did not occur (i.e. transportation, craft industries, and machine manufacturing).<sup>36</sup>

Marx's somewhat baffling assertion of the purportedly law-like link between industrialization and feminization reveals, if nothing else, his presumption that labor is properly masculine. In each of the above passages, women's employment is depicted as a degradation of the presumptively masculine labor force, a symptom of capital's unchecked power. These passages give us a clue for a possible interpretation of Marx's above-discussed invocation of the political alignment of employed and unemployed groups: perhaps he was referring to the campaigns that formed over the 1830s and '40s to press for legislative and other measures to restrict the employment of women and children. Such campaigns served the economic and social interests of both waged and unwaged working class men at the expense of working class women's capacity to earn wages and in this way to contest patriarchal family relations. If we follow this line of interpretation, Marx would appear to be arguing that, insofar as women's employment tends to follow from industrialization, the widespread exclusion of women from waged employment since the midcentury must have been an effect of the political combination of employed and unemployed (adult male) workers. In other words, he would be arguing that women's merely *indirect* involvement in the surplus labor force follows from a particular moment of class struggle – a moment that, while not ultimately emancipatory, constitutes a contingent necessity for labor politics.<sup>37</sup>

The historical claims here imputed to Marx do not, however, hold up to scrutiny. As feminist social historians have argued for some time, factory-based industrialization tended to reduce the employment of women, especially married and/or middle-aged women, in part because it separated production from the domestic sphere.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the formal and informal exclusion of women and children from waged employment was not simply an effect of masculinist labor struggle (as consequential as such struggle was), but also followed from ruling class anxieties at the midcentury about the physical degradation of working class children, from inter-capitalist rivalries, and from broader gender discourses of labor and injury that made women's employment in certain roles appear inappropriate.<sup>39</sup> In many industries that were relatively less affected by labor organizing or state regulation – the early railway industry, for one –

women were nonetheless almost never hired. Industrialization was thus not typically associated with the feminization of the waged workforce, the early British textile industry notwithstanding.

Rather, industrialization, especially in its second iteration, corresponded with the systemic exclusion of women from key sectors of industry, and with the taking root of formerly middle class gender norms amongst working class populations. At the midcentury, working class women came to be judged more sharply against the ideal of the housewife, and to be reimagined as subjects responsible for managing, within the domestic sphere, the effects of industrial injury.<sup>40</sup> This was a moment when the social institution of marriage was being adapted in ways that would allow it to organize and to naturalize what was becoming a more gender-polarized division of productive and reproductive labor, and to “house” women who otherwise would have appeared as potentially dangerous constituents of surplus populations.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, this new dispensation of gender and work relations was not without its contradictions. Feminist agitation in late nineteenth-century Britain emphasized the demographic conditions, linked to empire and settler colonialism, that made it impossible for all women to be married, while also challenging the legally sanctioned authoritarianism of husbands.<sup>42</sup> Another contradiction of this post-1848 settlement in gender relations, particularly acute within working class families, was the economic insecurity wives experienced in the event of their husbands’ workplace injury or death. Women were made primarily responsible for the reproduction of working men, both current and future, but could secure no guarantee that such labor would continue providing them with a way to subsist. From this perspective, Marx’s anomalous reference to “the widows” in his list of the pauper class can be read as a veiled, even perhaps unconscious, registration of a larger contradiction in class and gender relations – a contradiction conditioned at once by the unsafety of industrial labor and by prevailing gender divisions of labor, which elsewhere he seems to endorse. In this way, Marx’s passing reference to the immiseration of working class widows might offer a way to read against the grain his invocation of the combination of employed and unemployed populations. What if we approached this political task in relation to the unemployment and immiseration of working class widows? What forms of organization might have existed, or have been constructed, to link their interests to those of other sectors of the working class?

Initially, it is worth registering the degree to which various techniques of moral improvement and self help, alluded to above, can be understood in these terms, as efforts to address, within the frame of the marriage relation, working class women’s exposure to immiseration in the event of a husband’s workplace injury. Such techniques of improvement linked the waged industrial worker to the dispossessed widow across the divide of his death. In particular, savings, life insurance, and benefit fund schemes were promoted to wage-earning men as means to ensure at least a modicum of income to women in the event of their being widowed. Ultimately, of

course, these means proved wholly inadequate. The contradiction that resulted from women's dependence upon husbands who themselves were exposed to injury at work thus could not be managed within the frame of the marriage relation, and imposed itself on other nineteenth-century social institutions, from workhouses to trade unions. However, into the twentieth century, effective institutional responses to the crisis of working class women's insecurity remained elusive.

Such elusiveness was partly an effect of the temporal dynamics of injury and immiseration: women faced a loss of income in the aftermath of their husbands' accidental deaths, when the indirect connections they had maintained with their husbands' employers, unions, benefit funds, and friendly societies were newly precarious, if not severed outright. The conditions faced by a given widow were largely determined by the degree to which she could effectively assert a continuing obligation on the part of one or more of these sources, or could secure access to other sources of income from surviving family members, from a new spouse, or from waged employment.<sup>43</sup> But at least in terms of sources linked to her former husband, she was at risk of appearing undeserving, a residual obligation to be cast off in order that these institutions might maintain balanced accounts. In this sense, industrial widows were not unlike severely injured men, scorned by former employers and inhabiting, in Marx's words, "the hospital of the active labour-army." Those affected by industrial injuries appeared as revenants in the eyes of institutions oriented toward productive labor, most notably company management and state bureaucracies, but also at times workers' organizations, such as trade unions and friendly societies. From this perspective, Marx's proposal for associations between the employed and the unemployed – including terminally unemployed paupers – would also suggest the establishment of relations that could mediate discrete temporal experiences, linking those caught up (directly or indirectly) in the daily routines of waged labor to those indefinitely cast out of such routines and thus living in a kind of *afterwardsness*.<sup>44</sup>

*Capital's* concluding chapter thus draws forward a form of spectrality specific to surplus labor – the *living on* of industry's victims. In doing so, the text echoes back to its introductory musings on the spectral quality of commodities – a spectrality figured forth by a strangely animated wooden table that seems to have appeared out of the recent past. The table, like the working class widow, appears as a revenant. The spectral figure of the widow stalks Marx's *Capital*, gesturing toward the living-on of industry's victims, while also implicitly raising flags over the exclusions built into Marx's political program. In the closing section to follow, I will turn finally to the wooden table's association with midcentury British spiritualism, thinking further about how Marx's engagements with questions of spectrality and temporal disjunction constitute important – if sometimes under-realized – elements of his materialist project, and about how such engagements enable a reflexive engagement in his work with the unsettledness of the conjunctures through which he lived and with the limits of his own political project.

### Remnants of Past Defeats

The historicizing footnote Marx attaches to his description of a dancing wooden table invites the reader to “recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still – *pour encourager les autres* [in order to encourage the others].”<sup>45</sup> The footnote draws the reader back to 1853, when Marx published an overly-optimistic article about the Taiping Rebellion and when, in the industrial West Yorkshire town of Keighley, a group of former Owenites established a spiritualist circle. By the time *Capital* was published in 1867, the Taiping Rebellion had been defeated, partly as a result of British intervention in support of the Qing government. The spiritualist movement, on the other hand, had grown dramatically. While in 1867 the spiritualist movement would have appeared successful, at its origin British spiritualism was also shadowed by political defeats. By the early 1850s, Owenism had been marginalized within working class movements, in part because its critical orientation to patriarchal marriage put it at odds with working class leaders’ desire, following the 1834 Poor Law amendment, to assert the respectability of working class families.<sup>46</sup> The Keighley spiritualists’ early writings evince an effort to reckon with political defeat and with their distance from what had become a central stream of working class politics.

In 1855 the Keighley spiritualists began publishing a penny periodical, the *Yorkshire Spiritual Telegraph*. The periodical’s title suggests that this group understood their ritual practices to be at home in an emerging, modern world, crisscrossed by telegraph and railway lines. Perhaps they had in mind the similarity between the “rapping” of telegraph signal machines and the table rapping techniques they promoted. The early episodes of the *Telegraph* describe how the group of Keighley spiritualists learned how to converse with a number of spirits – in particular the late Scottish poet, Robbie Burns – through the mediation of a wooden table and writing implements: “We may say, indeed, that we have seen [the spirit of Robbie Burns] manifest an intelligence in moving tables, giving and solving riddles, giving advice, poetry, medical prescriptions, and a variety of other things, not only equal to, but quite superior to that of our most acute and intelligent friends.”<sup>47</sup> In the early articles of the *Yorkshire Spiritual Telegraph*, Robbie Burns is generally presented as respectable spirit who encourages his mediums and, by extension, *Telegraph* readers, to undertake practices characteristic of midcentury forms of moral improvement, such as temperance, the pursuit of useful knowledge, and a reserved form of religiosity.<sup>48</sup> But Burns also manifests an iconoclastic streak, communicating strident challenges to Christian dogma and spinning allegories of class conflict. This oppositional side of the Keighley spirit was more in keeping with the historical figure purportedly communicating, through a rattling wooden table, with this West Yorkshire grouping. Robbie Burns had been a peasant farmer and poet, whose late life coincided with the French Revolution. Persecuted for his pro-Jacobin commitments, he also retrospectively might have appeared out of step with the mainstream of midcentury working class politics for

his having had multiple, longstanding romantic affairs. The Keighley spiritualists' elevation of Burns' spirit to the status of oracle, more perspicacious than "our most acute and intelligent friends," can be understood at once as an attempt to reclaim a national figure for the Left, and as a challenge to mainstream British working class leaders' acquiescence to the broader reactionary response to the French uprisings of 1848 and to a new, marriage-centered morality.<sup>49</sup>

The figure of Robbie Burns offered a way for a group of former Owenites to grapple with recent rightward turns in British working class culture and politics – to both find in the past some inspiration for holding out against this rightward turn and to confront the present with the unrecognized radicalism of an otherwise sanitized national past. Their resuscitation of Robbie Burns was driven by impulses similar to those manifested by Marx in his citation of these wayward Owenites' spiritualist experiments and in his reference to the then-defeated Taiping Rebellion. For Marx in 1867, as for the Keighley spiritualists in 1853, the aim was to unsettle the present and to draw from the past a sense of possible futures. As much as Marx wanted in *Capital* to anatomize an emergent order of social relations, he also sought to demonstrate how this order was haunted, not only by the specter of communism, but also by specters of pauperism, of dead labor, of capital's violent birth, and of provisionally defeated nineteenth-century rebellions. For Marx, capital's present was troubled by its unworked through pasts. The task Marx set for communists of his time was to find ways of articulating temporally non-identical formations – injured former workers and their employed neighbors, or geographically dispersed workers in industries with varying levels of productivity and forms of labor discipline – in forging a spectral communism.

Of course, there was also a certain irony in Marx's conjuring of the Keighley spiritualists. In 1853, these former Owenites melancholically refused to accept their marginalization from an increasingly patriarchal working class movement – a movement that recently had sought legislation excluding women from industrial labor. As we have seen, Marx considered such legislation a contingent necessity and a model for the sorts of alliance between waged and unwaged workers he advocated in *Capital's* concluding chapter. Given Marx's apology for the exclusion of women from waged work, we might read his allusion to the Keighley spiritualists as an act of unconscious self-criticism. Perhaps Marx conjured the ghosts of Owenites so that these specters from the recent past might indict his text for its patriarchal moments, and for how *Capital*, in its discussion of working class organization, concedes too much to what *is*, rather than holding out for what *ought* to be.

### Conclusion

I have attempted in this essay to provide an at once historicist and figural reading of the dancing table that Marx brings on stage in his opening chapter of *Capital*. The wooden table situates *Capital* in relation to its immediate past, evoking Marx's



initially optimistic reading of the Taiping rebellion, as well as the melancholic midcentury labors of the Keighley spiritualists. The rattling table, which appears through a complex play of metaphor, also highlights key interventions and impasses of the three volume critical project that it helps introduce. The table, with its wooden brain, evokes Marx's interest in reading the social relations of class congealed in everyday commodities, but also poses questions of temporal unevenness and sensuous materiality that push to its limits the theoretical and political project of Marx's text. *Capital* is a splintered text, pulled apart by the varied strains of materialism that course through its pages: the wooden table figures forth the text's non-identity with itself.

I have thus read Marx's wooden table as a figure that enables a certain amount of critical and historical reflexivity. The table is, after all, a well-worn figure of reflexive writing. As Sara Ahmed notes, to draw a table into a text is to put on display the most directly consequential material support for the writing process itself.<sup>50</sup> We might think here of the wooden table at the British Museum upon which Marx is said to have written *Capital*. While conventional in this respect, Marx's reflexive putting on display of the writing table nevertheless manifests a certain deflection from the immediate materiality of the table – a deflection that tells us something about his critical practice. For one thing, the table Marx brings to view is not present for the writing process itself, but instead is branded, via a footnote, with the year 1853. Even at its moment of composition, the table is thus out of date. Not only is the table itself somewhat anachronistic, but through its allusions to spiritualism and imperial trade relations, not to mention a two-thousand-year philosophical lineage, the dancing table also opens up broader questions of temporal contradiction and unevenness, of the tensions of abstraction and concretion, of historical closure and contingency. As Derrida might say, the table indicates that the time from which it emerges is out of joint. This contradictory quality of time, particularly for those caught up in industrial circuits of labor, forms a central preoccupation of Marx's later works. Marx seeks out in such contradictions possibilities for class composition and social transformation, despite the seemingly fixed quality of midcentury class relations, and despite an ever-mounting record of historical defeats. Perhaps a certain spirit of this undertaking speaks to our present, with its own dynamics of fracture and its own specters of the recent past.

### Notes

1. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990 [1976]) 163-4.
2. Marx, *Capital* 164.
3. Logie Barrow, "Socialism in Eternity: The Ideology of Plebian Spiritualists, 1853-1913," *History Workshop*, 9 (Spring, 1980) 40.
4. Karl Marx, "Revolution in China and in Europe," *New York Daily Tribune* (June 14, 1853). Emphasis added.
5. Such a historicist reading of *Capital* parallels the reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that Rebecca Comay offers in *Mourning Sickness*. Comay argues that Hegel's early work ruminates, in a melancholic vein, upon the recent containment of the French Revolution's emancipatory potentials. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Redwood City: Stanford UP, 2010).
6. Spiritualism reached a high point of its popularity in 1860s Britain. Nicola Brown and Carolyn Burdett, eds., *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004). For discussions of spiritualism's subsequent influence in British culture, see: Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
7. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 253-265.
8. Sigmund Freud, "The Dream-Work," *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2015 [1913]). "The first thing which becomes clear to the investigator in the comparison of the dream content with the dream thoughts is that a tremendous work of condensation has taken place. The dream is reserved, paltry, and laconic when compared with the range and copiousness of the dream thoughts.... As a rule the extent of the compression which has taken place is under-estimated, owing to the fact that the dream thoughts which are brought to light are considered the complete material, while continued work of interpretation may reveal new thoughts which are concealed behind the dream. We have already mentioned that one is really never sure of having interpreted a dream completely; even if the solution seems satisfying and flawless, it still always remains possible that there is a further meaning which is manifested by the same dream. Thus the *amount of condensation* is—strictly speaking—indeterminable."
9. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, James Morris Whiton, *A lexicon abridged from Liddell & Scott's Greek English lexicon* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891) 725.
10. Derrida writes that "One would have to put this table on the auction block, subject it to co-occurrence or concurrency, make it speak with so many other tables in our patrimony, so many that we have lost count of them, in philosophy, rhetoric, poetics, from Plato to Heidegger, from Kant to Ponge, and so many others. With all of them, the same ceremony: a séance of the table." Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Camuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) 151.
11. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker, ed. (New York and London: Norton, 1978) 597.
12. Marx, *Capital* 544-545.

13. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press) 336-349.
14. Marx, *Capital* 545.
15. Marx, *Capital* 620-631.
16. James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009). James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014) 32.
17. Marx, *Capital* 783.
18. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1993) 368-9.
19. Cf. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).
20. Raphael Samuel, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop*, 3 (Spring, 1977) 37.
21. Marx, *Capital* 163-4.
22. On "new materialisms," see: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).
23. Karl Marx, "The Chapter on Capital; Notebook VII, End of Feb, March. End of May - Beginning of June 1858," *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993 [1973]) 699.
24. Marx, Economic Works of Karl Marx, 1861-1864, *Marx Engels Collected Works*, 34, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: International Publishers, 1975).
25. According to this approach to the text, the section on original accumulation is more a coda than a conclusion.
26. Marx, *Capital* 793-4.
27. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker, ed. (New York and London: Norton, 1978) 597.
28. Even though Marx does make a reference to the lumpenproletariat in *Capital*, his positive account of the possibilities for alliance between unemployed and employed populations cuts against his overwhelmingly negative treatment of marginal urban populations in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. In this way, a consideration of Capital's concluding chapter would put in question Laclau's critique of Marx on the basis of his incapacity to think the so-called lumpenproletariat — and generally unemployed populations — in any but negative terms. Cf. Ernesto Laclau, "Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics," *Critical Inquiry* 32:4 (2006) 646-680; Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
29. Marx, *Capital* 797.
30. Marx, *Capital* 797.
31. Anonymous, "House-Keeping Accounts", *The Family Economist*, Vol. 4 (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1851) 3-5; Anonymous, "Household Furniture", *The Family Economist*, Vol. 4 (1851) 61-2, 102-3; Francis Plimley, "Letters to Working Men, No. 2, The Benefits of Life Insurance", *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor*, Vol. 3 (London: Cassell, 1853) 42-3.
32. Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man 1830-1850* (London: Oxford UP, 1963) 39-40; Penelope Ismay, "Between Providence and Risk: Odd Fellows, Benevolence and the Social Limits of Actuarial Science, 1820s-1880s, *Past and Present*, 226 (Feb. 2015); Simon Cordery, *British Friendly Societies, 1750-1914*

- (Palgrave, 2003); Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840-1880* (London: Routledge, 2016 [1978]).
33. Anonymous, "House-Keeping Accounts", *The Family Economist*, Vol. 4 (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1851) 3-5. On the remaking of gender relations in British working class communities at the midcentury, see: Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Wally Seccombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (London: Verso, 1993); Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (New York: The New Press, 1999 [1968]) 96-8. On the intimate violence perpetrated by men against women that accompanied the reconstruction of working class domestic norms, see: Nancy Tomes, "A 'Torrent of Abuse': Crimes of Violence between Working-Class Men and Women in London, 1840-1875", *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring, 1978) 328-345.
  34. Marx, *Capital* 788.
  35. Marx, *Capital* 799.
  36. See: Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*; Robert Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).
  37. This reading suggests that Marx's implicit reflections in *Capital* concerning restrictions on women's employment depart from his and Engels' dialectical critique of bourgeois family morality in the *Manifesto*. There are, however, traces of this dialectical critique in *Capital*, as for instance in Marx's insistence that: "However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes.... It is also obvious that the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker" (620-1). As much as this passage would seem to contain a thread, however thin, of feminist sense, Marx follows this passage with an argument for the necessity of the "generalization of the Factory Acts, for transforming them from exceptional laws relating to mechanical spinning and weaving — those first creations of machinery — into the general law for all social production" (a necessity that he suggests imposed itself upon state and capital, given the powers of [adult male] working class organization and the distortions introduced by the initial partiality of these acts). Thus, as much as Marx appears to want to hold onto a vision of gender equality in a future communist organization of social production, he also embraces the "necessity" of gender (and age) restrictions of employment under capitalism, as part of a larger dynamic of industrial regulation (See: 620-631).
  38. For an early articulation of this position, see: Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly, "Women's Work and

- the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17:1 (Jan., 1975) 36-64.
39. Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England*; Wally Seccombe, “Patriarchy Stabilized” 53-76.
  40. In Marx’s brief allusions to gendered reproductive labor, we can see traces of this midcentury conception of working class women’s responsibility for managing the injuries of their husbands. In Chapter Six of *Capital*, Marx frames the lower limit of subsistence in terms of the line separating the “normal quality” of labor power from its “crippled state” [verkümmertes Form]. Marx, *Capital* (1990 [1976]), pp. 274-7. On the modeling of gendered reproductive labor on the work of nursing, see: Amanda Armstrong, *Infrastructures of Injury*, Diss (University of California, Berkeley, 2015).
  41. For a source demonstrating the midcentury bourgeois fear of working class women involved in sexual and economic exchanges with multiple men at once, see: Anon, “Moral and Physical Evils in Connection with Railway Works,” *Manchester Guardian*, Saturday, March 7, 1846.
  42. See, for example: Josephine Butler, ed., *Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1869); Jane Rendall, “Recovering Lost Political Cultures: British Feminisms, 1860-1900,” *Women’s Emancipation Movements in the Nineteenth Century: A European Perspective*, ed. Sylvia Paletschek (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005) 33-52.
  43. Cf. Seccombe, *Weathering the Storm*.
  44. Marx’s work on industrial injury might offer a point of entry for thinking together psychoanalytic and historical materialist categories. We will recall that Freud’s theories of trauma were constructed in part out of reflections on the wartime phenomenon of shell shock, and that his early research was influenced by work on *railway spine*. And, as I hope to show, Marx’s engagement with the phenomenon of industrial injury can be linked to his broader interest in spectral phenomena, thus drawing the key Marxian categories of commodity, capital, labor, and value into relation with the structurally injurious, traumatic qualities of modern life.
  45. Marx, *Capital* 164.
  46. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1993 [1984]).
  47. *Yorkshire Spiritualist Telegraph*, Vol 1 (1855) 4.
  48. *Yorkshire Spiritualist Telegraph*, Vol 1 (1855) 4, 16. See also: Logie Barrow, “Socialism in Eternity: The Ideology of Plebian Spiritualists, 1853-1913,” *History Workshop*, 9 (Spring, 1980) 37-69.
  49. For the response, within British working class movements, to the June days of 1848, see Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, “Preface to the English Edition” (Moscow: Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1969 [1887, 1845]). “The French Revolution of 1848 saved the English middle-class. The Socialistic pronouncements of the victorious French workmen frightened the small middle-class of England and disorganised the narrower, but more matter-of-fact movement of the English working-class. At the very moment when Chartism was bound to assert itself in its full strength, it collapsed internally before even it collapsed externally on the 10th of April, 1848. The action of the working-class was thrust into the background. The capitalist class triumphed along the whole line.”
  50. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006) 25-65, 164-8.



## To Compare Otherwise: Immanence, Totality, and the Crisis of Capital

Shaoling Ma

Dialectical thought is therefore profoundly comparative in its very structure, even in its consideration of individual, isolated types of objects.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the *world market*, the connection of the *individual with all*, but at the same time also the *independence of this connection from the individual*, have developed to such a high level that the formation of the world market already at the same time contains the conditions for going beyond it.) *Comparison* in place of real communality and generality.<sup>2</sup>

Few today would disagree that the field of comparative literary studies expanded and reinvented itself thanks to the intense globalization of the last two decades. As one of its most celebrated critics puts it, comparative literary studies can be "ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of world capitalism."<sup>3</sup> Yet, ideological critique aside, no one has asked the epistemological question of what it means for comparison, as a specific application of an intellectual approach or method, to work *like* capital. And if there indeed exists a link between intellectual comparisons and the value-form of capital, is it possible to compare otherwise, which is to say, to mobilize comparison for a critique of global capital?

Comparison, to ventriloquize what Frederic Jameson says of capital, is "a totalizing or systemic concept: no one has ever met or seen the thing itself."<sup>4</sup> Like capital, comparison is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. I focus on comparative literature — and not other forms of comparative study such as comparative history, comparative politics, or comparative philosophy — because it is my trained discipline. The more compelling reason, however, is that comparative literature's reflexive and methodological attention to the units of comparison, that is, the relation, distance, and scale between texts and the world — between the objects of comparison and other social processes — mobilizes the same kind of dialectical thinking with which

Marx analyzes the immense wealth of societies starting from the form of appearance of value in a commodity's relation with another commodity. On the level of form, the comparative relation corresponds to the exchange relation as a social relation premised on equivalence as well as contradiction. As to whether the different aspects or forms of appearances of labor, which make any two commodities comparable in Marx's theory of value is also that which drives intellectual comparisons, we will have to look no further than the *comparability* — let us, when we can, abandon the vague term “relation” — between cultural and literary comparisons and the economic world of comparisons. When this comparability proves itself to be viable up to a certain limit, that is also when intellectual comparisons come into its own as critique.

The kind of comparison I have in mind is thus an immanent one, which, in Moishe Postone's formulation, evaluates its own conceptual position in relation to and not outside of its object, and ground the possibility of its existence in its social, and in this case, disciplinary context.<sup>5</sup> Disagreements between comparative literature and world literature scholars over the conceptualization of totality, whether the latter takes the name of the world, globe, planetarity, *mondialization*, or *Tout-monde*, to give but a few examples, reveal false distinctions insofar as they rely on comparative thought as itself the constitution of a self-organizing and self-referential totality.

I take as my first case study Ursula K. Heise's recent article “Globality, Difference and the International Turn in Ecocriticism,” where she identifies in broad strokes two comparative approaches, namely the noncentric or deconstructive and the systemic, which both center on the problem of the world and global capital as a totalizing structure but with opposing views on what to do with totality's “other,” that is, difference. For comparatists who develop “overarching models and methods” in order to explain global systems, networks, and cultural economies — Heise includes works such as Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism; Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, and Franco Moretti's contributions to world literature; and John Guillory and James English's studies of cultural economy — cultural difference, while important, is secondary to their accounting and explanation of the structural coherence of such systems.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, comparatists who focus on socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, linguistic, or national difference tend to analyze global capital in terms of how it exploits and intensifies difference.<sup>7</sup> Theorists in this group range from postcolonial luminaries such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Walter D. Mignolo, to cultural theorists as varied as Paul Gilroy, Timothy Brennan, Simon Gikandi, Xiaomei Chen, Sibylle Fischer, Ramón Saldívar, David Palumbo-Liu, and Bruce Robbins.<sup>8</sup> Without being an exhaustive account of the state of the field, Heise's categorization, however schematic, serves to show how differing emphasis on globality or difference on the level of content corresponds to the form or method of presentation of the theoretical work itself. Hence, whereas Casanova's world republic of letters is a “complex but well-defined network,” Spivak's planetarity “remains frustratingly but deliberately vague, since the construction of a planetary whole beyond the inequalities



of colonialism, in her argument, is a task yet to be accomplished.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet, it is never as if an either/or choice marks existing debates on totality and difference: poststructuralism’s concern with difference operates as a Derridean supplement — as both accretion and substitution — to the comparative discipline’s engagement with totality. At the same time, Nicholas Brown reminds us that totality — far from eliminating all contingency and complexity as an erroneous association with totalitarianism might imply — is the “precondition” for understanding difference.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the divide continues to sharpen. Eric Hayot, in *On Literary Worlds*, introduces the categories of “generic” and “material” totality to account for the opposition between world-systems theorists and the disciplinary discourse of comparative literature, which “aims for a frame for the act of comparison and the problem of human literary history that is as expansive and non-Eurocentric as possible.”<sup>11</sup> Their oscillation between a “generic” and “material” totality is reflected in the definition of the word “world” itself as both an “ontological reference” to self-enclosed wholes and a “material reference” to the largest possible.<sup>12</sup>

The problem with the framing of these debates is that it overlooks how the possibility of a relation between totality or globality and its individual units, and that between materiality and the non-material, are inherently comparative. In a recent essay, Natalie Melas, who wants to have, to pun, the best of both worlds, argues for totality or structured wholes as a material condition and structuring reality without the grand, systematizing methods of comparison popular in the nineteenth century, which the recent computational turn inspired by Franco Moretti’s quantitative and collaborative scholarship in the Stanford Literary Lab risks reproducing.<sup>13</sup> Following Glissant’s *Tout-monde*, Melas’ notion of the “merely comparative” is first and foremost “relationality as such... the condition of existing in the midst of the co-presence of all the cultures in the *Tout-monde*”<sup>14</sup> Whereas European colonialism determines the standard of evaluation within “a totality of discrete cultures occupying distinct and knowable territorial units” effected by a knowing subject’s distinct, voluntary act of comparison, decolonization puts in its place a comparative condition or a mode of being both “symbolic” and “unconscious/unknown,” which disrupts the power dynamics of the subject-object.<sup>15</sup> The *tout-monde*, or relationality as such is less a determinant as it is the “merely” necessary condition, the “relativization inherent in the conditions of possibility for narrating the story of the world from any place in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

After making such a distinction between the colonial and decolonizing comparative without denying that even the latter conditions human experience, albeit in “relative” and aporetic fashion, Melas ends her reflections by bringing in another discrete level or modality of comparison. Drawing from Pheng Cheah’s recent essay, the author shows that her evocation of the “merely comparative” has to adhere to larger comparative structures and processes that create the material conditions of the capacity for ethical comparison in the first place.<sup>17</sup>

Because the biopolitical ethos of late capitalist globalization, based as it is on the quantification of life, is intrinsically inclusive, recent intellectual comparative projects, according to Cheah, cannot be presumed to resist it and can indeed be construed as complementary epiphenomena, easily accommodated into its infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

Glissant's critique of the colonial standard of evaluating the totality of cultures and territorial units is certainly a precursor (or accompaniment, depending on how one reads the "post") to what Cheah calls the "postindustrial comparison machine."<sup>19</sup> Yet, how and with what certainty does one assign "intellectual comparative projects" — or anything intellectual, since Cheah also includes here literature — to the level of epiphenomena in the first place?<sup>20</sup> What exists, indeed, what is the relation or comparative condition between the material, infrastructural comparison machine and "recent intellectual comparative projects" as wide-ranging as Melas' "merely comparative" without method or mastery and the resurgence of comparative methods such as the computational turn inspired by Moretti's quantitative and collaborative scholarship?<sup>21</sup> Where does one side's conception of totality begin and another's end?

It should be of little surprise that we find ourselves on the scarred battlegrounds of cultural critique that is the notorious question of the relationship between the base and superstructure, this time reframed as that between the materialist-comparative base and the cultural-epiphenomenal-comparative superstructure. Not only do both levels operate comparatively on their own terms; the similarity and difference between them indicate a comparative relation to the second power, a comparison about comparing itself.<sup>22</sup> The more notorious a concept like base-superstructure is, the more telling it is, Jameson claims, that demands for its decent burial comes from the family members themselves, as evident in recurring critiques in the Marxist tradition.<sup>23</sup> Engels' "reciprocal interaction," Raymond Williams' mobilization of Gramsci's hegemony, Althusser's "overdetermination", just to name a few, have tried to find a substitute to the base-superstructure relationship rather than do away with it altogether.<sup>24</sup> The history of these intellectual attempts show that it is high time to understand base-superstructure less as a "theory in its own right, but rather the name for a problem, whose solution is always a unique, ad hoc invention."<sup>25</sup> I have tried to show that debates over the units of comparison, which determine how one conceives of totality, are never innocent but in fact intervene directly in their comparative relation. To be sure, there will always be weak solutions that range from the valorizing of an inevitable, causal law of economic determinism or a mystical autonomy of the cultural. Regardless, "[i]t is when one has decided in advance that the relationship to be thus established is no longer an interesting or important question that we may speak, using one of Adorno's cautionary fragment in *Minima Moralia*, of throwing the baby out with the bathwater."<sup>26</sup>

At this point, I am reminded of Edward Said's observation in *Orientalism* more

than thirty years ago that North American Marxist literary studies have successfully avoided the task of “bridging the gap between the superstructural and the base levels in textual, historical scholarship” is, for good or for bad, still resonant today.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps a reason for such avoidance has less to do with the base-superstructure relationship but the nature of the base and superstructure in the first place. The “base,” Williams claims, has too often been regarded abstractly and unvaryingly as some site of economic production consisting of the real social existence of men. Marx’s emphasis of the base, however, in terms of the *process* and not a static state of productive activities, which constitute the foundation of all other activities, is neither static nor uniform but deeply contradictory in its structural relationship with other social activities.<sup>28</sup>

Cultural materialism therefore complicates Cheah’s schema of the materialist-comparative base and the cultural-epiphenomenal-comparative superstructure by revisiting the entire definition of “productive” forces or work. The example Williams gives is that of the pianist, who unlike the piano maker and the man who distributes the piano is not a productive worker in the Marxist analysis of capitalist commodity production, and hence has no place in the metaphorical notion of the base.<sup>29</sup> Yet, considered from Marx’s more complex notion of productive forces whereby “the most important thing a worker ever produces is himself, himself in the fact of that kind of labor, or the broader historical emphasis of men producing themselves, themselves and their history,” it is possible to reinvigorate the whole question of the “base” with its figurative implication of a fixed spatial relationship as quite literally, “basic,” that is, in a broader sense of the primary production of society itself.<sup>30</sup> Correspondingly, the term superstructure defines a dynamic range of cultural practices rather than a “reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content” to be dismissed as merely secondary.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas Cheah offers little in terms of a dynamic reconceptualization of the base-superstructure relationship other than an insistence on the imbrication of epiphenomenal comparisons in infrastructural comparisons, Williams would likely insist that such imbrication changes the units of comparison and their interrelationships. In his words, “[a] society is not fully available for analysis until each of its practices is included,”<sup>32</sup> and I maintain that intellectual work and cultural theory, which attempt such analysis also be seen as one of its practices. It bears to repeat that the notion of social totality in the Marxist tradition from Jameson’s project on the unconscious representation or allegorical investments of totality to Brown’s argument for postcolonial literature’s utopianism in representing the unrepresentable totality, is an incomplete one necessary to the historicization of the role of culture under global capital.<sup>33</sup> A critique of how intellectual comparison also conditions the “economic” comparative “base” must thus presuppose the very incompleteness of the concept of the world or social totality because an expanded definition of labor as productive forces demands so. Turning now to Marx, the kind of comparison he

conducts does not isolate the economic from cultural or ethical worlds but negotiates between related and yet competing visions of social totality.

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“A culturalism that disavows the economic in its global operations cannot get a grip on the concomitant production of violence.”<sup>34</sup>

Whether it is discussing accumulation, contradiction, social relation, historical development, or conflict, Marx’s analysis of capital carries out some of the principle activities of comparison. The first few pages of the first volume of *Capital* address the discipline’s fundamental and at the same time enigmatic task: namely, how to abstract from two things a corresponding value or unit of analysis that can then be interpreted in varying contexts. A preliminary response by way of Marx’s inquiry into the exchange relation is intriguing to say the least: comparison must be able to represent two commodities in a “third thing, which is in itself neither the one nor the other”; a “common something” that cannot be a “geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property” of the two things compared.<sup>35</sup>

The value-form, or the form of appearance of value is the common factor represented in the exchange relation, but value is not what makes two things comparable. In the language of *Capital*, values are the “crystals” of “congealed quantities of homogenous human labor.”<sup>36</sup> Commodity exchange is the exchange of equivalents — as values — but what drives their comparability is their “phantom-like objectivity” as products of labor. In *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx challenges the notion that “commodities could be directly compared with one another as products of social labor” when they are “only comparable as the things they are ... [as] the direct products of isolated independent individual kinds of labor,” that is, as private, concrete labor in its different, specific forms.<sup>37</sup> Yet, comparison through exchange results in the universal alienation or abstraction of individual kinds of labor as social labor, not because the process of exchange bestows a “social form on hitherto private labor but that it brings out the social character which is already latent, albeit bringing it out in a fetishized form, as a ‘social relation between things.’”<sup>38</sup> The two-fold nature of labor embodied in commodities — social/abstract labor and private/concrete labor — must neither be seen as concepts for different kinds of labor nor different stages of labor but concepts for different aspects of labor.<sup>39</sup>

It is these different aspects or forms of appearances of labor, its “social character,” which make any two commodities comparable. Comparison, because it *begins* from the premise that commodities are “the direct products of isolated independent individual kinds of labor” and *arrives* at the abstraction of individual kinds of labor as social labor, grasps the movement of value embodied in a commodity as a social relation. Comparison does not alter things but changes the way they appear to us: “since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their

labor, the specific social characteristics of their private labor appear only within this exchange.”<sup>40</sup>

While commodity exchange is an exchange of equivalents, it is premised on contradictions at different stages of its development. When a commodity represented as relative value meets another that serves as equivalent, the two “mutually condition” while at the same time exclude each other as “opposed extremes.”<sup>41</sup> Comparability through exchange consistently produces value as an *internal* opposition, as both use-value and exchange-value within a single commodity; yet such an opposition is only manifest when it is in a value-relation or an exchange relation with *another* commodity.<sup>42</sup> The external opposition between two commodities whereby one counts directly as use-value and another as exchange-value is in fact a representation of an internal opposition, which — and this is the paradox — does not exist in the first place if the commodity is looked at in isolation.<sup>43</sup> In other words, an individual commodity’s inherent incomparability with itself is both the basis and consequence of its comparison with something else, which promises equivalence-as-opposition.

By giving the Hegelian logic of the identity of identity and difference its concrete and social character through exchange, Marx’s proverbial inversion of Hegel’s dialectical thinking of totality emphasizes exchangeability less as an individual, *ad hoc* process but a larger, unspoken rule governing the “immense collection of commodities” that “make up the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails.”<sup>44</sup> Exchangeability does not hinge on a single, isolated act that reduces commodities to a common element of equitability since, as Diane Elson explains, Marx is not arguing from a formal, ahistorical concept of exchange but from a precise *social* relation, namely, capitalist commodity exchange.<sup>45</sup> That two commodities as different as corn and iron can be reduced to a “third thing” or “common something” is not a result of one individual act of exchange but a *general exchangeability* of every commodity with every other commodity. This is why the exchange relation does not rely on use-value, the physical or natural property of commodities but on exchange values for “other commodities in the most diverse proportions.”<sup>46</sup> A commodity, by definition, is interchangeable with other commodities even if it has not actually exchanged with any of them.

Hence, we hardly have to wait for Cheah’s demarcation of the biopolitical ethos of late-capitalist globalization to see that because of the exchange relation at the heart of the capitalist value-form, larger, more general comparative structures and processes condition all intellectual comparisons. This does not mean that subjective acts are non-existent. After all, it would be ridiculous, Marx reminds us, to imagine that commodities, without their guardians, can go to the market and perform exchanges.<sup>47</sup> “But insofar as the exchange-values appear to be ‘given’ to each commodity owner it is a general social process which takes place ‘behind the backs’ of the commodity owners.”<sup>48</sup> Like the comparative relation between individual and systemic units of comparison that I have been tracing in Heise, Hayot, Melas, and Cheah, the exchange

relation is first and foremost an immanent one, which reflects on comparison as a dialectical process. It critiques its own comparative process just as it assumes the work of comparison between two commodities in particular historical and global contexts. Herein lies their key formal correspondence: if intellectual comparisons take place under the conditions of capitalist comparison, the latter is no mere backdrop but is itself subject to mediating between subjective and general levels of exchangeability.

Exchangeability and therefore comparability are crucial presuppositions of Marx's historical-materialist investigation into production not only as a particular production but a "certain social body, a social subject,"<sup>49</sup> or in Williams' words the "primary production of society itself, and of men themselves, the material production and reproduction of real life."<sup>50</sup> Little surprise that Jameson attributes to "[e]xchange value, then, the emergence of some third, abstract term" between what would otherwise be two incomparable objects, "the primordial form by which identity emerges in human history."<sup>51</sup> More than simply a representation of the value-form, the equivalence of commodities is an "objective expression of a relation between men, a social relation, the relationship of men to their reciprocal productive activity."<sup>52</sup> Marx's theory of value thus has for its object, according to Elson, the "indeterminateness" of labor in its various stages of production and distribution, labor, that is, as "the living, form-giving fire... the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time."<sup>53</sup> And such indeterminateness fuels the incomplete totality of social relations.

For this reason, Elson's contribution towards a broader re-definition of political economy reading is significant beyond its refutation of the labor theory of value.<sup>54</sup> Whereas an "arithmomorphic model" of economy like that employed by proponents of the labor theory of value treats phenomena of the material world like "symbols of arithmetic and formal logic, separate and self-bounded,"<sup>55</sup> Marx prioritizes "the law of their variation... their transition from one form into another, from one series of connections into a different one."<sup>56</sup>

Precisely because of such a view toward the ebb and flow of economic life, a historical-materialist view of comparison acknowledges its own concepts as one-sided abstractions of concrete realities. As "the simplest economic category," exchange value "presupposes population, moreover a population producing in specific relations; as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole."<sup>57</sup> Such a living whole belongs to:

the life processes of definite individuals... not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, *produce materially*, and hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will.<sup>58</sup>

Marx's investigation into the forms of labor expressed in value does not simply begin with comparability-through-exchange. The finished product of analysis, which constructs the totality of social relations in terms of how men produce materially, further compares "totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts" with "the real subject [that] retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before."<sup>59</sup> Hence it is not a matter of simply pointing out that intellectual (what Cheah calls ethical) comparisons practiced by comparative literary studies can never escape the material conditions of infrastructural comparability, but rather, that comparison as such necessarily entails this gap between the world as it appears to us and the world itself.<sup>60</sup>

If social totality cannot be grasped in thought but only through practical action, holding *Capital* as exemplary for comparative studies, it is legitimate to ask whether Marx's analysis of capitalist exchange adequately critiques it. For he is really working backwards from the finished world of comparisons that is the wealth of societies as an immense collection of commodities to individual commodities and their value-form in order to reach the ground of comparison itself. As Marx puts it, "reflection begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready at hand."<sup>61</sup> In tracking comparability in the form of commodity exchange, to what extent does Marx compare *like* capital?

The question can be alternately posed in terms of theory and practice: does a theory of comparison also compare? The recent surge in self-reflexive or disciplinary debates around comparison and comparative literature and cultural studies (both Heise's and Melas' articles appear under *PMLA*'s "theories and methodologies" section) appears to distinguish between theories of comparison and more orthodox works of comparative criticism that "do" the work of comparing one set of cultural objects with another, whether such objects under comparison are organized around national, thematic, temporal, or other criterion. This division, like any division or label, is artificial and problematic since any work of comparative criticism necessarily includes a methodological reflection.<sup>62</sup> That comparative-literary theories remain attractive despite or perhaps because of its lack of a concrete "methodology" has much to do, Ming Xie argues, with the nature of theories in general. "Comparing is to comparison as theorizing is to theory. Something in the comparing, as in theorizing, differs from the result of its own operation — that is, a comparison or a theory."<sup>63</sup> It is safe to agree with Xie that "something" in the practice of comparative literature contributes to our thinking of theory even as there continues to be a paradoxical relationship between the two: "it is the limit of theory that comparativity cannot be grounded theoretically; yet, comparativity lets us see theory as intrinsically comparative."<sup>64</sup>

Xie's insight into theory's "intrinsic" comparativity turns out to be rather compatible with Melas' appeal to the "merely" comparative even though one forceful adjective seems to cancel out the other measured adverb. Is this another variation on the artificial schism between so-called systemic and non-centric approaches

in comparative literature and cultural studies? Is the “ultimate” comparison that which examines totality “as it appears in the head, as a totality of thought” alongside the totality or “world” that “retains its autonomous existence outside the head”?<sup>65</sup> If Marx’s theory of value contests an “arithmomorphic model” of economy, his comparative method no longer simply marks an approach or disciplinary field but an understanding of related but competing notions of social totality in which literature, culture, politics, and economics intersect. This is why efforts to read Marx “textually” by literary critics, one of its most famous instances being Gayatri Spivak’s 1985 essay “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” which defines textuality as a “structural description [which] indicates the work of differentiation (both plus and minus) that opens up identity-as-adequation” can be buttressed by the thinker’s own words: not to repeat the “mistake of the political economist who bases his explanations on some imaginary primordial condition.”<sup>66</sup>

The question of whether a theory of comparison also compares hopefully sharpens another edge in the dialectics of comparison, which confounds the very need to distinguish between one’s object of analysis and analytical category. To return to Marx, it only *appears* that he is working from the finished product of capitalist comparison because the presentation of one’s work has to differ from the process of one’s inquiry. This difference is so commonsensical that it goes without saying, but Marx spills much celebrated ink on the subject in the postface to the second edition.

Inquiry has to appropriate the materials in detail, to analyze their different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back into the ideas, then it might appear as if we have before us an a priori construction.<sup>67</sup>

Substitute comparison for inquiry, and the presentation of its findings, namely, the “inner connection” of “different forms of development” of value-formation *appears* as a mere reflection of capitalist comparison. Marx’s goal at the beginning of *Capital* to investigate capitalist wealth or the “immense accumulation of commodities” starting from the single unit of a commodity unravels the particularities of comparison under capital at the same time as it critiques it.<sup>68</sup> The more rigorous a “practice” of comparison is, the more theoretical it appears as it reflects the “life of the subject-matter.”

Jameson’s persuasion that a “genuinely dialectical criticism must always include a commentary on its own intellectual instruments as part of its own working structure” does more than encourage self-criticism or reflexivity.<sup>69</sup> It judges Marx the comparatist vis-à-vis the larger comparative structures and processes, which form at once the material conditions as well as object of his intellectual work. Can the



thinking of the relation between the comparative superstructure and comparative base — comparison to the second power — constitute the indeterminateness of labor as the primary production of society itself?

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“... the very term superstructure already carries its own opposite within itself as an implied comparison, and through its own construction sets the problem of the relationship to the socio-economic base or infrastructure as the precondition for its completeness as a thought.”<sup>70</sup>

We have almost come full circle to find that the question of the comparability between intellectual comparison and commodity exchange is also that which will, hopefully, allow us to mobilize comparison for a critique of global capital. To do so, “we have to trace the development of the expression of value contained in the value-relation of commodities from its simplest, almost imperceptible outline to the dazzling money-form,” although our eventual aim is not to solve the “mystery of money” but that of comparison.<sup>71</sup> Because the analysis of the development of values in the price or money-form of commodities becomes increasingly problematic and tenuous, and prone to disintegration from its own internal contradictions, the point of capital’s limits — its possibility of crises — marks also the end to comparability between intellectual comparison and the capitalist value-form, and at the same time the beginning of comparison’s possible respite from global capital. This argument in the spirit of its ethical injunctive is not new, typifying to a certain degree Spivak’s vision of comparative literature as the “irony of globalization,” Melas’ focus through postcolonial literature on forms of incommensurability, and Emily Apter’s proposal of untranslatability to battle world literature’s endorsement of cultural equivalence.<sup>72</sup> I depart from these approaches in my critique of capitalist totality from inside and not outside the value-form as well as an insistence on a comparative solution to what is essentially a comparative problem.

Earlier, I demonstrated how it is the two-fold nature of labor embodied in commodities that make any two commodities comparable. The process by which only one aspect of labor, abstract labor gets objectified as the value of a commodity happens through further development of the exchange process resulting in the “visible incarnation” of an universal equivalent, which eventually becomes the measure of all things while itself being outside of comparability. This process begins with the expression of abstract labor in a thing, which is materially different from the commodity being evaluated, and yet common to that particular commodity and all other commodities.<sup>73</sup> Such a commodity — say, a coat — serves as a “bearer of value,” or equivalent form to, say, the linen whose value is reflected as the relative form.<sup>74</sup> (The equivalent form represents a “supra-natural property,” that of a purely social and exchangeable value, while the relative form relies on the commodity’s

natural properties, that is, its use-value.<sup>75</sup> The distinction in these two value-forms constitutes the basic unit of comparison, which, as previously discussed, can only arise from “the joint contribution of the whole world of commodities.”<sup>76</sup> It is crucial to recognize that while this infinite process of direct exchangeability makes the equivalent form the material embodiment of all other commodities, the same process is also premised upon its isolation until the equivalent form is “excluded from the ranks of all other commodities, as being their equivalent.”<sup>77</sup> When such exclusion becomes final, what we have is money as the embodiment of abstract labor and only then does “the uniform relative form of value of the world of commodities attain objective fixedness and general social validity.”<sup>78</sup>

On the one hand, Marx makes no exception for the universal equivalent as a measure of value to be comparable to other forms of value assumed by any commodity; on the other hand, because money also performs the function of the standard of price, it needs to have uniquely specific material qualities, such as being capable of purely quantitative differentiation, of being readily divisible and reassembled.<sup>79</sup> Money, which does not render commodities commensurable, nonetheless embodies in its two-fold nature at the end of a series that shape the prices of commodities, the *form* of commensurability as incommensurable. Hence although price, “being the exponent of the magnitude of a commodity’s value, is the exponent of its exchange-ratio with money, it does not follow that the exponent of this exchange-ratio is necessarily the exponent of the magnitude of the commodity’s value.”<sup>80</sup> The possibility of this incongruity between price and the magnitude of value is requisite for the price-form in order for the latter to serve “adequate[ly] for a mode of production whose laws can only assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities.”<sup>81</sup>

The force behind this incongruity, that is, the relative autonomy of money from the circulation of commodities — proceeds to a “certain critical point [where] their unity violently makes itself felt by producing — a crisis.”<sup>82</sup> Marx’s theory of capital’s limits against which value production becomes precarious is internally consistent to its object because antithesis — “immanent in the commodity between use-value and value, between private labor which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labor, and a particular concrete kind of labor which simultaneously counts as merely abstract universal labor” — can only be immanently grasped in its own terms.<sup>83</sup> After all, “[t]he further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move.”<sup>84</sup>

It may appear that this brief exposition of the development of the money-form has taken us far from the question of the relation between the comparative superstructure and comparative base, unless the real intention is to eventually show that incongruity and thus the possibility of non-identity and crisis are immanent in it. It is far trickier to ascertain the link between the two levels outside of their formal affinity their respective objects of comparison differ in their relation to

capitalist rationalizations. To be sure, the production of certain cultural objects such as original artworks are not subject to the average socially necessary labor time constitutive of commodity value, and therefore cannot be, argues David Brech, “really subsumed” by capital. Yet, depending on what gets compared, commercially reproducible cultural objects, for example, novels and films do not entirely escape the law of value.<sup>85</sup> In Sarah Brouillette’s assessment, “artworks are not ‘non-economic’ so much as defined fundamentally by their unusual relation to the economic sphere.”<sup>86</sup> Basing her observations on Marx’s remarks on Milton and Raphael, she goes on to explain that art and culture are precisely “not the singular achievements of given expressive individual consciousness... but rather the products of practices that are materially, concretely, importantly distinct from capitalist norms.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the distinction between the objects of intellectual comparisons and the commodity under capitalist exchange art must be seen as a material distinction.

It is in the realm of comparison as an academic practice rather than that the general area of artistic production, however, that we see an even more direct redefinition of conceptual thought to its social, material basis. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, studying how principles of thought crucial to Greek philosophy as well as modern natural science originate in and develop in tandem with the exchange abstraction as a particular mode of social interrelationship, refers to this process as “real abstraction.” As Anselm Jappe observes:

The faculty of abstract thinking, *of seizing what is common to several objects without being visible in any of them*, is not a given, a prius, as the idealistic conception of thought has always claimed, but is the result of the existence of real abstractions in the production and reproduction of human life.<sup>88</sup>

Comparison — “seizing what is common to several objects without being visible in any of them” — is as elemental in abstract thinking as it is in the concrete historical conditions of material existence. Like capitalist exchange, intellectual comparisons abstract and objectify; premised upon equivalences and contradictions alike, comparative literature’s concerns with the dialectics between totality and difference mirrors capitalist exchange as a subjective act amidst a more general, social process.

It goes without saying that none of the literature scholars mentioned in the first section of this essay analyze commodities of the linen-and-coat variety produced by wage laborers, yet this does not mean that their academic labor has nothing to do with a broader understanding of economic activity that is, in Jappe’s words, “the production and reproduction of human life.” Adapting Marx’s theory of subsumption for academic labor, Krystian Szadkowski argues that formal and real subsumption are shifting, simultaneous processes rather than sequential ones, and adds to these recognized forms of subsumption two overlooked categories: hybrid and ideal subsumption.<sup>89</sup> Hybrid subsumption explains the ways that financial and commercial

capital control higher education, and ideal subsumption projects a “framework of capitalist production (i.e. its language, logic, technologies) onto higher education” insofar as the latter (at least non-profit making institutions) has not yet conformed to the mode of capitalist production.<sup>90</sup> Precisely because academic labor is not directly productive labor, and yet idealized as productive by encroaching “profit-seeking technologies of control,” its “schizophrenic” existence promotes and intensifies the exploitation of precarious, adjunct labor.<sup>91</sup>

“Theory” today encompasses a wide range of practices, but the general tools of its trade such as “ideological critique, history from below, deconstruction of norms, institutional analysis, race-class-gender inquiry, not to mention classical self-reflection,” Vincent B. Leitch writes, “all mandate investigation of current professional regimes.”<sup>92</sup> Hence it seems both natural and conscientiously necessary that English and Cultural Studies professors like Cary Nelson, Michael Bérubé, and Marc Bousquet count amongst one of the most trenchant theorists of the higher education industry. Marxism is of course the likely ally here; I am proposing that comparative theory, or theories of comparison, be brought into this fold. For a start, viewing works of comparison produced by university researchers in light of academic labor closes the gap between intellectual comparisons and the totality of capitalist production. I am less interested in the exceptionality (or intersectionality) of objects of literature and culture with the commodity form as I am in emphasizing comparability as a social relation, one with the *effect* of abstracting social labor from products of isolated, independent kinds of labor. Just as the equivalence of commodities is an “objective expression of a relation between men, a social relation, the relationship of men to their reciprocal productive activity,” comparison exceeds the reified category of intellectualism or ethics when it more fundamentally describes the conceptualization as well as the concrete reality of the totality of social processes in which what is known as the economic, political, or ideological and cultural relate to one another.<sup>93</sup>

Yet, ultimately, the comparability of intellectual comparison with the capitalist value-form can only go so far: no universal equivalent as that which develops in the dialectical progression of the value-form as the money-form exists for intellectual comparisons. Only a sigh of relief can accompany this truncated relation because either literary comparison isolates one object as the embodiment of all other objects, a supreme standard against which all literatures and cultures could be evaluated, say the “Western” canon or civilization, with the relative autonomy of the circulation of this universal equivalent from all other things resulting in the system’s crisis, or, to move to a higher register, the larger comparative “base” or “infrastructure” so unequivocally determines and structures the comparative “superstructure” until, as its universal equivalent, their unity similarly produces a crisis. The end to comparability thus goes hand in hand with the possibility of crisis in the comparative process.

While the exchange relation has shown in so many ways to be profoundly comparative, it is neither feasible nor favorable for the similarity to proceed to the

point where literary or cultural comparisons could, like the value-form, precipitate in a form of universal equivalent. Far from suggesting with this proposition that men's consciousness is no longer determined by social relations, perhaps it is the very relation between consciousness and social relations that needs to be rethought — from the basis of an order or modality of comparability other than economic exchange. We could learn a few things from Marx's famous use of chemical metaphors in *Capital* where he analyzes the peculiar objectification or materialization of a certain aspect of socially necessary labor-time, that is, the aspect of abstract labor: commodities are merely "congealed quantities of homogenous human labor" and "crystals of this social substance."<sup>94</sup> As Elson explains, socially necessary labor-time does not determine value in "the logical or mathematical sense of an independent variable determining a dependent variable" but "in the sense that the quantity of a chemical substance in its fluid form determines the magnitude of its crystalline or jellied form."<sup>95</sup> The emphasis is rather on determination as a dynamic, two-way process that signals both continuity and discontinuity.

Once again, the principles of immanent critique, which does not have a "logical form independent of the object being investigated, when that object is the context of the argument itself" proves invaluable.<sup>96</sup> Any attempt to find similarities and differences between the worlds of economic exchange and intellectual comparison must reflexively grasp the relation between the two spheres as a comparative problem. (Economic and intellectual spheres are neither perfect nor absolute terms; we have found that they also stand problematically for "base" and "superstructure," "material" and "ethical," and "practice" and "theory".)

To compare otherwise has thus been a shorthand for comparing immanently. I conclude by way of a "practical" solution: if capitalism is the ultimate comparative machine, there is no better place for comparative literature scholars to work through the relation between their own work and the capitalist logic of equivalence and exchange than from the representation of this dialectical relation in literary, cultural, and theoretical texts. The epigraph of this essay excerpted from Marx punctuates my own preliminary effort: comparison, made possible by the world market to connect *and* disconnect the individual maps at the same time the place of "real communality and generality."<sup>97</sup>

### Notes

1. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 45.
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1973) 161.
3. David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.4 (2011) 456. It was Marx and Engels who in their "Manifesto for the Communist Party" first observed the "cosmopolitan character" given to production and consumption by the bourgeoisie, and the rise of world literature from national and local literatures. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 476-77.
4. Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 354. In his *Distant Reading*, Franco Moretti provides an alternative version to Jameson and Damrosch's observation with an emphasis on uneven development. "...like capitalism, *Weltliteratur* is itself one and unequal, and its various components — the world's many national and local literatures — are often thwarted in their development by their position within the system as a whole" (127). See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2015).
5. Qtd. in Neil Larsen, "Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint," *Mediations* 24.2 (2009) 50.
6. Ursula K. Heise, "Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) 637.
7. Heise, "Globality" 637.
8. "Globality" 637.
9. "Globality" 637.
10. Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 9. Brown's dialectical grasp of totality as the "Hegelian identity of identity and difference," as that which gives us access to the radical incompleteness of what appears spontaneously as solid and whole", makes sense not only for the comparative nature of his project on British modernism and African literature, but also for his thinking of the rift between capital and literature. "Complete, self-evident things (say, a commodity, a democracy, a novel) are in fact incomplete and always derive their being from something else (the production cycle, the world economy, the concept and institution of literature)" (10).
11. Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 33.
12. Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* 39.
13. While comparison reigned as a method during Ernest Renan's time as "the great instrument of criticism" through the early twentieth century as a positivist and synthetic program, its popularity waned during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. During this time, comparison-as-method gave way to "scope, or transversal extension in geographic and disciplinary space" in order to mitigate the effects of Eurocentrism, elitism, sexism, racism, nationalism, etc.
14. Natalie Melas, "Merely Comparative," *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) 652.
15. Melas, "Merely Comparative" 654.
16. "Merely Comparative" 654. On the vexed question of historical determinism in Plekhanov, Jameson

suggests that it is perhaps “more a question of a feeling than of a concept... the emotion characteristic of historical understanding as such.” Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 360.

17. In “The Material World of Comparison,” Cheah contrasts the subjective techniques of comparison in Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel to Adam Smith’s analysis of comparison as the operational basis of any healthy political economy (537). Taking Smith’s view of political economy as a backdrop for the emergence of Foucault’s notion of biopower, Cheah defines material processes in terms of technologies directed at the whole population, state power aimed at the maximization of resources, and the precise cultivation of the populations’ overall physical needs as well as intellectual capabilities (536). The essay, in a way, rehearses the opposition between the idealist predication of the subject on consciousness and the materialist predication on labor-power that concerns Spivak in her essay “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value.” Yet, Cheah is curiously silent with regards to Marx’s contribution not just to this dialectics but also to the development of the value-form in being both the analysis and critique of capital’s limit. See Pheng Cheah, “The Material World of Comparison,” *New Literary History* 40.3 (2009) 523-545. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” *Diacritics* 15.4 (1985) 73-93.
18. “Merely Comparative” 658.
19. Qtd. in “Merely Comparative” 658.
20. Cheah defines material processes in biopolitical terms, consisting of technologies aimed at the population, state-controlled processes that increase material well-being, and the overall “milieu” for developing the material-bodily and intellectual needs of both individuals and the general population (536). Cheah is quite content to limit the material, in short, to what “conditions, influences, and shapes any intellectual consciousness,” and in so doing begs the question of the nature of such conditioning and influencing.
21. A possible response implied in Cheah’s essay, since the question above is mine and not his, is the notion of aesthetic-cognitive mapping in novels like Pramoedya’s *Buru Quartet*, José Rizal’s *Noli me tangere* and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, which examines how the mechanisms and technologies of infrastructural comparison work in specific locations and their negative, coercive effects” (Cheah 543). Cognitive mapping serves well as a “spatial analogue” to Althusser’s positive definition of ideology in terms of “the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence,” between individual phenomenological perception and the larger reality of “class relations” on a “global” or “multinational” scale by conscious and unconscious representation (Cheah 542). Yet once determined as an aesthetics — since literature, to recall, is always part of the “postindustrial comparison machine” — cognitive mapping only further begs the question of the relation between cultural and literary comparisons and the totality of material or infrastructural comparability in Cheah’s, and by extension, Melas’ essays.
22. See also Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010) 32 where he argues that the dialectic appears whenever there is a thinking of incommensurability in whatever forms. I take the phrase comparison as thought to the second power from his comment on the dialectical method in *Marxism and Form* 45.
23. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990) 45.
24. Jameson, *Late Marxism* 45.
25. *Late Marxism* 46.
26. *Late Marxism* 47.

27. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House Books, 1979) 13.
28. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005) 33-34.
29. Williams, *Culture and Materialism* 35.
30. *Culture and Materialism* 35.
31. *Culture and Materialism* 34.
32. *Culture and Materialism* 44.
33. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI Pub., 1996). There, Jameson further defines totality in terms of the social or collective: "For it is ultimately always of the social totality itself that it is a question in representation" (4). Since it is impossible to represent social totality, the cognitive or allegorical investment in such a representation will mostly be an unconscious one (9). Any act of comparison as such, do not simply reproduce the various groups or collectives under representation. To be clear, comparisons bring to light an allegorical, non-literal representation of what is in fact impossible to represent completely. For an ambitious overview of the concept of totality in Marxism, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
34. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," *Diacritics* 15.4 (1985) 85.
35. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 127.
36. Marx, *Capital* 128.
37. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, trans., S.W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow; London: Progress ; Lawrence & Wishart, 1981) 85.
38. Diane Elson, "The Value Theory of Labor," *Value: The Representation of Labor in Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015) 146-47.
39. See Elson, "The Value Theory of Labor" 145. While there are overlaps in meaning, abstract does not mean the same as social, or concrete the same as private. It is just that capitalism tends to cancel out the distinctions such that the concrete aspect of labor is privatized, and the social aspect of labor is abstracted.
40. *Capital* 128.
41. *Capital* 139-40.
42. *Capital* 152.
43. *Capital* 152-153.
44. *Capital* 125.
45. *Capital* 152.
46. *Capital* 127.
47. *Capital* 178.
48. "The Value Theory of Labor" 156.
49. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* 86.
50. *Culture and Materialism* 35.
51. *Marxism and Form* 75.
52. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964) 147.
53. *Grundrisse* 361.
54. For an overview of the republication of *Value: The Representation of Labor in Capital* in which Elson's essay



is published, see Joshua Clover, “Value in the Expanded Field,” *Mediations* 29.2 (2016) 161-67. I am grateful for the second anonymous reader who pointed me to Clover’s review.

55. “The Value Theory of Labor” 131.
56. Qtd. in “The Value Theory of Labor” 140.
57. *Grundrisse* 101.
58. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, Together with Marx’s “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy”* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004) 46-47, emphasis added.
59. *Grundrisse* 101.
60. Cheah, “The Material World of Comparison” 543.
61. *Capital* 168.
62. A search in the MLA Bibliography for monographs published under the subject “Comparative Literature” from 2000 to 2014 generates 44 results, while that for monographs with “Comparative Approach[s]” in the same time period produces 33 titles with 22 overlaps. Even while taking into consideration the non-exhaustive and non-systemic nature of these searches, it is possible to induce that Comparative Literature criticism encompasses comparative approaches, while the latter does not need to include the former; the clearest example being Ming Xie’s *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry*, which appears in the second search but not the first. There are of course notable exceptions. Emily Apter’s *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* is clearly theoretically focused but is not categorized under “Comparative Approach.” See Ming Xie, *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry* (London: Continuum, 2011) and Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
63. Ming Xie, “What Does the Comparative do for Theory?” *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) 676.
64. Xie, “What Does the Comparative do for Theory?” 677.
65. *Grundrisse* 101.
66. See “Scattered Speculations” 81; Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin 1992) 323.
67. *Capital* 102.
68. *Capital* 125. See also Neil Larsen, “Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint,” *Mediations* 24.2 (2009) 48-65 where he revisits this old question of immanent critique in *Capital* and touches on a similar point on the separation of “theory” and “text” as a “fallacy of application.”
69. *Marxism and Form* 336.
70. *Marxism and Form* 4.
71. *Capital* 139.
72. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).
73. *Capital* 142.
74. *Capital* 142-43.
75. *Capital* 149.
76. *Capital* 159.
77. *Capital* 160-62.
78. *Capital* 160-62.

79. *Capital* 184.
80. *Capital* 196.
81. *Capital* 196.
82. *Capital* 209.
83. *Capital* 209.
84. *Capital* 198.
85. Sarah Brouillette, "On Art and 'Real Subsumption,'" *Mediations* 29.2 (2016) 170.
86. Brouillette, "On Art and 'Real Subsumption'" 171.
87. "On Art and 'Real Subsumption'" 173.
88. Anselm Jappe, "Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of 'Real Abstraction': A Critique of Production or a Critique of Circulation?," *Historical Materialism* 21.1 (2013) 4.
89. Karen Gregory and Winn Joss, "Marx, Engels and the Critique of Academic Labor," *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 28 (2016) 4.
90. Gregory and Joss, "Marx, Engels and the Critique of Academic Labor" 4.
91. "Marx, Engels and the Critique of Academic Labor" 4-5.
92. Vincent Leitch, "Work Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 31.2 (2005) 291.
93. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* 147.
94. *Capital* 128.
95. "The Value Theory of Labor" 133.
96. Qtd. in Larsen, "Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint" 51.
97. *Grundrisse* 163.

Tamas Nagypal. "Mourning the Loss of a Communist Revolution that Didn't Happen: The Undead Historicity of Italy's *Anni di piombo* in *Zombi 2*, *Year of the Gun*, and *Arrivederci amore, ciao*." *Mediations* 31.1 (Fall 2017) 47-68.  
[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/mourning-revolution](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/mourning-revolution)

## **Mourning the Loss of a Communist Revolution that Didn't Happen: The Undead Historicity of Italy's *Anni di piombo* in *Zombi 2*, *Year of the Gun*, and *Arrivederci amore, ciao***

Tamas Nagypal

"Rome, January 1978. Italy is in chaos. A group of terrorists calling themselves the Red Brigade has brought a shocked society to a state bordering on revolution. It is the ...  
VERLIEBT IN DIE GEHAHR - YEAR OF THE GUN"<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The above quotation is from the opening credits of John Frankenheimer's 1991 film *Year of the Gun*, a partially fictionalized account of the political unrest in Italy during the late 1970s that Franco Berardi called "the last revolt of the communist proletarians of the twentieth century against capitalist rule and against the bourgeois state."<sup>2</sup> The film's sensational premise glosses over the complexity of the actual situation by identifying a single revolutionary agent in the "Red Brigade" (a simplified rendering of *Brigado Rosso*, Red Brigades), delivering one last jolt of red scare for the western viewer still recovering from cold war paranoia while witnessing the disintegration of the USSR. In reality, Italy's communist Left at the time, while enjoying a historically unprecedented support of the population, was far from being unified. Its parliamentary wing, the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) that had a strong base among union workers, was desperately trying to hold onto its electoral gains in a cold war environment where the victory of the radical left outside the Soviet zone of influence usually triggered a far-right *coup d'état* backed by the United States. While the full extent of the NATO meddling in Italian politics during the period is still unknown, the neo-fascist "strategy of tension" — a series of indiscriminate terrorist acts against the general population that started with the bombing of the Bologna train station on December 12, 1969 — is now generally understood as a far right tactic to provoke a state of emergency, blame communists for the attacks and discredit the PCI.<sup>3</sup> It was as a response to this right-wing terror that vanguardist militant groups like the Red Brigades or *Prima Linea* had formed on the far left, aiming to bring about a communist revolution by targeting (kidnapping and/or killing) those they considered to be representatives of the establishment (policemen, lawyers, politicians, oligarchs, etc.). The term *anni di piombo* (years of lead) commonly used to describe this period of right- and left-wing

terrorism (1969-83) covers over these differences, not unlike Frankenheimer's film appropriating the name without referencing the neo-fascist side of political violence.<sup>4</sup> By revealing every leftist character (a gay university professor among them) as an agent of the Brigades, *Year of the Gun* also conflates red militancy with the nonviolent factions of the extra-parliamentary left, the diffuse network of counter-cultural "Autonomist" movements mainly comprised, as Patrick Cuninghame stresses, of the emerging post-Fordist precariat (students, unemployed and underemployed youth, radical feminists, gays, lesbians, artists, and intellectuals) who were disillusioned with the PCI's orthodox Marxism.<sup>5</sup>

Due to these frictions within the Italian radical left, contrary to *Year of the Gun's* red scare narrative, the historical shock value of 1977-78 was precisely the *lack* of a communist revolution that did not take place despite the seemingly favorable political climate that, if nothing else, had slowly eroded the legitimacy of the post-war bourgeois democracy. As Paul Ginsborg puts it, "the PCI was unable and unwilling to use its considerable powers of mass mobilization to force the DC [Christian Democrats] into making real concessions. Once again, they accepted the internal logic of the capitalist plea to salvage the economy without having an alternative economic strategy of their own."<sup>6</sup> Instead of using its mass support from union workers to rewrite the social contract, Communist Party leader Enrico Berlinguer rather attempted to engineer a "historic compromise" for the PCI, effectively allying it with the conservative Christian morals and authoritarian values of the DC in the name of "preserving Italy from the moral degradation of late capitalism, from 'unbridled individualism, senseless consumerism, economic disorder and the dissipation of resources'."<sup>7</sup> This new strategy seemed safe enough to deliver an electoral victory to the PCI in 1976; however, just days before the decisive vote, the Red Brigades killed three government officials, turning the public sentiment against the Communist Party and making it lose at the ballots.<sup>8</sup> These events showed the deadlock of a parliamentary mobilization of the communist Left during the cold war era only too clearly: on the one hand, Berlinguer's move to the center, justified by the threat of civil war, was successful insofar as Italy avoided the fate of Chile and the party secured temporary electoral gains. However, the tactic of pitting those with a regular job against the unemployed and the precarious in the name of a new, moralized centrist consensus, combined with an unfortunate Stalinist heritage of authoritarianism eventually led to the return of the repressed in the form of strengthened red terrorism on the one hand, and post-political disillusionment among voters on the other.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, the Italian Communist Party fell between two stools under the table and perhaps no other event symbolizes this better than Aldo Moro's 1978 kidnapping and subsequent murder by the Red Brigades, itself already a repetition of the turmoil around the 1976 elections. Moro was the DC's man who had negotiated the compromise with the PCI, offering government positions to the Communists in a Christian Democrat-led administration; he was kidnapped on March 16, 1978, on

the day when the new coalition would have been officially announced, only to be killed 54 days later. Moro's death put an end to the "historic compromise"; by 1979 even Berlinguer himself had admitted its failure.<sup>10</sup> As a result, nothing happened: "the Republic went on in much the same way as before. Democracy survived, but no radical change took place in the relationship between state and society" — wrote Paul Ginsborg in March 1989, not knowing about the imminent collapse of the Soviet bloc, an event that symbolically repeated the local failure of communism in Italy on a global scale. Unlike Ginsborg, Frankenheimer already had this insight while making his film, thus for him the "nothing" that had happened in 1978 gained a more ominous dimension: it marked the emergence of a global capitalist consensus that became official only with the collapse of its last remaining challenger:<sup>11</sup> the USSR, the fading shadow of the twentieth-century revolutionary left that has managed to survive its own death by a few decades. As Mario Tronti summarizes, "[o]nce the revolutionary project was defeated, the reformist programme became impossible too. In this sense, the latest form of neoliberal capitalism may prove ironically similar to the final forms of state socialism: incapable of reform."<sup>12</sup>

Yet, this event, despite its extraordinary consequences, should not be confused with the successful mourning of the unrealized and now, supposedly, lost utopian potential inherent even in the unreformable institutions of really existing socialism, the counterproductive vanguardism of red terrorism, or the anti-political exhaustion of Autonomia. As Derrida reminds us in his timely *Specters of Marx*, it is only today that the revolutionary legacy of Marx starts to haunt in a properly undead form, from beyond the horizon of our liberal capitalist status quo after the supposed end of history, destabilizing our post-ideological conceit again and again.<sup>13</sup> In the Italian context, what continues to haunt is, paradoxically, the very non-event, the lack of a communist revolution, a historical deadlock often mediated in the postmodern cultural imaginary by the returning figure of Aldo Moro. As Nicoletta Marini-Maio puts it, "Moro's body has assumed the residual, ghostly insistence of a murdered corpse that continues to appear and make its presence felt. Moro has become a remnant, returning to haunt Italian society and to search for justice."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Alan O'Leary sees the continuing fascination of Italian cinema with the Moro affair as an expression of national guilt, with films like *Maledetti vi amerò* (1980), *Il caso Moro* (1986), *Buongiorno, notte* (2003), or *Aldo Moro: il presidente* (2008) playing the role of a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" about the *anni di piombo* that has been painfully missing from official political discourse.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this also means that the body of Moro is a perfect fetish object for the post-ideological era that "conceals the lack ('castration') around which the symbolic network is articulated,"<sup>16</sup> the fundamental antagonisms of history that give birth to political and ideological struggle. To lay the specter of Italy's twentieth-century radical Left to rest, to truly come to terms with its legacy therefore could not mean the elimination but rather the reactivation of its 1978 political deadlock in the historical present. Not the reconciliation with a past

trauma but the operationalization of the radical historical contingency (lack) it stood for so that another world could be imagined once again.

The key question this paper investigates is therefore not the use-value of various cinematic representations of Italy's Years of Lead for the purposes of national reconciliation, but rather how the "nothing" at the core of politics as such can be rendered visible and audible through their dialectical images that reveal history's radical contingency. Rather than taking the non-occurrence of a communist revolution in the late 1970s merely as a failure, I'm interested in how such non-event can inspire the cinematic representation of historicity in its pure state. Taking a transnational approach, I look at three films depicting the impasse of Italy's red terrorism, one from the time of the Moro murder (*Zombi 2*, 1979), one from the year when the USSR collapsed (*Year of the Gun*, 1991), and one from Italy's Berlusconi-led "post-ideological" Second Republic (*Arrivederci amore, ciao*, 2006) that show the contemporary global capitalist consensus in its nascent, strengthened, and already-crumbling state. I underline the contingency of this consensus by drawing attention to the real of history that returns as a destabilizing force field underneath the films' shifting symbolizations of the *anni di piombo*. Significantly, the trajectory I'm mapping is circular rather than linear. First, *Zombi 2* allegorizes the traumatic deadlock of Italian history, the stalemate between forces of the communist Left and the supporters of a capitalist paradigm through a magical narrative about a colonial zombie uprising. *Year of the Gun* then melancholically displaces this very conflict into the past, signaling the apparently unanimous victory of the second faction. Yet, *Arrivederci* retroactively turns this move into an ineffective temporary repression, exposing the contradictions of the post-Soviet neoliberal consensus by returning to Italy's 1978 impasse once again.

### **Historicity and the Living Dead**

Curiously, we gain access to images of historicity in all three films through the radically atemporal figures of the living dead. In *Zombi 2*, the protagonists are actual zombies; in *Year of the Gun*, the hero is a burned-out former student activist cynically detached from political turmoil around him; finally, *Arrivederci amore, ciao* features a sociopathic ex-terrorist who has survived the loss of his cause as a soulless opportunist. All these characters are stuck in what Slavoj Žižek calls the place between two deaths, the gap that opens up when the body dies but is not given a proper burial, or a social symbolic persona is deactivated while the biological body lingers.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, we are left with a subject outside linear temporality who is *death driven* in the psychoanalytic sense. As Žižek stresses, "'death drive' is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, an 'undead' urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, generation and corruption."<sup>18</sup> For Lacan, this undead urge that lurks behind every socially constructed subject position is the compulsion to return again and again to the constitutive void (lack) at the core of the symbolic order without assigning

any meaning to it; to enjoy the very dissolution of the social-symbolic status quo and its linear order of time.<sup>19</sup> In Deleuzian terms, the living dead emerge through the deterritorialization of the (normative, Oedipalized, bourgeois) human body, positing, as Jason Wallin argues, “a malevolent life poised to betray the image of the human organism in preparation for a perverse people yet to come.”<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, the death driven subject is an isolated monad detached from the social-symbolic community of language users; yet, for this precise reason he is also *potentially* the member of a new, not-yet-actualized political collective. Standing for a rupture in any actualized temporal order, the living dead is therefore the name for the subject expressing the radical contingency of history, that is, the historicity of the human condition.

For this reason, the historicity of the 1978 events in Italy lies in its opening of a gap between the living body (movement) of the radical left and its symbolic place (its name or ideal). While, arguably, the former is defeated at that time, the latter is officially deactivated only in 1991, which is why during this period the people of the communist revolution linger on in the spectral domain of the living dead.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as Simon Clark stresses, paraphrasing Freud, symbolic burying rituals may also not end the persistence of the undead. Exposure to the disturbance caused by the deceased loved one can cause the mourner to melancholically identify with her very undeadness, perpetuating the suspended state between life and death through the endless reimagining of the moment of loss.<sup>22</sup> As Derrida argued, the revolutionary Left continues to haunt after it has been symbolically declared dead by its opponents. Along these lines, I propose that *Zombi 2* represents the movement of Italian communism allegorically in a state of disintegration, surviving only as the blind compulsion to repeat fragmented revolutionary gestures in the name of an abstract communist ideal after hitting an unresolvable deadlock with the events of 1978. *Year of the Gun*, on the other hand, is a film about how even this increasingly more empty symbolic fiction of the Left is deactivated when it is turned into a media spectacle that inscribes the trauma of its failure into a forever lost historical past. *Arrivederci amore ciao*, by contrast, suggests that such pathos of symbolic closure may have been premature and tackles the problem of a melancholic attachment to a *failed* revolution that not only remains effective after the fall of the Berlin Wall but emerges only with it, serving as the unacknowledged fantasmatic underside of the new global capitalist order, paralyzing its subjects’ capacity to imagine its alternative in the present.

Significantly, such imaginative blindness pervading even the contemporary global left (a phenomenon termed capitalist realism by Mark Fisher) also recalls a particularly unfortunate heritage of Italy’s idiosyncratic post-unification (1871) history usually referred to as *transformismo*: a combination of the people’s revolutionary expectations and the consecutive governments’ inability to enact political reforms, leading to a resigned ideological conviction about the static nature of Italian society.<sup>23</sup> Along

these lines, Stefano Ciammaroni reads the nihilist turn of the country's postwar extra-parliamentary politics and cinema of the 1960s as a symptom of an excessive attachment to the heroics of anti-fascist resistance between 1943 and 1945, holding on to the myth of an authentic, purely negative revolutionary violence that undercuts pragmatic attempts to build new political institutions after the war, inevitably leading to the return of terrorism.<sup>24</sup> For him the *Autonomia Operaia's* refusal of work as such — a stance that undermines any possible alliance with mainstream representatives of the working class (such as the PCI) — is part of the same ahistorical critical decadence of the radical Left as Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961) that fetishizes the death driven idleness of the Roman sub-proletariat.<sup>25</sup> Intellectuals like Tronti, Negri, or Pasolini, Ciammaroni suggests, were looking for a pure, uncorrupted form of subjectivity outside the historical institutions of capitalism but ended up with an all too naïve “revolutionary spontaneism” and “third worldism.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, they were interested in fantasmatically preserving the radical negativity of those who are “alive while dead”<sup>27</sup> by forever staying in a melancholic limbo between life and death, heroically refusing any actualization of the people. Their ideas prefigure Agamben's later concept of *homo sacer*, a subject he identifies as the necessary byproduct of modern sovereign power, someone who is included in the constituted social reality only insofar as he is excluded from it, serving as its continuously abjected shadowy supplement. The fantasy driving the Italian radical Left of the postwar era, Ciammaroni claims, is then the direct politicization of the radically excluded *without* their symbolic integration — a utopia of a “revolution without a revolution” that paralyzes any political struggle aiming to have lasting effects.<sup>28</sup>

Such contradiction is also well known to contemporary “zombie studies,” just like the term *homo sacer*, which is widely used to designate the biopolitical ambiguity of the living dead.<sup>29</sup> As the authors of *A Zombie Manifesto* put it, “the zombie is currently understood as simultaneously powerless and powerful, slave and slave rebellion”<sup>30</sup> whose disruptive power lies entirely in a “negative dialectic,” in the anti-cathartic embodiment of an “irreconcilable tension.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, unlike Ciammaroni, they see an emancipatory potential in this radical post-human negativity insofar as the very existence of the zombie's paradoxical body promises the collapse of the capitalist system that relies on the separation of subject and object, body and soul, producer and consumer, etc., without, however, offering the reconciliation of these antinomies into some higher unity. This position could indeed seem very close to the so called Italian nihilists' discussed above. I nonetheless suggest that Ciammaroni's critique of what could be called zombie politics risks conflating different forms of undeadness into a single ahistorical category, forgetting the dialectical paradox that sometimes what appears as an escape into ahistorical temporal suspension is the expression of very concrete forces of history hitting a deadlock. In these cases the point is not to dismiss abstract negativity but to identify at its core a genuine critique of the present situation, a critique that cannot fully come forward, but also cannot simply disappear.



Following Fredric Jameson, one should make a distinction here between antinomy and contradiction; while the former is an arrested, frozen form of binaries as they appear irresolvable, outside possibilities of historical change, the latter is the dialectical-historical interpretation of an antinomy that brings out the living and progressing antagonism the binary both expresses and obfuscates.<sup>32</sup> Along these lines, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate through the dialectical work of interpretation that not all of cinema's living dead are the same in their relation to history; while some are able to capture and mobilize in a contradiction the constitutive negativity (that is, the historicity) of their present constellation, others fail to do so, which is why they fall back into a melancholic fixation on the past where they believe they have *lost* such negativity.<sup>33</sup> It is only this latter configuration that fits Ciammaroni's critique of Italian *decadentismo*, and, as my analysis of *Year of the Gun* will show, the phenomenon he criticizes is far from being limited to the Italian context and could be understood as the symptom of today's all pervasive capitalist realism.

### **Zombi 2: Historical Trauma as Magical Narrative**

Antonio Gramsci's remark "The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters" can serve as an appropriate summary not only of the terror ridden years of Italy transitioning into a global capitalist consensus in the late 1970s and early 1980s but also of the shifts of focus in Italian genre films around the same time.<sup>34</sup> Previously popular, white anthropocentric genres such as the *commedia all'italiana* (Italo-comedy), the *poliziesco* (Italo-crime film), the *giallo*, or the spaghetti western gradually gave way to a cycle of the infamous zombie and cannibal films, supernatural horrors and other subgenres with a distinctive trash aesthetic that, unlike their already viscerally exploitative predecessors, often abandoned the pretense of coherent narrative altogether.<sup>35</sup> The cinematic emergence of these undead monsters, I will argue, can be seen as a symptom not only of the increasing international demand for cheap B movies due the rise of video culture, but also of that intermediate stage in the country's history between the two deaths of its communist mass movement when the people's revolutionary body survived only as a living dead. Curiously, the allegorical potential of such films is ignored by academics who discuss the representation of the *anni di piombo* in Italian genre films, either focusing on genres that make explicit references to terrorism (*poliziescos* and italo-comedies),<sup>36</sup> or mentioning only the *giallo's* "hyper-aesthetic" of violence as a "symptom of anxieties about the presence of terrorism in Italian society."<sup>37</sup>

At first sight, Lucio Fulci's 1979 *Zombi 2* [*Zombie aka Zombie Flesh Eaters*] is just one among many supernatural schlock scenarios from that period with zero references to contemporary Italy, unlike Umberto Lenzi's *Nightmare City* (1980) for instance with its machine gun wielding zombies terrorizing Milan. Critics have often dismissed *Zombi 2* as an incoherent piece of Euro-exploitation trying to break into the international market with ridiculously exaggerated gore effects, third-rate Italian actors pretending

to be Americans, and a supposedly spectacular zombie apocalypse in the middle of Manhattan that doesn't seem to disturb the afternoon traffic in the city even a little.<sup>38</sup> Others, such as Patricia MacCormack, rehabilitate Fulci as an auteur of sensual events who is interested in shocking the audience with the delirious intensity of his affection-images and therefore willfully ignores the rules of conventional storytelling.<sup>39</sup> While these latter qualities certainly earned him an eternal place in the pantheon of Euro-cult directors and made *Zombi 2* a recurring point of reference in the canon of visceral horror films, I argue that its systematically ignored narrative structure is equally worth looking at as it may supplement the sensual materialist reading of Fulci's surreal imagery with a historical dimension.

The film's plot revolves around the outbreak of a mysterious plague on a small Caribbean island that causes the dead to come back to life and feed on the living. Among the main characters there is a Dr. Moreau-esque white colonial doctor engaged in suspicious activities with the natives, apparently trying to find the cure for the disease; the daughter of a his former colleague investigating her father's death; two tourists; and a journalist from New York looking for cover story material. After the Americans arrive on the island, the situation quickly escalates and centuries-old carcasses of Spanish conquistadors start to climb out of their graves; it becomes obvious that small group of Westerners won't be able to stop the spread of the infection. Although a few of them manage to escape from the island on a boat back to New York, it's already too late: an army of zombies is marching on the Brooklyn Bridge to take over Manhattan.

The finale's carnivalesque overturning of the dominant social order is prepared by Fulci's play with the viewer's narrative expectations earlier insofar as he encourages us, as Ian Olney observes, "to recognize and reject the flawed perspective of the film's nominal white heroes, while at the same time inviting us to performatively adopt the point of view of the living dead."<sup>40</sup> In one scene we see a white heroine's eyeball being pierced by a zombie in a painfully dragged-out series of close-ups where the editing mirrors the suspended temporality of the monster's body while the camera assumes its perspective. The director also deploys unsutured point-of-view shots throughout the film that are retroactively claimed by the zombie-proletariat in the finale: the living dead emerge from behind the camera, evoking the famous scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) where the animals suddenly enter a God's-view shot of Bodega Bay from negative diegetic space and, as Žižek insists, de-realize the image by giving body to its constitutive (primordially repressed) outside (the camera's gaze).<sup>41</sup> The zombies' entry triggers a similar visual paradox: while they are marching on the upper boardwalk of the Brooklyn Bridge, the traffic of cars just a few meters below them goes on uninterrupted. This way, *Zombi 2*'s conclusion offers what Fredric Jameson calls a "magical narrative," usually a product of transitional periods "in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist. Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle

of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a Utopian) harmony."<sup>42</sup> These ideological fantasies, despite their attempt to posit a world that would overcome the contradictions between old and new, are in fact symptomatic of the opposite, of the inability to imagine a social totality that would satisfy the reality principle. Magical narratives are "compromise formations and mediatory combinations in which the two codes are playfully recombined" but in a way that "the narrative must not be allowed to press on to any decisive conclusion."<sup>43</sup> Simply put, harmony in the magical universe lays bare the antagonisms of the real world.

*Zombi 2*'s carnivalesque swapping of place and function between the upper and lower social strata of global capitalism (between the accelerated life of its center and the third world masses staggering behind) is therefore a way to magically represent as irresolvable, through their allegorical displacement, the social contradictions of contemporary Italy. An allegorical reading reveals such displacement as the weakening revolutionary Left's compromise formation with the emerging global capitalist order which, for a while at least, was also unable to cast out the haunting spirits of the communist movement. Instead of delivering the closure of the narrative one way or another, the final shots produce *dissensus* in Rancière's sense of the term, putting "two worlds in one and the same world," attesting to their impossible co-presence.<sup>44</sup> This imaginary antinomy is further enhanced through a gap between the visible and the audible as the soundtrack with noises of the city in chaos and an anxious radio report about a building under siege by zombies in no way corresponds to what we actually see. Finally, what sounds like tribal drums join the pandemonium but only to introduce the mellow synth music score that accompanies the upcoming credit sequence, during which the zombies keep marching and the cars keep running, but noises of their imaginary clash magically disappear.

On the Jamesonian *political* level of its ideological texture the film avoids closure through a decisive symbolic act (other than the paradoxical images at the end, the doctor also fails to find a cure for the zombie plague and we never find out where the disease originates from).<sup>45</sup> On another level (what Jameson calls the *social*), however, these formal techniques can be seen as ideological insofar as they translate the necessary inconsistency of the social-symbolic order as such into ideologemes, that is, imaginary formations structured by antinomies like the mythical struggle between good and evil, upper and lower social strata, or the dichotomy between a proper (white western) human body and its abjected undead correlate.<sup>46</sup> The ideological mystification lies here not in the gesture of closure, but in the ahistorical manner in which gaps are introduced into the social fabric. The key to appreciate the properly *historical* spectrality of Fulci's monsters is Jameson's third level of ideology critique which concerns the succession of the modes of production, thus from a Marxist standpoint it is the only historical interpretation proper. He argues that history is the absent cause of social structures, the unrepresentable *real* in the Lacanian sense;

it is “what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention.”<sup>47</sup> In Lacanian terms, history as *real* is a force field that thwarts and distorts the normal functioning of the *symbolic* (what Jameson called the political) and the *imaginary* (the social), undermining both gestures of closure and the illusion of neatly fixed antagonisms.

A properly historical analysis should thus look for “the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes” through which “the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended.”<sup>48</sup> In *Zombi 2* this dimension opens up through the resurrection the Spanish conquistadors, the old feudal colonizers of the New World which later became the center of modern capitalism. They break their gravestones while slowly rising from the dead, undoing the symbolic resolution of a past historical transformation. From this perspective, the finale with the zombies in Manhattan slowly dragging their feet while the cars underneath are running uninterrupted also goes beyond the limits of a mere ideologeme and opens up the wounds of Italy’s own never completed transition/acceleration from feudalism to capitalism, as well as of the country’s disavowed colonial adventures in Africa.

It is through historical analysis that one can understand the film’s enigmatic opening sequence where the doctor, his face covered by a shadow, slowly points a gun at a dead body wrapped in white cloth. The body then slowly starts to rise up on the bed, and the doctor pulls the trigger, putting a bullet in the zombie’s head. Then he utters mysteriously: “the boat can leave now, tell the crew.” It only becomes clear later that the boat he sends back to New York with the dead body of his colleague ends up carrying the zombies responsible for spreading the plague. Instead of dismissing this part of the film as merely an illogical plot device, I suggest to read it as an example of how the real of history distorts the film’s symbolic texture. The doctor’s strange mental split between western scientist and “Indian” sorcerer is a symptomatic torsion produced by history’s force field for which voodoo (itself, as they put it in the film, the “mixture of two religions: Catholicism and African tribal rituals”) serves as the central metaphor. This way, if we take the immediate historical trauma of Italy at the time — that of Aldo Moro’s bullet-ridden body found in the trunk of a car — the doctor’s character can function as a stand-in for both Moro and his murderers: he is both the father figure looking for the symbolic cure for society’s illness *and* the murderer of the father who unleashes the plague that ruins the world.<sup>49</sup> The merit of Fulci is that he doesn’t try to cover up this historical deadlock inherent, as Jameson argues, in the very form of the “narrative as a socially symbolic act.” Instead, he pushes it to an almost ridiculous extreme in the denouement, ending the film with a rather dysfunctional carnivalesque event, the real magic of which lies in the sheer absurdity of its taking place, accurately capturing how the forces of history undermine not only the simple closure of the symbolic but also the imaginary articulation of any fixed

binary splitting it apart.

### ***Year of the Gun: From the Trauma of the Real to the Melancholy of its Loss***

Formally, the exposition of John Frankenheimer's *Year of the Gun*, a Hollywood neo-noir shot in Italy, is the opposite to that of *Zombi 2*, an Italian exploitation film made in America. Instead of drawing its audience into a hallucinatory vortex of history's death drive right away, signaling how Italy's 1978 trauma haunts the popular imaginary even after multiple displacements, *Year of the Gun* allows the viewer an initial distance from this foreign country's complicated history by focusing on its outsider protagonist. David is an ex-leftist journalist who considers his years of youthful college radicalism to be over and seeks a comfortable life in Rome as an American writer working on a "travel book." He is deliberately choosing conformism and commercial opportunism, ignoring the political upheaval happening in front of his eyes ("Americans in Rome don't need politics. They need American Express cards," he quips).

As we soon find out, however, he is not writing a book for tourists at all; he is working on a novel about the Red Brigades, a fictional account that nonetheless uses real events and actual people as points of reference. Yet, he doesn't realize the gravity of the historical real surrounding him until an American war photographer, Alison finds out about his book deal as well as his student activist past, and putting two and two together assumes that David is trying to infiltrate the Red Brigades to write a first-hand report on Italian terrorism. Not buying David's story about a travel book and because of wanting to be in on the project, she manages to get her hands on the manuscript that indeed reads like embedded journalism about the Brigades, involving a fantastic but possible plot to kidnap Aldo Moro. She mentions her discovery to one of David's Italian friends, a gay professor of literature at the local university. This is the moment when what the protagonist intended to be pure fiction finally touches on something real: not only does the professor turn out to be working for the terrorists, informing the headquarters about the book, but as a result David and Alison get kidnapped because the Red Brigades did in fact have a plan to take Moro already in preparation.

This plot twist illustrates Lacan's claim that "the letter always arrives to its destination,"<sup>50</sup> in the sense that the empty exercise of David's leftist fiction serves in the end to signify a real, traumatic historical event. The film goes even further suggesting a deeper connection between the inevitable return of the hero's repressed past and the action of the terrorists. Earlier in the film we see him following Moro's car to find a plausible location for his fictional kidnapping plot. Later on, the actual kidnapping takes place on the very same street corner, demonstrating that the real is nothing but the torsion of the symbolic, that, as Jameson insists, "history is inaccessible to us except in textual form... that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization."<sup>51</sup> While *Zombi 2* was a film about the real of history as an undead excess preventing the emergence of a coherent symbolic order, *Year of the*

*Gun* shows how what at first sight might look like a neatly framed symbolic fiction is always already distorted by the real. In this sense David is the postmodern decedent of the existentialist hero in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* who also wanted to be nothing but a pure conformist, to renounce any passion for the real, only to end up shooting an Arab in the face in French occupied Algiers "by accident."<sup>52</sup> The message of Frankenheimer's film, then, is that one cannot escape his or her complicity in the making of history.

This message, however, only appears after various ideological distortions of the narrative. First of all, to use Jameson's interpretative horizons, David's act of writing a novel could have been a resolution on the political level that would have helped him (and the American viewer) to mourn the failure of the Left in his own country and justify his support of the emerging global capitalist consensus. In the immediate post-cold war context of the film's release, such desire for symbolic resolution through a "neutral" account of Italy's apparently self-induced political chaos by a detached observer also includes, as Alan O'Leary points out, the "retrospective justification for American policy during a period when the Partito Comunista Italiano commanded such a large percentage of the vote," that is, the disavowal of historical responsibility.<sup>53</sup> David's inability to simply go through with his project signals the disruptive forces of history (intervening through the undead fiction of communism), causing a series of displacements on the social level. For instance, the poor American trying to marry a rich Italian aristocrat (Lia) is a magical response to the class antagonisms of the neoliberal US (such as the young precarious intellectual David's inability to find a steady job there). Their apparently harmonious relationship, however, is eventually thwarted following the formal conventions of film noir and is channeled into the conflict between gullible male protagonist and *femme fatale* as the fiancée reveals herself to be working for the Brigades. This antinomy is then neutralized through David's choice of the non-threatening Alison over her, a fellow American who turns out to be just as cynical and burned out as him, despite their initial differences. It is through this production of a non-antagonistic couple that the denouement of *Year of the Gun* offers a form of closure, taming the disruptive effects of the historical real. After the successful execution of the Moro kidnapping, the terrorists release the two American journalists taking full advantage of the publicity they can bring to their cause, even executing Lia as a traitor in front of them, proving their ruthlessness to the eyes of the global media. The final scene then shows David years later, giving a TV interview about his new book on the Red Brigades he had put together with Alison; a heroic work of embedded journalists risking their lives to bring the truth to the public. He is joined through live video feed by Alison herself, reporting from the middle of the civil war in Beirut. Both of them do their bit of plugging the book, then Alison formulates the pathetic moral of their story: "I don't think that those of us who simply record events are that important finally. Maybe that's the biggest thing we have to live with." The reporter quickly responds: "Well, what you have to live

with has certainly turned into a huge bestseller...” After the interview, we see David gazing at the monitor showing Allison’s blank stare at the camera on the other side. Then, without exchanging words, they walk away quietly.

In the end, ironically, David’s “novel” does work as a symbolic act suturing together the narrative. Not as mere fiction but not as an account of the real either; rather, as the point of indistinction between the two. It seems that Frankenheimer blames the media for such a transformation of history whereby the events of 1978 are turned into a five-minute talk show segment, part of a continuous flow of mediatized shocks blatantly exploited for commercial purposes. This is certainly one way to understand what the second death of the communist Left could mean: not the elimination of history’s distorting effects from a total and homogenous world of global capitalism but rather the successful imaginary integration of these very ruptures into the status quo. It is for the same reason that Antonio Tricomi accuses the Red Brigades of complicity with the late capitalist establishment, comparing them admen in the society of the spectacle.<sup>54</sup> As Alan O’Leary puts it, “Terrorist action involves precisely the employment of the spectacle for the ends of political coercion: it is politics as singular impressive event contingent upon the mediatic apparatus of modern society.”<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, the ideogeme offered in the end — the two protagonists looking at each other, one of them standing in the real of history’s rupture, the other, newly denominated as a figure of symbolic authority, watching her from a comfortable distance — doesn’t form an antinomy proper. It is as if they were both looking into a mirror, as if they knew that for the new society of the spectacle channeled by the mass media, their position is ultimately the same.

In this regard, as Gerard Pratley observes, *Year of the Gun* is not really a film about politics in Italy under the Red Brigades but about the cynical media landscape of an emerging globalized world led by the US.<sup>56</sup> And yet, its Baudrillardian conclusion, which prefigures Italy’s own post-political turn under Berlusconi’s media oligarchy, is not without its particular brand of nostalgia for a time in the past where real ideological struggles still existed, for the strangely Orientalized territory of chaos ridden Italy where a group of passionate non-Americans still believed, almost religiously, in the cause of the radical left (cases in point are the Gregorian soundtrack or the recurring Madonna paintings around terrorists). Through this spatiotemporal (and ethnic) displacement, Frankenheimer’s film can articulate the utopia of a revolutionary alternative to capitalism but only as something already lost — a gesture that effectively places this utopia into a quarantine, as if to make sure it doesn’t disturb the global capitalist consensus of the West anymore. As Agamben points out, such paradoxical performative relation to loss characterizes what could be called the politics of melancholia:

[Melancholy is] the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. If the libido behaves as *if* a loss had occurred although nothing has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it

has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never perhaps existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost.<sup>57</sup>

In this light, the second death of the Italian Left presented by *Year of the Gun* gains a more suspicious dimension. It doesn't simply mark the end of actually existing socialism as much as it demonstrates how the emergence of nostalgia for an authentic Left coincides with the melancholic *construction* of it as lost, revealed here as the very ideological founding gesture of the so called post-ideological global consensus after 1989, at the supposed "end of history."<sup>58</sup> Or to put it differently, the film shows that the rise of today's cynical (capitalist realist) consciousness is strictly correlative to the imaginary conjuring up of what Žižek calls the phenomenon of the "subject supposed to believe," a figure of the Other who is presumed to have a direct, organic connection to the lost ideologies of the past without the postmodern ironic distance.<sup>59</sup> It is symptomatic, for instance, how *Year of the Gun* emphasizes the authentic fanaticism of David's soon-to-be-killed terrorist fiancée through tribal imagery, showing her paint her lips and nipples in deep red with lipstick in allusion to Nastassja Kinski's putting blood on her lips at the moment of her beastly awakening in Paul Schrader's *Cat People* (1982).<sup>60</sup>

### ***Arrivederci amore, ciao: From Melancholy to Mourning***

A Jamesonian reading of the melancholic (lost) antinomies in *Year of the Gun*, along the lines of his critique of postmodern "nostalgia films," should emphasize their depoliticizing effect, symptomatic of the contemporary waning of historicity, of our inability to perceive the present as history, as a symbolic totality split by conflict/struggle that we can meaningfully participate in.<sup>61</sup> One way to reactivate the antagonisms of the real in the present, then, is to destroy the fetishistic support of the melancholic-cynic, the nostalgia for a subject who supposedly really believes, and this way clear the space for a new Leftist imaginary not coopted by the status quo. This, I claim, is what Michele Soavi's neo-noir/*giallo* *Arrivederci amore ciao* (2006) accomplishes. While the protagonist of Frankenheimer's film was a cynic who by the end of the film had managed to develop a sentimental-melancholic relationship to the unrealized utopianism of his past, it is precisely such melancholic attachment that Giorgio, the former red terrorist hero of *Arrivederci* tries to cut out of himself. Hiding out somewhere in the jungles of South America, it is the symbolic defeat of the twentieth-century communism, the fall of the Berlin Wall that triggers his drive to betray his cause; he murders his guerilla leader friend and informs on his comrades in exchange of "rehabilitation," the chance of a clean slate and reintegration into the Italian society after a short prison sentence.<sup>62</sup> He cynically turns into a conformist not because he is a beautiful soul who doesn't have the stomach for political violence like David in *Year of the Gun*, but as a fascistic act of self-determination, the choice of a violent path of mourning that leads through the corrupt *mise-en-scene* of late-capitalist urban Italy, getting him involved in gambling, prostitution, armed robbery,



and murder.

Director Michele Soavi takes his viewer on a roller coaster ride of visual and audial shocks in the tradition of the 1980s Italian exploitation cinema's hallucinatory exuberance that often borders on the ridiculous, much like Fulci's *Zombi 2* did.<sup>63</sup> The constantly but slowly moving camera, the excessive use of noir style close-ups, low-key lighting, skewed camera angles and rain showers, the obsessive repetition of the sentimental title song and the traumatic flashback (night)scene from the hero's "dark past" have a cumulative tongue in cheek effect, neutralizing the melancholy about any traumatic loss resisting representation. Soavi takes Guy Debord's critical diagnosis about late capitalism, "that which appears is good, that which is good appears" and makes it, ironically, his *ars poetica*, showing Giorgio's repressed primal scene of terrorism (his inability to prevent a postman from being accidentally killed by his bomb) multiple times in slow motion so that viewers can enjoy it in full detail.<sup>64</sup> The same goes for the final reenactment and subsequent letting go of this trauma through the cold blooded murder of his fiancée for finding out that he is (still) a killer; he invites her over for dinner, poisons her and then watches her die slowly as she is crawling towards to exit, playfully appropriating the moment of impotent passivity that paralyzed him in the past. On her coffin he puts a wreath that reads "Arrivederci amore ciao" [Farewell my love, goodbye], the title of the song that was playing on the postman's radio before the bomb went off. The next day he is officially rehabilitated into a full member of society, "an honest person like everyone else," as he remarks cynically.

This grotesque parody of a symbolic closure along with the hyperbolic amoralism of *Arrivederci* serves as a bitter satire of the new bourgeoisie of Italy's post-1992 Second Republic that set out to "normalize" the country after decades of political turmoil (i.e. organized crime, terrorism, and institutionalized corruption) by turning yet again to consensus building and conformism — a strategy that ended up legitimating a new system of "post-political" violence and corruption by putting Berlusconi in power.<sup>65</sup> The film in fact satirizes the very formula of "propa-tainment," the dominant product of Berlusconi's monopolistic media empire build on the "values" of "*intimismo, individualismo, atomismo, qualunquismo*" [intimacy, individualism, atomism, indifference].<sup>66</sup> For the protagonist, the ideological device uniting these characteristics in support of the new consensus is identity politics pushed to a fascist extreme, where the competitive grieving of one's idiosyncratic loss is presented as the ticket to the newly stabilized multicultural "democratic" community. Against Judith Butler's claim that "the prohibition on certain forms of public grieving itself constitutes the public sphere on the basis of such a prohibition," Soavi depicts a society of the spectacle where everyone's losses can equally appear because they *must* appear.<sup>67</sup> While for Butler, the public ban on grieving *certain* losses (like that of the same-sex other) is what forces those subjects to disavow their lost objects and turn melancholic, in Soavi's ostensibly post-melancholic universe everyone's

trauma is equally commodified and thus ultimately — politically — meaningless.<sup>68</sup> There seems to be nothing repressed, nothing lost here anymore; all we have is a series of equivalences, a flat ontology of subjects and their once lost object-causes, everything in full view. For instance, the team that Giorgio assembles for an armed robbery consists of two Ustasha fascists and three Spanish anarchists, former enemies working together now in a tolerant, culturally diverse environment allowing them to reify the loss of their cause which the leader of the operation dutifully names with mock-political correctness. Even one of the more recent historical traumas gets a symbolic representation through the corrupt police captain who promotes beating people to death with a club as the “Rwanda method,” a memento of his (and the justice system’s) instrumental exploitation of Giorgio’s own ex-terrorist body for similar purposes. Despite its dark comedic undertones, one shouldn’t simply dismiss the film’s references to mourning as unserious or fake; their apparent ridiculousness comes rather from Soavi’s effort to present a universal public sphere of grieving subjects that takes no exception, where even terrorists and criminals have a chance to narrate their stories and get recognized provided they don’t question the apparatuses of power they become caught within as a result.<sup>69</sup>

Is *Arrivederci amore, ciao*, then, finally a post-ideological film? Did it accomplish what *Year of the Gun* couldn’t, a cynical act of closure (mourning) that turns former ideological antinomies into an endless series of equivalences by giving up the possibility of even a melancholic (lost) alternative to the global capitalist consensus? Is its fabric a pure simulation that cannot be touched by the real of history anymore? Yes and no: it is because Soavi fully confronts the deadlocks of spectacular identity politics that he is able to show that not all is captured by its logic; that it is merely an ideological apparatus of the new bourgeoisie that, contrary to its own *modus operandi* pushing for the historicizing narration of the self, relies in fact on a fundamental disavowal of historicity. As a result, history proper returns in the film with a vengeance as the real of class struggle. This is the excess that haunts in the form of the Balkans folk music score that persists in the background beyond the brief scenes involving Romanian miners and former Croatian terrorists, detaching itself from distinct subjects to pose as a disruptive sound cloud against Giorgio’s often repeated theme song, his fetish object that is the last vestige of his melancholic self. The soundtrack is then a manifestation of the real of history, a reminder that the economy of contemporary Italy is heavily dependent on cheap migrant labor from the EU’s underdeveloped periphery; a fact that serves as the dark underside of the protagonist’s quest for a bourgeois life. Or better yet, it is a reminder that for the establishment, despite his conformist aspirations, he himself counts as an underclass immigrant, a *sans papier* who is willing to take imprisonment, humiliation, and blackmail by the regime’s corrupt officials in exchange for potential future status and recognition. Another reminder of his class status is the homeless woman who disturbs the setup of the armed robbery he masterminded, for which she almost gets shot by the team’s trigger

happy sharpshooter if it wasn't for Giorgio's intervention. Nonetheless, this latent social conflict appears explicitly only through the suspicious bourgeois fiancée who is reluctant to marry him after she finds out about his current shady dealings, even though she was more than willing to embrace Giorgio's terrorist past as long as he repented for it.<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, the ideologeme that mediates the real of class struggle in the end is the antinomy of sexual difference that follows both noir and *giallo* conventions. It culminates in the already mentioned theatrical murder scene, a grotesque marriage ceremony where the bride is tortured and executed while the title song is playing as wedding march — a magical answer to an irresolvable antagonism comparable to Fulci's notorious denouement in *Zombi 2*.

If *Year of the Gun* presented the radical left of the late-twentieth century as the melancholic pipe dream, the fundamental (primordially lost) fantasy of the new global capitalist order, the merit of *Arrivederci amore, ciao* is to turn this around, suggesting that this idea of capitalism without an alternative itself is nothing but the hallucination that the old left conjures up on its deathbed to cover up its zombified state, i.e. its historical deadlock. In the end what Giorgio was unable to mourn was not simply his communist past but his dream about an impossible, frictionless bourgeois life, the true fundamental fantasy driving his terrorist and criminal transgressions alike, the melancholic fixation on which had turned him into a living dead in the first place. The symbolic letter of the title thus arrives at its destination (to the wrath on his fiancée's coffin) when it signals the successful reconfiguration of this fantasy by uncovering and problematizing the fetish object that supported it. Giorgio's melancholic attachment to the title song reveals its former ideological function when it becomes the signifier of his fiancée's bourgeois naiveté and ignorance, when she turns out to be his ultimate "subject supposed to believe," a fetish he created to support his cynical journey. The paradoxical final images, then, through a cunning of history akin to the one that brought Fulci's zombies to the Brooklyn Bridge, demonstrate, against the hero's overt intentions, his irreducible separation from the social symbolic order the very moment of his apparent integration to it. This way the film is able to allegorically overcome the contemporary Left's paralyzing attachment to the trauma of the Years of Lead. What Soavi's final symbolic gesture of mourning accomplishes is the undoing of this melancholic fixation on the past through its historicization — not by resolving its deadlock but by reactivating it, blowing up what used to be a nostalgia for a lost antinomy into a contradictory dialectical image of the present that could free political imagination and direct it towards the future.

## Conclusion

These three accounts of communism's living dead, then, represent two incompatible positions towards the trauma of the *anni di piombo*: while the two Italian films come to terms with it by bringing forth its historical impact on the present, *Year of the Gun* offers its melancholic disavowal. I have suggested that the critical potential of these

films lies not simply in the content of their narrative but in the particular formal distortions it goes through. A non-dialectical reading of *Zombi 2*, for instance, could easily dismiss its ideological agenda as vulgar “third worldism,” in the same way as *Arrivederci amore, ciao*’s ostensibly fascistic plot makes it an unlikely candidate for a contemporary Leftist text. By contrast, *Year of the Gun* might appear quite progressive for a Hollywood film with its liberal message “that foreigners really have no business getting involved in other countries, especially ones whose internal traumas they do not understand.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, I have shown that a historical analysis of the films’ political unconscious actually turns these initial impressions on their head, helping to distinguish accounts of critical zombie politics from the reactionary politics of melancholia parasitizing the cinematic figure of the living dead. What is at stake in this distinction is the critical understanding of today’s all pervasive ideology of capitalist realism which the historical deadlocks of Italian *transformismo*, amplified by Aldo Moro’s 1978 murder, provide an early model for on the local level. What films like *Zombi 2* and *Arrivederci amore, ciao* demonstrate is that even in these dark times after the *de facto* defeat of twentieth-century communism the cunning of history continues to undermine the reigning post-ideological consensus; that the death-driven insistence of its living dead, easily mistaken for ahistorical nihilism, might in fact help to build a critical consciousness of our present situation, laying bare its fundamental inconsistency, in other words: its historicity.

## Notes

1. *Year of the Gun*, directed by John Frankenheimer (1991; Initial Films)
2. Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, trans. A. Bove et al. (London: Minor Compositions, 2009) 15.
3. For an account of the possible NATO links to neo-fascist terror in Italy see Leopoldo Nuti, "The Italian 'Stay-Behind' Network — The Origins of Operation 'Gladio,'" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30.6 (2007) 955-80.
4. For an overview of the *anni di piombo*, see Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990) 348-406.
5. As Cuninghame emphasizes, this diffuse network of Autonomia should not be confused with the Autonomia Operaia movement organized around mostly male intellectuals like Antonio Negri or Oreste Scalzone that attempted, in vain, to hegemonize the extra-parliamentary left through the operaist tradition of worker's autonomy that sought to reinvent working class life beyond its victimist vision promoted by trade unions and the PCI. Patrick Cuninghame, "For an Analysis of Autonomia: An Interview with Sergio Bologna," *Left History* 7.2 (2001): 90-91.
6. Cuninghame, "For an Analysis" 390.
7. "For an Analysis" 357.
8. "For an Analysis" 375.
9. "For an Analysis" 381.; As Antonio Tricomi summarizes, "In post-1978 Italy, the youthful revolutionary utopia of the protestors was followed by complete disillusionment; civic commitment was replaced by detachment and ever-increasing retreat into the private." Antonio Tricomi, "Killing the Father: Politics and Intellectuals, Utopia and Disillusion," in *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy 1969-2009*, ed. P. Antonello and A. O'Leary (London: Legenda, 2009) 26; on the PCI's exploitation of the antagonism between the traditional working class and the new precariat, see Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody* 22; on the failure of the PCI's strategy, see Perry Anderson, "An Invertebrate Left," *London Review of Books* 31.5 (2009) 12-18.
10. Ginsborg, *Contemporary Italy* 402.
11. On the historical significance of this year in the emergence of a global neoliberal paradigm see David Harvey, *The Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 1-5.
12. Mario Tronti, "Our Operaismo," *New Left Review* 73 (2012) 139.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).
14. Nicoletta Marini-Maio, "A Spectre is Haunting Italy: The Double 'Emplotment' of the Moro Affair," in *Terrorism, Italian Style: Representations of Political Violence in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, ed. Ruth Glynn, Giancarlo Lombardi, and Alan O'Leary (London: Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2012) 159.
15. See Alan O'Leary, "Introduction," in *Terrorism, Italian Style* 14. See also Alan O'Leary, *Tragedia all'italiana: Italian Cinema and Italian Terrorisms, 1970-2010* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011) 48. As sociologists Raimondo Catanzaro and Luigi Manconi argue, Italy's left wing terrorism is "a wound not yet healed, a collective ache that explodes violently and painfully whenever discussion of those years is rekindled." Raimondo Catanzaro and Luigi Manconi quoted in Marini-Maio, "A Spectre is Haunting Italy" 157.
16. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008) 50.
17. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997) 89.

18. Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006) 62-63.
19. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981) 174-87.
20. Jason Wallin, "Living...Again: The Revolutionary Cine-Sign of Zombie-Life," in *Psychoanalyzing Cinema: a Productive Encounter with Lacan, Deleuze, and Žižek*, ed. Jan Jagodzinski (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 250.
21. In 1991, the Italian Communist Party leader Achille Occhetto declared Eurocommunism to be over and renamed his party the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) where about two thirds of the PCI membership followed him. The minority of dissenting PCI members in turn founded the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC) which, however, remained a fringe party with less than 5% of the popular vote for the most part of the following decades.
22. Simon Clark, "The Happiness of Undeadliness; a Methodology for Melancholic Practice," *Incognitum Hactenus* 3 (2012) 19.
23. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009). Carlo Celli, *National Identity in Global Cinema: How Movies Explain the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 85.
24. Stefano Ciammaroni. *The Way of All Flesh: A History and Historiography of Violence and Death in Italian Cinema (1943-1980)* (PhD Diss., New York University, 2011) 450.
25. Ciammaroni, *The Way of All Flesh* 219-87.
26. *The Way of All Flesh* 287.
27. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 89.
28. *The Way of All Flesh* 186-219; Ciammorani reiterates here a version of what Sergio Bologna calls the "Calogero Theorem." As Bologna explains, Pietro Calogero was "a magistrate (investigating judge) in Padua linked to the PCI, arrested and charged Toni Negri and most of the intellectuals and academics associated with Organised Autonomy with terrorism and attempted subversion of the state, on 7 April 1979. His theorem was that Autonomia Organizzata was the 'brains' behind the Red Brigades (BR), that the two organisations were one and the same, and that Negri and others in Autonomia were the 'intellectual authors' of the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, the former DC prime minister, in 1978." "For an Analysis" 102.
29. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 131; Jon Stratton, "Zombie trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life and Displaced People," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14.3 (2011) 265-81; Eugene Thacker, "Nomos, Nosos and Bios Eugene Thacker," *Culture Machine* 7 (2005), accessed May 25, 2014 <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/25/32>
30. Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," *boundary 2* 35.1 (2008) 98.
31. Lauro and Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto" 86-87.
32. There is a "difference between [the] binary opposition, and what ordinarily... would be more properly described as a contradiction. The former is a static antithesis; it does not lead out of itself as does the latter." Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) 36; "the unmasking of antinomy as contradiction... constitutes truly dialectical thinking as such." Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*

- (New York: Verso, 2009) 43.
33. I'm following here Žižek's intimations on how the melancholic misinterprets the constitutive lack of the symbolic order as loss. Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act," *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000) 659.
  34. Gramsci quoted in Slavoj Žižek, "The Un-Shock Doctrine," *Guernica*, 1 May 2011. [http://www.guernicamag.com/features/zizek\\_5\\_1\\_11/](http://www.guernicamag.com/features/zizek_5_1_11/) Accessed 25 July 2013.
  35. See Howard Hughes, "Splats Entertainment: Italian Cinema Eats Itself," *Cinema Italiano: The Complete Guide From Classics to Cult* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).
  36. Alan O'Leary, "Italian cinema and the 'anni di piombo,'" *Journal of European Studies* 40.3 (2010) 243-57 and Giancarlo Lombardi, "Screening Terror: Political Terrorism in Italian Cinema," *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy 1969-2009*, eds. P. Antonello and A. O'Leary (London: Legenda, 2009) 88-101.
  37. O'Leary, *Tragedia all'italiana* 18.
  38. Not to mention that *Zombi 2* was distributed as the unofficial "sequel" to George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, i.e. the producers tried to exploit the success of the American film (titled *Zombi* in Italy) by calling Fulci's version *Zombi 2*. See Brad O'Brien, "Vita, Amore, e Morte — and Lots of Gore: The Italian Zombie Film," *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, ed. S. McIntosh and M. Leverette (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008) 57; The differences between the two films' politics are, however, significant: while, as Ian Olney argues, in Romero's films the zombie emerges as a "symbol of postmodern angst," in *Zombi 2* (and Italian zombie films in general) the living dead are agents of "postcolonial rage." Ian Olney, *Euro Horror: Classic European Horror Cinema in Contemporary American Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013) 207.
  39. Patricia MacCormack, "Lucio Fulci," *Senses of Cinema* 31 (April 2004). <http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/great-directors/fulci/> Accessed 8 August 2013.
  40. Olney, *Euro Horror* 213. On the political potential of the carnival see Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Grotesque Image of the Body and its Sources," *Rabelais and His World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998) 303-65.
  41. Slavoj Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large" *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1992) 237.
  42. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Routledge, 1983) 135.
  43. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 136.
  44. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010) 69.
  45. Rancière, *Dissensus* 64.
  46. *The Political Unconscious* 69.
  47. *The Political Unconscious* 88.
  48. *The Political Unconscious* 85.
  49. This way, Fulci deconstructs what Pierpaolo Antonello and Alan O'Leary see as the dominant form of representing the *anni di piombo* in Italian cinema between 1979 and 1982: Oedipal narratives of sons murdering their fathers. Pierpaolo Antonello and Alan O'Leary, "Introduction," *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy 1969-2009*, ed. P. Antonello and A. O'Leary

- (London: Legenda, 2009) 5.
50. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005) 30.
  51. *The Political Unconscious* 67.
  52. See Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946)
  53. O'Leary, *Tragedia all'italiana* 68.
  54. Tricomi, "Killing the Father" 23.
  55. *Tragedia all'italiana* 104.
  56. Gerard Pratley, *The Films of Frankenheimer : Forty Years in Film* (Cranbury, NJ: Lehigh University Press, 1998) 208-209.
  57. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Roland L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 20.
  58. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
  59. *How To Read Lacan* 31-32.
  60. The scene is also an allusion to a scene in *La battaglia di Algeri* [The Battle of Algiers] (1966) in which female Algerian bombers disguise themselves as Europeans. I owe this point to one of my anonymous readers.
  61. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) 279-96.
  62. This phenomenon is called *pentitismo*. See O'Leary, "Introduction" 20.
  63. Soavi is the former assistant of Dario Argento, and the one responsible for some horror classics in the genre's period of decline in Italy like *Deliria* (1987), *La setta* (1991), or *Dellamorte Dellamore* (1994).
  64. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970) 12.
  65. See Perry Anderson, "Land Without Prejudice," *London Review of Books* 24.6 (2002) 6-13.
  66. See Carlo Testa, "Italian Political Cinema: Surveying a Once Glorious Genre in Times of Anguish" (paper presented at the Cornell Entralogos Conference, February 2005) <http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/2654> Accessed May 30, 2014.
  67. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) 37.
  68. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 132-50.
  69. Giorgio's coldly pragmatic voiceover accompanies the series of heinous crimes he commits throughout the movie never for a moment showing signs of a guilty conscience but always being eager to share his thoughts about his everyday life, like "exerting power on a woman helped me live," etc.
  70. As O'Leary observes, the Giorgio's real sin in the woman's eyes is his former ideological commitment to communism: "she asks him if it is true he was once a *terrorista*, and then to reassure her that he is no longer a *comunista*." O'Leary, *Tragedia all'italiana* 230.
  71. Scott Murray, "Year of the Gun," *Cinema Papers* (October 1992) 42.



## Roberto Arlt's Urban Montage: Forms of Combination in a Peripheral Metropolis

Tavid Mulder

In "How to Write a Novel," a piece published in his daily column *Aguafuertes Porteñas*, the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt envisions his literary works as literally the products of cutting, what he calls "the work of scissors [*la tarea de tijera*]." <sup>1</sup> Arlt explains that, "[h]aving finished the 'bulk' of the novel, that is, the essentials, the author who works in a disorganized manner, as I do, must dive, with monumental patience, into an enormous chaos of papers, clippings, notes, marks in red and blue pencil." <sup>2</sup> Arlt seems to prefer this chaotic process of revision over the moment of creation on a blank piece of paper perhaps because "the work of scissors" does not simply describe the final stage of writing; it indicates Arlt's materialist approach to the readymade materials of urban modernity in the interwar moment. In the prologue to *The Flamethrowers*, Arlt similarly argues that the contemporary moment demands a literature whose form articulates the contradictions of the social totality. Although Arlt aspires to write a beautiful, "panoramic canvas" like the novels of Flaubert, "today, among the noise of an inevitably collapsing social edifice, it isn't possible to think about ornamentation." <sup>3</sup> Arlt must thus abandon harmony and write works that "contain the violence of a 'cross' to the jaw." <sup>4</sup> Against the idealist impulse to produce works whose seamless unity compensates for social reality, Arlt grounds literary construction in montage.

This article reads Roberto Arlt's *The Seven Madmen* (1929) and *The Flamethrowers* (1931) in terms of a form of montage that consists not in the mere accumulation of incongruous fragments but in the arrangement of contradictory elements in a dialectical manner that reveals their social mediation. Siegfried Kracauer, in his contemporaneous *Die Angestellten* (1929), likewise insisted on a critical montage whose juxtapositions were derived from knowledge of the social structure. "Reality is a construction," he wrote, but "it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather, it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning." <sup>5</sup> This montage, in other words, does not constitute the attempt to shock and disrupt

habit, as if by assimilating the excessive stimuli of the metropolis, but a conceptual map of the unevenness of global modernity. In this regard, montage also appears as a determinate response to the representational dilemma outlined in Fredric Jameson's "Modernism and Imperialism." Because the structure of imperialism, in which a fundamental part "of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere," means that the "daily life and existential experience in the metropolis... can now no longer be grasped immanently," modernist literature must substitute a spatial language for the absent totality.<sup>6</sup> Jameson, of course, finds a solution to the dilemma in Joyce's *Ulysses*, since Dublin amounts to an "exceptional situation, one of overlap and coexistence between these two incommensurable realities... those of the metropolis and of the colony simultaneously."<sup>7</sup> Arlt's Buenos Aires displays a similar mediation of capitalism's contradictory structural tendencies, albeit for different reasons. Situated between the European metropolis and the periphery, Buenos Aires folds within itself and points to aspects of both realities, making this Latin American city into what Beatriz Sarlo calls a "peripheral metropolis."<sup>8</sup> Jameson maintains that the modernist situation "is still organized around two distinct temporalities: that of the new industrial big city and that of the peasant countryside."<sup>9</sup> But the relationship of the country and the city, Harsha Ram argues, effectively serves "as a diminished substitute for modernity's larger geographies."<sup>10</sup> While the European metropolis tends to appear as a complete microcosm, Buenos Aires foregrounds its incompleteness and the international dimension of uneven development. As a result, Arlt's montage, by drawing on ready-made materials, does not simply juxtapose contingent fragments but constitutes, by building on the way the peripheral metropolis posits its relationship to global modernity, a formal attempt to mediate individual experience and the underlying structural tendencies of global capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, I argue that Roberto Arlt's *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* evoke the city and utilize factual forms through a peculiar dialectical montage. This montage serves to articulate and overcode contradictory tendencies, keeping alive the tension between opposites while forming a chiasmus in which each tendency turns into its opposite. The novels, as I will show, imitate and parody factual forms — journalism, footnotes, etc. — undermining their appearance as immediately verifiable, while also appropriating and rearranging pseudo-fascist clichés and mythical images — above all, in the Astrologer's plans for a secret society that would install a dictatorship and redeem meaningless existence in modernity through the invention of "metaphysical lies" — to insist on illusion as a fundamental reality of the historical situation. Moreover, I show that this dialectical reversal informs Arlt's conception of the urban modernity, which, through expressionist language, technical images and geometrical forms, appears simultaneously as the new and the same, as possibility and the ineluctable necessity of meaningless modern existence. Roberto Arlt's urban montage, as a result, figures the combined development of the peripheral metropolis and provides a vantage point from which the problem of the

opposition of realism and modernism may appear as its own solution, illuminating Arlt's own peculiar position in literary debates at the time in Argentina and speaking to contemporary discussions of the relation between realism and modernism.

### **“Century of Phrases”: Montage as the Unity of Journalism and its Opposite**

Because of its semi-peripheral position — not a colony, not a core region — Argentina may appear to have been relatively isolated from the interwar crisis. The Great Depression, of course, impacted all nations in the global economy, but Argentina maintained its neutrality during the two world wars. In reality, the interwar crisis prompted a significant transformation in Argentina's position in the global economy and in its political and social structures. From the second half of the nineteenth century to the interwar period, the prevailing economic model was based on the export of agricultural raw materials and beef to industrializing economies in Europe and the US. As Ernesto Laclau argues in an early essay, this arrangement — in which labor-intensive and even precapitalist modes of production persisted in Latin America while industrialization rapidly advanced in the center — enabled the formation of an average rate of profit whereby surplus-value produced in Latin America compensated for the rising organic composition of capital and the corresponding tendency for the rate of profit to fall.<sup>12</sup> Argentina, however, held a peculiar position in the global economy. While entirely dependent on export, the productivity of the land in Argentina surpassed that of many other countries, leading to a situation in which, according to Laclau, differential rent allowed Argentina to appropriate surplus produced elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Dependent and exploitative, Argentina indeed formed a peripheral metropolis, and the contradictions of this peculiar combination were expressed most clearly in Buenos Aires. Ultimately, this relationship to the global economy was incredibly tenuous; it thrived insofar as export demand remained high, but the aftermath of World War One began to dispel the illusion of this model's future viability. Unemployment soared in Buenos Aires, and although things stabilized in the second half of the twenties, the problems intensified during the Great Depression. Liberalism — the ideology of the Latin American oligarchy, who sought to maximize production for the global market — slowly crumbled during the twenties, and the thirties saw the rise of authoritarian nationalism and populism, with vague resemblances to fascism, and strained attempts to expand domestic industry. These changes, unfolding in the peripheral metropolis, thus mediated Argentina's shifting position in the global economy.

“The Art of Collecting Cigarette Butts,” a piece written in 1931, exemplifies how Arlt utilizes montage to map the extremes of the peripheral metropolis. In this text, Roberto Arlt discusses how desperate *porteños* — inhabitants of Buenos Aires — devised inventive strategies to deal with the harsh economic realities of the interwar period. Arlt quotes a man he met in a café:

This city lacks nothing in misery and poverty to match European cities. The only thing that distinguishes us from over there are appearances. Because, tell me: “Who, seeing my look, this cheap tie, my cheap boots, my cheap suit, my cheap hat, which all together give me the appearance of a decent person, could suspect that many nights, at twelve or one in the morning, I go out to gather cigarette butts in the streets so I have something to smoke the next day?”<sup>14</sup>

This acquaintance abruptly reverses the conception of the European metropolis and its peripheral counterparts, since the city embodies not human achievement but “misery.” In its deteriorating economic condition, Buenos Aires has overcome the distance separating it from Paris and Berlin, but its inhabitants cling to the fading appearance of distinction. Rather than give up smoking, this acquaintance — and, as Arlt relates, many others whose economic position would not seem to necessitate such desperate measures — continues this habit by recovering the scraps of bourgeois society. The cigarette-butt collector thereby thrives on the city’s inequality. The inhabitants of the city’s poor neighborhoods could not afford to waste anything, smoking the cigarette till nothing was left, but inhabitants of the rich neighborhoods might take a drag or two before causally throwing the cigarette onto the street. The cigarette-butt collector’s attention to the disregarded materials of the city, however, also articulates how Arlt in his writings gathers and arranges prosaic scraps that elude the typical *porteño*’s attention. Arlt, like his acquaintance in the café, is “a ragpicker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart.”<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin famously used these words to describe Siegfried Kracauer. Arlt developed a similar montage technique grounded in the particulars of the metropolis.<sup>16</sup> The reality of the interwar crisis, whose tension between value and material wealth could not simply be dissolved by a conceptual synthesis, demanded a montage that was not simply a contingent combination of mundane objects but a conscious form of construction that articulated the relationship between the elements of an inherently contradictory social reality.

More specifically, Arlt’s journalistic writings arrange verbal fragments through overlapping and open-ended quotations. In the second half of “The Art of Collecting Cigarette Butts,” Arlt describes a discussion with a friend who elaborates on the details of this practice. The friend’s voice initially appears as one quote among others, subordinated to Arlt’s authorial voice, but the ending suggests that the second half of the text has been either one continuous quote without quotation marks or an ambiguous mixture of two voices. As a reporter, Arlt defers to the friend’s account, but Arlt neither returns to make a final comment nor makes a clear distinction between the direct discourse and the discourse of the column writer, violating the supposed objectivity of journalism, based on the separation of reporter and words reported. This *aguafuerte* has become what Bakhtin might describe as “double-voiced,” since “we hear in that word another person’s voice.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, this double-voiced

word does not amount to stylization or parody, phenomena in which the speaking subject, out of agreement or disagreement, subordinates the intentions of another speaker. The words of the friend (and Arlt) would be more accurately described as passively double-voiced. The voices enter into a dialectical relationship whereby “the other person’s words,” which are manipulated for external purposes in stylization and parody, instead “exert an active influence and inspiration on the author’s speech, forcing it to change accordingly.”<sup>18</sup> As an avid reader of Dostoevsky, Arlt appears to have come to the same conclusion as Bakhtin about dialogism. Because of the massive wave of immigration to Argentina in the early twentieth century, dialogism was an urgent political matter, prompting writers and the dominant class to defend the purity of literature as a model of the national language. But Arlt, as Ricardo Piglia argues in a memorable moment from *Artificial Respiration*, “works with what *remains*, what is sedimented in language, with leftovers, fragments, amalgams, that is to say, he works with what really is the national language.”<sup>19</sup> The negativity of this prosaic national language — its non-identity, its inter-national and relational character, its tendency toward fragmentation — disqualifies it as a static model, whether real or ideal, to be copied. Arlt does not reproduce a static, pre-existing language but rearranges, overlaps and thereby transforms these recognizable verbal scraps.

The journalistic practice described here differs significantly from that of the *modernista* chronicle: the journalistic writing of turn-of-the-century Latin American poets. As numerous critics have shown, the chronicle (*crónica*) played a fundamental role in the constitution of Latin American literature.<sup>20</sup> Since Latin America’s publishing industry was still in its infancy at the time, poets turned to journalism as a source of steady income, initiating the incomplete autonomy of literature from political power. But journalism also represented a serious threat to literature. Aníbal González, for instance, refers to the *modernista* concern that “journalism not only degrades the author, but it also ‘chops him to pieces.’”<sup>21</sup> Unlike the time-intensive craft of poetry, the newspaper’s “impersonal, reportorial ‘telegraphic style’ was, for them, the very negation of style, and, therefore, of the author.”<sup>22</sup> The chronicle constituted, as Julio Ramos argues, the place “where literature would represent (at times anxiously) its encounter and conflict with the technologized and massified discourses of modernity.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, the *modernista* chronicle registers the gap between prosaic object and unitary poetic subject, a struggle that marks the uneven modernization of Latin American literature.

But in Arlt’s journalism, as we have seen, the author no longer maintains a rigid separation between self and urban modernity. The peculiar form of combination in Arlt’s use of voices reveals his conception of the urban subject as an overloaded, or supercharged, montage. That is, Arlt combines his voice with another in order to render visible the inherently fractured and multiple nature of the subject who has been pieced together from impersonal urban fragments. In this way, Arlt’s *aguafuertes* may bear more similarities with the articulation of voices in Baudelaire’s prose

poems and with a set of modernist fragments that Andreas Huyssen had identified as “metropolitan miniatures.”<sup>24</sup> These short prose pieces — written by Kracauer, Benjamin, and Bloch, among others — dispense with plot and character. Preferring a provisional, kaleidoscopic approach to the city, the miniature both performs and reflects on the urban transformation of subjectivity and perception. The multi-perspectivism of the literary miniature coordinates, without collapsing, the distinct modes of expression that overlap and coexist in the metropolis: slang, advertisements, headlines, etc. Likewise, in Arlt’s journalistic writings the montage form registers what Beatriz Sarlo calls the “culture of mixture” in Buenos Aires, where questions of immigration and periphery overlaid the already dissonant combination of cultural forms in the city.<sup>25</sup> The newspaper, the very medium in which Arlt’s *aguafuertes* appeared, provides an exemplary instance of this juxtaposition of incongruous elements because it incorporates, without any apparent hierarchy, heterogeneous registers on the same page: factual, fictional, banal, and sensationalized observations. Sarlo has also discussed how the major newspapers in Buenos Aires in the twenties and thirties, in apparent violation of the standards of journalism, presented an almost fantastical combination of news, technical information, and utopian technological dreams, and she has rightly connected these “modern dreams” to Arlt’s work.<sup>26</sup> The newspaper thus bears an intrinsic relationship to the combined unevenness of the city and Arlt’s journalistic writings embody in their formal principle the inner connection of metropolis and newspaper.

At the level of subtext, *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* incorporate another dimension of journalism: its claim to factual presentation. The novels offer themselves as reportage, as the non-fictional reconstruction of events that had been sensationalized in the news. The narration initially appears omniscient, but the narrator intervenes directly about half-way through *The Seven Madmen*, at which point he explains that the story has been pieced together from first- and second-hand accounts. For instance, Erdosain, one of the principal characters, told the narrator about the events prior to committing suicide.<sup>27</sup> The narrator, who refers to himself as “the commentator,” claims to have housed Erdosain for three days, during which Erdosain explained every detail.<sup>28</sup> After Erdosain commits suicide, the commentator claims to have consulted other characters and various police and journalistic accounts. The novel’s jarring *in medias res* opening becomes clearer in this light. The narrator provides no background but simply jumps into the first scene, assuming that the reader already knows about Erdosain from having read the newspaper.

*The Seven Madmen* begins as Remo Erdosain is accused of stealing money from his employer, the Sugar Company. To return the money he stole, Erdosain goes to the suburban neighborhood of Temperley to seek out the help of “the Astrologer” and Arturo Haffner, also known as “the Melancholy Pimp.” Erdosain subsequently becomes involved in the Astrologer’s plans to use brothels to finance a pseudo-communist, pseudo-fascist secret society. To obtain the initial capital needed for

the brothels, Erdosain proposes that they kidnap, ransom, and murder his brother-in-law, Barsut. This plan fulfills Erdosain's need to kill in order "to be." In the end, the Astrologer fakes the murder in order to satisfy Erdosain's need but uses the opportunity to recruit Barsut, whom he will double cross in the next book.

In *The Flamethrowers* the story becomes increasingly dispersed and disjointed. Erdosain moves into Barsut's old boarding house and begins work on plans for a chemical weapons factory that would allow the Astrologer's secret society to rapidly spread terror and overthrow the Argentine government. At the boarding house, Erdosain gets engaged to the owner's daughter, "the Cross-Eyed Girl." In the meantime, the Melancholy Pimp is murdered by a rival pimp. The Astrologer establishes an alliance with Hipólita, to whom Erdosain had confessed the plan to kill Barsut in the previous novel. Hipólita initially planned to blackmail the Astrologer, but his fascinating ideas convince her to become a devout follower. After Barsut kills the Astrologer's dim-witted assistant, Bromberg, the Astrologer and Hipólita burn down the house in Temperley and leave the country. At the same time, Erdosain delivers the plans for the chemical weapons factory to the Astrologer, murders the Cross-Eyed Girl and then commits suicide on a train.

Although these characters appear eccentric and unlikely to reveal overarching historical tendencies, Arlt insists that the novels bear a fundamental relationship to their historical situation. Like Kracauer, Arlt believed that "[o]nly from its extremes can reality be revealed,"<sup>29</sup> and these characters, these "madmen," are nothing if not extreme. In an *aguafuerte* written shortly after the publication of *The Seven Madmen*, Arlt responds to a letter in which a potential reader asks if the novel is worth buying. Arlt, who had no qualms about self-promotion, uses the opportunity to give a review of his own book. The plot of the novel, he says, is minimal. Instead, the novel revolves around its the characters. They, in Arlt's words, "[h]ate this civilization. They would like to believe in something, to kneel before something, to love something, but they are denied the gift of faith, 'grace,' as the Catholics say."<sup>30</sup> They are, in other words, spiritually homeless. But Arlt does not hypostasize this existential crisis as the fundamental condition of humanity. Instead, he relates it to "the disorientation that, after the great war, has revolutionized the consciousness of men, leaving them empty of ideals and hopes."<sup>31</sup> But, Arlt insists, these characters are not simply literary illustrations of the historical moment. Arlt claims that they are "individuals and women from this city, whom I have met."<sup>32</sup> Arlt, in other words, had no need to invent extreme characters because they existed ready-made in Buenos Aires, embodying the historical shifts of the interwar moment. Moreover, this *aguafuerte* reiterates the novels' self-assertion as documentary works, as factual accounts.

Indeed, *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* often suggest, but never claim, that Arlt is the "commentator," the narrator-journalist who took down Erdosain's testimony and carried out an investigation of the events. In various footnotes, Arlt appears to speak directly, announcing, for instance, the details of the second novel

or commentating on the remarkable similarity between the Astrologer's plot and the "conservative revolution" of September 6 in Argentina.<sup>33</sup> Occasionally, these comments carry the heading "author's note" and thus appear to set themselves apart from notes made by the narrator.<sup>34</sup> But not always. The last footnote in *The Flamethrowers*, simply titled "note," reiterates Arlt's frequent complaint about the temporal constraints he faced as a writer and journalist: "This work was finished with such speed that the publisher was printing the first sheets as the author was editing the final chapters."<sup>35</sup> These are surely Arlt's words, but they occupy the space — the footnote — reserved for the narrator's comments. The notes thus open the possibility of two distinct interpretations, that the novels are factual documents of real people or fictional representations of reality. A qualitative distinction, of course, exists between Arlt-as-author and Arlt-as-narrator, and Arlt would not deny such a distinction. But he writes the novels in such a way that they constantly shift back and forth between fictional and factual registers, asking the reader to do an impossible task: to see the work as both simultaneously.

While the footnotes entail a complex mediation of author and narrator, they also produce reality effects through journalistic references to contemporary events in an international framework. The novels thereby make explicit the connection between the plot and the interwar moment, and perhaps more importantly, they claim empirical verification for the reality of the story. Arlt, in other words, does not create reality effects by means of meticulous descriptions of urban and domestic settings, as in a novel by Flaubert or Balzac. Instead, he relies on documents, on forms of writing whose factual status seemingly enables them to make truth-claims. In *The Flamethrowers*, for instance, Erdosain claims that there is no escape from suffering, because "[e]very coast of the world is occupied by ferocious men who, with the help of canons and machine guns, install factories and burn alive poor indigenous people who resist their robbery."<sup>36</sup> The commentator agrees, including in a footnote a recent report from a French newspaper about Chinese writers and Communists who were executed or burned alive. Or, in another instance from the beginning of *The Flamethrowers*, the Astrologer justifies his conviction that "half a dozen willing associates can turn the best made society upside down"<sup>37</sup> on the recent news that Al Capone and George Moran had formed an alliance. Despite operating outside the law, these men have become so powerful that the alliance is reported as if it were "an offensive or defensive treaty between Paraguay and Bolivia, or Bolivia and Uruguay."<sup>38</sup> The Astrologer thus seeks to convince his interlocutor, the Lawyer, and the reader by extension, of the feasibility of his secret society on the basis of what is actually happening elsewhere in the world. The commentator, however, footnotes updated news on the alliance: Capone's thugs, disguised as police officers, killed a number of Moran's men and nearly killed Moran himself.<sup>39</sup> The alliance, it seems, was simply a deceitful maneuver, a way to get close to Moran in order to then destroy his organization. Correspondingly, the news report, the fact that presents itself as immediately verifiable, turns out



to be an unwitting illusion. The footnotes thus stage a dialectical reversal whereby the most factual moments of the novels — journalistic reality effects — reveal their falseness and, in another reversal, suggest that deceit may be the fundamental truth of the historical situation.

As a result, the footnotes underline a fundamental problem in the novels: unreliable narrators. The footnotes often interrupt the narrative flow in order to offer a conflicting perspective or even explain that something is false. During a meeting of the secret society, in a chapter aptly named “The Farce,” a Major in the military proposes how the Argentine military could be used to serve the society’s goals. Yet, after delivering his speech on the failings of parliamentary democracy, the Major admits that he is playing a role, that “this was nothing more than a rehearsal, but some day we’ll act out the drama for real.”<sup>40</sup> But the footnote reverses the picture once again: “It was later discovered that the Major was a real rather than an imaginary officer.”<sup>41</sup> Suspicions multiply further when “the Gold Prospector,” another member of the secret society, tells a captivating story about the discovery of colloidal gold in Patagonia, only to admit to Erdosain that the story was false. Unreliable narrators are the norm in these novels. Erdosain’s testimony constitutes the fundamental basis of the commentator’s reconstruction, and while Erdosain does not appear to deliberately deceive, unlike other characters, his hallucinations and delirious experiences deprive him of reliability. The chapter “In the Cavern,” for instance, oscillates between three levels: Erdosain on the train (present); Erdosain’s first encounter with Hipólita’s husband, Ergueta (past); and Erdosain imagining that he is telling Hipólita about his first meeting with Ergueta (hypothetical future). The narration often conflates these levels within a single sentence, eliminating the possibility that one could definitely decide which parts are true. Even if the novels, in their fictional self-presentation, aspire to the objectivity of reportage, the narration and its sources cannot coalesce into a factual report. The commentator may claim to rectify apocryphal accounts, but the narration cannot completely purge itself of the unreliability of its sources. Moreover, the Astrologer disappears by the end of *The Flamethrowers*, making him unavailable for questioning, but the novels contained detailed chapters on the Astrologer’s thoughts. The narration thus contradicts its claim to empirical verification. And yet, this is not a fault or a sign of inconsistency. Arlt’s novels, Ricardo Piglia suggests, deal fundamentally with “the possibility that fiction has to transmute reality... the possibility to *make believe*.”<sup>42</sup> In raising the question of belief in the context of a self-declared factual presentation, *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* ask what counts as a fact.<sup>43</sup>

Ultimately, the dialectical relation between factuality and deceit unfolds in the framework of the peripheral metropolis. For Arlt, cynical reason prevails among urban subjects, but this cynicism also paves the way for mythical, compensatory images. In “We Are Suspicious for a Reason,” an *aguafuerte* published in 1929, Arlt insists that “you cannot believe anyone.”<sup>44</sup> Sitting on the train or in the park, overhearing

conversations, Arlt notices a recurring pattern of deceit in the city. In the countryside, Arlt explains, deceit is uncommon because everyone knows everyone else, but the city is “a sort of masonry forest where in every cavern a wild animal hides and stalks its prey.”<sup>45</sup> The city thus highlights the peculiarity of the capitalist social formation, which, Marx argued, replaces “[r]elations of personal dependence” with “[p]ersonal independence founded on objective [*sachlicher*] dependence.”<sup>46</sup> Insofar as it is structured by the logic of capital, modern urban life entails anonymity and alienation. Moreover, and more fundamentally for Arlt, urban modernity creates cynical subjects who deceive in order to avoid being deceived. Accordingly, Arlt states that we are witnessing “the twilight of compassion... This is the *century of phrases*.”<sup>47</sup> Arlt does not elaborate here on this terse and brilliant historical diagnosis, but “phrases” (*frases*) refers to quotations, empty sayings and clichéd language, encapsulating thereby the proliferation of mass media and disingenuous political propaganda in the early twentieth century. The idea of a “century of phrases,” in other words, identifies how cynicism prepares the ground for its opposite, creating the conditions for a desired return to mythical images.

The Astrologer bases his secret society precisely on this need for “a metaphysical lie.”<sup>48</sup> In his diagnosis, modern rationalization and the brutality of recent world events have led to a spiritual and existential crisis: “Once science has extinguished all faith, nobody will want to go on with a purely mechanical existence... an incurable plague will return to the earth... the plague of suicide.”<sup>49</sup> In this desperate situation, the Astrologer proposes “tak[ing] a step backwards,”<sup>50</sup> inventing gods and cultivating myth. Deceit would serve as the cement holding together the secret society and the society it would rule. The Astrologer’s grandiose ideas appear absurd, but they are nothing but a montage of pseudo-fascist and pseudo-communist clichés that were readily recognizable at the time. In a brilliant work on fascism in Arlt, José Amícola has shown, for instance, that one of the Astrologer’s most notorious quotes — “We’ll be Bolsheviks, Catholics, fascists, atheists or militarists, depending on the level of initiation”<sup>51</sup> — evokes a well-known statement made by Mussolini, whom the Astrologer considers his model.<sup>52</sup> Given Arlt’s commitment to write a work that grasps the interwar moment, what Jameson has described as “a wholly new force field, in which, not the older nation-states, but rather the great new emergent and transnational forces of Communism and Fascism, become the ‘subjects of history,’”<sup>53</sup> he draws widely on readymade materials found in newspaper reports. Arlt condenses the contradictions of the historical situation into the Astrologer’s ideas, which thereby appear as a caricature comprised of over-coded and overlapping ideological clichés and historical fragments.<sup>54</sup> Because his words assume the form of an over-coded montage, the Astrologer is the master of what Bakhtin describes as the loophole, “the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one’s own words.”<sup>55</sup> He rearranges readymade clichés and always holds onto the possibility of another reorganization that would transform the meaning. These factual documents

— sayings, propaganda, etc. — thus posit the novels' relationship to the historical situation, but they also appear as mere "phrases," as the empty words fascism used to deceive and over-coded words that appear to fill in the longing for stable meaning. Through this form of montage, Arlt appropriates, imitates and parodies the fascist discourse of mythical images.

In this regard, there is a striking affinity between Arlt's novels and the photomontages of John Heartfield. Unlike his earlier work with Berlin Dada, characterized by explosive fragmentation and the disintegration of illusionism, Heartfield's photomontages in *AIZ (Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung)* mobilized montage to simultaneously create the appearance of reality and parody the imagery of National Socialism, producing a project which, according to Devin Fore, amounts "to a zealous overcoding" of the techniques of "mimetic illusionism."<sup>56</sup> Heartfield's "Hurrah, die Butter ist alle!" (1935), for instance, presents a quasi-realistic image of a bourgeois dining room that turns out to be an absurd realization of Hermann Göring's statement that butter and lard make the nation weak, but ore makes it strong. In appropriating and imitating fascist images and sayings, Heartfield does not present an unambiguous message but rearranges fragments in such a way that they say more than what was intended and thus highlight a contradiction. Accordingly, Devin Fore writes, following the lead of Tret'iakov in his monograph on Heartfield, that montage does not consist of "mere accumulation"; rather, montage only happens when "pieces have been assembled in a way that supercharges the image semantically, giving rise to dynamic visual impressions and a multiplicity of potential interpretations."<sup>57</sup> As a result, Heartfield's photomontages often assume the form of a multistable Gestalt figure, like the duck-rabbit, that can be understood in two different ways but not both simultaneously.<sup>58</sup> And Heartfield achieved this "overcoding" through the rearrangement of exclusively pre-existing images and sayings, factual and imaginary materials in circulation that would have been easily recognizable. Rather than explode the appearance of coherent reality, as in Dada, or present utopian images of Communist workers, Heartfield imitates mythical images and illusory appearances through a dialectical montage that operates as an immanent critique.<sup>59</sup>

Like Heartfield, Arlt stages a relationship of fact and myth that is deeply dialectical, in which factual documentation becomes illusion and in which myth and deceit appear as the fundamental truth of the "century of phrases." *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* thus exploit the constitutive tension at the heart of the documentary novel. As Barbara Foley defines it in her brilliant study, the documentary novel "purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation."<sup>60</sup> However, the point, as Foley makes abundantly clear, is not to eradicate the distinction between fictional and factual discourse, since the documentary novel asserts that such a qualitative distinction exists by shifting back and forth across the dividing line. The documentary novel, in its peculiar montage of fact and fiction,

entertains and overcodes two Gestalt frames of interpretation simultaneously, even as it denies the possibility of their synthesis. Arlt likewise undertakes a montage of contradictory tendencies, a parodic imitation of factual forms (journalism and the footnote) and mythical images (fascist distortions) not in order to assert that all reality is fictional but to insist on the need for a dialectical mediation, a shifting back and forth, that grasps the contradictory imbrication of reality and illusion.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Expressionist City: Geometry, Second Nature, and Combined Unevenness**

Montage also operates as the logic of the Arltian city. Arlt finds in the city's "culture of mixture" a constructive potential to disassemble and reassemble existing relations. In the Buenos Aires of the twenties and thirties, Corrientes was the street that most embodied this tendency toward contradictory extremes. Porteños would go to Corrientes above all for the theater, but the street, located at the center of the city, also displayed the most intense manifestations of crime, modernity and immigration in Argentina. In "Corrientes, at Night," an *aguafuerte* published in 1929, Arlt presents Corrientes as Argentina's Babel, as a chaotic combination of extremes. "[A] unique and strange cosmopolitan humanity," Arlt writes, "shakes hands in this unique drain that has the city for its beauty and joy."<sup>62</sup> Arlt thus suggests that, as a result of mass immigration to Buenos Aires and the structural peculiarity of the peripheral metropolis, cosmopolitanism assumes a peculiar meaning in Corrientes; no longer an expression of the desire to escape narrowly nationalist concerns, cosmopolitanism appears as a moment within the national frame, deflating ideas about a singular Argentine essence and making the contradictory combinations of national reality appear as the result of its determinate relationship to global modernity. Moreover, Arlt's language echoes *The Communist Manifesto* because Corrientes embodies the creative destruction of capitalist modernity: "Everything here loses its value. Everything is transformed."<sup>63</sup> In this street, the restless pursuit of novelty sweeps away any fixed identity. The street thus seems to lend itself to infinite variation:

Unique street, absurd street, beautiful street. Street for dreaming, for getting lost, for going from there to every success and every failure; street of joy, street that turns women into gauchos and thugs; street where tailors give advice to authors and where cops fraternize with morons... street that, as day breaks, turns blue and dark, because its life is only possible in the artificial light of methylene blue, of the copper sulfate greens, of the picric acid yellows, which inject in it a pyrotechnic, jealous madness.<sup>64</sup>

Corrientes, in other words, breaks out of nature's constraints and rhythms. With neon lights, the night opens up to new activities and encounters. All rigid, seemingly natural hierarchies crumble in the absence of any firm foundation. As Oscar Terán

argues, Arlt's representation of Corrientes contrasts sharply with the conception of the neighborhood (barrio) found in tango lyrics at the time. While tango imagined "the neighborhood as a *locus amoenus*, a familiar stronghold, protected from the anonymity of the big city and providing all primary affects," Arlt sees nothing but stingy opportunism in the neighborhood.<sup>65</sup> Instead, Corrientes presents Arlt with "exceptional marginality and social mixture," with "modernity... taken to its most intense extremes."<sup>66</sup> In such an unstable environment, tradition had no place, so conservatives regarded Corrientes as the embodiment of the threat of immigration. Arlt had no interest in the nationalist agenda and instead saw in the extremes — noise, bright lights, technology and cultural mixture — the internal contradictions of urban modernity.<sup>67</sup>

The Arltian city invariably affirms its provisional status as a montage that can be reconstructed. Unlike many of his contemporaries, whose family names were intimately linked to the history of Buenos Aires and the nation, Arlt was a first-generation Argentine who, according to Beatriz Sarlo, "lacked all nostalgic feeling for the past."<sup>68</sup> Beatriz Sarlo identifies the parallel between this attitude and the colonial image of Latin America as a world without history.<sup>69</sup> But, for Arlt, the absence of history does not derive from the colonial past; rather, it marks the most modern dimension of the city. At roughly the same time, Ernst Bloch and Jean-Paul Sartre insisted that Berlin and New York, respectively, were colonial cities. Berlin, Bloch writes, evoking the city's sandy foundation and incessant transformations in the early twentieth century, is an "eternal colonial city... a structure that, so to speak, always becomes and never is."<sup>70</sup> Arlt's Buenos Aires, we might then say, was not "the Paris of the South" but "the Berlin of the South." From these determinate perspectives, Buenos Aires and Berlin exhibit a sort of pure modernity that is simultaneously a deterioration of the city insofar as this modernity entails the ongoing transformation of existing reality and the creation of new possibilities and, through its inner logic, the systematic shutting-down of these same possibilities.

And yet, the novels never explicitly present this sort of enthusiastic celebration of the dynamic metropolis. *The Seven Madmen* begins in the city center, enumerating the various streets Erdosain passes as he thinks desperately about ways to come up with the 600 pesos he stole from the Sugar Company. The city, at this point, reflects the anguish of Erdosain's existential crisis. And far from presenting a continuous path from one point to another, the narration jumps from one urban reference to another, skipping intermediate steps, and even includes a chapter on Erdosain's penchant for walking in Palermo and Belgrano, the rich neighborhoods to the north, and fantasizing that a millionaire woman will save him from his despair. The narration does not engage in meticulous description of the physical landscape of the city but evokes obliquely the urban surroundings through disjointed images. The city only becomes an explicit object of narration after Erdosain visits the Astrologer's house in Temperley, in particular after the Gold Prospector rails against the city in his apocryphal speech

on colloid gold. At this point, Erdosain, apparently having internalized the Gold Prospector's comments, regards the city and its miserly inhabitants as something to be conquered or destroyed. This city, the rotten city (*ciudad canalla*), embodies the deterioration of modern civilization and pervades the Astrologer's theory of need for a metaphysical lie. Urban modernity, in short, assumes a determinate form in *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* when it appears on the explicit level of narrative, but it assumes a different shape on the implicit level, the shape of a determinate negation of the city's explicit form, so to speak. In the words of the characters, the city consists of brutal, meaningless existence, but this immediate appearance remains one-sided, since Arlt also patterns his expressionist language and technical images on urban modernity and its historical dynamics.

The city, in other words, constitutes the subtext of the novels, acting as a constructive, informing principle. Unlike the balanced silence of the countryside, this city, the expressionist city, is characterized by extremes: noise, clashes, chiaroscuro, speed, etc. Like Simmel and Benjamin, Arlt registers the presence of the city in terms of overwhelming stimuli that disrupt the normal workings of mental life and generate anxiety. Maryse Renaud thus highlights the characters' physical and psychic mobility: "restless, anxious, unstable, they seek to develop in a rather hostile environment, which drives them to cover an extensive range of experiences, to explore the capital's multiple hells."<sup>71</sup> In effect, Arlt makes Corrientes, the Babel of Argentina, into the basis for his characters and the literary construction of Buenos Aires. Corrientes permeates the fabric of the narrative, even when the action takes place outside the city. Indeed, a surprisingly great deal of plot occurs at the Astrologer's house in Temperley, a suburban area in the south. Arlt frequently employs organic motifs in descriptions of the house, which was probably built in the art nouveau style preferred by the emergent bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. When Erdosain first approaches the house, "[h]e felt as if he were far from the city, in the middle of the countryside... the rose bushes gave off such a strong and penetrating scent that it seemed the whole garden was tinged with a red shimmer as cool as a mountain stream."<sup>72</sup> The Astrologer's house in Temperley first presents itself as natural oasis from the anguish of the city. But the house also becomes the source of violent ideas about dictatorship, mass deception and chemical warfare. This seemingly natural dimension turns out to be mythical insofar as the violent extremes of the city shape the construction of the Astrologer's house as organic. What appears to lie outside, rooted in the organic world of the countryside, is actually a projection from within the city. The city, in other words, plays the role of the masses in Baudelaire's poetry, paraphrasing Benjamin, we can say that the city "had become so much a part of [Arlt] that it is rare to find a description of [it] in his works."<sup>73</sup> As subtext, urban modernity structures the characters' subjectivity and the formal language and imagination of the novels.<sup>74</sup>

This underling figuration of the city would best be described as expressionist

for the way it constitutes itself as a geometrical totality. “Geometry and anguish”: Federico García Lorca used this phrase to describe his impression of New York, but the words are no less apt for expressionism’s relation to the city in general and Arlt’s in particular. Overpowered by the city, the expressionist could not see buildings, streets, and crowds as separate. The impressionist sees the city as landscape, like the natural settings he or she painted *en plain air*, but the expressionist seeks “the inclusion of the spectator in the frame of the street.”<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, expressionist representations are often built on correspondences between internal and external. In bringing the subject into the frame, the subject is contaminated by the object and the subject projects his or her intense emotional states onto the object. César Aira relates the extremes of Arlt’s fictional world to the tortuous distortions undergone as a result of the expressionist’s participation in the object, in the artistic material. The artist finds himself immersed in a world “of excessive contiguities and deformations from lack of space in a limited area,”<sup>76</sup> but the artist refuses to step back and observe. Subject and object thus mutually determine one another, but the expressionist city does not amount to harmonious reconciliation. Whereas the impressionists emphasize fleeting perceptions through soft edges and indistinct boundaries, the expressionists use straight lines to figure the ongoing antagonism between subject and object and the geometrically-organized metropolis. The city, organized according to a grid, could only be artistically rendered by a geometrical imagination. Indeed, Arlt figures anguish geometrically in what Erdosain calls “the anguish zone.” At the beginning of *The Seven Madmen*, Erdosain walks the streets in desperation:

He imagined this zone floating above cities, about two meters in the air, and pictured it graphically like an area of salt flats or deserts that are shown on maps by tiny dots, as dense as herring roe.... [The zone] slid from one place to the next like a cloud of poison gas, seeping through walls, passing straight through buildings, without ever losing its flat horizontal shape; a two-dimensional anguish that left an after-taste of tears in throats it sliced like a guillotine.<sup>77</sup>

The anguish zone appears as the result of condensing the city’s oppressive height into a horizontal plane. Both amorphous and razor-sharp, it cuts into domestic spaces and inflicts pain. Similarly, Arlt utilizes the image of a mill to depict how the city weighs on its inhabitants.<sup>78</sup> After his wife leaves him, Erdosain “felt himself crushed by a sense of pure dread. His life could not have been flatter if he had gone through the rollers of a sheet-metal mill.”<sup>79</sup> Although this sensation derives immediately from his wife’s departure, the technical metaphor of the mill once again links Erdosain’s suffering to the geometrical organization of city, flattening out individuality and thereby creating the anonymous existence of the masses. Arlt’s expressionist city gives geometrical form to the anguished existence of urban modernity and thereby

constitutes the ineluctable center of gravity for the novels.

The geometrical nature of Buenos Aires posed a problem for many Argentine writers and politicians in the early twentieth century. In the Argentine liberal tradition, the search for national identity depended on the fate of the city, a circumscribed, centrally organized entity, in contrast to the Pampa's ungovernable vastness. But, as Adrián Gorelik explains, "it became increasingly clear" to the Argentine elite that "through the [urban] grid the city was extended along the Pampas in a process of metamorphosis rather than in a process of acculturation."<sup>80</sup> The destiny of Buenos Aires, with its checkerboard-style urbanism, appeared to resemble the shape of the Pampas, a flat, horizontal, indefinitely expanding terrain. As such, this city could no longer offer itself as the positive alternative to barbaric nature. Urban politicians thus felt the need to modernize the city, to make it into a unifying point, and to set limits on the city's growth. Against this centralizing endeavor, the avant-garde in Argentina initially played a progressive role insofar as it turned away from the city center and toward the peripheral *barrios*.<sup>81</sup> But, Gorelik argues, the creole avant-garde's project to discover the essence of the Buenos Aires turned into a conservative restoration and culminated in the construction of the obelisk in 1936.<sup>82</sup> The obelisk — designed by Alberto Prebisch, a frequent contributor to the *Martín Fierro* journal — stood at the center of Buenos Aires, at the meeting point of major diagonal streets, which were also completed in the thirties. Against the dispersal of the barrio, the obelisk reestablished the city's classical hierarchies. Its verticality broke the ceaseless horizontality of the Pampas. With respect to this creole avant-garde, Arlt presents a distinct trajectory. His point of concern, as we have seen, was Corrientes, the city center, but he never mobilized the center for the sake of national identity. Instead, Arlt sought to trace the contradictions of urban modernity, the dialectical reversal whereby historical possibility turned into its opposite.

At this time, in the context of the restructuring of Buenos Aires, the geometrical configuration of the city raises questions of nature and history. In Arlt's works, the most emblematic image of this configuration is the copper rose. Erdosain invents the copper rose and then convinces the Espila family, with false, fantastical promises of future wealth, to devote their time to its production. The rose — the organic poetic form par excellence — undergoes a mechanical, industrial transformation: "the flower contained a botanical life that had been consumed by the acids, but was its very soul."<sup>83</sup> In its submission to a technologically-mediated labor process, the copper rose negates organic life, but, at the same time, it reestablishes nature in its artificial "soul." The copper rose, in other words, exists as a form of second nature. As such, it displays a dialectical tension between myth and history: the man-made copper rose represents an "advance" over the merely natural rose but it also resurrects the very categories its invention would seem to render obsolete, making the natural — and, by extension, the rural — appear as a product of the very modernization process that would claim to destroy it. The city follows the same logic in the Astrologer's diagnosis. At the



beginning of *The Flamethrowers*, the Astrologer engages in a fascinating discussion about the truth of suffering and the fate of civilization. “The Truth is Man. Man with his body,” he proposes.<sup>84</sup> Whereas intellectuals and artists turn toward abstractions, denigrating the body in turn:

[B]usinessmen, soldiers and industrialists and politicians crush the Truth, that is, the Body. Complicit with engineers and doctors, they have said: man sleeps eight hours. To breath, he needs so many cubic meters of air. To not rot and to not corrupt us, which would be the most serious, so many square meters of sun are necessary, and with that criteria they build the cities.<sup>85</sup>

The geometry of the city — divided into “square meters of sun” and “cubic meters of air” — was initially conceived as a rational solution to basic human needs, but this geometry, the result of a mechanical paradigm, ultimately intensifies human suffering. Rather than a separation between myth and history that maps onto discrete entities — the city and countryside — the city presents itself as a technical human construction that comes to dominate its inhabitants as a form of unfreedom. *The Seven Madmen* highlights this dialectical reversal of the geometrical city when Erdosain is unintentionally pushed into a wall by a stranger in the street. Erdosain, “like a tiger cub let loose in a brick jungle,” promises to avenge this outrage on the urban setting itself: “You will be ours, city.”<sup>86</sup> This is Erdosain’s Rastignac moment, when the protagonist asserts and projects his heroic triumph over the city. But, immediately after articulating this threat to the city, the commentator explains that the Major, on the Astrologer’s orders, has been following Erdosain. Unlike *Père Goriot*, where this moment concludes the novel, Erdosain’s fate will unfold pathetically over the course of another novel. Arlt’s geometrical city thus establishes itself as an ineluctable horizon of necessity.

Like the copper rose, the Astrologer’s plans exhibit a paradoxical combination of history and myth, intense industrialization and primitive nature. His attempt to recreate the messianic figure, for one, is not premised on any genuine belief but on a cynical, completely disenchanting view of human existence. The members of the secret society, he says, must know fundamental truths if they are to effectively deceive the masses with mythical images:

[M]y idea is this: there will be two castes in this new society, with a gap between them. . . or rather, an intellectual void of some thirty centuries between the two. The majority will live carefully kept in the most complete ignorance, surrounded by apocryphal miracles, which are far more interesting than the historical kind, while the minority will be the ones who have access to science and power. That is how happiness will be guaranteed for the majority, because the people of this caste will be in touch with the divine world, which today they

are lacking. The minority will administer the herd's pleasures and miracles, and the gold age, the age in which angels roam along paths at twilight and gods are seen by moonlight, will come to pass.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the language of "miracles" and "divine world," the Astrologer in no way attempts to return to a pre-industrial age. The secret society is based on a rigorous division of labor and its myths are suffused with technological imagination. This, in other words, will not be a traditional secret society, but one based on industrialism in the wake of Ford, Morgan, and Rockefeller, god-like men who "were capable of destroying the moon... [who] could wipe out a race with a snap of their fingers, just as you trample on an ant-hill in your garden."<sup>88</sup> And, again evoking the gap of "thirty centuries," the Astrologer imagines a landscape that combines industrial dynamism and nature: "at the center, among clouds of coal dust, rise the blast furnaces, their cooling systems like monstrous armor plating. Tongues of fire leap from the reinforced furnace mouths, while outside thick, impenetrable jungle stretches into the distance."<sup>89</sup> In this secret society, technology would serve merely to reinstate mythical nature, and fantastic miracles would be made possible by scientific research and rationality. This surreal imagination, in which the jungle exists alongside industrial machines, illustrates the Astrologer's profound capacity for holding together contradictory elements in such a way that each one turns into its opposites and becomes compatible with the other.

Ultimately, the Astrologer's montage of contradictory tendencies derives from the peculiar historical dynamic of capitalism and the way it manifests itself in determinate national formations. By juxtaposing mythical nature and intensified industrialization, the Astrologer's plan bears a striking resemblance to the German proto-fascism that Jeffrey Herf describes as "reactionary modernism."<sup>90</sup> Herf uses this term to describe proto-fascist writers and intellectuals in Germany who rejected the philosophical and political heritage of the Enlightenment but affirmed "the most obvious manifestation of means-end rationality, that is, modern technology."<sup>91</sup> Unlike conservatives, who posited an insurmountable gap between technology and German culture, reactionary modernists like Ernst Jünger embraced modern technology for a reactionary defense, and even intensification, of the existing social order. This incongruous ideological combination, Herf argues, was made possible by the combination of rapid, yet partial, industrialization of the German economy and the absence of a corresponding bourgeois revolution.<sup>92</sup> This internal unevenness marks Germany just as much as Argentina, even though the former occupies a core position in the global capitalist economy, the latter a semi-peripheral position. And the Astrologer's plans, accordingly, no longer appear as the deluded dreams of a madman but as the intensified description of latent historical tendencies, of how the uneven development of capitalism plays out in national situations in the form of peculiar combinations of the new and repetition.

In the case of the Astrologer and reactionary modernism, this combined unevenness consists not in the mere coexistence of old and new but in the dynamic fusion of opposites whereby pre-capitalist social relations retain their form but acquire another valence as a result of incorporation in the capitalist world economy. More broadly, Arlt's urban montage registers the structural contradiction in capitalism between value and material wealth. With relative surplus-value, this contradiction gives rise to the peculiar historical dynamic of capitalist modernity, what Moishe Postone calls a "treadmill effect" in which the new and the same are produced simultaneously.<sup>93</sup> The expansion of capital requires ceaseless increases in productivity and thus "the ongoing transformation of social life in capitalist society, as well as the ongoing reconstitution of its basic social forms."<sup>94</sup> The ambiguity of the Arltian city, as both revulsion in the face of meaningless modern existence and the intuition of futural possibilities, as mythical nature and history, gives form to the "shearing pressure"<sup>95</sup> of capitalism's contradictions, the way it pushes forward while staying in the same place. Ultimately, the Arltian city foregrounds the sameness of the treadmill dynamic and the existential anguish of life in urban modernity, formalizing how Argentina's social structures repeat themselves, despite political changes. Distrustful of both liberal promises based on export and nationalist hopes to build Argentina's industry, Arlt recognized and gave form to the underlying sameness, the ineluctable limitations resulting from Argentina's peripheral condition.

And yet, Arlt insists that this repetition is not a consequence of the lack of modernity but the determinate form that modernity assumes in Argentina. At other times, modernity takes on an extreme form in Arlt's works — as acceleration, industrialization, creative destruction, and above fantastical dreams — but the intensity of these images does not derive from the absence of modernity. Marshall Berman argues that whereas "the modernism of advanced nations" can build "directly on the materials of economic and political modernization," peripheral modernism "is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity," giving these works a "desperate incandescence."<sup>96</sup> Berman's account, premised on a rather one-sided interpretation of modernity as the new, suggests that modernity as such does not exist in the periphery and will accordingly have an oneiric character in the periphery. Borges presents a similar view, even though he is more ambiguous about modernity in Argentina. Preoccupied with the problems of the "new country," he spoke of the need to create myths for Buenos Aires, since "[t]here are no legends in this land and not a single ghost walks through our streets... the life of our imagination is paltry."<sup>97</sup> Modern dreams would thus seem to stem from an absence, as a way to compensate for a prior lack. Arlt, I argue, would respond that there was no need to invent myths for urban modernity since they already exist readymade in the international conjuncture and in the peculiarities of combined unevenness. Moreover, this modern mythology derives from the determinate existence of modernity in the peripheral metropolis, the new always pushing against the same, despite their interdependence, and giving rise to

the image of a modernity defined exclusively by the new. As Arlt formalizes it in the peripheral metropolis, modernity consists of a contradictory historical dynamic, and this non-unitary reality calls for montage as its necessary form of articulation.

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Roberto Schwarz, in his discussion of the novel in nineteenth-century Brazil, insists on the paradox that the novel is “an artistic form whose presuppositions, in the main, either did not apply to Brazil at all, or applied in altered circumstances.”<sup>98</sup> The novel thrived in Brazil even though the novel’s various organizing topics — the conflict between the rising bourgeoisie and the *ancien régime*, the emergence of the commodity-form, etc. — appear out of step with national reality, which was based on slavery until the very end of the nineteenth century. Schwarz, however, does not draw the conclusion that the novel, as a foreign form, should be rejected because of its extrinsic relationship to local reality. Rather, Schwarz argues that this disparity, which is itself a function of the uneven character of global capitalism, structures the form of the novel in Brazil. By moving from a consideration of “the contingency of geographical origin” to “the sociological presuppositions of the forms,” Schwarz reconstructs the notion of literary form — what he calls elsewhere “objective form” — as a mediated category, form as “the abstract of specific social relationships,” because “a part of the original historical conditions reappears, as a sociological form, first with its own logic, but this time also on the fictional plane and as a literary structure.”<sup>99</sup> Social reality, in other words, appears in the work not in its descriptive details but in its principles of construction, which mediate in peculiar ways the contradictions shaping that social reality.

Along these lines, we might say that modernism and realism are literary forms whose presuppositions partially apply in the peripheral metropolis. Roberto Arlt’s urban montage, with its emphasis on journalism, unreliability, expressionist language and images, amounts to a self-conscious recognition of the way that forms of combination in Buenos Aires demand contradictory formal articulations. Montage, in other words, is not simply a modernist technique but the juxtaposition and dialectical mediation of modernism and realism. As the story goes, often in exaggerated form, in the twenties, the literary field in Argentina was divided between Boedo and Florida, two literary groups (and city streets) that were associated with realism and modernism respectively. Roberto Arlt has always been difficult to place in this polemic, but his realist modernism (or modernist realism) intimates the solution: that, in Argentina and perhaps elsewhere, the opposition of realism and modernism is a false problem. Seen from the perspective of the peripheral metropolis, where the reality of combined development makes palpable the treadmill effect of capitalist development, modernism and realism appear not as successive literary movements but as necessarily contemporaneous.<sup>100</sup> The opposition is not overcome in a final synthesis by displacing the realism/modernism debate to the periphery. Rather, the

dissonant combination of realism and modernism appears as the formal articulation of the contradictions underlying global capitalism's historical dynamic.

### Notes

1. Roberto Arlt, *Las aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt: Publicadas en "El Mundo", 1928-1933*, ed. Daniel C. Scroggins (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1981) 144.
2. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 143-44.
3. Roberto Arlt, *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas*, ed. Mario Goloboff (Madrid: Colección Archivos, 2000) 286.
4. Arlt, *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas* 287.
5. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998) 32.
6. Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso Books, 2007) 157.
7. Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 164.
8. Beatriz Sarlo, "The Modern City: Buenos Aires, The Peripheral Metropolis," *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*, ed. Vivian Schelling, trans. Lorraine Leu (London: Verso, 2000) 108-23.
9. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso Books, 2012) 142.
10. Harsha Ram, "Futurist Geographies: Uneven Modernities and the Struggle for Aesthetic Autonomy: Paris, Italy, Russia, 1909-1914," *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, eds. Mark Wollaeger & Matt Eatough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 318.
11. To put it another way, we could paraphrase Althusser: the Arltian city represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real, global and contradictory conditions of existence.
12. Ernesto Laclau, "Modos de producción, sistemas económicos y poblacion excedente, aproximación histórica a los casos argentino y chileno," *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología* 69.2 (1970) 276-316.
13. Laclau, "Modos de producción" 292.
14. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 239.
15. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 310.
16. Indeed, Arlt takes up this *aguafuerte* as if it were one of the scraps he found in the city. He reuses the material in a chapter of *The Flamethrowers*.
17. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rostel (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973) 152.
18. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 164.
19. Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, trans. Daniel Balderston (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 134.

20. See Aníbal González, *Journalism and the Development of Spanish American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. John D. Bianco (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
21. González, *Journalism* 89.
22. *Journalism* 89
23. Ramos, *Divergent* xli. Ramos's account, however, seems to artificially separate *modernista* journalism and poetry. The chronicles were not simply a buffer, absorbing the shock of modernity. Rather, they gave the poets an opportunity to flex their literary muscles by writing poetically about non-poetic topics. For instance, *modernistas* often wrote about American and European cities—chaotic, crude realities far removed from the ethereal forms of *modernista* poetry — to show that the poet could even make the city into a stylized, beautiful object.
24. Andreas Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
25. Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires, 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988).
26. Beatriz Sarlo, *Imaginación técnica: Sueños modernos de la cultura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1992). See especially the chapters “Arlt: la técnica en la ciudad” and “Divulgación periodística y ciencia popular.”
27. In a recent television adaptation of the novels, Ricardo Piglia's opted to foreground the relationship between Erdosain and the commentator. The series opens with Erdosain waking up on the commentator's couch and beginning to recount the story.
28. The narrator also refers to himself as “cronista,” “comentarista” and even “autor.” For the purposes of simplification, I will use “the commentator,” the most frequent name the narrator gives himself.
29. Kracauer, *Salaried* 24.
30. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 139.
31. *Aguafuertes* 139. In the novels, the narrator makes no such socio-historical explanation. The narrator's explanations are few in number and largely psychological in nature. But these explanations are difficult to take seriously because the novels cultivate a pervasive sense of unreliability.
32. *Aguafuertes* 139. Arlt's friends and contemporaries often reiterated this idea, claiming that the characters in *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* were real people. Onetti, for instance, once described his friendship with Kostia — the nickname of Italo Constantini — Arlt's lifelong friend who claimed to know various characters in the novels. See Juan Carlos Onetti, *Requiem por Faulkner* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Calicanto, 1976) 127-37. Mirta Arlt, Roberto's daughter, claimed that Ergueta was her childhood dentist in Córdoba.
33. On September 6, 1930, the military overthrew president Yrigoyen, replacing the largely liberal orientation of the Argentine government with an authoritarian, nationalist tendency that curtailed popular participation and distanced itself from the export model in the economy.
34. In his translation of *The Seven Madmen*, Nick Caistor renders all the footnotes as “commentator's notes” and thus eliminates the ambiguity of speaking subject in the original.
35. Arlt, *Los siete locos* 599.
36. *Los siete locos* 492.

37. *Los siete locos* 353
38. *Los siete locos* 354.
39. By referring to the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, as it became known, the commentator implicitly foreshadows the failure of the Astrologer's secret society.
40. Roberto Arlt, *The Seven Madmen*, trans. Nick Caistor (London: Serpent's Tail, 2015) 178.
41. Arlt, *The Seven Madmen* 178
42. Ricardo Piglia, *Crítica y ficción* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2001) 24.
43. In part, Arlt's approach to journalism is not unique. Aníbal González has argued that the Latin American avant-gardes, unlike their *modernista* predecessors, often incorporated journalism into literature with "the effect of undermining journalism's claim to be fundamentally different from fiction" (104). Yet, with the exception of Borges, whose use of footnotes and reality effects uncannily resembles those of Arlt, no one takes this relationship of literature and journalism to such extreme ends. And, as I will explain, what is at stake in Arlt is not simply the postmodern erosion of the distinction between fiction and reality but a dialectical shifting that maintains but does not reify the distinction.
44. *Aguafuertes* 206.
45. *Aguafuertes* 206
46. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicholas (London: Penguin, 1993) 158.
47. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 206, emphasis added.
48. *Seven Madmen* 154.
49. *Seven Madmen* 153.
50. *Seven Madmen* 154.
51. *Seven Madmen* 161.
52. Mussolini: "Noi ci permettiamo il lusso d'essere aristocratici, conservatori e progressisti, reazionari e rivoluzionari, legalisti e illegalisti, a seconda delle circostanze di tempo, di luogo, d'ambiente nelle quali siamo costretti a vivere ed agire." See José Amícola, *Astrología y fascismo en la obra de Arlt* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editorial, 1994) 39. At the time Arlt was writing these novels, German National Socialism had not attained the level of visibility that Italian fascism had, but one can imagine that the novels would have been littered with Hitler's sayings, if Arlt had written the novels in the mid- or late-thirties.
53. Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 11.
54. Devin Fore has reconstructed the context in which caricature fascinated montage artists like Heartfield and Eisenstein because caricature, like montage, "designate[s] a supercharging," seen in the Italian root of the word *caricare*. See Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012) 259.
55. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 233
56. Fore, *Realism* 247.
57. *Realism* 258.
58. Various critics have pointed to the parallel between Heartfield's photomontages and Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. Fore evokes the comparison in his discussion of "The Meaning of the Hitler-Salute: Millions Stand Behind Me!" (1932) in which "millions" refers both to the masses supporting the Nazi Party and

to the financial backing of National Socialism by German capital. *Realism* 265.

59. Sabine Kriebel refers to this as “suture” to distinguish Heartfield’s phantomontages from the standard association of montage with fragmentation and anti-illusionism. “His photomontages,” Kriebel writes, “stage our illusory, unstable apprehension of the world by *exploiting* the discourses of illusion, of false cognition, by engaging in and reproducing its very terms ... Thus, the viewer experiences a constant relay between illusion and disillusionment, myth and demystification, accompanied by a baseline of seditious laughter.” Sabine T. Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 12.
60. Barbara Foley. *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 25.
61. Again, the dialectical point, shared with montage, is to hold together opposites without eliminating the tension that exists between them. As has argued, ideology does not consist in an external misrepresentation of reality. Rather, illusion, in the form of commodity fetishism, structures social reality.
62. *Aguafuertes* 148.
63. *Aguafuertes* 149.
64. *Aguafuertes* 150.
65. Oscar Terán, *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina: diez lecciones iniciales, 1810-1980* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2008) 212.
66. Terán, *Historia* 212-213.
67. Arlt “sees a city in construction, where other writers, his contemporaries, see a city that is being lost: for Arlt, Buenos Aires was not but will be: teams of workers dig the foundations of future skyscrapers, the disorder of the facades indicates the mixture of the old that is being demolished and the new that has not been finished.” Sarlo, *Imaginación* 46
68. *Imaginación* 44.
69. *Imaginación* 45. In *The Lettered City*, Rama outlines how Spanish colonizers invoked the notion of a *tabula rasa* in the foundation of Latin American cities. Rama links this project to the Renaissance episteme, where, in Foucault’s analysis, signs acquire autonomy from objects. The Renaissance episteme, as a result, enabled Spanish colonizers to organize the city according to a rational order, not through an organic connection to nature. Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 1-15.
70. Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Andrew Joron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 366. Sartre claims that “New York is a colonial city, an outpost,” and like Bloch, he connects this claim to the remaining presence of nature in the metropolis. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962) 130. Unlike the European city, built as refuge from barbarous nature, New York stands exposed to the elements. This, along with the absence of history, gives New York a lightness that one would not find in the enclosed European city.
71. Maryse Renaud, “La ciudad babilónica o los entretelones del mundo urbano en *Los siete locos y Los lanzallamas*,” *La selva en el damero: Espacio literario y espacio urbano en América Latina* (Pisa: Giardini Editori, 1989) 198.



72. *Seven Madmen* 30-31.
73. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 322. We could also draw a parallel here between Arlt and Dostoevsky. In contradistinction to Balzac and Dickens, whose novels create panoramic descriptions of the city, Dostoevsky “experienced the city as a total environment thoroughly internalized and assimilated in his personality and outlook.” Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 95. Dostoevsky was perhaps Arlt’s biggest influence. *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers*, for instance, were based in part on Dostoevsky’s *The Demons*. Incidentally, Dostoevsky’s novel was based on real events, so Arlt’s inspiration to write a pseudo-reportage novel may have also come from his Russian precursor.
74. In using the term subtext, I intend to evoke Jameson’s argument in *The Political Unconscious* about how history manifests itself in the formal structures of the work. Literary objects, Jameson argues, do not passively reflect history in their content because at the level of subtext “the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction.” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1981) 81-82.
75. David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001) 238.
76. César Aira, “Arlt,” *Paradoxa* 7 (1993) 57.
77. *Seven Madmen* 6.
78. See Renaud, “La ciudad babilónica” 204.
79. *Seven Madmen* 70.
80. Adrián Gorelik, “A Metropolis in the Pampas: Buenos Aires, 1890-1940,” *Cruelty & Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America*, ed. Jean-Francois Lejeune (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003) 47.
81. Against this impulse to search for the center, Borges discovered the essence of Buenos Aires in the city’s edges, the *orillas*. In these quiet corners of the city, far removed from the crowds of the center, Borges found the bare urban grid, the point where city and country converged. Unlike his politically conservative contemporaries, who feared contamination by the countryside, Borges maintained that abstract geometry — the model of the city and the Pampas — could serve as the “mythical foundation of Buenos Aires.” For Borges, the city lacked myths, but they were to be found in the city’s solitary edges.
82. “In the center was the Obelisk, its pure form connecting the modern city with the universal culture and, most of all, with national history since it established an immediate dialogue with the old Pyramid of May 9th (the monument to the founding of independent Argentina) located in the historical Plaza de Mayo at the other end of the Diagonal. In the middle of the confusion created by the ‘vulgar’ languages of the modern metropolis, this special version of modernism managed to produce, finally, the act of recognition that the cultural elite had looked for... The ‘modern Buenos Aires’ assumed its definitive appearance at the end of the 1930s through an architectural avant-garde that looked for an elitist and nostalgic return to order, denying the metropolitan expansion that would continue nonstop throughout the Pampas.” Gorelik, “Metropolis” 58.
83. *Seven Madmen* 226.
84. Arlt, *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas* 298.
85. *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas* 298

86. *Seven Madmen* 295.
87. *Seven Madmen* 155.
88. *Seven Madmen* 152.
89. *Seven Madmen* 272-73.
90. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
91. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* 1.
92. *Reactionary Modernism* 5-6.
93. The notion of the “treadmill effect” comes from Moishe Postone’s brilliant discussion of the value-form and its temporal determination. Since value is an average, “socially necessary labor time,” once increases in productivity are generalized, total value produced doesn’t change, “increased productivity results neither in a corresponding increase in social wealth nor in a corresponding decrease in labor time, but in the constitution of a new base level of productivity—which leads to still further increases in productivity.” Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 347. The treadmill effect is not, in other words, static; it is a dynamic that stays in the same place.
94. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 300.
95. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 302.
96. Marshal Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 231-232.
97. Qtd. in Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, trans: John King (London: Verso, 1993), 20.
98. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, trans. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992), 41.
99. Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 53.
100. The Warwick Research Collective makes roughly the same point when it argues that just as Adorno defended modernism for its realism, realism must be defended for its modernism. WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 77.

## **Black as the New Dissonance: Heidegger, Adorno, and Truth in the Work of Art**

Jensen Suther

This essay will take up Theodor Adorno's idea of "truth" in the work of art, in explicit contrast with the most ambitious competing account of aesthetic truth in the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art." Through a reconstruction of Heidegger's theory of the artwork as a critique of the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel, I will seek to demonstrate the necessity of a materialist aesthetics, grounded in an account of artistic technique as productive force. To this end, I will turn to Moishe Postone's theory of historical time as the temporal, rather than material, dimension of use-value, in order to pose the question of truth in art and its relation to the forces of production. I want to argue that the modernist artwork, grasped as a peculiar form of commodity, is able through dissonance to explicitly exhibit this temporal dimension of use-value as a unique form of social knowledge, what Adorno calls the "truth content" of the work. Finally, I will use this framework to make sense of the debates surrounding the work of Frank Stella, whose Black Painting *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* is, in my view, an exemplary interrogation of the "reason" (exchange value) and "squalor" (use-value) of the commodity-form. By reading Stella this way, I hope to defend his body of work against the critique articulated by J.M. Bernstein, and to critique the defense of his work provided by Michael Fried, whose famous claim that "presentness is grace" should — according to my reading of Stella and of modernism in general — be revised. To carry out this revision, I want to draw on a little-remarked passage from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, in which the experience of shock occasioned by modern works is theorized as the possibility of knowledge of their truth content, and forms the basis of a new form of aesthetic judgment I will call "dialectical judgment." To state things all at once, the inability of Heidegger's theory to come to grips with modernism demonstrates the necessity of Adorno's historically specific, critical theory of the dissonant artwork, while Heidegger's *transcendental* categories of earth and world should be understood as rendering intelligible the very possibility of a Marxist aesthetics committed to preserving the traces of freedom in

the blackened art of late capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

### Heidegger's Concept of Truth in Art

Heidegger's essay on the work of art draws on the account of truth as "disclosure" developed in paragraph forty-four of *Being and Time* in order to demonstrate the unique status of art as an *explicit* form of such disclosure. The artwork, on this account, is "true" inasmuch as it opens a "world" or context of significance determined by a historically specific form of subjectivity in the light of which objects and practices become intelligible as such objects and practices. For instance, in his famous reading of a painting by Van Gogh, Heidegger argues that the pair of worn boots it depicts is illuminated as a piece of "equipment" that gains its significance in the practical context of the world of a peasant woman, whose labor determines the form of her life and thereby establishes the conditions for her experience of reality. While the boots are disclosed as reliable equipment to the peasant woman through her actual practical engagement, that disclosure *itself* is disclosed to the beholder of the work of art. In other words, the painting is true not because it is an accurate rendition of the boots of a peasant, but because it illuminates the historical conditions for the intelligibility of the boots as boots, letting us know "what the shoes, in truth, are."<sup>2</sup> In Heidegger's parlance, the "being" (*Sein*) of this "being" (*Seiendes*) or shoe-entity is explicitly unveiled in the artwork, so that the shoes are disclosed in and through their "world," or on the basis of conditions that — as historical and thus finite — are subject to change.

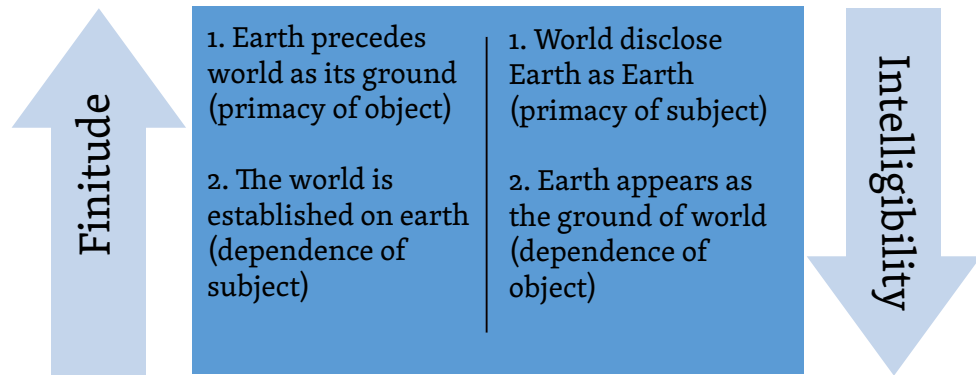
This account of truth in the artwork is critically engaged, both implicitly and explicitly, with the two most prominent aesthetic theories of German Idealism, Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful* (in the *Critique of Judgement*) and Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. A brief rehearsal of Heidegger's critiques of these theories will help to establish the stakes of his essay and to clarify his arguments, while also laying the foundation for the reconstruction below of Adorno's own critical inheritance of the Idealist tradition.

Heidegger's critique of Kant contains two main components, which parallel the subjective and objective aspects of Kant's theory of the beautiful while underscoring and radicalizing their interdependence. Kant is explicitly mentioned twice in the essay, but only in connection with his conception of thinghood in the *Critique of Pure Reason* rather than his aesthetics. In the second of the two references, Heidegger rejects the "Kantian-transcendental" interpretation of the thing "in terms of matter and form," claiming that "it represents an assault on the thing-being of the thing."<sup>3</sup> This contains an important clue concerning the "objective" dimension of Heidegger's critique of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, which implicitly makes use of Kant's notion of the thing in defining the object of beauty.

In his summary of the "Third Moment" of the judgment of taste, Kant articulates his conception of aesthetic form: "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end."<sup>4</sup> The object of a

judgment of taste, for Kant, is defined by the *form* of purposiveness: it appears as if it were designed for a purpose, without actually having one. The experience of beauty in the judgment, moreover, is also free of “charm and emotion,” which arise from unreflective sense impressions of the object, such as a lone perception of the “tone of a violin,” isolated from the compositional whole.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the purposiveness of the object of beauty is subjectively generated through a “reflective” judgment on the form of the object— or the process of giving matter form— but without the guiding concept of a purpose (*forma finalis*). The form of the purposiveness of the object, therefore, characterizes the subject’s *representation* of the object. In paragraph nine, Kant calls this process a “free play” of the imagination and understanding, arguing that the “truth” expressed by beauty — that is, the objective criterion that allows us to expect our judgments to resonate with others — is the very animation of our faculties for the sake of the constitution of an object of experience.<sup>6</sup> Rather than experiencing a particular determinate object, or merely enjoying an indeterminate sensation, we experience in the object of beauty — determinate in its indeterminateness — the power of “cognition in general” to constitute the *objectivity of objects* (the “thing-being of the thing”) and thus the power of reason to give form to our experience as such.

In the second part of the “Origin” essay, “Truth and Art,” this conception of the aesthetic object receives a thorough renovation. Heidegger defines the “work-character” of the artwork in enigmatic terms as the “strife between earth and world,” which can be elucidated as the tension between the space of meaning or intelligibility and the material limits of such intelligibility — as embodied by the irreducible materiality of the work — that also serve to “delimit” and make possible the space of world. Earth is, as it were, the material reminder unique to art of the *finitude* of any world, which must *sustain itself* in light of the ever-present possibility of its failure or collapse.<sup>7</sup> Earth signifies the dependence of social meaning on a material substrate that can never be fully mastered, like the trembling hand that belies the avowed steadfastness of one’s commitment to a deed to be performed. More fundamentally still, earth expresses the elemental senselessness that can overtake the substrate of any purposive entity, whether a tool, a living being, or a world. A glass can shatter into meaningless fragments; the wings of a bird will lose their animating purpose upon its death; the corpse of a collapsed community is its ruined infrastructure and the dead it leaves behind. The artwork “brings [earth] into the open as self-secluding” by explicitly disclosing the *a priori* threat of senselessness as the condition for the possibility of sense, and it is able to reveal this condition — to render earth intelligible as the constitutive limit of intelligibility — by disclosing a particular world in its fragile state of dependence.<sup>8</sup> World is dependent on earth for its self-maintenance, while earth is dependent on world for its intelligibility.



**Figure 1: The Disclosure of a World in its Finitude as the “Work” of Art**

When Heidegger tells us that this strife constitutes the “fundamental design” of the artwork, and that “the structured rift is the jointure of the shining of truth,” he is intimating a critique of Kant’s claim that the formal purposiveness that defines our representation of beauty manifests the form-giving power of our cognitive faculties.<sup>9</sup> For Heidegger, it is Van Gogh’s particular arrangement of materials, his distinctive stylization of paint, that both generates the world of the peasant and exposes its fundamental contingency, its fragility in its dependence on a material substrate. The raggedness of the peasant’s boots, for instance, as uniquely “formed” by the painting, allows for a recovery of their initial reliability in the face of the elements (what Heidegger calls the “steady pressure” of “earth”) as a condition for their meaningfulness as equipment.<sup>10</sup> If, then, for Kant the beautiful is a heightened awareness of subjectivity in its power, Heidegger conceives of the beautiful — what he calls “the shining that is set into the work” — as an expression of a historically determinate form of the subject in its constitutive vulnerability.<sup>11</sup>

According to Kant, a pure judgment of taste produces a sense of pleasure that arises strictly from reflection on the purposiveness of form, and is combined with no “interest” in the object, whether culinary or instrumental. In several places in the third *Critique*, Kant ascribes to this “disinterested” form of satisfaction a moral significance. Paragraph forty-two contains one of the most striking of these passages, when Kant argues that, in finding no purpose or “end” externally, in the object of beauty, “we naturally seek [it] within ourselves, and indeed in that which constitutes the ultimate end of our existence, namely the moral vocation.”<sup>12</sup> The moral vocation to which Kant refers here is the “highest good,” defined as maximal happiness and worthiness of happiness, or virtuousness. Playing the role of a regulative principle in our practical experience as the “final end” of morality, the idea of the highest good

dictates that we act in accord with the moral law, which demands that the maxims by which we act have universal validity and treat others as ends, and that the law itself be the principal incentive for our actions. The disinterestedness that defines our experience of the purposiveness of beauty, Kant argues, fosters our morality by preparing us to act without interest (or with a strictly moral interest); while the purposelessness of beauty attunes us to an end within ourselves, the moral law. Kant's claim, then, at the end of his analysis of aesthetic judgment, that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good," establishes the second "truth" expressed by beauty, the moral vocation of man.<sup>13</sup>

Heidegger develops a very different theory of reception, in the concluding pages of his essay, by way of a concept he calls "preservation," which is defined as a "standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work."<sup>14</sup> The position occupied by the beholder standing within such openness might be called the *view from being*, in which beings are what they are "in truth" because they are made to disclose the historical conditions for their intelligibility. Preservation is for Heidegger structurally necessary for the constitution of artworks as artworks and can take two different forms. When a work loses its grip on us and is itself graspable as a work only in its foreignness and antiquation, it takes the form of *oblivion*. Such a work is rendered intelligible, consequently, as essentially unintelligible, as no longer reflecting who we are or as reflecting a loss of historical consciousness.<sup>15</sup> But preservation can also take the form of *actual disclosure*, in which case the work transports us "into [our] appointed task," through its knowledge of the collective commitments that make us the historically specific subjects that we are.<sup>16</sup> The latter form of preservation can be undertaken either implicitly or explicitly. For example, one can imagine the success of a certain opera, or the controversy surrounding it, as *implicitly* attesting to its capacity for disclosure of truth, for telling us something essential about who we are. By contrast, the interpretation of an artwork, like Heidegger's reading of Van Gogh, would represent an *explicit* form of preservation, as a philosophical articulation of the painting's truth.

In conceiving of aesthetic experience as preservation, Heidegger determinately negates Kant's characterization of the experience of beauty as disinterested, not in the sense that the interest of Heidegger's beholder is of the culinary or instrumental varieties rejected by Kant, but in the sense that if a work succeeds, it does so by disclosing to us historically specific norms and commitments that, in forming an "invisible" substructure of sense, are ours to take up, sustain, or even relinquish. Indeed, in a lecture on the misreading of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* that Nietzsche inherits from Schopenhauer, Heidegger remarks that

Kant's interpretation of aesthetic behavior as "pleasure of reflection" propels us toward a basic state of human being in which man for the first time arrives at the well-grounded fullness of his essence. It is the state that Schiller conceives of as the condition for the possibility of man's existence as historical, as grounding history.<sup>17</sup>

While Kant argues that the disinterested satisfaction that arises from the "purposiveness of form" helps us to cultivate respect for the moral law and to thus act "without interest" and solely for its sake, Heidegger's point is that the work of art enables us to see the concrete *historical* norms — collectively "self-legislated" — that govern our practices and constitute who we are (or could and should be). Finally, Heidegger's notion of a historically "appointed task" should be read as a critique of Kant's conception of man's "moral vocation," especially in light of Heidegger's explicit reformulation of the moral law in *The Essence of Human Freedom*: "Thus the categorical imperative says: before anything else, in all your actions, always act in your essence."<sup>18</sup> Heidegger conceives of essence not as static and unchanging, but rather as "promissory": it refers to a *practical identity* comprised of the various fundamental commitments (rather than Kant's single, overriding commitment, man's "moral vocation") that govern one's engagements with others and comportment toward the world; that constitute one's sense of self *at* and indeed *for* a time; and that cease to be so constituting if one fails to sustain them, if one's practices change.<sup>19</sup>

This critical inheritance of Kant anticipates Heidegger's critique of Hegel in the Afterword to his essay, where he affirms Hegel's thesis that "art, considered in its highest vocation [that is, the expression of truth], is and remains for us a thing of the past."<sup>20</sup> In Hegel's account of "absolute spirit," art constitutes the first of three historical forms through which spirit represents itself to itself, followed by religion and philosophy. Hegel argues further that the "romantic" art of modernity, defined as it is by irony and self-reflexivity, is no longer a properly "aesthetic" or sensuous expression of spirit's self-understanding, pointing, in its "excessive" self-consciousness, to philosophy-as-spirit's true modern medium. By way of philosophy, then, spirit grasps itself for the first time as spirit, or the collective, historical subject that, as "free" or self-determining, is the product of its own practical activity. Art ceases to be an adequate medium for the expression of spirit's self-understanding because in recognizing itself as free, it comprehends itself conceptually rather than sensibly-affectively ("aesthetically"), and comes to understand the normative structure of reality as neither imposed by nature nor divinely ordained but as legislated to spirit *by itself* in progressively more conscious forms over the course of its history.

Heidegger's affirmation of the end-of-art thesis takes the form of a critique of Hegel's project. As he writes:



A decision concerning Hegel's judgment has not yet been made; for behind the judgment there stands Western thinking since the Greeks, a thinking which corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. The decision about the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of beings. Until then, the judgment remains in force. But for this very reason we need to ask whether the truth it expresses is final and conclusive, and what then follows if it is.<sup>21</sup>

The thesis is affirmed as true only inasmuch as it expresses a historical condition that in itself is false. Heidegger calls this false condition the "oblivion of being" and ascribes it to "the essence of modern technology," which, as he puts it in his essay on the subject, "is itself nothing technological."<sup>22</sup> Said all too quickly, Heidegger claims that this essence lies in a process of "enframing" (*Gestell*), which produces the form of objectivity in modernity. As a collective practice that determines our self-understanding and, *ipso facto*, our understanding of objects, enframing "frames" objects in terms of their instrumental value as "standing reserve" (*Bestand*). Accordingly, Heidegger suggests that the understanding of nature typified by industrial production and modern scientific inquiry now serves as a schema for human experience in general. Enframing is, then, considered a form of "misrecognition" in this account because it conceals its status as a historical form of practice. Because it is "naturalized," its character "as a claim" forgotten, enframing "threatens to sweep man away into ordering as the ostensibly sole way of revealing."<sup>23</sup> The "being" of the subject is, consequently, itself occluded, such that its fundamental historical mutability, the dependence of its "essence" on its practices, is veiled.

Heidegger's skepticism about the possibility of art in the twentieth century is a corollary of his pessimistic theory of modernity. Preservation in the sense of the disclosure of truth becomes questionable in the age of modern technology because enframing has greatly diminished our capacity for understanding ourselves as historical beings formed by institutions we sustain and transform through our practices. Hegel's philosophy of spirit, according to Heidegger, is predicated on an understanding of experience informed by enframing, the principle of the intelligibility of reality under the rule of technology over man.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Heidegger believes that Hegel's judgment "remains in force" not because he shares his view that we have achieved self-consciousness, but because artistic practices themselves have been so reshaped by enframing that art — now abstract and conceptual — has lost its defining capability, its power to disclose a world.

Scholar Ingvild Torsen has shown in her essay "What Was Abstract Art?" that Heidegger's refusal to recognize abstract art as art was indeed grounded in his views concerning technology. But she also emphasizes that Heidegger gestures towards a different potential for the artwork in "The Question Concerning Technology": "the potential to challenge and make us aware of [enframing]."<sup>25</sup> Heidegger turns

to the Greek word *techne*, which denotes both technology and art, in order to argue that the artwork is a species of technical making that is also more than the mere application of technique, inducing a unique space for interrogation of our relation to technology by disclosing to us the *ontological* conditions — historicity rather than history, worldhood rather than actual social worlds — that render normative practices possible, but also defeasible and subject to change.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on his late writings on Paul Klee, Torsen suggests that Heidegger did not regard the abstract artworks of late modernism as *works* at all, but rather at best as occasions — precisely because of their abstractness and distance from the everyday — for reflection on such abstract ontological conditions, on “what it is to be a world or site that human Dasein can inhabit in a meaningful way.”<sup>27</sup>

Heidegger’s refusal to engage abstract art as art is, I want to argue, an indication of the limits of his philosophy of art. For all the sophistication of his account, it is nevertheless predicated on an antinomy of the abstract and the concrete. Because Heidegger strictly opposes world, as concrete and practical, to the “abstract” and technical form of understanding governed by enframing, he is unable to grasp the modern artwork, such as the one by Stella to be explored below, as disclosive of a world founded on concrete practices that give rise to, and are reshaped by, abstract, impersonal forms of domination. Moreover, Heidegger fails to ground in a historically self-reflexive manner his own theory of the dissonance intrinsic to the artwork, the strife between earth and world, which, I will argue below, only becomes articulable in the moment of modernism. His theory is, consequently, *historically indeterminate*, failing as it does to recognize its own ground in the modernist artwork it rejects.

Relatedly, Heidegger’s philosophy of art is *theoretically vague*. First, because of the abstractness of his historically indeterminate categories, his conception of dissonance often suffers from obscurity. It is not clear, for instance, what degree of consciousness different historical societies have had of the strife between earth and world, and whether it has had the same significance throughout history. But the instance of Heidegger’s theoretical vagueness most fateful for his philosophy of art concerns his account of technology. His failure to theorize the historical specificity of modern technology entails an under-determination of his key concept, enframing. Heidegger’s critique of Kant and Hegel is truly pathbreaking, but it remains crucially incomplete, I want to argue, because he does not undertake that critique on the basis of the historical condition that made it both possible and necessary, *capitalism*. Indeed, Heidegger’s notion of enframing is an attempt to account for the modern social relations that give rise to industrial technology, but in order to properly ground enframing, he would need to theorize those relations themselves, as the *relations of production*. In the absence of such a theory, enframing remains an empty placeholder, a mere promissory note.

In the opening paragraph of Georg Lukács’ essay on reification, a *tour de force* that does successfully ground its own critique of Kant and Hegel in a theory of capital, he

writes that “at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back... to the riddle of the commodity-form.”<sup>28</sup> One can make good on Heidegger’s insights into the end of art, I want to argue, only by reframing, and thus transforming, them in light of Marx’s theory. By turning now to the work of Moishe Postone and Theodor Adorno, I will complete my critique of Heidegger through a demonstration of the superiority, on the level of social and historical consciousness, of a materialist aesthetic theory, whose resources enable it to understand the modernist artwork as art and anti-art *simultaneously*. What Heidegger considers the “ontological truth” disclosed by the “non-works” of modernism becomes in Adorno the *truth content* of the dissonant work, its unique knowledge of social and historical contradiction. This is not, however, the final pronouncement on Heidegger: Adorno’s theory of dissonance itself remains incomplete without the transcendental ground established in Heidegger’s account of the strife between earth and world. Adorno’s historically self-reflexive account of art under capitalism requires as the condition for its possibility the categories set forth by Heidegger in his *philosophically* self-reflexive account of the work of art. *A materialist aesthetics is not opposed to but rather presupposes the transcendental categories of an ontology of art.*<sup>29</sup>

### **Adorno’s Materialist Aesthetics**

Postone reinterprets the contradiction between the forces and relations of production identified by Marx as a contradiction between two forms of objectified time that correspond to the two dimensions of the commodity-form, use-value and exchange-value. Briefly, then, under capitalism workers exchange their labor power for a wage: through their concrete labor, they produce specific “use-values,” while the time they expend to produce those specific articles for use constitutes the measure of their value. If use values are the product of specific forms of concrete labor, then their exchange-value is the product of *abstract labor*, characterized by the expenditure of time.

So the famous argument goes, workers do not receive the full value of their labor, since they are paid for their *labor power* rather than for what they produce. Each hour of labor in advanced capitalism is divided into necessary and surplus labor time: the condition of the labor exchange is that in order to earn a wage, the worker must also spend part of her time working *gratis*. The surplus-value that workers produce is either consumed by the capitalist or reinvested in the production process, in the form of constant or variable capital. Constant capital comprises the means of production, such as the raw materials to be valorized and new machinery: the introduction of new technology gradually changes what Marx calls the organic composition of capital, through the gradual replacement of labor by machines. Production time is greatly diminished, but paradoxically, the labor performed by workers is intensified: owing to mass unemployment engendered by the shift in the organic composition of capital, competition increases for even the worst-paying jobs.

Postone's point, in brief, is not that workers are dominated by rapacious capitalists, but that workers are dominated by their own alienated labor, which comes back to haunt them in the form of technology that actually renders labor superfluous instead of necessary. The abstract time of living labor is objectified in the alienated form of new productive forces, which, it is important to note, are *form-determined* by capital: they are shaped by their purpose, the valorization of value and expansion of the production process.

Yet while this alienated form of objectified time dominates the proletariat further, by decreasing its share of the value it produces, it also makes use of "the social labor and knowledge of the past," preserving what Postone calls *historical time*, which indexes the "general intellect" — the capacities, forms of knowledge, and technologies that result from the development of the productive forces — at a given moment in the history of capitalism.<sup>30</sup> In its alienated form, the general intellect is shaped by its purpose under capitalism, the extraction of surplus-value, but as Postone argues, because "historical time" is preserved in but not expressed by objectified labor time, it represents a "potentially liberating accumulation of human power and knowledge." Accordingly, Postone writes:

The course of capitalism drives technological development forward, whose concrete form remains an instrument of domination — yet whose growing potential allows for a transformation of society, of a reflexive utilization of this potential on the social division of labor such that *not only the goal of machine production but the machines themselves will be different.*<sup>31</sup>

To frame this in terms of the commodity-form, by way of transition to discussion of the artwork, use value is not neutral or "natural," but shaped by the principle of exchange, whether in the form of the "planned obsolescence" of popular electronics or in the degrading and deskilling forms of concrete labor performed by the proletariat. With respect to the commodity, then, the contradiction of capitalism can be expressed as follows: the material form of use value that is molded by exchange preserves a temporal moment — historical time — that points to what use value could be were it not for exchange.

Over the course of his career, Stewart Martin has developed a reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* which centers on the following passage: "The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity."<sup>32</sup> For Martin, this striking claim is key to understanding Adorno's theory of modernism, and explodes the antinomy between two contemporary, countervailing aesthetic theories, one that insists that the artwork is, as a commodity, insuperably determined by capital, and one that claims that the artwork is autonomous and insulated from the process of exchange. Martin, then, reconstructing Adorno, claims that the autonomous work of art is "both a commodity and not, both destroyed by *and* a product of capitalism, both its critique

and its ideology.”<sup>33</sup> The commodity is not an empirical category that attaches to some objects and not to others, but *the form of the intelligibility of objects* under capitalism. Art is, in Marx’s terms, “unproductive” intellectual labor, whose relative autonomy is determined by the alienated wage labor that makes it possible: artworks are, in other words, defined by that which they oppose. In order to understand Adorno on dissonance, it will first be necessary to rehearse Martin’s account more fully.

Following Kant, Adorno understands “autonomy” in art as its independence from any external use or purpose. The autonomous work exists solely for itself, not for any political or didactic end, nor even for entertainment. Yet the artwork is a commodity exchanged on a market, a product of the social division of labor that is made possible by the surplus-value that wage labor generates. Its autonomy is, precisely as Marx defines it, a “fetish,” inasmuch as, through its autonomous appearance, the artwork conceals its social determination and origin in the division of labor and does so precisely as a commodity, in accord with the logic of commodity fetishism. Because, however, the work insists on its autonomy from any external end, it mobilizes fetishism against its own commodification. In this way, as Martin argues, the exchange-value of the artwork becomes a means for criticizing capital’s implicit claim “that exchange-value is the only possible value.”<sup>34</sup>

The fetish of autonomy, then, makes the artwork appear as an exchange value detached from any use value whatsoever. Inasmuch as capital strives to produce as much value as possible out of the fewest possible resources, the impossible contradiction at the heart of the commodity-form is the idea of a pure exchange-value, divorced from a material carrier and even from the concrete labor that makes it possible: capital is production for the sake of value, not for the sake of use. In its apparent uselessness and autonomy, the absolute artwork converges with this idea of an absolute commodity, and in a further ironic twist, precisely because of its claim to independence from exchange, the fetish of autonomy allows the artwork to appear as a use-value that cannot be exchanged, on account of its apparent uselessness.

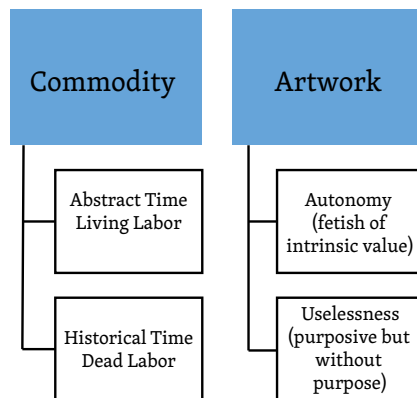


Figure 2: Artwork as Commodity

Through its fetishistic claim to independence, the autonomous artwork suspends its own exchangeability and appears in its specificity. But rather than rescuing use-value from exchange, the modernist artwork actually explicitly exhibits use-value in its stuntedness. Aesthetic autonomy, like value, is derived from the artwork's internalization of abstract labor. As a commodity, it is thus objectified labor time, and this determines the artwork's form: in light art, the work is standardized in accord with the demands of the commodity, while in serious art, the work bears the scars of its failed resistance to commodification.

The most paradigmatic and well-known example Adorno gives is the twelve-tone technique developed by Arnold Schoenberg, which “dominates” the musical material by disallowing the predominance of any one tone, requiring that the composer adhere stringently to a “row,” or a specific ordering of the twelve-tones of the tempered half-tone system. Such rationalization of the material reflects, as Adorno writes in “The Dialectical Composer,” the achievement in Schoenberg of “Hegelian ‘self-consciousness,’ or, better, its measurable and exact showplace: musical technology.”<sup>35</sup> The status of musical technique as *productive force* is discovered in the invention of the twelve-tone system, which thereby also makes explicit the relation of such technique to historical reality.<sup>36</sup> (“Hegelian self-consciousness” would in this context be consciousness of the “historicity” of musical forms and techniques, the fact that they are expressions of a historically specific social form. Or put in Postone’s Marxian idiom, the “historical time” that is “in itself” in the forces of production becomes “for-itself” in music conceived explicitly as “musical technology.”) As Adorno argues, the rational integration of the material in twelve-tone compositions results in a sonic disintegration that registers, in a “depositional” rather than expressive form, the shock, anxiety, and loneliness that define the experience of alienated individuals in the rationalized society of late capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

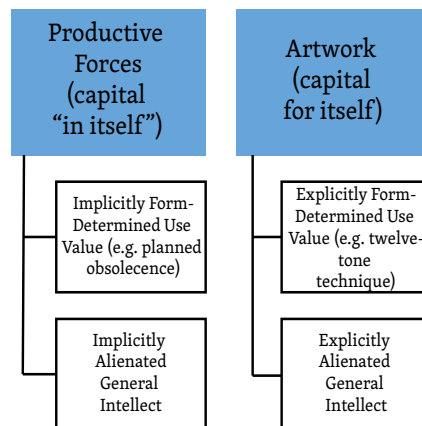


Figure 3: Artwork as Productive Force

Precisely by way of its objectified labor time, the artwork appears as an autonomous exhibition of its own specificity (a unique “in itself”), but because, in its specificity, it is still form-determined by capital, it is the explicit presentation of the *deformation* of use-value in its *formation* by exchange and thus of the *deformation* of the general intellect in its *formation* by capital itself.

Adorno’s notion of “dissonance,” worked out in the context of his analysis of serialism, can help us to better understand the relationship between the artwork as commodity and what he calls its “temporal nucleus” or “truth content.” In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno famously claims that “dissonance is the truth about harmony,” which I read as indicating that the modernist artwork retrospectively illuminates the integral or harmonious works of art’s “heroic” period as also intrinsically, if only latently, dissonant.<sup>38</sup> Modernism, in other words, makes explicit what has always been implicit in art, the dissonance that allows a work of art to *be* a work of art, to be more than an everyday object of use. This is why, for Adorno, it becomes necessary to listen to the *Missa Solemnis*, for instance, from the standpoint of the Second Viennese School, or to hear in Bach not a stringent traditionalism, but a modern sound achieved through the free and individuated employment of archaic techniques.

But what exactly is dissonance? I will perform an analytic reconstruction of this notion in Adorno by turning to key passages in his work. By way of such a reconstruction, I will argue that Adornian dissonance consists in a quasi-temporal process comprising three logically distinct moments; and that by making the constitutive dissonance of the artwork explicit, modernism also makes explicit art’s essence as a historically specific form of truth, or as *knowledge* of history as the self-contradictory unfolding of human freedom. Following this discussion of dissonance, I will return to Heidegger’s account of the strife between earth and world in order to render intelligible the possibility of Adorno’s theory.

As Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “[w]hat appears in the artwork is its own inner time; the explosion of appearance blasts open the continuity of this inner temporality.”<sup>39</sup> This “explosion of appearance” is key to understanding the first moment of dissonance. In Martin’s account, the autonomy of the artwork derives from its fetish character, or the appearance of its intrinsic value apart from the abstract labor it has internalized. The initial appearance of the artwork as an artwork is thus characterized by the *primacy of autonomy*, through which the material form of the work determined by concrete labor appears in its auratic specificity.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the artwork appears as an immanently meaningful unity, in which the parts are the cause of the whole, and the whole the cause of the parts. In Kant’s famous phrase, it appears as “purposive but without purpose,” and such purposiveness signifies the work’s “lawful” character, which, Kant argues, in a rare hermeneutic gesture, symbolizes that of the subject who acts in conformity with the moral law. Yet the phrase “explosion of appearance,” as a double genitive, is ambiguous, suggesting both an “explosive” appearing and the explosion of appearance, or appearance exploded. The subjective

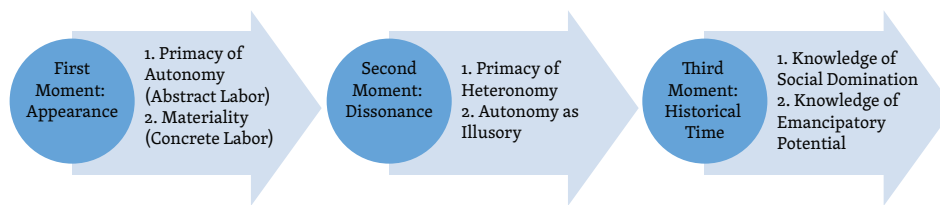
genitive indicates the first moment, that of autonomy, which is “explosive” in its disruption of the everyday, but the objective genitive points toward the “truth” of this first moment, the revelation of appearance as appearance, in the second.

The second moment of the artwork, then, is the moment of dissonance proper. The same techniques through which the work is unified and its materials integrated function dialectically as a force of disintegration. Even the appearance of unity is only possible on the basis of constitutive non-identity, without which the illusion of autonomy could not be generated in the first place. Absent the tension between semblance and material, there would be no semblance, just material. In the moment of dissonance, the autonomy of the work is revealed to be illusory and *heteronomy gains primacy*: by exploding the appearance of autonomy, dissonance reduces the work not to its bare materiality, but rather to the *dead labor* it contains.<sup>41</sup> In the social forces of production, dead labor is the constant capital that, in reducing necessary labor time, actually *intensifies* the labor of the worker through the enhancement of productivity, which results in an increase of relative surplus-value.<sup>43</sup> “Vampire-like,” Marx writes, dead labor “lives only by sucking living labor.”<sup>44</sup> In the dissonant work of art, in its second moment, it dissolves its fetish and reveals its own character as dead labor. This is tantamount to a commodity laying bare the stuntedness of its own use-value dimension, or the way in which that use is both formed and deformed by exchange. Said one final way, in the moment of dissonance, the work of art discloses its heteronomous determination by capital.

The third moment, then, is the disclosure of the “inner temporality” of the work of art, or of what Postone called above “historical time.” While the potential for emancipation preserved in the dead labor that makes up the productive forces remains, in Postone’s account, largely unconscious, the dissonant artwork is, as it were, the self-consciousness of dead labor as historical time. In the sphere of production, historical time implicitly indexes emancipatory potential; in the artwork, it explicitly indexes historically specific forms of domination and deformation. As Adorno puts it, “What results from the disintegration of the auratic or closed artwork depends on the relation of its own disintegration to knowledge.”<sup>45</sup> Dissonant techniques, like abstraction in painting, stream-of-consciousness in literature, and serialism in music, are sensible-affective forms of social knowledge; they disclose to us the discrepancy between who we take ourselves to be and who we actually are. In the case of Frank Stella, as I will argue below, abstractness registers that of the world, remade in the image of the commodity-form. Nevertheless, the revelation by dissonance of dead labor in its deadness, or less elliptically, the revelation of the material features of the artwork as form-determined by capital, retrospectively illuminates the moment of autonomy as the preservation of the emancipatory potential of historical time in the artwork. In the work of art, the two contradictory dimensions of historical time are explicitly expressed in the dissonance between autonomy, as what could be, and its deformed material support, as what is.



Dissonance, therefore, is expressive of what was defined earlier as the self-contradictory general intellect, or the collective subject grasped in terms of the objective forms — whether technological, cultural or political — through which it constitutes itself. As Adorno puts it: “The aesthetic We is a social whole on the horizon of a certain indeterminateness, though, granted, as determinate as the ruling productive forces and relations of an epoch.”<sup>46</sup> This “aesthetic We,” explicitly conceived here in terms of the forces and relations of production, is the self-consciousness of the general intellect in its alienation; it exists on “the horizon of a certain indeterminateness” inasmuch as the artwork, as an impossible attempt to form a whole from conflicting or “dissonant” fragments, models a self-conscious general intellect that has returned to itself from its alienation. In the third moment of the analytic of dissonance, autonomy returns as the memory of the possibility of collective freedom.



**Figure 4: Three Moments of the Analytic of Dissonance**

With this analytic of modernist dissonance now in place, Heidegger’s categories of earth and world can be reintroduced. As the transcendental articulation of the finitude of any world, earth is the condition for the intelligibility of the deformed material support of the dissonant work *as* deformed. The deformation of the support makes explicit our collective failure to “act in our essence,” or to fulfill our practical identity. Earth is the categorial condition for the historically specific aesthetic expression of our finitude under late capitalism. It signifies our finitude in two related senses: (1) our *misrecognition* of the material conditions of capitalism as the conditions of freedom and (2) the *precariousness* of our commitment to such freedom in the face of the possibility of our failure to achieve it, its erasure from memory through the disintegration of historical consciousness, or even the loss of our capacity for freedom through collective self-destruction. Earth, then, is the condition for the intelligibility of what Adorno calls “blackness,” which names the aesthetic expression of the threat of collapse faced by the world of late capitalism.<sup>47</sup>

In a short paragraph in *Aesthetic Theory* entitled “Black as an Ideal,” Adorno meditates on the enervation suffered by art in its increasingly strained endeavor to seek out new possibilities for autonomy, employing an unusually (for Adorno) painterly metaphor to describe a condition besetting art as such, in all its media. He writes there that

radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black.... The ideal of blackness with regard to content is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction.... Art indicts superfluous poverty by voluntarily undergoing its own; but it indicts asceticism as well and cannot establish it as its own norm. Along with the impoverishment of means entailed by the ideal of blackness... what is written, painted, and composed is also impoverished; the most advanced arts push this impoverishment to the brink of silence.<sup>48</sup>

As these lines make clear, “blackness” is an aesthetic convention that registers and thereby indicts the literal poverty that historical time renders superfluous. It is “dissonant” inasmuch as the impoverishment of means reflected in blackness is an explicit form of dead labor that makes possible the moment of autonomy that it also disrupts. That is, the blackened work of art achieves the distance from empirical reality that defines aesthetic autonomy, but paradoxically, at the price of that autonomy. Blackness is thus not just one form of dissonance, one way in which the dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy unfolds, but is rather a deepening of the crisis of art, an intensification of dissonance. Approaching the point of indifference between autonomy and its absence, blackness transforms autonomy into the means by which the artwork reveals its heteronomy, its determination by capital. And yet it should be emphasized that the most advanced arts push the impoverishment of means to the *brink* of silence, and not to silence itself. What is disclosed by the blackening of art is the *threat* of the breakdown not just of aesthetic meaning, but of *social meaning* and the collective capacity for self-legislation — for binding ourselves to norms — that makes such meaning possible.

Adorno’s conception of blackness, then, is crucial for understanding the way his project both differs from and yet requires Heidegger’s: blackness is the condition for the emergence of dissonance as dissonance, since it is only in the face of perceptibly deficient materials — of a use value that renders its own stunted character explicit — that the dissonance between those materials and aesthetic autonomy becomes manifest. Said precisely, in the language of Marx, blackness marks the *real subsumption* of art under capital. In blackness, in addition to unveiling itself as illusory, autonomy becomes the revelation of the rottenness of its own foundation.

At the same time, it is Heidegger’s category of earth that grounds the possibility of understanding blackness as an expression of both the threat to and the demand for freedom. If blackness is to be understood as indicting superfluous poverty, it is because we understand such poverty as contradicting our practical identity and as posing an existential threat to our collective project. Adorno’s powerful account of blackness interprets the dissonant artwork as posing the old Marxist question: socialism or barbarism? Yet it is only in light of Heidegger’s categories of earth and world that the possibility of the urgency of the question can be rendered intelligible.

If the project of realizing socialism is urgent, it is because the condition of superfluous poverty essential to the dynamic of capitalism menaces what matters to us most, the idea of collective self-determination and the idea of leading our lives. The historical time explicitly embodied in the dissonant works of modernism allows us to begin to understand our world as a world, as a set of normative practices we institute and sustain; and to understand earth as earth, as the fragility of our collective project and our freedom. In modernist dissonance, the strife between earth and world first comes to consciousness.

### **The Marriage of Reason and Squalor**

At this point, I want to turn to Frank Stella and, briefly, to the debates surrounding his irregular polygon paintings from the 1960s, whose significance for the present discussion lies in what the clash of views reveals about aesthetic autonomy and historical time under late capitalism. Michael Fried, Stella's staunchest defender, authored two famous articles in the late 60s about his paintings, since republished in *Art and Objecthood*. As Fried argues in "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," the power of the polygon paintings lies in the fact that they overcome the distinction between literal and depicted figure, or the literal shape of the canvas and the shape of the figure depicted within its space. By overcoming this distinction, so the claim goes, Stella manages to reinvigorate the medium of painting in face of the threat of its dissolution by minimalists like Donald Judd and Larry Bell. Through the creation of figures that acknowledge their literal support, Stella divorces "literalness" from the support and generates a new illusionism on the basis of it.

In the essay "Art and Objecthood," published in 1967, just months after his text on the polygon paintings, Fried grasps Stella's achievement as preserving the possibility of "absorption," which I read as a neo-Kantian conception of the subjective effect of the autonomy of the art object. Very briefly, the illusion generated by artworks like Stella's is one in which their objecthood is suspended. They confront their beholders with the illusion of their separateness, engendering a moment of "presentness," as Fried calls it, in which one experiences the "depth and fullness" of the work at hand.<sup>49</sup> In the experience of presentness, which resembles Kant's notion of the "free play" of the faculties in the experience of beauty, it is as if we were encountering another subject rather than an object. Just as the human soul or identity of the subject is a bodily practice sustained over time, an effect of the way we use our bodies in the world, the autonomous artwork likewise appears as an embodied form of significance that, like the deed of the social actor, "happens" in the instant of presentness.

The minimalists, by contrast, influenced by Stella's own early stripe paintings, like the one I will treat below, actively sought to suspend the illusion of autonomy and to underscore the objecthood of the artwork, effectively, for Fried, dismantling its character as art. Rather than producing an instantaneous moment of "presentness" and reflection, their "literalist" creations induce a sense of "endless or indefinite

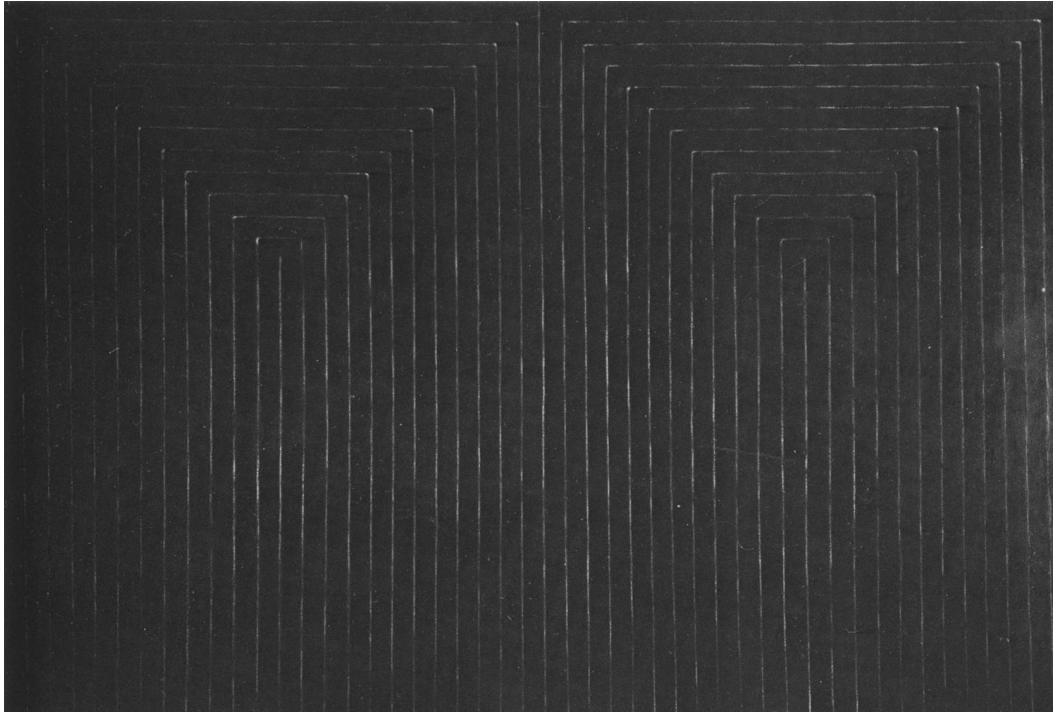
*duration*,” blurring the line between experience of the work and experience of everyday time.<sup>50</sup>

In a sure testament to the enduring significance of “Art and Objecthood,” in an article published nearly three decades after its appearance, critic J.M. Bernstein attacks Fried’s reading of Stella’s polygon paintings by pointing out that the moment of autonomy they achieve is, to frame it in my terms, simply fetishistic, without a corresponding moment of dissonance. Stella’s paintings focus on an “endogenous history of modernism without adequate acknowledgement of the forces of disintegration besetting it.”<sup>51</sup> In essence, Bernstein’s point against Fried is that Stella’s paintings may shore up the artwork against the encroachment of the standardized, deskilled products of the culture industry, but by failing to point up the fragility of their own achievement, they become just as harmless — or just as pernicious — as mass culture. Hence the ease with which Stella transitioned from leading figure of the Manhattan avant-garde in the 1960s, to the go-to art supplier for the sleek reception areas of many of the borough’s corporate office buildings.

Yet while I agree with Bernstein’s critique, to my mind, the Black Paintings that preceded Stella’s irregular polygons exist today as a sharp rebuke to his later, now assimilated work, “meting out justice, eye for eye, to hedonism,” as Adorno writes about the “ideal of blackness.”<sup>52</sup> In the recent retrospective of Stella’s work at the Whitney Museum (2015-2016), sponsored, unsurprisingly, by Morgan Stanley, the Black Paintings stood out with a certain bleak dignity, throwing into relief the affirmative, arts-and-crafts character of the more recent *Moby-Dick* series, which is surely destined for entombment in a midtown mausoleum.<sup>53</sup> I will now discuss one of the works from the Black Painting series in light of the framework I have developed and then conclude by turning away from the object and toward the subject, in order to briefly — and, admittedly, somewhat cursorily — spell out, by way of juxtaposition of Adorno and Fried, how aesthetic judgment might be reconceived in relation to dissonance.

At Pratt in 1960, in a very brief lecture on his method, Stella remarks that he solved the spatial problem of what to paint on a blank canvas under the pressure of his influences: by seeking to force “illusionistic space out of the painting at a constant rate by using a regulated pattern.”<sup>54</sup> The problem that remained, he continues, “was simply to find a method of paint application which followed and complemented the design solution. This was done by using the house painter’s technique and tools.”<sup>55</sup> *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*, apparently named after the condition of Stella’s studio, was made using this design solution and the complementary technique. The lines of white were not painted, but are rather strips of the raw canvas appearing between the painted black bands. Despite the industrial precision of Stella’s inexpressive brushstrokes, with which he aimed not only to complement formally the deductive geometric structure but also to evoke the numbing labor of the factory worker, the facture of the painting forcefully betrays the fact of its having been

painted—an eruption of earth that begins to bring our world into view. When Stella tells us, in his memorably physical, ambiguous turn of phrase, that “illusionistic space” is forced out of the canvas at a “constant rate,” he likely means, in accord with his minimalist program, that he is banishing such space from the canvas’ interior, destroying, as it were, the illusion of an interior, but he could also be understood as saying that he is *compelling* illusionistic space *into existence*. This ambiguity, I would argue, is significant, and helps us to grasp a peculiarity of the painting at hand, its permeation in places by a kind of chalky mist, itself an illusion created by the combination of thin strokes and wide ones, the varying density of paint.



**Figure 5:** Frank Stella, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, second version (1959), black enamel on canvas, 7' 6 3/4" x 11' 3/4". © 1996 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The deductive organization of the painting defeats its objecthood by acknowledging the literal shape of the canvas while also projecting the space induced beyond its bounds. But the literalness that becomes the basis of this painting’s illusion avenges its usurpation by undermining the integrity of the geometric figure, which is variously erased and distorted all over the canvas. The literal canvas reappears in the illusion of literalness. Or, to translate this back into my own terms, the autonomy of the painting is explicitly undercut by the dissonance between semblance and material support that makes its appearance as a painting possible. The literal impoverishment of the form illuminates the dead labor of the painting in its deadness: when Stella famously

declares that “what you see is what you see,” one should take this to mean not, as the later minimalists thought, that he had simply abolished illusion in favor of objecthood, but that the illusionistic space he does architect terminates in the black abyss of dead labor from which it arose. But what does this black abyss mean?

The title of Stella’s painting, I want to argue, does not actually refer to his studio, but refers instead to the essence of the painting itself. The marriage of reason and squalor is the dissonance between autonomy, as exchange-value, and material form, as stunted use-value. That the two halves of the painting are mirror images, virtually indistinguishable pendants to the two elements in the title, further reflects the condition of standardization effected by the subordination of rational means to an irrational end — the valorization of value. The corrupting repetition performed by the painting is the perversion of reason into squalor. It is no coincidence, then, that Stella refers to his production of illusionistic space as occurring at a “constant rate,” which amounts to an implicit identification of his painting’s illusionism with the temporal expenditure of abstract labor. The black abyss is the painting’s knowledge of capital as an abstract form of social domination, but the deductive structure that the abyss both produces and swallows becomes, through its dissonant articulation knowledge of the emancipatory potential of that same abstract form, the idea of freedom from the same exchange-value in which it consists. The historical time of *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* is explicit knowledge of *reason as the alienated general intellect and of squalor as the deformed realm of use formed by that intellect in its alienation*. As such knowledge, the painting indicts this marriage and becomes, in its abjectness, the call for the divorce of reason from squalor by way of the actual integration of the general intellect with society.

As mentioned, I want to conclude here with some brief remarks on Fried and Adorno. For Fried, a successful painting is one that achieves autonomy through a self-reflexive relation to its literal foundation that allows it to suspend its objecthood; on the side of reception, this success engenders the appearance of separateness that, dialectically, absorbs the beholder, whose own everyday conception of reality is suspended in the “presentness” induced by the work. While this well-nigh Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment might seem to be appropriate to Stella’s later work, the Black Paintings, I would argue, demand a different form of judgment, what I would call “dialectical judgment” — a form of Heideggerian “preservation” appropriate to the contradictory reality of capitalism.

(It should be emphasized, however, that it is not the case that dialectical judgment is applicable to some works and not to others. The point is rather that Stella’s polygons are *not* actually autonomous, that they *are* socially determined, but that they *fail* to bring that determination to speech. It is a mark of their failure that the free play of the faculties and disinterested reflection described by Kant *appear* to be appropriate to them, and that analysis of their social and historical embeddedness *appears* out of place, which is, I take it, Bernstein’s point.)

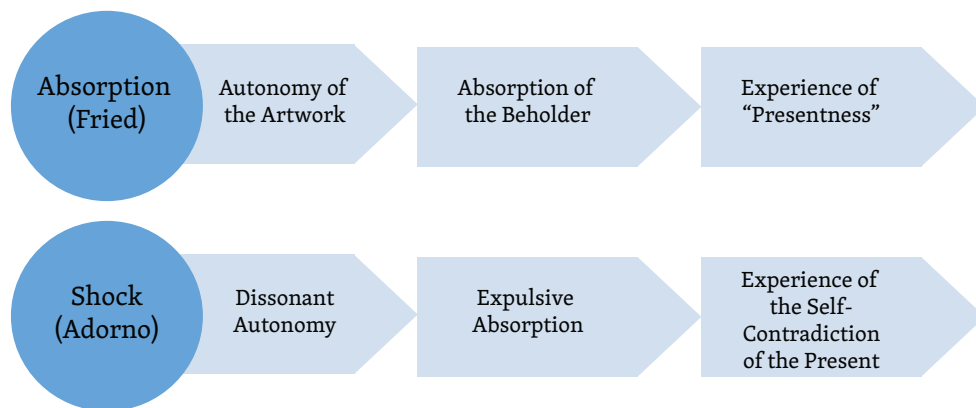
The germ of the idea of dialectical judgment, which Adorno never explicitly develops, first appears in the “Society” section of *Aesthetic Theory*, in a tacit critique of Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In this essay, Benjamin develops a theory of shock that complements, on the side of reception, what his theory of the dissolution of aura (of aesthetic autonomy) proposes on the side of production. Shock, then, is the state induced in the beholder by the anti-auratic work, whose first, deficient form was the painting and poetry of the Dadaists.<sup>56</sup> The shock effect only comes into its own, according to Benjamin, in film, which rigorously precludes reflection, but without the moralizing intent of the Dadaists, and the residual possibilities for reflective engagement preserved by the traditional forms they employed.<sup>57</sup> In his own account of shock, provided below, Adorno does not oppose shock to reflection, but rather grasps it as the possibility for a form of reflection that produces knowledge of social truth instead of a disinterested satisfaction:

The shock aroused by important works is not employed to trigger personal, otherwise repressed emotions. Rather, this shock is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing; the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible. This immediacy, in the fullest sense, of relation to artworks is a function of mediation, of penetrating and encompassing experience [Erfahrung]; it takes shape in the fraction of an instant, and for this the whole of consciousness is required, not isolated stimuli and responses. *The experience of art as that of its truth or untruth is more than subjective experience: It is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness.*<sup>58</sup>

This critique of Benjamin can also be read in the current context as an account of absorption that avoids the one-sidedness criticized by Bernstein in Fried. The “instant” Adorno mentions recalls Fried’s characterization of “presentness” as instantaneous, but the difference is that, in the moment of shock, dissonance shatters the illusion of autonomy and separateness for the sake of knowledge. The beholder is absorbed by the autonomy of the work, but is simultaneously repulsed by its dissonance, which makes possible “the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness,” or the explicit presentation by the “absolute commodity” of *historical time*. Rather than terminating in the fullness and depth of the work, in the Kantian manner of reflection on the beauty of its form, dialectical judgment inhabits the work in order to comprehend the contradictory reality that stands outside it, terminating in *interpretation of its form as knowledge of history*.<sup>59</sup> If, for Fried, in the face of the vacuous literalism of the minimalists, “presentness is grace,” then for the dialectical critic the present is a literally shocking image of its own beyond.

Dialectical judgment is, therefore, the speculative product of Adorno’s critique

of Kantian formalism and Hegel’s conception of truth, which enabled him to do what Heidegger failed to: to articulate the dialectic of content and form specific to capitalism, which I have explicated here in terms of historical time. The Hegelian notion of “truth content” Adorno advances is intended as a determinate negation of the Kantian conception of taste: while taste for Kant, as I showed in the first section, derives its objectivity and universality from (1) the *sensus communis* of beholders, or the faculties they share that generate the form of purposiveness, and (2) the concept of man’s moral vocation that serves as an implicit criterion for judgment of the beautiful; for Adorno, the *quality* of artworks is determined by their *truth content*.<sup>60</sup> Put schematically: (1) The Kantian *sensus communis* is superseded in Adorno’s account by a critical form of the Hegelian notion of objective spirit, the general intellect, which is grasped as self-contradictory, and (2) Kant’s indeterminate concept of morality is superseded by Adorno’s determinate conception of truth, which I have attempted to present in this essay.



**Figure 6: Absorption Versus Shock**

Yet as I have shown, Heidegger’s critique of Kant also provides the transcendental basis for grounding that of Adorno. In the final pages of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger describes the process of “poeticizing projection,” whereby the practical identity of the collective subject — the self-conception in light of which it acts — is preserved by the work of art:

The truly poeticizing projection is the opening up of that in which *Dasein*, as historical, is already thrown. This is the earth (and, for a historical people, its earth), the self-closing ground on which it rests, along with everything which — though hidden from itself — it already is. It is, however, its world which prevails from out of the relationship of existence to the unconcealment of being.<sup>61</sup>



By laying bare the “earth” on which a historical people founds itself, the work of art discloses the *precariousness* of its collective commitments and thereby those commitments themselves. In Adorno’s account of the artwork under late capitalism, he articulates the practical identity of the modern collective subject, its explicit commitment to freedom, as well as the threat to that identity posed by its practices: self-domination through production for the sake of value. The condition for the possibility of the affective response of shock in dialectical judgment is the category of earth, which lends to the question that every effective artwork poses—socialism or barbarism?—its urgency and force. What shocks us in our experience of the self-contradiction of the present is the reality of collective breakdown and the risk of total collapse posed by the perpetuation of the capitalist form of social life.

Pace Heidegger, then, it is modernism that fully reveals truth as the criterion for beauty. Frank Stella’s Black Paintings are, accordingly, more beautiful than the irregular polygons that succeeded them. Their beauty paradoxically lies in the disruptive force of their ugly industrial blackness, which allows for an instant convergence between the private intellect of the beholder and the self-contradictory general intellect with which the work is soaked through. That beauty must be black bears witness to the severity of art’s crisis: it can only be itself by ceasing to be.

Stella’s painting, then, which Heidegger would identify as yet another example of the domination of art by enframing, becomes from an Adornian standpoint a compelling expression of the self-alienation of objective spirit. Nevertheless, it is Heidegger’s categories that render intelligible the possibility of Adorno’s: the painting discloses the *world* of late capitalism, and the blackness of *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* is its colorless color, the eruption of *earth* as the threat of the breakdown of social meaning and to the possibility of freedom on which such meaning depends. To experience Stella’s painting as art and anti-art simultaneously is to experience the aesthetic particular as the unfolding of the self-contradiction of the concept, of freedom under capital. Through its encounter with the marriage of reason and squalor, in a moment of shock, the subject *preserves* the possibility of making good on the promise of this unholy union, of effecting the reconciliation—however provisional—between who we are and who we could be.

### Notes

I want to thank Ksenia Sidorenko for her invaluable comments and suggestions, without which the discrepancy between what this essay is and what it ought to be would be far greater.

1. I have borrowed this locution from Robert Pippin, “Brandom on Hegel on Negation,” unpublished essay. <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rbp1/publications.shtml>.
2. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and eds. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 15.
3. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” 11.
4. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Guyers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 120.
5. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* 108.
6. *Critique of Judgment* 102-104.
7. The account that follows presupposes Martin Hägglund’s forthcoming reinterpretation of Heidegger’s project, and was influenced by his recent lectures on “The Origin of the Work of Art” at Yale University. My analysis has also greatly benefited from several conversations with Hägglund about Heidegger’s text.
8. “The Origin of the Work of Art” 25.
9. “The Origin of the Work of Art” 38.
10. “The Origin of the Work of Art” 14-15.
11. For a compelling revisionist reading of the Kantian account of the beautiful, see Hägglund’s “Beauty That Must Die,” where he argues that the experience of beauty, by increasing the subject’s “feeling of life” (*Lebensgefühl*), attunes it to its finitude, which first makes that experience possible (106). Martin Hägglund, “Beauty That Must Die: A Response to Michael Clune.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.3 (2015) 101-108.
12. *Critique of Judgment* 181.
13. *Critique of Judgment* 227.
14. “The Origin of the Work of Art” 41.
15. *Antigone* is a powerful example of a work that has been preserved precisely as unintelligible in light of our current commitments. As Hegel’s famous reading of the play shows, if it is *self-consciously* preserved as antiquated and alien, its foreignness becomes an occasion for self-clarification in the present as regards our commitment to freedom.
16. “The Origin of the Work of Art” 49.
17. Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) 113.
18. Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002) 200-201.
19. Following a general trend in recent American Heidegger scholarship, I adopt Christine Korsgaard’s notion of “practical identity” here, from *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 102. See Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 174; and Rouse, “Heidegger, Sociality, and Human Agency” *European Journal of Philosophy* 24.2 (2013) 11.
20. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 11.

21. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 51.
22. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*, trans. William Lovitt, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008) 325.
23. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" 332, 337.
24. Heidegger says as much in "Hegel's Concept of Experience," *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 144.
25. Ingvild Torsen, "What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Heidegger)," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72.3 (2014) 297.
26. "The Question Concerning Technology" 339-40.
27. Torsen, "What Was Abstract Art?" 298.
28. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972) 83.
29. For an important discussion of Adorno's implicit dependence on the kind of transcendental categories advanced by Heidegger see Iain Macdonald, "Ethics and Authenticity: Conscience and Non-Identity in Heidegger and Adorno, with a Glance at Hegel," *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions*, eds. Iain Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 6-22.
30. Moishe Postone, "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism," *Social Research* 45.4 (1978) 770. My use of "general intellect," drawn from a famous passage in Marx's *Grundrisse* (285), is to be distinguished from that of the Italian autonomists, such as Paulo Virno in his *A Grammar of the Multitude*, which one-sidedly aligns it with the emancipatory potential of Post-Fordist production. (Virno goes so far as to call Post-Fordism the "communism of capitalism" [110-111].) Postone's own reading of the general intellect has the virtue of being truly dialectical, in that he grasps it as a form of domination, in its alienation under capital, that also points beyond itself. See Karl Marx, "The Grundrisse," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. and ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1978); Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).
31. Postone "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 778.
32. Stewart Martin, "The absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity," *Radical Philosophy* 46 (2007) 21.
33. Martin, "The absolute artwork" 18
34. "The absolute artwork" 18.
35. Theodor Adorno, "The Dialectical Composer," *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 207.
36. Hence Adorno's critique, in "The Aging of the New Music," of the dogma of "total serialism," which reified Schoenberg's technique by elevating it to the status formerly occupied by tonality. For Adorno's notion of a form of music that, it might be said, has achieved "Hegelian self-consciousness," by way of awareness of its condition as a historically contingent productive force, see his "Vers une musique informelle." Adorno, "the Aging of the New Music," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 188; see also, Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011) 269-322.
37. That is, in Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University

of Minnesota Press, 2006) 42-43, he argues that Schoenberg's compositions "depose" objective reality instead of imitating, through the tonal conventions of traditional music, the dramatic passions and emotions of the bourgeois subject. See also Robert Hullot-Kentor, "The Philosophy of Dissonance," *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor Adorno*, ed. Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 75.

38. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, eds. Gretel Adorno, Robert Hullot-Kentor, and Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Continuum, 1997) 110. In the unfinished manuscript for his projected book on Beethoven, in a discussion of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Adorno claims that the appearance of Beethoven's compositions as integral totalities corresponds to the transfiguration of political reality by the bourgeoisie during the French Revolution. The "heroic classicism" of the bourgeois class manifested in its attempt to "repeat" the Roman Republic, which acted as "the means of self-deception they needed, that they might hide from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the struggle in which they were engaged" (79). Just as the proletarian struggle for socialism would retrospectively reveal these limitations of the bourgeois revolution, so does modernism reveal the cracks in the closed, bourgeois work of art. See Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
39. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 85.
40. As Adorno writes in a surprisingly schematic footnote in the *Philosophy of New Music*, "Benjamin's concept of the 'auratic' artwork largely coincides with that of the 'closed' artwork. The aura is the uninterrupted contact of the parts with the whole that constitutes the closed artwork" (183).
41. I thus disagree here with J.M. Bernstein's reading of Adorno's concept of dissonance in "Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism," where he writes that "dissonance is the crumbling of form, its dissolution; it is that moment in which the elements composed in a work return to their elementality, their abject separateness" (208). Even if there is such a moment of dissolution in the radical artwork, the emphasis Bernstein places on its demonstration of art's supposed status as "the refuge of sensuous particularity" seems to me to miss Adorno's point that the "anti-art" tendency in modern art reflects its alliance with knowledge and its character as a *sui generis* form of cognition. Adorno makes clear his opposition to romantic valorization of particularity throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, in lines like the following: "The untruth attacked by art is not rationality but rationality's rigid opposition to the particular" (98). See "Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism (Thierry de Duve and Marcel Duchamp)," *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 194-222.
42. Like Bernstein, Robert Pippin reads Adorno as arguing for "some retrieval, or memory, of sensuous particularity as the proper function of modernist art" (*After the Beautiful* 54), but rather than espousing Adorno's position, he rejects it from a Hegelian standpoint as a "romantic regression" (55). Pippin is best understood, I would argue, as critiquing not Adorno, but recent liberal appropriations of his project that locate in his thinking an ethics of empathy based on a critique of instrumental reason. Pippin's Hegelian interpretation of the "weakened presence of animated subjectivity" in modernist painting as an expression of "the failure of the historical world to allow for the realization of such subjectivity" is a *less* rather than more dialectical theory of modernism than Adorno's, which grasps the true severity of art's crisis as a historical institution as well as what that crisis tells us about the historical beings that

we are (57). Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). For a critique of Pippin along these lines, see Gregg Horowitz, "Review of *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*," *Platypus Review* 71 (2014).

43. Fredric Jameson's recent book *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* underscores that this intensification of the labor process is grounded in unemployment, what Marx calls "the industrial reserve army of labor," whose desperation is a structural condition for the devaluation of labor and augmentation of relative surplus value. This point cannot be pursued further here, but in its "uselessness," as an object that illusorily enacts its emancipation from exchange, the work of art resembles the unemployed worker, grasped as a subject whose exclusion from capitalist production is the contradictory form of its actual emancipation. Thus Marx's comment, in his early *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, that "when the proletariat announces the dissolution of the existing social order, it only declares the secret of its own existence, for it is the effective dissolution of this order" (65). See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2014). See also Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. and ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) 53-65.
44. Marx, *Capital Volume One* 342.
45. *Philosophy of New Music* 183.
46. *Aesthetic Theory* 168.
47. The account of earth I have given should be contrasted with Pippin's critique of earth in *After the Beautiful*. On his view, Heidegger's notion of earth articulates an insuperable restriction on knowledge and sense-making that allows meaning to "happen" in artworks only by concealing it at the same time. Heidegger's account is held to run athwart Hegel's in its supposed denial that we can ever provide a satisfying account of our historical conditions and projects and the reasons for their failure (114-115). Pippin's critique of Heidegger's account takes the form of an interpretation of Cézanne, whose paintings, he suggests, do not demonstrate some "ontological truth," but show instead that in our historical situation, "earth is 'winning'" (129). Pippin proceeds to tell us that "the failure of meaning is therefore... always itself determinately comprehensible, for a historical society, at a time, in a certain relation to its own past. ... Whatever *Erde* [earth] turns out to be, it too is a concept, a *Begriff*, ultimately fully transparent" (130). What is surprising about this critique is Pippin's unmistakable reliance on the very category he rejects. Without Heidegger's notion of earth, which he explicitly employs, the possibility of such a reading of Cézanne's paintings — as expressing a historically specific form of the threat of senselessness — would be unintelligible. The category of earth does not signify the impossibility of satisfying accounts of collective failure, but the constitutive finitude that makes the attempt to provide such accounts necessary. Earth signifies not that failure cannot be explained (though, of course, not every failure can be); it signifies instead that the facticity of failure — the fact that we fail — cannot be explained and overcome, at least not without our ceasing to be the free beings that we are. As Heidegger puts it, "Every decision is grounded in something that cannot be mastered [...]. Otherwise it would not be a decision" (31). Far from foreclosing the kind of robust account of historical conditions Pippin sketches, Heidegger's concept of earth articulates a condition for its possibility.
48. *Aesthetic Theory* 39-40.
49. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 167.

50. Fried, "Art and Objecthood" 166.
51. J.M. Bernstein, "Aporia of the Sensible—Art, Objecthood, and Anthropomorphism: Michael Fried, Frank Stella, and Minimalism," *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 140.
52. *Aesthetic Theory* 40.
53. Wrong life, as Adorno tirelessly reminds us, cannot be lived rightly. Consequently, all artworks are "guilty," no matter how critical they might be. That the retrospective of an erstwhile radical artist was bankrolled by one of the finance giants bailed out by the Federal Reserve following the 2008 financial crisis is a truly stunning demonstration of art's dependence on the same alienated labor whose existence it immanently protests. But it is precisely the *structural necessity* of this contradiction that should reveal the limits of indignation at or opposition to "Wall Street" or condemnation of the Whitney or Stella's work. Comprehension of such necessity should touch off not moral outrage, but recognition of the absence of political forms capable of effecting radical structural change.
54. Stella, "The Pratt Lecture," *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Auping (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 153.
55. Stella, "The Pratt Lecture" 153
56. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings: Volume 3 1935-1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 119.
57. See Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) 172-179, where it is argued that Benjamin's categories in the "Reproducibility" essay are derived by way of critique of Kant's in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. The distracted experience that defines shock marks the impossibility of reflective judgment under capitalism.
58. *Aesthetic Theory* 244-245.
59. For a non-dialectical approach to the relationship between materiality and conceptuality in abstract painting, see Henry Staten's "Clement Greenberg, Radical Painting, and the Logic of Modernism" *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 7.1 (2002) 73-89. Staten seeks to sever the idea of art from the idea of craft in the name of the latter, and to separate the good judgment "this is a good painting" from the bad judgment "this is art." Staten thus wishes to reduce painting to a "non-artistic" craft to be judged solely in accord with banausic criteria such as virtuosity and craftsmanship. The problems with such a *purely* "immanent" approach, that is, an approach that consists strictly in technical or formal analysis, are innumerable and cannot be dealt with in this space, but the argument I have attempted to present in this essay could be read as an implicit critique of thinking like Staten's.
60. For a contrasting view, see Peter Hohendahl's "The Presence of Hegel in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," which argues that Adorno failed to adequately address the Kantian concept of taste, since his "response remains at the empirical level, namely, the actual taste of concrete social groups and the opportunity of training the observer to become a discriminating judge of art" (42). Peter Hohendahl, "The Presence of Hegel in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *Telos* 174 (2016) 33-53.
61. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 47.

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## The Sidings of History

Laura Krughoff

In China Miéville's telling, the story of the Russian Revolution ends with the Bolsheviks stumbling out of the Second Congress of Soviets in Petrograd, having assumed full control of the government, blinking in the light of "a new kind of first day, that of a workers' government, morning in a new city, the capital of a workers' state. They walked into the winter under a dim but lightening sky" (304). *October* as a text, however, ends elsewhere. Though he has taken care to make nothing up in his telling of the two revolutions that rocked Russia in February and October of 1917, Miéville suggests in his introduction that the story of the revolution hasn't yet concluded, that "[i]f its sentences are still unfinished, it is up to us to finish them" (3), and he finishes his book with a speculative turn:

By the forest shacks are the points, the switches onto hidden tracks  
through wilder history.

...

Onto such tracks the revolutionaries divert their train, with its contraband  
cargo, unregistrable, supernumerary, powering for a horizon, an edge  
as far away as ever and yet careering closer.

Or so it looks from the liberated train, in liberty's dim light. (320)

The book ends with the revolutionaries working in the present tense, not the past. For readers of Miéville's fiction, the image of a revolutionary train both liberated

from time and trapped on a horizon is a familiar one.<sup>1</sup> It is the avatar of an impossible future that might yet one day be manifest.

In *October*, the image of a train diverted by revolutionaries does other work as well. In the Epilogue, Miéville recounts an instance of the term *switchmen* being used as a slur for Bolsheviks. The provenance of the term and how it came to be derogatory is a mystery to the Western witnesses who recount having heard it deployed in a speech to the Duma. Miéville finds the key to unlocking this little linguistic puzzle in the glossary to the English translation of Chaim Grade's Yiddish memoir *Der mames shabosim*. There the term Forest Shack is defined as "the switchmen's booths along the railway tracks in the vicinity of Vilna. Before the Revolution of 1917, the area around the Forest Shacks was the clandestine meeting place for the local revolutionaries" (318). Miéville assumes the Bolsheviks must have garnered this nickname from their clandestine meeting place. When used by Bolshevik critics whose commitment to liberalism was based upon the belief "epochs must succeed one another perforce, like stations along a line" (319), Miéville claims the derogatory nature of the term becomes clear. The Bolsheviks' leap from Russian feudalism to communism without a stop along the line for liberal capitalism flew in the face of their critics' "stageist dogmas." "What could be more inimical to any trace of teleology," Miéville wonders, "than those who take account of the sidings of history? Or who even take them?" (319).

The teleology Miéville imagines the revolutionaries refusing as they shunt their train off onto secret tracks is two-fold. The Bolsheviks refuse the teleology of liberal capitalism as a necessary stage on the path to communism, and Miéville seeks to tell the story of their revolution in a way that refuses the logic that "October lead inexorably to Stalin" or that "the gulag [is] the telos of 1917" (315). He calls the revolutions of 1917 a "torqueing of history" (1) and by ending his book with what might have been possible rather than with what actually happened, he torques their telling. He is, of course, a novelist, not an historian. And by his own account he is a novelist who begins each project by starting "from the presumption the impossible is true."<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, the most interesting way to read *October* isn't for any simple insight into the political machinations of today.<sup>3</sup> (Although it is hard not to conjure up contemporary American politics when reading about how "[t]he Romanovian method becomes one of appointing adventurer after incompetent after nonentity to grand office of state" while "liberals and the sharper-witted right grow ever more apoplectic," or how a representative to the Duma lambasts both the tsarina and her latest appointee as prime ministers by punctuating his speech to the body with the repeated question, "Is this stupidity or is it treason?" [36].) Nor is the most useful way to read the text to do so for new insight into the actual facts of the Revolution, though the average American reader will find two-hundred-odd pages of new information about the development of the soviets, the splitting of the Marxists into the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, the existence of a non-Marxist agrarian communist party, the invention of the Duma in its varied permutations, what votes were taken when



and by whom, and how those votes confounded previous ones and/or the will and expectation of party leaders. Indeed, the story reads with all the force and intrigue of a thriller, if thrillers could be written about endless committee meetings. Miéville conveys the confusion and contingency of each revolutionary moment, noting at one point that in response to an uprising beyond their control the “Soviet leaders and their parties gathered in emergency session. They were not even certain what it was they needed to discuss or debate. The situation was tense but incomprehensible” (221). As a revolution via committee would likely be.

The most interesting way to read *October* is as a window into the political work Miéville hopes narrative — and perhaps art more broadly — is capable of. Miéville hasn’t written a history; he’s told a story, and it’s clear he’s told it in a way he hopes might intervene in history, might open up alternative endings to a story that isn’t finished yet. The Bolsheviks’ failure to achieve the new world their Revolution aimed at is only part of the story for Miéville. Though the revolutionary moments he celebrates “are snuffed out, reversed, become bleak jokes and memories,” he insists, “it might have been otherwise” (317). Tied to the events of history as he is in *October*, Miéville can only gesture speculatively toward what might have been, but, in his fiction, he is utterly free to imagine what that otherwise could be. While much of Miéville’s speculative fiction takes place in worlds organized in ways that differ from our own, his most recent novella, *The Last Days of New Paris* (2016), not only imagines an alternative history but dramatizes art’s material intervention in that history. By reading his nonfiction story of the Russian Revolution with and against his entirely fictive account of an alternative non-ending to World War II, Miéville’s project in *October* and his understanding of the potential for art to intervene in politics both become clearer.

In *The Last Days of New Paris*, Miéville conjures a Paris of 1950 still occupied but not yet subdued by Nazi forces. This Paris has been sealed off from the rest of France to contain the living manifestations of various works of Surrealist art brought to life by the accidental detonating of an imagined S-bomb. The war-torn arrondissements are a patchwork of Partisan-held territory, Nazi-controlled spaces, and terrain that can’t be claimed by either side because it is “too completely made of recalcitrant art for anyone to take” and will “shelter no one but the partisans of that art — the Surrealist stay-behinds, soldiers of the unconscious” (17). The living art of New Paris does what it wants, and though it cannot be counted on to act for the benefit of French freedom fighters, it constantly thwarts Nazi efforts to control the city streets.

In New Paris, only real art is manifested by the S-bomb, and real art, what Miéville elsewhere calls “the god stuff,” almost by definition isn’t made by Nazis.<sup>4</sup> True Surrealist art can’t be compared to “a poem by some stupid American, or fascist scrawls, or Derianist crap” (52). It’s important to note, however, that what art manifests and what art doesn’t isn’t predicated on the political position of the artists who made it but rather on the quality of the art itself. Nazi art doesn’t fail to manifest because

Nazis made it, but because it is bad art: stupid scrawly crap. Nazis just happen to be capable of little else.

The most powerful manifestations are exquisite corpses, images made by chance as the Surrealists “play foolish games to thumb their noses at perpetrators of mass murder” (115). What gives these images the potential to leap off the page and into life, and therefore to intervene in the war being waged block by block throughout Paris, is the fact they are “neither evolved nor designed” but rather, “[c]oagula of fleeting and distinct ideas and chance... chimeras for this era” (116). The Surrealists produce “beasts of collective unconscious” (116). The very most important thing about a work of true Surrealist art is that it is free from the intention of any individual creator and free to wander the streets of New Paris without loyalty or obligation to anything or anyone. The “chimera for this era” are, in fact, not solely the products of famous Surrealist, though often they are.<sup>5</sup> The manifestations wandering Paris are also the products of “hundreds of women and men never heard of and never to be heard of but who were the spirit of this spirit, the inspirations behind and unsung practitioners of this ferocious art” (117–18). For Miéville, Surrealist art represents an expression not of a person but of the people, just as the Russian Revolution, in the moments it is most true to its ideals, is a spontaneous uprising of the people, a revolution that has its own life antecedent to, and superseding the wishes of, any political party or political structure.

There is, of course, something wonderfully egalitarian in this way of imagining Surrealist art. It is not the status of the artist that confers status on the work but the collectivist spirit with which it is conceived and brought forth. The manifestation of a collective unconscious feels far freer than anything made by just one person for just one purpose. In the novel, the primary evil the Nazis commit in New Paris is to attempt to force life into their own terrible art, Frankenstein’s monster-style, and to control and direct these manifestations for their own purposes. No less a monstrous figure than Josef Mengele is the murderous mind behind the creation of Nazi manifestations.

Certainly it would be hard to argue with the notion that Mengele is bad and the collective spirit of French Surrealists is good, but it’s possible to imagine a world in which the collective unconscious of a population, if it is a population primarily made up of Nazis, isn’t much better than Mengele. Indeed, in *October*, Miéville reminds readers that the revolution was always under threat from anti-revolutionaries. Even in the heady early days, Miéville points out “ideologues and true believers like the murderous Black Hundreds — ultra-monarchist pogrom enthusiasts, proto-fascists and mystics of hate — skulked and schemed behind closed doors, biding their time” (107). Later, as a revolutionary government failed to consolidate the power to govern through the Soviets, “malcontents on the right pined for reaction, dreaming ever more loudly of a dictatorship” (195). From Miéville’s account of what aligns good art on the side of freedom, it is unclear what would prevent the collective unconscious of proto-fascists and pogrom-enthusiasts and those dreaming of dictatorship from

manifesting something deeply inimical to freedom as such. In a novel that attempts to fully animate the political potential of art, Miéville replaces an ideological with an aesthetic commitment, sweeping any kind of political commitment off the page. The manifestations of New Paris are outside of politics entirely, reducing art's political interventions to nothing more than happenstance.

When the Nazis successfully manifest an Adolf Hitler self-portrait, described as “[a] poor, cowardly rendition, by a young bad artist,” (162) that threatens to destroy New Paris by turning it into an entirely depopulated watercolor of itself, a “Paris in pastel outlines... a simpering pretense... a cloying imaginary” (162) all is almost lost. Hitler's great crime in this world is his penchant for bad representational landscapes. Because the problem has become an aesthetic rather than an ideological one, the solution in the novel is similarly free of ideological commitment. The human protagonist of the novel happens to have been carrying around the severed head of the Breton *Exquisite Corpse*, which he hurls at the Hitler self-portrait in a state of panic. The *Exquisite Corpse's* head, by chance, falls on top of Hitler's head, covering it like a Halloween mask. Now, “[i]ts head was not chosen by its artist” (166). As the image is “randomiz[ed]” by replacing Hitler's head with another one, the image becomes an “exquisite corpse. It is remade. It is without artist” (166). Once cut off from its artist, the image becomes part of the “collective unconscious,” unable to wreak the destruction it has been intended to, but also unable to do anything else, really. It is just one of many images, staggering about the streets of Paris, outside of but not in any obvious way in opposition to the ideology of any of the warring factions.

The story of *The Last Days of New Paris* ends in a way quite similar to that of *October*. A great struggle has taken place and an important battle has been won, but the struggle is never ending and a new world has not yet come. The protagonist, afforded the option of escaping New Paris where the Nazis still hold power even after their Hitler self-portrait scheme has been thwarted, chooses to return to the battle. He returns because “*The Last Days of New Paris* needs writing. Even though these are not the last days,” and so, “bruised and tired, triumphant and unsure, [he] takes a deep breath and steps over the boundary, back into New Paris, the old city” (168). The story is over and yet the story is not over, might never be over. The work of narrative is to foreclose the foreclosure of anything.

In the closing paragraphs of his epilogue to *October*, Miéville recounts Marx claiming “[r]evolutions... are the locomotives of history.” In a note Lenin wrote to himself just weeks into the new world created by *October*, he admonished himself to “[p]ut the locomotive into top gear... and keep it on the rails.” “But how could you keep it there,” Miéville wonders, “if there really was only one true way, one line, and it is blocked?” (319). If the enemy of the new world Miéville longs for in his fiction and in his political writings is teleology of any sort, then the refusal of his narratives to foreclose any future and the refusal of art to abide by or do service to any ideology work against that enemy. In his fiction Miéville can imagine Surrealist trains that

emerge from a now-defunct Sacre-Coer “where tracks shook like lizard tails” on an utterly irregular schedule “hurtl[ing] along one or other of these evanescent tracks into the city” (75). These trains are driverless, more art than infrastructure, utterly indifferent and impervious to the transit needs of the people of Paris. This doesn’t prevent the protagonist and other humans from hitching a ride as a train howls out into the city on rails that “appeared before it and sank behind it into the earth. It explored and they hung on within” (76). This locomotive can’t possibly be deterred by a blocked line; it makes its own line. But it is also a locomotive that can be driven by no one, not the Partisans of New Paris, not the revolutionaries in the woods of Vilna, not even Lenin. If trains throw up their own track and throw off the dictatorial control of rail and engineer, they are the avatar of total freedom and possibility. By very definition their destination is unknown. Or perhaps more properly, they have no destination at all.

Reading *The Last Days of New Paris* with and against *October*, it is hard not to wonder if an ungovernable train with no commitment to anything other than its own freedom is the way a Marxist wants to finish the unfinished story of the Russian Revolution.

### Notes

1. See China Miéville, *Iron Council* (London: Del-Rey, 2004).
2. China Miéville. Interviewed by J.J. Charlesworth. *ArtReview* 60 (2012). 18 June 2012. Web. 11 July 2012.
3. Miéville says it would “be absurd, a ridiculous myopia” to do so, though he also suggest a proper reading of the history isn’t irrelevant to our contemporary political moment (318).
4. China Miéville, “Guilty Pleasures: Art and Politics,” International Socialist Organization, *Socialism* 2012, 28 June 2012 <http://wearemany.org/a/2012/06/guilty-pleasures-art-and-politics>
5. *Exquisite Corpse* (1938) by André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, Yves Tanguy is an essential character in the story.

Justin Raden. "Review of *Postmodern/Postwar — and After*." *Mediations* 31.1 (Fall 2017) 129-136.  
www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/postmodern-postwar

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## The Anxiety of the Contemporary

Justin Raden

Recently, I heard someone preface a paper with an apologetic disclaimer to the effect of, "this is very much a pre-November paper," referring to Donald Trump's victory and the apparent break it represents for, among other things, critical thought. We have become somewhat habituated to statements like these, to pre- and post- designations that seem to have appeared with increasing frequency since the beginning of the twenty-first century: pre- and post-2008, 2001, 1989, 1972, 1968, 1945, 1917.<sup>1</sup> Such a frequency of breaks should make us wonder what the status of the present really is. Are these shifts lateral? Additive? Are they epistemological or ontological? Are they really shifts at all?

Part of what makes this such a slippery thought may be, as Fredric Jameson indicated when he provocatively announced "we cannot periodize," that the basic causal structure that underlies what he calls the "dialectic of the period and the break" is flawed.<sup>2</sup> This structure, really a structure of thinking disguised as a structure of temporality, assumes that things progress in a more or less straightforward linear, causal fashion. The two-fold problem, for Jameson, is that the position from which we observe the unfolding of events and in turn assign designations of break and period is always and necessarily insufficient; we can never see enough to be sure. At the same time, this observational process excludes itself from the frame of observation: a kind of Heisenberg principle of historicity. This condition appears — appears to us *at this time* — to be particularly prevalent from the second half of the twentieth century to the present; perhaps because of the peculiarities of our relationship to time which, it is often said, has sped up, and perhaps — at least in the present case

— because of the observational proximity to certain objects. This latter is the specific problem of scholars who study literature variously classified as postmodern, postwar, or contemporary.

It's not surprising, then, that a book purportedly concerned with reexamining the periodizing logic on which these classifications depend would appear as a document of thoughts struggling under the weight of their own remit. The recent collection of essays, entitled *Postmodern/Postwar — and After: Rethinking American Literature*, is one such document and one which makes a point of foregrounding its anxieties. These anxieties stem almost universally from the basic problem outlined above and, somewhat ironically, give the book a certain cohesion. Debates about continuity and break abound, but so do discussions of unintuitive causal relations. What counts as “before” and “after” often becomes the contributions' central question. In the words of the collection's editors, the book seeks to “lay out the parameters of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary studies, to serve as a source book for the new field” and to do so as “more of a conversation than a conclusive account” (2). This comes as no small relief when so many field surveys proclaim encyclopedic ambition.

This is not to say this collection lacks ambition. To wrangle into a single calculus the disparate and mutable classifications of literary production after modernism, and indeed after postmodernism, would be nothing short of miraculous. But, as the introduction has it, the effects of canon expansion and acknowledgements of continuities (rather than emphasizing a strong break with previous periods and practices) have actually facilitated comprehensibility even if they haven't produced an entirely stable object. This shouldn't fool us into imagining a closure of the field, whatever its name. The introduction signals as much, ending with a provocative list of questions that inform many of the essays that follow. It's impossible to reproduce in full here, but it begins with this gambit: “Did postmodernity ever begin? Is it now over?” (15).

But what form should such an anxious document take? As the title suggests, the old divisions are held open at least provisionally. Three sections of essays — “The Postmodern Revisited,” “The Postwar Reconfigured,” and “What Comes After?” — are preceded by a “dialogue” on the state of this difficult to define field. Part of the problem appears to be one common to literary studies in our present moment: a number of fields are being subjected to “the continual emergence of provisional canons, idiosyncratic periodizations, and new approaches” (3). Another part, certainly related but not reducible to this general instability, has been the proliferation of arguments for continuity (aesthetic, institutional, socio-political) across the 1945 dividing line and the corresponding territorial encroachment of modernist studies whose most extreme iteration has attempted to annex no fewer than five hundred years of human activity. All of this comes in the context of a contemporary revival of interest in form in literary studies.

In the introduction, editors Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden suggest that the

general return to concerns of form might usefully be thought of as a return to a kind of postmodern critical logic and that, therefore, “a reevaluation of postmodernism might be useful for thinking of form today” (15). This seems to point toward a less ambitious — but no less important — agenda than those circulating through the essays themselves. The individual assertions about, for example, whether the end of the cold war or 9/11 constitute strong breaks in sociality or aesthetic practice, whether digital technologies have left a permanent imprint on textuality, or whether “sincerity” marks a unique aesthetic ideology, collectively produce something one might risk calling a meta-narrative. On this level, the collection raises a number of useful questions about the scale and substance of periodization and the qualifying features of epistemological rupture and can be generatively read as primary sources of a particular conjuncture of critical thought; one in which emerging, or in some cases renewed, critical practices combine with instability in neighboring fields as well as ever-increasing institutional drama.

In a foreshadowing example from the dialogue, Amy J. Elias muses, “I’m not the only one who firmly believes that there is a difference between modernism and what happens in art after the 1960s” (32). Presumably, she’s thinking of the shift from so-called countercultural interest in representing social totalities — like the urbanist art of the Situationists and Fluxus — to the predominance of the aleatory and the particular typified by the critical work of Nicolas Bourriaud. But even these apparently cut-and-dried shifts are actively debated, so it’s not always clear what the “difference” Elias refers to consists of.<sup>3</sup> In other words, how does one distinguish the particular differences of an increasingly heterogeneous modernism from the implicitly universal difference between these differences and whatever postmodernism is? Elias later appends her statement, claiming “we needed to think break as well as continuity between modernism and what followed” (33-34). Anyone looking for a definitive account of a methodology for identifying these various breaks and differences, as well as continuities, will be dismayed.

If I appear to be dwelling overmuch on the introductory sections of the book it is because they raise concerns that thread through all the essays without ever being comfortably resolved. And this is no shortcoming of the collection. Indeed, any resolution would inevitably come off as spurious oversimplification. That said, the articulation of these issues in the editorial introduction — issues of periodizing scale, the logic of self-reflexivity, the concept of the contemporary — will be invaluable to anyone invested in this antinomian field which even still we seem unable to quite name (is it Post-45, Postmodern, Contemporary, Post-Post-... or, perhaps, as Donald Barthelme once quipped, just the “New Newness”?).

An exemplary case is provided by what Paul K. Saint-Amour calls, in his essay of the same name, “perpetual interwar” — the experience of both constant anticipation of the next war and being in the midst of war (167–68). Beyond merely a phenomenological condition, perpetual interwar signals a discrepant temporality

wherein the nominal end of war is not consonant with the actual activity of war. He cites here the continuity of war powers in the U.S. beyond the official cessation of hostilities after WWII as grounding the operant logic of the Authorization to Use Military Force, which facilitated most of U.S. military activity after 9/11. Accordingly, periods of so-called war and peace fail to be self-consistent and bleed into one another. In a forceful rereading of that seminal text of postmodernism, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Saint-Amour claims that it is "a veritable encyclopedia of means by which a time can fail or refuse to be contemporary with itself" (171), accomplishing this by reactivating a number of modernist texts "as undepleted resources in contending with war's deformations of time and totality" (172).

The mode in which this continuity operates provides a good starting point for looking at the various elaborations of the field in this collection, which appear to produce a postmodernism that also refuses to be contemporary with itself. On the one hand, the concept of perpetual interwar interestingly contents with Daniel Grausman's claims elsewhere in the collection that the apparent continuity of the cold war (or what we might call the cold war discourse) suggests "less a straightforward break with postmodernism" (144) than a kind of doubling down of the self-reflexivity of postmodernism — or else a slackening of this self-reflexivity which allows writers/critics to imagine they are critiquing the period from an "after." In other words, to Saint-Amour's claim that it is the structure of experience and especially time in perpetual interwar that authorizes a "*longue-durée* approach" (166), Grausman proposes the specific temporalizing of the cold war, or what he calls the "temporality of nuclearity" (145). Grausman's essay, in turn, means to problematize the two major developments that appear to herald an *after* postmodernism: the end of the cold war and 9/11. But here something has to be said about some of the less clearly drawn differences.

On the significance of the post-cold war and the post-9/11 as determinate breaks, Leerom Medovoi makes an all too common misstep. "There are thus two distinct developments in the literature that follows postmodernism," he claims, "separate phases in the cultural logic of what we might call 'later capitalism'" (95). This claim appropriates the representational schemes attendant to the cultural logic that apparently shifts after both of these events to itself define a new phase in the mode of production; apparently an erroneous conflation of "postmodernism" as a designator of social configuration and phase of capitalism. This points to a larger problem of how to conceive the apparently disparate temporalities of cultural shifts and changes within a stage of capitalism which itself appears unstable. Medovoi would hardly be the first to argue that within the proliferation of responses to these so called breaks, as well as the speed at which the dialectic of period and break appears to operate, we should seek aesthetic evidence of a shift in the phase of capitalism. But he *doesn't* make this argument. It is only implied by way of a semantic slippage in his use of "postmodernism."



Either this is representative of what in the “dialogue” is marked as an awkward self-consciousness or, as Theodore Martin takes up in his essay, the difficulty of self-comprehension of the slippery “contemporary,” or else the problem is of a potentially more complicated nature.<sup>4</sup> The latter case would be something like an exacerbation of what Ernst Bloch called “asynchronicity” — the temporal disjointedness of modernity in which capital, technology, and social life operate according to different temporalities. Such a set of conditions has produced, in other discourses, notions of a phase shift as well; toward vague notions of a “post-capitalism” that indicate either a redoubled entrenchment or, indeed, a something “after.”<sup>5</sup> In either case, readers will likely wonder about certain absences in this book, such as the structural breaks that fail to appear in spectacular fashion, but which nonetheless we recognize as crucial, such as the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement. Brian McHale, for example, makes frequent reference to 1972 as a critical mass of aesthetic, especially novelistic, production without ever mentioning Bretton Woods. Similarly absent from the discussion is the slow creep forward in time in academic focus — the very condition of possibility of the field of postmodern or contemporary literary studies — that is at least contemporary with the departmental expansions occasioned by the GI Bill.

It’s hard to determine whether these are merely problems with the essays or if they indicate problems with the field. Indeed, the myopia worried over by some of these scholars does seem at times to be the very core of its critical metabolism. So, while Caren Irr produces deft analyses of the novelistic politics of Jonathan Franzen, Philip Meyer, and Adam Haslett, in which she marks (rightly) the absence of class conflict and the generalization of particular political experience (white, male, middle class), we’re left to wonder at the selection of these supposedly representative texts and to the provisionality of canon formation to which Gladstone and Worden have already alerted us.<sup>6</sup> Framing her canon as the neo-realist American political novel only partially shields her from the incaution. Irr appears to duplicate the epistemological error of the novels she’s chosen: they try to generalize from particular “American” or class experiences but are ultimately only representations of this or that particular iteration of an abstract generality, just as Irr’s account of “American national allegory” does not really account for the contemporary political novel in America (except perhaps via tautology), but only this or that particular American political novel.

In still other essays we can glimpse, if only obliquely, a response to this selection problem. Rachel Greenwald Smith is explicitly critical of the tendency toward what she calls “compromise aesthetics” in fiction after postmodernism, a kind of post-experimental aesthetics she perceives as symptomatic of neoliberalism (183). Smith mediates between aesthetic and critical practice, locating the source of critiques, like Irr’s, of the generalizing of particularity at least partly in a critical apology that fails to recognize the political and economic dimensions of the formation of that particular: “literature is said to affirm the fundamental existence and importance of individual

subjective experience in general even if works demonstrate skepticism toward any individual subject's reality as universal" (187). This self-consciously produced and flexible subject is, for Smith, analogous to the figure of the entrepreneur; both have the production of value as their ultimate objective.

Michael Clune's essay tracks a slightly different concern with subjectivity through postmodern and contemporary art and fiction; in particular, to a version of subject formation occasioned by the interruption of facile recognition. In Clune's estimation, it is the combination of the aesthetic and social programs aimed at producing unrecognizable objects in order to occasion new social formations "that constitutes the historical novelty of our emerging period" (244). It's worth dwelling for a moment on Clune's claims because of the implications they appear to have for the possibility of producing a discrete contemporary period, whether or not it includes postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> For a number of reasons, Clune's conceptualization appears superficially spurious. Not least because as an aesthetic program it appears entirely consonant with the modernism of Wallace Stevens, for whom difficulty and unfamiliarity was meant to produce a new aesthetic sensibility, not to mention modernism's general inclination toward subjectivized rather than totalized narrative perspective. This would also seem to put paid to Clune's notion that such "unrecognizable" work would also be anti-Romantic. As Audrey Wasser has convincingly shown, the comprehensibility of literary form is inseparable from its Romantic articulation as long as it remains characterized by the speculative gesture of a work-to-come which has of necessity to retain a relation to that which it succeeds in time.<sup>8</sup> Clune himself permits such continuity: "Beckett makes it vanish. Nabokov makes it vanish. O'Hara makes it vanish. Plath makes it vanish. Thomas Bernhard makes it vanish" (245). To be fair, it is Clune's notion that, in its more recent permutation, the aesthetics of subjective defamiliarization now corresponds to a "form of *radical subjectivity*" (247) upon which, somewhat obscurely, new "post-recognition" collectives could be built. This maneuver, fundamentally *pre-* rather than *post-* or anti-Romantic, allows him to oppose the objectal obsession of the current ontological turn on a Cartesian playing field. He is effectively making-it-new by making it old. It's a provocative claim and one that perhaps warrants more attention than the often-fatuous pronouncements of sincerity that abound in the contemporary discourse.

Ursula K. Heise re-raises the issue of postmodernism's internal periodizing dynamics in relation to an even broader scalar concern with overdue acknowledgement of the Anthropocene. I say overdue because hers is the final essay in the collection, but it is in fact brilliantly located as a final rejoinder to the myriad concerns of *Postmodern/Postwar — and After*. Opening postmodernism's perspectival paradoxes onto the dimensions of geological time, Heise meditates on the discrepant accounts of social and ecological pace in which modern life's rapidity has motivated a (somewhat reactionary) return to slowness while, at the same time, foot-dragging legislative and regulative institutions cannot keep up with the rate of environmental degradation.

Fast and slow are both conflictually moralized within these concurrent discourses. In a final nod to the myopia lamented throughout the collection, Heise offers a picture of the period's self-reflection as a passive relation to its own conditions: "postmodernism watches itself riding toward the future, not knowing whether it is moving in time lapse or slow motion" (257).

To call *Postmodern/Postwar* — *and After* an important contribution to the field would be something of a cop-out. This collection has the dissimulating effect of causing one to wonder what an "important contribution to the field" would even be. Or what "the field" is ("Did postmodernity ever begin? Is it now over?"). These are not failings but fundamentally important reflections generated from the unique attempt to observe the protean thronging of aesthetic practice and produce out of it a useful object for scholarly examination. And whatever disagreements readers might find themselves having with this or that essay, the collection as a whole has done a fine job of already staging, within its network of critical and methodological commitments, many of the most provocative versions of those disagreements. In this way, it has paid apt homage to its most frequent interlocutor, Frederic Jameson, whose work is always a launch pad for often contentious but always vital discussion and thought.

### Notes

1. 2001 having the dubious distinction of containing two major “breaks”: 9/11 and the end of the dot-com crash.
2. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002).
3. See Hal Foster, *Bad New Days* (New York: Verso, 2016).
4. “Such paradigms as ‘the-neo-avant-garde’ and ‘postmodernism,’ which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead.” Hal Foster, “Questionnaire of ‘the Contemporary,’” *October* 130 (2009) 3.
5. McKenzie Wark, for example, has referred to this “after” as Vector Capitalism wherein commodity production shifts to information production and the means of production become the “legal and technical protocols for keeping information scarce.” See Wark’s “The Sublime Language of My Century,” *Public Seminar* (May 14, 2016). <http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/05/the-sublime-language-of-my-century>
6. On the opposite tendency toward representations of totality in contemporary visual arts see Peer Illner, “The Artist as Whistleblower,” *Continent* 6.2 (2017) 37-47; and for an alternative view of contemporary fiction and totality see Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2017).
7. This circulates as a kind of secondary concern in *Postmodern/Postwar — and After*, namely that, if we can’t make the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century cohere into a single period, what are the periods contained in that frame?
8. Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

## Contributors

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