

# Mediations

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## Realism Reevaluated

It is, the saying goes, easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Assigned to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, it served as a tentpole axiom in Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. Published just over a decade ago, *Capitalist Realism* argued that realism is the preferred literary mode of capitalism. Realism, Fisher argues, had in fact become "capitalist realism," and capitalist realism is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."<sup>1</sup> Although Fisher's account of realism—many in this double issue will point out—does not foreclose the political possibilities of literary form, many scholars have taken his account to mean that realism is inherently conservative—little more than a sophisticated technology for capitalism to secure its continued existence and expansion. Such historicist accounts often point to the coincident rise of the realist form and the corresponding expansion of capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century or to the renewed interest in the realist form following the financial crisis of 2008 as evidence of the intimate relation between the two. Too often, however, such accounts privilege mimesis as realism's defining attribute, subsuming what is unique about the work of literature, its form, to the world.

On this view, the novel cannot help but reinforce the social world and that it represents. Each of the essays in this issue challenges the merely mimetic by investigating how realism, conceived as a particular mode, constructs the world anew. Realism, Anna Kornbluh has argued elsewhere, "fundamentally designs and erects socialites" and in doing so "imagines the grounds of collectivities" and political possibility.<sup>2</sup> This is not, strictly speaking, a refusal of mimesis as a principle of the form, but it is a refusal of the authority of mimesis to govern the meaning of the text. As Nicholas Brown points out in his contribution to this volume, in the historicist, descriptive account of literary form "the text owes its authority to facts outside the text, which the text is one way or another obliged to mirror, reflect, or represent." On this account, insofar as the work derives its authority from the world, it cannot help but ratify those relationships. This is, no doubt, part of what it means to argue that realism is the preferred form of capitalism. But the point, argued differently in each of the essays collected, is that mimesis cannot be the horizon of our interpretive engagement with realism—in part the "reality" presented in the text is a reality

ordered by the form of the novel. At least one possible outcome of this feature of literary texts is that in asserting its form it makes a claim on the world that is not merely mimetic. That is, if the relationship between the world and the text is one asserted by the form of the text, what we interpret when we interpret a novel is not (or not only) a set of social relationships but a set of formal ones. What follows from this differs for each of the contributors, but it is enough to say by way of introduction that it is not a kind of formal guarantee for capitalist social relations.

This issue begins with Thomas Laughlin's essay on George Eliot and her "epic syntax," arguing that the logic of "expanded reproduction," that characterized capitalist development in the mid to late-nineteenth century "finds its figurative mirror" in "the production of sentences" rather than in the "direct representation of...labor *per se*." Eliot's sentences mark a move in realism, he argues, toward "epic syntax" that, at moments, glimpses the particularities of capitalist social relations. Building from Auerbach through Jameson, Laughlin argues that what is particular about Eliot's literary form — and perhaps realist fiction more broadly — is not only mimetic (though it is that too) but formal, realized in the dialectic between the mimetic and the syntactical.

From here, the issue expands, as capitalism will, from the seat of colonial power to its periphery in readings of Kang Kyŏng-ae's *From Wonso Pond* (1934), about workers in colonial Korea and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946), about dispossessed miners in pre-Apartheid South Africa. As Jacob Sloan argues in his essay, although "both novels have been criticized for clinging to the supposedly naïve projects of literary mimesis and socialist commitment," such criticisms naïvely suggest that because of the realist's forms mimetic commitments, it is less politically sophisticated because less formally so than its modernist counterpart. "The proletarian novel's attempt at mimesis" is often considered its "its cardinal sin." Such a view, however, requires bracketing the complex ways the proletariat novel formalizes, in Gyorgy Lukacs's formulation, the "nonsynchronous nature of reality under capitalism." It is not, in other words, mimesis, or even its refusal that makes the text more or less politically desirable, but the extent to which the text is able to bring the world it reflects under a form that mirrors not only the real, but actually existing social relations.

Zooming back into a particular periphery, the issue turns its focus to Latin America and to the resurgence of the realist historical novel. Ericka Beckman here argues that this resurgence is coupled to "transitions to capitalism" in the region. "To no small degree," She writes, "the resurgence of the historical novel in mid-twentieth-century Latin America...attempts to narrate the massive though always uneven, incorporation of predominantly agrarian societies into commodity relations." Though many have argued that realism "flattens the cultural and historical particularities of Andean society," Beckman argues that Peruvian José María Arguedas' realist form articulates "how indigenous people and belief systems" are "subject to historical transformation" brought on by capitalism. Attending to the ambitions of the realist mode, this essay

attends to the different ways realism registers uneven development at different moments within the history of capitalism.

What happens when that moment is yet to come? In Mathias Nilges' article, temporality takes center stage as he investigates the realist form from within a crisis of futurity, in a "timeless present that seems to absorb the future into it as a result of our inability to imagine substantive alternatives to the status quo." If it has become a matter of fact that it is easier to imagine the description of our planet than it is to imagine alternative to capitalism, is it possible for realism to "accomplish [anything] other than reiterating the same diagnosis and confirming the crisis of futurity?" As Nilges describes it, capitalist realism is not necessarily the "exhaustive foreclosing" of possibility many have understood it to be. Rather than view the form as "yet another index" of a futureless present, the new realist forms of the past decade might better be described as opportunities to critique such a view. Arguing for what he calls a "prospective realism" Nilges argues the form does not merely represent reality, but "establishes a critical relation to it" by "making legible those paths forward that exist in the present as latent."

This speculative note continues with Anna Kornbluh's reading of Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*. Reading the "aesthetic and ideological complexity of Robinson's novel alongside Fisher's definition of capitalist realism as "the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." If Robinson's novel has much of the mimetic trappings of realism, she argues, its "decidedly non-realist" mode of narration does not. Building on this dialectic Kornbluh asks whether or not capitalist realism is "mood, or mode?" The answer, it turns out, is both. But, she argues, "the difference between the two might actually be pivotal for critical judgments of...political promise in the present." The mismatched narrative and "atmosphere" — the "refusal of dystopian depression" — argues Kornbluh, offers, if not a path forward, a first step toward a future that is not foreclosed by the extractive logic of capitalism.

Nicholas Brown's contribution serves as a kind of coda to these essays, further drawing out and radicalizing the dialectical tension between representational and formal demands of realism. Engaging the work of prominent Brazilian literary critics Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz, Brown articulates what he views as overlapping but not coincident modes within literary realism: The descriptive and the narrative. In the descriptive (mimetic) mode most commonly associated with realism, Brown argues, the text "is obligated to mirror, reflect, or represent" the world and in this mode "the authority belongs to the object," or world, rather than to the text, which presents both an aesthetic and ideological problem for the text. In this mode the text virtually cannot help but ratify the logic of capitalism. Only when the descriptive is successfully subsumed into the text's narrative logic does the text gain its authority: "The authority of the text resides not in representational elements but in the form," he writes. And whatever political claims the novel makes about the

world, then, are not “strictly speaking representational.” This has implications not only for the novel, conceived as a work of art, but for interpretation and, perhaps more forcefully, about the kinds of claims we make about the world.

The question between the limits and political possibilities of the realist form raised in these essays gets taken up in through a more explicit engagement with *Capitalist Realism* in a roundtable edited by Matthew Flisfeder. Essays by Jodi Dean, Leigh Claire Le Berge, Benjamin Noys, Kai Heron, and Dan Hassler-Forest grapple with Fisher’s characterization of the “feelings of crisis and despair,” that define the capitalist realist aesthetic and the utopia that might exist “beyond the limits of the present.” Crucially, these essays extend beyond the literary to engage Fisher’s writing on other media as well, articulating the wide-ranging scope of his criticism and suggesting the ways Fisher was attuned to the “the radical utopian elements of some of our most ideological texts... capitalist popular culture.”

Finally, the issue continues its explorations of form with two reviews. The first, by Robert Cashin Ryan reviews Josh Robinson’s *Adorno’s Poetics of Form*. Robinson deftly meets Adorno on his own terms in this case book, writes Ryan, lucidly drawing together various threads of Adorno’s thought that culminates in a sustained engagement with the dialectical tension between literary and commodity forms. Jessica Hurley reviews Myka Tucker-Abramson’s *Novel Shocks*. Hurley begins her review by pointing out that whatever else scholars disagree about when it comes to neoliberalism, the timeframe is relatively settled — neoliberalism took its economic form in the early 1970s. One of the great interventions in Tucker-Abramson’s *Novel Shocks*, Hurley suggests, is that it “radically resituates the emergence of the proto-neoliberal subject much earlier in the twentieth century. Through incisive readings of the ways mid-century novels register urban renewal, Tucker-Abramson is able to show how “the contradictions of Keynesian economics...produce a proto-neoliberal economic reality” as early as the 1940s.

Taken to together these articles, roundtable, and reviews constitute a significant engagement with the history and future of realism, probing the most common assumptions made about literary realism. In raising these questions, the issue not only raises fundamental questions about what literary realism is, but about the way we read now — about the importance of attending to form as something other than merely mimetic.

- Davis Smith-Brecheisen, for the *Mediations* Editors



**Notes**

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (UK: Zero Books, 2009)
2. Anna Kornbluh, "Realist Blueprint." *The Henry James Review*, 36.3 (Fall 2015) 200.



## George Eliot's Epic Syntax: History and Totality in *Middlemarch*

Thomas Laughlin

Really, universally, human relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.

—Henry James<sup>1</sup>

[C]artography is not the solution, but rather the problem.

—Fredric Jameson<sup>2</sup>

George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, published serially from 1871 to 1872, appeared at the end of the most important years of industrial-capitalist development in Britain, in the wake of the Second Reform Act of 1867, and in the midst of a transition from a national *laissez-faire* economy to one increasingly of monopoly on a world-scale—from what Eric Hobsbawm calls the Age of Capital to the Age of Empire. Yet Eliot's novel takes as its historical content and setting the period of the so-called industrial revolution and the clamorous political landscape leading up to the First Reform Act of 1832 (the English half of Hobsbawm's Age of Revolution). Between these two periods lies a gulf.

When Henry James wrote in 1876 that "[r]eally, universally, human relations stop nowhere," he expressed it as an eternal truth; but really this had only been felt to be the case for the previous twenty-five years or so.<sup>3</sup> One hundred years earlier it would have sounded metaphysical, not axiomatic. "When we write the 'world history' of earlier periods," writes Hobsbawm, "we are in fact making an addition of the histories of the various parts of the globe, but which, in so far as they had knowledge of one another, had only marginal and superficial contact."<sup>4</sup> For Hobsbawm, "the great boom of the 1850s" is what actually "marks the foundation of a global industrial economy and single world history."<sup>5</sup> The novelist's effort to "draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which [human relations] shall happily *appear*" to *end somewhere* had thus

only really become a problem for those novelists of the latter half of the nineteenth century, who, like Eliot and James, set for themselves the special task of representing the totality of those relations (however narrow and limited each author's grasp of that totality might prove to be in the end). As Georg Lukács observes,

economic reality as a totality is itself subject to historical change. But these changes consist largely in the way in which all the various aspects of the economy are expanded and intensified, so that the "totality" becomes ever more closely-knit and substantial. After all, according to Marx, the decisive progressive role of the bourgeoisie in history is to develop the world market, thanks to which the economy of the whole world becomes an objectively unified totality.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge Eliot encountered in her effort to draw the totality of these new relations into "a geometry" of her own fictional making was then not only one of recording and representing a historical phenomenon, but of making sense of its totality as a *world process* as well.

By and large Marxist literary critics have gauged the accuracy or "realism" of a novel's world-picture on the degree to which it both includes and foregrounds labor. However, as Carolyn Lesjak argues, one shortcoming of hinging a mimetic theory of capitalism's representation *solely* on the inclusion of labor is that it greatly reduces the number of places and aesthetic forms to which we may look to see capitalism's shaping and determining influence.<sup>7</sup> To this we might add also that the transformative power of the capitalist process of production lies *not only* in its radical reorganization and expropriation of labor, but in the fact that it is "at the same time the *production* of capital and the *production* and reproduction of the entire capitalist relation on a steadily increasing (expanding) scale."<sup>8</sup> This logic of "expanded reproduction," I will argue, finds its figurative mirror not in the direct representation of actions and characters, or even labor *per se*, but in the production of sentences, which, over the development of the realist novel, reach a higher level of complexity, as authors seek out more nuanced ways of drawing their characters together and representing them simultaneously as a social organism, obeying laws and logics beyond the aims or intentions of any of their characters.<sup>9</sup> In Eliot's *Middlemarch*, this becomes a search for different metaphors of simultaneous, but largely invisible interrelationship. These metaphors are not so much stated as they are enacted in the production of what Jameson would call "dialectical sentences," which pull together disparate materials under the command of a single syntactical logic, which itself drives both hypotactically and sublimely towards ever larger expansions of meaning and interrelationality.<sup>10</sup> Such sentences mirror, in a purely formal way, the dialectical logic of capitalism's own inner workings and expansion. Eliot's metaphors, however, point towards the revelation of the social organism itself, allowing us to fill in the

contours of her dialectically expanding sentences with a sense of the subsuming logic of capitalism, which, in pulling ever more materials and people into its grasp, begins transforming society as a whole. Eliot's contribution to literary history, then, is thus nothing less than a new epic syntax with which to convey the particularities of this new secularized life world reproduced by capitalism on a larger and larger scale.

I propose *epicness* as a way to describe Eliot's syntax to suggest, first, the sheer force and breadth of her sentences, which, especially in her narratorial asides, seem to eclipse the rest of the novel's drama, making her prose into a kind of heroic subject in its own right. However, I also have in mind Lukács's claim in *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) that the classical epic of antiquity was able to take the unity of subjective and objective worlds for granted and was thus *in-formed* by the presupposition of an "organic" and "concrete totality"; whereas, "The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality."<sup>11</sup> For Jameson, in his Lukácsian-inflected examination of totality in Marx's *Capital*, "the conclusion to draw here is not that, since it is unrepresentable, capitalism is ineffable and a kind of mystery beyond language or thought; but rather that one must redouble one's efforts to express the inexpressible in this respect."<sup>12</sup> For both Lukács and Jameson, the vocation of the novel (and the realist novel *in particular*) is thus, "by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life."<sup>13</sup> Eliot's *epic* syntax is in its own way an attempt (with varying degrees of success) to give form and feeling to the transformative power and scale of capitalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, there will be reason later to comment on how Eliot's syntactically encoded worldview also re-naturalizes this process of capitalist transformation, making it part of a steady, ineluctable "middlemarch," in which the possibility of revolution, no less than reform, must face inevitable disappointment when viewed through the "mature" lens of her omniscient narrator, who stands outside the history she represents.

### History and Hypotaxis

The most sustained investigation of syntax's role in the representation of history and everyday life, as well as its evolution from epic to novel, is not to be found in Lukács's work, but in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953). Auerbach famously opens his book with a juxtaposition of two epic styles, that of antiquity, originating in Homer, and that of the Bible, encompassing both Old and New Testaments. The style of the first, he says, is elevated and hypotactic, subordinating numerous clauses and assimilating various adverbial and adjectival materials into large syntactic formations, in which—despite their length—meaning is well rounded and self-illuminating: everything, he says, is "brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never

a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths.”<sup>14</sup>

A peculiar tic of the Homeric style, however, is the flattening of time. The bard’s syntax, while constantly expanding through hypotactic additions (the lusty elaborations, for example, associated with the epic simile), does not move steadily into the future, but at various points moves retrogressively into the past, recovering anecdotal histories and interpolating them into the present tense of the epic drama. Auerbach’s key example is the anecdote of Odysseus’s scar, in which the narrator switches from the present to the past to recount, in similar detail and also in the present tense, the manner in which Odysseus acquired his scar. As Auerbach observes, “this procession of phenomena takes place in the foreground that is, in a local and temporal present which is absolute.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, while the syntax is dynamic and propulsive, the action is temporally static, subject to alternating progressions and retrogressions that happen as if in a vacuum.

Parataxis, for Auerbach, has the opposite effect, piling up content, which remains only minimally connected, lacking syntactical subordination. The result is a sharp sense of “background,” of gaps and fissures, which create confusion, yes, but also in the case of the Bible a place for mystery and therefore revelation. In the Old Testament, he says, we get “the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity.” The result is that “the whole [is] permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal,” which nonetheless “remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background.’”<sup>16</sup> It is through such gaps that History gradually enters. Turning to the representation of Peter’s denial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, Auerbach notes how Peter’s motivations are never divulged and yet implicit in this paratactic elision is a sense of the “enormous ‘pendulation’” that “is going on in him,” as he swings back and forth in his fidelity to Jesus. However, at stake in the “pendulations” of Peter’s heart is not just the fate of the interpersonal relationship between Jesus and his disciple, but also “the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life.” Thus, for Auerbach, “[w]hat considerable portions of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles describe ... is unmistakably the beginning of a *deep subsurface movement, the unfolding of historical forces*” (emphasis mine).<sup>17</sup>

For Auerbach, this “subsurface movement” represents a sharp break with the surface-oriented description of the classic epic and even the histories of Tacitus and Thucydides, which, because of the strict rules of the separation of styles, are confined to treating only lofty subjects appropriate to the high style of narration and therefore prevented from developing a layered socio-economic approach to history.<sup>18</sup> The subject of Auerbach’s book is thus the historical dialectic of the separation of styles in the classical period and their gradual intermingling over many centuries, in which the “low” themes appropriate to the modern historiography of daily life gradually enter into Western representation and are at last treated with the high-seriousness

of epic or tragedy in the French realist novels of the nineteenth century. As Jameson puts it, "'realism,' or mimesis in [Auerbach's] sense, is a syntactic conquest, the slow appropriation of syntactic forms capable of holding together multiple levels of a complex reality and a secular daily life."<sup>19</sup> Auerbach's theory of representation, if it is appropriate to call it a theory, is clearly *mimetic*—in that, a work's representational impulse is indexed to the degree that it seriously *replicates* everyday life and the historical forces shaping it. His understanding of how *mimesis* is achieved, however, is far from vulgar or naive. For him *mimesis* is inseparable from the formal evolutions of style that accompany it. What matters is not so much the content, but rather the stylistic form with which the author is able to discover and, at the same time, render daily life as a dynamic and evolving, multilayered totality.

*Middlemarch*'s dialectical sentences are just such "syntactic forms," seeking a style "capable of holding together multiple levels of a complex reality" all at once, oscillating not merely at the anecdotal level between the past and the present (as was the case in the Homer), but now also between "foreground" and "background," brought together often in a single syntactic formation—not just the mingling of references to the country gentry and "belts of thicker life below,"<sup>20</sup> but also repeated references to those deeper and more abstract historical forces, or "subsurface movement[s]," producing what Jameson calls a new "secular daily life."

Eliot's experiments in both form and syntax all clearly distinguish *Middlemarch* from other novels of its period as a landmark achievement—a "mature" or even proto-modernist work of art.<sup>21</sup> The decisive shift that I want to pinpoint here is Eliot's turn away from the atomized, but also the necessarily *central*, individual of the classic European *Bildungsroman* to what is now a kind of social group, or Gestalt, in *Middlemarch*, in which we encounter a plurality of characters, each operating on the basis of her or his own imagined centrality, and in pursuit of her or his own individual aims, but locked in a kind of unconscious entanglement and competition by virtue of the "web" of their sometimes hidden, sometimes open, relationships to one another in the social totality. While *Middlemarch* preserves the individual, that all-significant category of bourgeois philosophy and political economy, that same individual is now perpetually displaced by the omniscient narrator's invocation of a system of relations so vast and dynamic as to reveal any one character's imagined centrality as a delusion bordering on the pathological: "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world," asks the narrator, "and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self."<sup>22</sup> Eliot's syntactical experiments, codified in her narrative asides, are attempts to transcend the limitations imposed by such specks of ego, and grapple with the larger process of transformation operating behind the backs of her characters.

As Elaine Freedgood observes, it seems "around 1870, the representation of the object matter of reality began to require greater authorial intervention."<sup>23</sup> At stake in Eliot's interventions is not just the re-orientation of the individual within this newly

categorized social group, but now also that of the social group within the larger totality of the world-historical process that forms it: the “subtle movement” and “less marked vicissitudes” of “Old provincial society” as it was being transformed by capitalism.<sup>24</sup> Here, her representational challenge is twofold: to grasp the totality at work and, at one and the same time, create a new novelistic idiom, or syntax, capable of sustaining the expression of that totality as it threatens to evade her representation and slip from view. This twofold representational challenge, however, becomes doubly problematic, as the more concretely the totality of this process is grasped and represented by her narrator, the more it seems to undermine the coherence of the social group itself, liquidating it and dissolving it in the flow of an on-going social-evolutionary process in which its momentary appearance must now be understood as a temporary stage which only has the appearance of internal, organic coherence. Such temporariness is identified as early as the opening paragraph of the Prelude when the narrator identifies the topic of her introductory remarks as nothing less than a meditation on “the history of man, and how that mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time.”<sup>25</sup>

Representation in *Middlemarch* thus resolves itself into antinomies, pulling its *raison d'être* in contradictory directions: on the one hand, a nationalistic and romantic representation of the British social group or “imagined community”—its *organic* continuity with a historical and traditional past; its budding modern sensibility; and its gradual, evolutionary maturation towards democratic inclusiveness and tolerance —and, on the other hand, the realist’s “cognitive mapping” of the process of industrial-capitalist transformation, which was actually dislocating community from its rural past, atomizing it into a myriad of isolated and competing individuals, and making the “imagined community” of the former a kind of necessary fiction or even fantasy.

### Thinking the Nation, Mapping Totality

For Benedict Anderson, any nation is an “imagined community.” “It is *imagined*,” he says, “because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>26</sup> The nation is an ideological construct, but necessarily so. There is no possibility of thinking the nation without some form of mediation since the modern conjuncture in which the nation form becomes the most frequent “imagined community” was one in which the historical process was driving ever more people together so that their totality—an increasingly finer and more intricate web of interrelations—was now also harder to grasp. To imagine this totality in the projected image of a *community*, however, was to imagine this totality as something holistic and, in so doing, ideologically erase the various conflicts and tensions of the new class society that dictated how most often strangers in this larger society actually confronted one another. The nation, Anderson writes, “is imagined as a *community*,



because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>27</sup>

Anderson gives both language and literary representation an enormous role in the crafting of this national imaginary of "horizontal comradeship." In particular, he argues that the rise of the novel is directly connected to its ability to grapple with and mediate the new temporality of modern social space within the nation, which has to do now with the coincidence of simultaneity rather than the teleological, unitary time of pre-secular societies: a distinction he draws via Walter Benjamin's concepts of "homogenous, empty time" and "messianic time." In the former, which it is his primary concern to elaborate, he says, "simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar."<sup>28</sup>

The characters of this new national literature are thus depicted as acting in ignorance of each other's acts, which leads them, usually by turns, to grave and unfortunate misunderstandings and accidents, and then to happy coincidences, until, at last, resolution can be achieved with some sense of realistic plausibility. However, their connection to one another, outside of these fateful encounters—which, by the time of Victorian realism, are even fewer and farther between—is largely imagined: they exist together by virtue of the fact the author has brought them together in her book and made the reader *think* them simultaneously; their lived-connection to one another is as tenuous as it is obvious, the product of an arbitrary confluence of time and space. Their simultaneous existence, however, becomes an adequate way of thinking the nation. The reader imagines their simultaneity as an allegorical vehicle for her or his own simultaneity with a national population far vaster than the repertoire of characters represented.

Thus, if on the one hand imagining the nation as *community* means excising its conflicts and tensions to imagine "a deep, horizontal comradeship," on the other hand, the representational machinery that a novel like Eliot's deploys in order to mediate these "horizontal" relationships in "homogenous, empty time" often means treating totality as something *impersonal*, bringing people together regardless of their private wills and intentions. There is therefore an internal contradiction, both ideological and, at the same time, representationally productive, in trying to imagine the nation as a community, since imagining a society of strangers as a holistic "organic community"—what Terry Eagleton defines as "the supposedly spontaneous unity of natural life-forms" and their "harmonious interdependence"<sup>29</sup>—means also, by necessity, figuring some cognate placeholder of the system of their alienation since that is the only thing that actually connects them in the new society of the modern nation. This is the famous difference and rupture between community and society, or *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, theorized by Ferdinand Tönnies. Where the "theory of *Gemeinschaft* starts from the assumption of perfect unity of human wills as an original or natural condition," "*Gesellschaft*," he says, "is to be understood as

a multitude of natural and artificial individuals, the wills and spheres of whom are in many relations with and to one another, and remain nevertheless independent of one another and devoid of mutual familiar relationships.”<sup>30</sup>

What confronts us in *Middlemarch* then—in the sheer magnitude of its pages, the complexity of its multi-plot narrative and metaphors, and, above all, in its sprawling hypotactic sentence constructions—is an attempt to “square the circle” of the new problem of the waning centrality of the individual in the everyday experience of selfhood, which attempts to preserve the individual at the cost of repositioning it within the ever-widening context of a totality that now threatens to take its place. *Middlemarch* thus constitutes a transitional stage in what Jameson has called “the construction of the bourgeois subject in emergent capitalism and its schizophrenic disintegration in our own time.”<sup>31</sup> It is in this sense that Eliot’s metaphors of the “web” of social relationships—although they eclipse and mortify the imagined centrality of any of her characters—are themselves a willed attempt to give a kind of form and content, or “cognitive mapping,” to the vast network of relations that threatens to displace them.

The scale of this new capitalist totality, however, is highly resistant to direct, unmediated representation. An exact replica of *contemporary* capital’s peregrinations, for example, could only fit on a map as large as the planet itself (especially now, given the fatal tethering of the earth-system to the social-system caused by anthropogenic climate change). Such a map would have to be viewed from outer space if it were to be viewed at all, and even then, because of its enormous size, the fine grain of its detail would be lost to the human eye. We would need state-of-the-art telescopes to zoom in on the cell of the commodity-form and its genesis in the production process. But such telescopic focusing would carry with it the unfortunate corollary of obliterating the very image of the whole for which the colossal map had been constructed in the first place. As Jameson argues, “This means that every attempt to construct a model of capitalism—for this is now what representation means in this context—will be a mixture of success and failure: some features will be foregrounded, others neglected or even misrepresented. Every representation is partial.”<sup>32</sup> For Jameson, as for Marx and, to a certain degree, Eliot, it is only dialectics that can bring together these desperate elements and points of view to create a theoretical representation of the whole, much in the same way that actually *functional* maps can never be purely *mimetic*, but instead require a certain quotient of cognitive distillation in their presentation.

This is what Jameson calls “cognitive mapping,” a process which, he says, “enable[s] a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.” Cognitive mapping is thus for Jameson neither representational nor ideological in the way that we conventionally understand those terms, since although it is both inaccurate (i.e. non-*mimetic*) and, in that sense, also false or “ideological,” cognitive mapping is nonetheless *functional*—“involves the practical reconquest of a sense of

place”—and, in so being, bears a certain relation to the reality that it negotiates. To this end, he compares it to “the great Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as ‘the representation of the subject’s *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence.’”<sup>33</sup> Cognitive mapping, for example, is how we are able not to lose our bearings in a large metropolitan city, where often knowing that an extremely visible landmark is south, and not north, will be enough to help us navigate a vast unfamiliar urban space. For Jameson, however, cognitive mapping “becomes extraordinarily suggestive when projected outward onto ... larger national and global spaces”—“in terms of the way in which we all necessarily *also* cognitively map our individual social relationship to local, national, and international class realities.”<sup>34</sup>

What this cognitive impulse maps (as the other side of any attempt to think the nation in all its arbitrary simultaneity) is thus predominately an impersonal system of relationships and historical processes—tinged, as I will show, in Eliot’s idiom with telling economic metaphors—that actually breach the imaginary boundaries of the nation and undermine the romantic content of its group identity, or “organic community,” pointing instead to a different socio-economic reality (that of increasingly globalized capitalist social relations), which is other than the “holistic” totality claimed by romantic nationalism and, more often than not, associated with a now always-already receding rural past, or *Gemeinschaft*.

### **Narrating *Gesellschaft***

For Eliot to begin *Middlemarch* as a meditation on *Gesellschaft*, however, requires her to abandon her older project of representing “the history of unfashionable families,” which had necessarily begun by taking for granted the fact of holistic community.<sup>35</sup> A society of unrecognizable individuals is after all something much different than the “knowable community”—or *Gemeinschaft*—that Raymond Williams famously identified as the romantic content of Eliot’s early fiction.<sup>36</sup> Society cannot be “knowable” in the way that community can. What connects the seemingly arbitrary cluster of individuals that comprise *Gesellschaft* must be imagined for the same reasons Anderson says the modern nation must be imagined. Where *Gemeinschaft* is easily condensed in romanticizing fictions of a receding Golden Age, any representation of *Gesellschaft* must begin with the ever-evolving here-and-now of a society that increasingly, and necessarily, understands itself also in abstract terms. It is the task of Eliot’s syntax to track down this elusive referent and body it forth in some way that will capture its totality, not in some static way, but as the convulsive motion of capitalism as an endlessly repurposing *world process*—shaping and, in so doing, changing human natures and society as a whole.

Eliot’s ingenious solution to the problem of representing the new capitalist *Gesellschaft* is to frame her representation from the beginning as a meditation on the very problem of representation itself, dramatizing the internal tension between the novel’s chosen form and content:

Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion. With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul.<sup>37</sup>

This parabolic encapsulation of the modern subject's struggle "to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement" is repeatedly characterized in this passage as a problem of matching appropriate literary form and content. For the reader, this quest for form occurs at the level of Eliot's sentences. The content of heroic longing—that desire to do right and effect change—is present and also palpable for "the ardently willing soul," but neither the form of realizing such actions nor, as the narrator confesses, *the medium for representing them* are given in advance. Eliot's long hypotactic detours thus inaugurate a prosaic search for new stylistic containers adequate to the expression of a diffuse, modern daily life that is highly resistant to literary codification. Here, the would-be hero's fruitless search for "a constant unfolding of far-resonant action" is dramatized in the very syntactic unfolding and enumeration of asymptotic approaches to the ideal of heroic action set by the Catholic reformer. These failures, however, are in themselves neither given nor certain ("*perhaps* only a life of mistakes..."; "*perhaps* a tragic failure...."). The sheer number of expanding and qualifying clauses produces in the reader a feeling already for the "tangled circumstance" and "mere inconsistency and formlessness" that beleaguers the novel's would-be Theresas from the start.

For Eliot, this new secular reality lacks a genre; its literary form is absent and must be sought instead in digressive circumlocutions—a prosaic questing after totality. As Lukács observes, it is as if "the epic had to disappear" in order to "yield its place to an entirely new form: the novel."<sup>38</sup> Like the epic, the modern novel is oriented towards a representation of totality, but a totality that can no longer be taken for granted: "All the fissures and rents which are inherent in the historical situation must be drawn into the form-giving process and cannot nor should be disguised by compositional means."<sup>39</sup> Although Eliot's ability as a writer is obviously accomplished and intentional, her hypotactic digressions suggest instead a mode of narration without stylistic precedent, scouring the unorganized materials of daily life for its own ambiguous *raison d'être*. Here, what is discovered is a lack of available *means*—"a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity"—which is then correlated, in turn, to the lack of a "coherent social faith and order" that could communicate and pinpoint the appropriate outlets for realizing such "far-

resonant action”—in other words, the *Gemeinschaft*, or “organic community,” of the pre-secular past, which could prescribe, *a priori*, meaningful and rewarding ways for her characters to contribute to the commonweal.

The narrator's metaphors associate this existential problem of vocation with the literary problem of *expression* produced by the vanishing of literary precedents: “Many Theresas have been born who found ... no *epic* life ... perhaps a *tragic* failure which found no sacred *poet* and sank unwept into oblivion.” As Hans Ulrich Seeber observes in his analysis of the novel's Prelude, “The epic is used as a metaphor to designate individuals for whom action was in fact still possible. The demise of the epic signals the transformation of society from a feudal and intensely religious to a bourgeois and partially secularized order,” in which there is “a crippling lack of generally accepted models which prevents epic action.”<sup>40</sup> Eliot's *Middlemarch* frames the problem of action—ethical and political—within the same existential coordinates of the romantic critique of modernity with which Lukács opens *The Theory of the Novel*.<sup>41</sup> There was once a time when fiction and reality formed an unity and were mutually illuminating, but now there has been a fatal disavowing of the two so that all the inherited stories of the past, even the most recent past, can only be collected as so many ancient myths to which any Casaubon-like effort to restore their meaning, and, in so doing, re-illuminate them, must inevitably fail. The remnants of the cultural past now confront us, as the ruins of Rome confront Dorothea, as “gigantic broken revelations.”<sup>42</sup> It is the prose writer's task to sort through this miscellany and find adequate reflectors of its hidden unity or totality. Hence the directionality of Eliot's hypotaxis, which seeks to assimilate and enlarge our sense of the enormous motion of History occurring in the background of the novel at any given time, impinging on both the characters' lives and the realist author herself, who must now reconcile an imperfect art form and representational vehicle with the totality of a new life world in the process of its own emergence.

### Eliot's Prose of the World

According to the narrator what impinges most on her ability to represent *Gesellschaft* are the newly felt exigencies of an increasingly complex modern spatiotemporal order: particularly the new borderless “homogenous, empty time” of industrial-capitalist modernity. Distinguishing herself from her predecessor Henry Fielding, she writes,

A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books in his history, where he seems to bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English. But Fielding

lived when the days were longer (for time, like money, is measured by our needs) when summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings.<sup>43</sup>

Here, the narrator describes Fielding's style in a manner similar to Auerbach's description of Homer's lusty hypotaxis, with its meandering progressions and retrogressions, moving alternately backwards and forwards within the diegetic space-time of the epic storyworld. For Auerbach all these oscillations occur in the classic epic without producing narrative suspense or impatience. The same is true for Fielding's reader, who is imagined in Eliot's characterization as a rapt and patient listener, taking in the "lusty easy" of the chatty author's "fine English." The first sentence in the above passage, with its exponentiating clauses, produces in the reader a sense of the self-fashioned historian's capacious style, resembling a "colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under." The next sentence, however, abruptly shifts gears. The historical conditions under which the present author produces her narrative have changed irrevocably from those of "a hundred and twenty years ago." No longer is there time, as now "time, like money, is measured by our needs," for the chronicler of the past (novelist and historian forming an unproblematic unity for Fielding) to "bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us." And, in any case, the narrator asserts, the totality of what must be captured by the chronicler is now too vast and complicated for such a meandering approach to succeed: "We belated historians must not linger after his example.... I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe."<sup>44</sup>

The historically sensitive novelist must focus her attention instead on a "particular web," or cross-section, within the larger pattern of cosmic "relevancies," which are now too large for full description and "lusty ease" of narration. Instead the narrator is forced to jump back and forth dialectically from one center of consciousness to another and thus across different narrative threads, often in a single sentence "zooming" in and out, as it were, on the various webs of connection that would seem to connect these different centers of consciousness, but which cannot, because of a kind of cognitive parallax, be seen when we focus only on one character at a time.

The literary artist's compromise, though, is not just one between syntactical experimentation and conformity, but also between the ends and means of her representation whose object—the process of historical transformation itself—now *needs* more time to elaborate than the social history to which her literary predecessor had confined himself, for once again "time, like money is measured by our needs." Here, as always, Eliot's reference to money is a pointed one, which gives the comparative analogy a whole new index of meaning, whereby the enlargement of monetary needs brought about by the Enclosure Acts and the subsequent dissolution and subsumption

of the old self-subsisting agrarian communities into the ranks of the proletariat (which her novel prophesies with the coming of the railroad) is therefore concomitant, if not in some way actually identical, with the formation of the hourly wage which erodes the leisure time that Fielding's narrator could enjoy "when summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings." This comment is made bitterly ironic when we note that that once slow-ticking clock, which will now be used to calculate the periods of necessary and surplus labor time in the working day, not to mention Benjamin's and Anderson's "homogenous, empty time" of the modern nation, was manufactured early on in Eliot's native Coventry, which she took as the basis for her representation of provincial life in *Middlemarch*.<sup>45</sup>

What should be concluded from all this then is that, far from being a *more* economical method of representation than Fielding's, as this passage would seem to suggest on first glance, Eliot's dense comparative analogies and complicated syntax actually forestall and delay the very object they are put in the service of conveying—historical transformation—so as to multiply indexes of meaning that dramatize on an ever larger scale a more *total* depiction of that historical process in motion, which any one cross-section in the web of her narrative events can be made into an opportunity for her sentences to elaborate. The period between the switch in narrative requirements and protocols described by the narrator is thus also the period in which the historical transformations of Middlemarch-society are slowly, as the narrator says in a passage to be analyzed later, "presenting new aspects in spite of solidity."<sup>46</sup>

### **Third-Space, or, The World in a Water Drop**

The social totality it seems can only be reached in this roundabout way, by constant recourse to such closed examples and comparisons (such as the one between her method of representation and Fielding's), which provide the narrator with convenient models for discussing the hypothesized characteristics of the larger social transformation that she wants to take as the primary object of her novel's representation, but which she cannot access directly. These narrative asides seek out metaphors that project a kind of third-space between the narrator and the object of her representation—an abstract, or virtual plane, sustained by the author's hypotactically expanding syntax, whose exponentiating clauses gesture to multiple levels of meaning and significance all within a few sprawling sentences. However, as the invocation of this comparative third-space starts to slip from the narrator's view, the narrator relates it back to the absent-present force of History, allowing the reader to associate the shape and feel of the sentence itself with those abstract, multilayered forces (social, political, and economic) bearing down on both her characters and her own narrative strategies. Such third-spaces provide a placeholder for the more properly collective drama of the historical narrative Eliot wants to tell, but which the novel, as an inherited form with a strong predilection for individual over collective drama, is ill equipped to represent even when it adds more characters to the mix.

Instead the random materials of everyday life, which, as Anderson argued, had once adequately allegorized the nation, must now—if they are to continue reflecting back to the reader an image of his or her own spatiotemporal reality—cognitively map, or somehow metaphorically vehiculate, a spatial, temporal, and economic relationship to a larger totality, which, already by the time of the novel's composition and what will soon become the imperialist “scramble for Africa,” must now extend beyond the metropolis to unobserved regions of the globe.

For Jameson, it is the discovery of “modernist or proto-modernist language”—for example that of a Henry James or Virginia Woolf, whose circumlocutions trace the body of some vague abstraction bearing down on their characters and frustrating linguistic expression—that at last affords the literary artist “some space, some third term, between the subject and the object alike” that can mediate the lost part of the metropolis's life world: that whole segment of the process of production now located elsewhere. Eliot's sentences are precisely those, then, of a prefigurative proto-modernism, mapping, by hypotactic additions and metaphoric redoubling, the totality of a social body already on the verge of impenetrable global diffuseness.<sup>47</sup>

In her effort to capture this totality, Eliot turns even the most obscure actions or chance events in the plot into renewed opportunities for her syntactic inventions to project images of interrelationship, which have the accumulative effect of attributing more and more agency to the system of relationships itself than to any of the parties involved. *Middlemarch* is not then, as Williams would have it in *The Country and the City*, “a novel of a single community.”<sup>48</sup> It is rather “a novel of a single community” set against the backdrop of some vast “web” of social relationships, extending far beyond the lives of any one of the novel's cast of characters, who are nonetheless at times made to “stand in” inadequately for this larger social process in formation, which we only glimpse here and there in the narrator's omniscient asides.

This is especially the case whenever the topic is that of historical transformation itself, as in the famous passage about “the double change in self and beholder”:

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rock firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder.<sup>49</sup>



Omniscient asides, like this one, force into view an image of the flow of History as it goes on behind the backs of the novel's characters, shaping them and the horizon of their choices without their knowing. The artist's struggle is to find an appropriate method of telling this dual narrative, of dramatizing at the level of the sentence the egoism of any one character and at the same time the flow of history to which their egoism blinds them. The recurring method is to turn "old provincial society"—in other words, Middlemarch and its surrounding neighborhoods—into an impersonal organism with its own "subtle movements" and "less marked vicissitudes," which can then be foregrounded for lengthy descriptions and analyses put in motion by Eliot's dialectically expanding hypotaxis. These small but significant changes are apprehended, as I will show in a moment, by a metaphorical switching back and forth between "weaker" and "stronger" lenses of microscopic inspection, the first focusing, we could say, on the level of character and plot—the ethical domain of choice and action—and the second on spatiotemporal setting, which, when magnified to such a degree by the narrator, is revealed, as if in the flash of some new scientific discovery, as the very process of History itself.

The fabric of this totality is thus one, as the above passage already makes clear, of perpetual weaving and unweaving, of various rises and falls in economic fortunes, some happy and others tragic, which are perpetually shaping and reshaping "the boundaries of the social intercourse." Eliot's sentences, however, add to these images of the simultaneous rise and fall shades of the dialectic whereby the quantity of changes enumerated begin to suggest a qualitative transformation in the social fabric as a whole, which marks, at least figuratively speaking, the advancement of History in the novel, "begetting new consciousness of interdependence":

Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection—gradually, as the old stocking gave way to the savings-bank, and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct, while squires and baronets, and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gather the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship. Settlers, too, came from distant counties, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage in cunning.<sup>50</sup>

What is especially poignant about this passage is that it demonstrates that the problem of representing the totality of capitalist relations—capitalism here being the absent-present force driving down the esteem of the aristocracy in the eyes of the rising bourgeoisie, transforming individual savings into finance capital, leading to the extinction of the "solar guinea" with the introduction of the sovereign, and driving more and more people into urban centers—is not a representational problem that is freely chosen, but one that asserts itself at the very level of the sentence itself, particularly in the artist's attempt marshal all this material towards the development

a realist aesthetic capable of managing (and, to a certain degree, resolving by way of some form of ideological closure) the paradoxical nature of capitalism, which, by creating an ever more tightly knit fabric of social relationships, makes relation itself ever more subtle and therefore harder to detect.

These projected images of Gestalt-being that flicker in Eliot's hypotactically expanding syntax, frequently mix metaphors borrowed from the laboratory experiments of the sciences, which encourage us to think of the transformations of Middlemarch society as part of a larger (and, for Eliot, *gradual*) social evolutionary process embedded in nature. When, for example, the rector's wife and town gossip Mrs. Cadwallader surprises Sir James Chettam with the news of Dorothea's engagement to Casaubon, instead of merely interjecting to tell us that Mrs. Cadwallader intended no malice beyond her customary pursuit of gossip, the narrator digresses in what becomes one of the novel's most potent metaphors of Gestalt-being that points as much towards an implied natural history of human relations as, by way of a dialectical cancellation and elevation of the original metaphor, to a social and economic history of the same:

Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs Cadwallader's matchmaking will show a ply of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed.<sup>51</sup>

Here, the narrator's allusion to the mini-world of the water drop and the living organisms it contains—while on the surface a metaphorical way of explaining Mrs Cadwallader's relative innocence within the larger machinations of the novel's plot which she nonetheless puts in motion—deploys a repertoire of dialectical maneuvers, which herald ever more extraneous content into the structure of one mammoth sentence, pointing, as this material accrues, well beyond the closed world of the water drop. The initial metaphor of this microscopic world—which originally linked the social sphere of the gossip to that of a predatory organism passively contributing to the kill-or-be-killed law of nature by the simple virtue of its inherited traits—is then expanded and re-grounded by the narrator's reference to “so many animated tax-pennies” and the “receipt of custom,” which point now to both economic and historical indexes of meaning whereby the circulation of gossip that the organisms' interrelationship was meant to convey is likened also to the circulation of tax money

(and therefore also that other side of taxation: the flow of capital) as well as the passing down of custom, by which any system, natural or economic, also comes to be “naturalized” and thought of, however mistakenly, as just the kind of closed natural organism being metaphorically examined here.

Such a metaphor operates dialectically then, turning the initial tenor—gossip—first into an opportunity for a meditation on the natural world and then, in due course, into an opportunity for the narrator to discuss the secret machinations of the natural organism under “a stronger lens” *as if* they might vehiculate—or *animate* like so many “animated tax-pennies”—the social and economic totality as well. For a moment, the contained, and particular, world of the water drop is elevated to the categorical position of the universal—the totality itself—only for that register of meaning to pass from view as the sentence dialectically reverses back to its original “motivation of the device,” which was Sir Chettam’s discovery of Dorothea’s engagement to Casaubon through Mrs. Cadwallader.

The metaphor’s momentary reflection of the social totality thus dramatizes its own impossibility. First with the warning against “coarse” interpretations—of which Eliot’s own metaphor, by the force of its sheer expansiveness and totalizing nature, is surely one—and then again, this time more pointedly, by the narrator’s deployment of an “as if” qualification, which deprives the metaphor of its would-be copular yoking of vehicle to tenor, transforming it instead into a mere similitude that can only allude to the thing to which it is compared by establishing this “third-space” between the subject and the object of its definition by way of a third term, which it is neither/nor. This third term—the contained world of the water drop—thus offers neither a wholly accurate nor necessarily imprecise representation of either the social world of gossip or money, but, in both instances, something somewhere in between, which hovers into view only for the duration it takes to read the sentence. For although we are confident that *Middlemarch*’s characters remain living parts of Eliot’s storyworld even when the narrator forgets them, analogies to water drops and later to pier-glasses are references to objects outside of the diegetic space of the novel and therefore survive only for the length of time that the author chooses to entertain them, vanishing all at once if not picked up again in the next sentence or even phrase.

As Catherine Gallagher notes, “The subtlety of such movements among referential levels, together with their frequency and seeming candor, the softening and hardening from instances to generalities and back again, reassures the reader that *this* fiction is always connected to the stuff of the real.”<sup>52</sup> Gallagher, however, goes on to make a muddle of Eliot’s representational strategies and dialectical syntax, insisting that, because the relationship between the real and the fictive in *Middlemarch* is always asymptotic (i.e., never converging), Eliot only uses such comparisons to highlight the fictive singularity of her text, as it once again “slides” giddily away from the real.<sup>53</sup> It is a mistake, however, to attribute to Eliot, as a result of the description of her own representational strategies as provisional (at best approximate and at

worst inadequate), some kind of poststructuralist skepticism or giddy freeplay, which would evacuate the text's conceptual machinery of any cognitive purchase on reality.<sup>54</sup> Eliot's dialectical tropes are better thought of instead as closed models meant, if not to convey the ever elusive thing-in-itself (the totality), then at least the condensation of its characteristics, which here is the very movement of the dialectic in both its natural and historical manifestations, represented as much by those "certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for [their] victims" as by the very shape and feel of the sentence itself, which its own metaphorical terminology seems as apt to describe as anything else.<sup>55</sup>

### Circulation and Sublime Labor

It is worth recalling here Marx's comments in the *Grundrisse* about the important role that conceptual models of circulation play in mapping totality from a trans-individual perspective: "Circulation, because a totality of the social process," he says, "is also the first form in which the social relation appears as something independent of the individuals, but not only as, say, in a coin or in exchange value ["so many animated tax-pennies"!], but extending to the whole of the social movement itself."<sup>56</sup> *Middlemarch's* deployment of such metaphorical models of circulation thus achieves for Eliot the properly non-individual plane of the sociological system in which she wants to place the drama of *Middlemarch*, to which she significantly adds the more sociological subtitle, *A Study of Provincial Life*.

The unfettered movement of Eliot's metaphoric "hairlets which make vortices for [their] victims," which furnish the novel with its first conceptual model of a trans-individual circulation system, acquires even greater specificity, when echoed later in the novel's figuration of the encroaching railroad (that strong signifier of capitalist development and harbinger of technological modernity) as the very force and pull of History itself:

As [Caleb Garth] said, "Business breeds." And one form of business which was beginning to breed just then was the construction of railways. A projected line was to run through Lowick parish where the cattle had hitherto grazed in a peace unbroken by astonishment; and thus it happened that the infant struggles of the railway system entered into the affairs of Caleb Garth, and determined the course of this history with regard to two persons who were dear to him.<sup>57</sup>

What business breeds, it is hoped of course, is more business, that is, more surplus value or capital, which must then be reinvested in technological innovations like the railway that will expand and support the circulatory system Marx calls Money-Commodity-Money', or M-C-M'—"where  $M' = M + \Delta M$ , i.e. the original sum advanced plus an increment," such that "[m]ore money is finally withdrawn from circulation

than was thrown into it at the beginning.”<sup>58</sup>

Although Eliot's narrator limits the determining-force of the railway here to “two persons who were dear to him,” Caleb Garth later invokes the technological expansion of the circulatory system as a process ineluctably pulling the entire collective being, including those not so “dear,” into the force field of capital's expanded scale of reproduction. When he and Fred Vincy surprise some enraged agricultural workers, who have set about destroying the railroad tracks that signify a threat to their way of life, he is exasperated by what he can only interpret as their backwardness: “Now, my lads,” he says, “you can't hinder the railroad: it will be made whether you like it or not. And if you go fighting against it, you'll get yourselves into trouble.”<sup>59</sup> The contradiction in Garth's naturalization of development, however, is inescapable: technological expansion is both ineluctable—“you can't hinder the railroad”—but also protected by law, and so not really in the end inevitable, but simply the logic of a certain mode of production legally protected from external impediments, be it the current division of land, machine-breaking, or rick-burning. These, coincidentally, are all legal protections close to the heart of the self-fashioned “progressive” and would-be liberal parliamentarian Mr. Brooke, who proclaims on the hustings (with the dramatic irony of one who exaggerates for rhetorical effect not knowing that history will prove his exaggerations right, but not necessarily in the way imagined): “It won't do, you know, breaking machines, everything must go on—trade, manufactures, commerce, interchange of staples—that kind of thing—since Adam Smith, that must go on. We must look all over the globe.”<sup>60</sup>

The railway—as both a concrete thing and also the marker of some larger system—is a properly “sublime object” insofar as for Immanuel Kant, Nicholas Brown reminds us, “The sublime ... requires the capacity to recognize that the sublime object is conceptually totalizable—in fact, it positively requires that we do so totalize it—at the same time as we fail to totalize it aesthetically,” since what is ostensibly condensed in that object must also surpass it in order to produce that emotion called the sublime.<sup>61</sup> The railroad thus serves as a local and concrete manifestation of industrialization and capitalist development within the closed world of *Middlemarch*, but also conveys the global march of capital's circulation prophesied by Mr. Brooke with more prescience than he would have guessed. It is in this sense, as with the microscopic world of the water drop previously discussed, that the title *Middlemarch* names, at one and the same time, a specific site and location in the “web,” or totality, of those relationships that Eliot wants to represent and a closed laboratory experiment in which the characteristics of the totality as a whole will be hypothesized, examined, and then, by the permutations of Eliot's dialectical sentences, sublimed.<sup>62</sup>

The sublime for Eliot, however, is no longer as it was for Kant merely the mind's self-satisfaction with its ability to grapple with totality through the concept of infinity.<sup>63</sup> That self-satisfaction, where it can be found, no longer pertains to the apprehension of one's own mental capacity to think the totality, but instead must

now also involve the apprehension of the “social body” that has created totality *as the concrete product of its own embodied labor*. The aesthetic qualities of the sublime thus become for Eliot a way of evoking the totality of relationships behind whatever object serves momentarily as their temporary placeholder; it is this same “social body” that is the elusive referent allegorized by the novel’s the various figures of circulation, which, often working in tandem with Eliot’s sublime objects, are deployed and then put in motion by Eliot’s dialectical and hypotactically expanding syntax.

In Caleb Garth’s “mental associations,” this becomes the circulation of labor itself—what Marx calls “human labour in the abstract”.<sup>64</sup>

Caleb Garth often shook his head in meditation on the value, the indispensable might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labour by which the social body is fed, clothed, and housed. It had laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shouts of the workmen, the roar of the furnace, the thunder and splash of the engine, were a sublime music to him; the felling and lading of timber, and the huge trunk vibrating star-like in the distance along the highway, the crane at work on the wharf, the piled-up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact work had to be turned out—all these sights of his youth had acted on him as poetry without the aid of the poet, had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. His early ambition had been to have as effective a share as possible in this sublime labour, which was peculiarly dignified by him with the name of “business.”<sup>65</sup>

*Sublime labour*: what is grasped here is not just individual labor, but a continuous, abstract labor, which circulates throughout these various scenes of work-a-day existence assimilated and arranged in the large middle sentence. Here, each instance of labor is connected to the next, forming an equal part of one sublime totality put on par by Caleb’s musings with the category of the Absolute in Romantic poetry, the Ideal in philosophy, and God in Christianity. But at a more practical level, what is being observed and assimilated here is merely labor in the process of being “congealed,” to use Marx’s metaphor, in the development of the various machinery of the increasingly cooperative production of industrial capitalism and the “piled-up produce in warehouses” that is its ultimate result. “Let us now look at the residue of the products of labour,” says Marx: “There is nothing left of them in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity.”<sup>66</sup> The commodity, for those who are willing to contemplate its “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” raises the specter of a sublimely abstracted labor, bestowing upon its commodities a “phantom-like objectivity,” as so many “merely congealed quantities of homogenous human labour, i.e. of human

labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure.”<sup>67</sup> What is lacking from Garth's romantic vision of this “sublime labour,” however, is precisely the image of those “hairlets which make vortices for [their] victims,” deployed in the earlier passage, which here would have had to vehiculate the force of capital itself as “the swallower [who now] waits passively at his receipt of custom”—the surplus value generated by the worker—when all that congealed labor is incorporated back into the circulation of MCM' via exchange value. Such exploitation is glimpsed only briefly in Mrs. Cadwallader's implicit comparison of Mr. Vincy to a vampire (“one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family look so fair and sleek” [*M* 327]) and in Caleb's final bathetic reduction of this whole sublime process of production to the name of “business,” which, as Alan Mintz reminds us, means simply “the replacement of labour value by money value.”<sup>68</sup>

So, while Eliot's dialectical sentences mirror rather perfectly the voracious appetite of capital as it was pulling ever more raw material and people within its grasp and repurposing them—“axiomizing” them as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would say—and in the process transforming the social fabric of “old provincial society,” Eliot's syntactical mediation of the socially and globally transformative power of capitalist accumulation does not give any representation of the actual class antagonisms driving that process, especially in her native Coventry which, as already noted, she took as the basis for her representation in *Middlemarch*. On the side of labor, we glimpse these class conflicts only briefly in the shadowy figures of the agricultural workers protesting their assimilation (such as those caught by Caleb and Fred Vincy sabotaging the railway) and in the angry cottager Dagley, who drunkenly tells his landlord Mr. Brooke, “look to yoursen, afore the Rinform has got upo' your back,” when the latter comes to tell Dagley that he has locked up his son for poaching a leveret on his land.<sup>69</sup> These, however, are figures caught in the crosshairs of the transformative process which Eliot's syntax seeks to give shape and feeling. They would not have particular relevance to the Coventry that the industrial revolution was producing. As social historian John M. Prest writes,

In 1830 Coventry still epitomized the old order, in which there were many ranks and conditions of men within a single, homogeneous society. But Coventry could not stand still while England moved, in the end Coventry succumbed to the standards of the nineteenth century all the more painfully for her long resistance to them. By 1865 the old, compact, ordered society of 1830 had broken up: in its place were the pieces, labelled capital and labour. There was an increased awareness of class, less deference to birth, and business was conducted on the principle of individual interest without reference to the feelings of the community.<sup>70</sup>

What we get instead is the syntactical image of the evolving *totality*, both microcosmic

and macrocosmic, but there are no longer in *Middlemarch* any “ideal types,” or “world-historical” figures representing the major forces and movements of their historical period, which Lukács had famously identified with European realism prior to 1848; this is because Eliot has found a new language in which she is able to express these movements and forces, albeit metaphorically, in all their non-humanness, which after all is how capitalism was most often coming to be felt.

### Low Expectations

“The irony of *Middlemarch*,” writes Eagleton, “is that it is a triumph of aesthetic totalisation deeply suspicious of ideological totalities,” particularly those propagated by her characters.<sup>71</sup> The inevitable failure of their endeavors to grapple cognitively with totality is most explicitly dramatized by Casaubon’s doomed search for “the key to all mythologies”—“he had undertaken to show ... that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed”—and Lydgate’s unrealized scientific quest for “the primitive tissue” of all organic beings.<sup>72</sup> The problem as Eliot’s omniscient narrator carefully puts it is that, while “[s]igns are small measurable things, ... interpretations [of those signs] are illimitable”; “all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors and act fatally on the strength of them”.<sup>73</sup>

For Eliot this cognitive failure is “part and parcel” with what becomes the novel’s coded prohibition against its characters’ reformist ambitions. For if the social totality cannot be comprehended, even in some partial, mediated way (ironically the very method adopted by the narrator), then it is equally impossible, the novel suggests, to intervene in that totality and reform or revolutionize it according to a conscious plan or project. This is a lesson that the novel’s idealistic characters—its would-be Therasas—can only learn through their own trial and error. Dorothea, for example, toys with the idea of setting up a worker’s colony that will improve the living conditions of the working poor. Lydgate and Casaubon, for their part, seek reforms in the respective fields of medical science and mythography. Even Mr. Brooke, with the help of Ladislav, stands for parliament as a reformer. Each of them, however, comes to discover that their ambitions are impractical. The totality of the issues they seek to address with their pet projects prove beyond their mastery, due as much to a lack of skill as to what the narrator suggests over and over again is the complex historical intractability of the social-evolutionary arc itself, which will move at its own chosen pace. As Seeber notes, a “shadow of melancholy failure looms large over Utopian attitudes and projects” in the novel once the latter are “exposed to the complexities of ‘real’ life.”<sup>74</sup> For this reason, he says, “In the course of his or her life the hero or heroine acquires maturity and satisfaction by an act of renunciation, by partly making peace with society,” rather than trying to transform it.<sup>75</sup>

For the younger characters, Dorothea, Lydgate, and Ladislav, this is a decision reinforced by pecuniary necessity. It is significant that the only character who turns



out better that he had seemed to promise ("no such failure" in the narrator's words) is Fred Vincy, who drops his pseudo-aristocratic pretensions to become "a theoretic and practical farmer," producing "a work on the 'Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-Feeding' which won him high congratulations at agricultural meetings."<sup>76</sup> Vincy presciently, even if somewhat pathetically, bends his skills and intelligence to the rationalizing economic spirit governing the very process of capitalist transformation in which the whole of Middlemarch society is caught up and in so doing creates a modicum of stability for himself.

What we are made to feel, then, in Eliot's syntactical flashes of this social totality is that the organization of society is such that revolutionary or even reformist goals are implausible and out of sync with the reality that confronts them. As Williams observes in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, Eliot's characters by the time we get to *Middlemarch* no longer exist in tidy "networked" communities like Hayslope, but find themselves instead enmeshed in a conflicting web, or social tangle, that expresses not so much community as its very point of crisis:

The network, we might say, connects; the web, the tangle, disturbs and obscures. To discover a network, to feel human connection in what is essentially a knowable community, is to assert ... a particular social value: a necessary interdependence. But to discover a web or a tangle is to see human relationships as not only involving but compromising, limiting, mutually frustrating. And this is of course a radically different consciousness: what is ... a modern consciousness; in fact the first phase of a post-liberal world: a period between cultures, in which the old confidence of individual liberation has gone and the commitment to social liberation has not yet been made.<sup>77</sup>

Eliot's manages this historical feeling of disappointment in the individual's ability to affect social change with the invention of an omniscient, controlling narrator, who intrudes to eke didactic—"mature"—lessons out of the failure and shortsightedness of such utopian longing. In so doing, Eliot reconciles the contradictory poles of her representation, arguing that a romantic national continuity with the past and the natural evolution of the group to a mature democratic inclusiveness and tolerance must be won largely by submitting to the impersonal movement of the social totality, and making small preparatory modifications to one's behavior: "the growing good of the world," as the narrator concludes, "is partly dependent on *unhistoric* acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."<sup>78</sup> No sooner is the march of History conjured, than its image is transformed from a sublime one into a bathetic one, as the narrator intrudes again to caution against anything that seeks to go beyond a dutiful submission to History's will and *telos* (which, it is worth

remembering, was also Eliot's excuse for not supporting female suffrage: *the time had not come*).

It is thus in the space between the historical past and her own present that the narrator's "maturity"—as a "structure of feeling"—begins to take shape, often in the form of a kind of "saying" or sententious expression of wisdom, syntactically expressed in such a way that bars refusal. "[L]ife must be taken up on a lower stage of expectation, as it is by men who have lost their limbs," says the narrator. The specific context is Lydgate's realization that if his marriage to Rosamond is going to survive its various tensions and disappointments, then "the tender devotedness and docile adoration of the ideal wife must be renounced."<sup>79</sup> But the "saying," the *wisdom* proffered by the narrator, comes at the end of the sentence and is therefore both detached and *detachable*, aspiring to a level of generality that seeks to surpass and transcend the context that had seemingly inspired it, but which now appears as a mere "motivation of the device." Not just marriage, but *life in general* "must be taken up on a lower stage of expectation."

For Isobel Armstrong, Eliot's "sayings," which "emerge from the narrative with a delicate, oracular dogmatism," create so many "bridges, not between our world and the world of the novel"—which, she says, would typically be the purposes of such omniscient asides in the Victorian novel—"but between the world of the novel and *our world*, for ... George Eliot's procedure depends upon the constant corroboration and assent of the reader to her sayings."<sup>80</sup> To this, it should be added that the bridge she creates is also between our past (real or imagined) and our present, a bridge which is then *effectively collapsed*. For if what was true in the past holds also for the present, there are no longer any new lessons to be learned. Such a "structure of feeling," captured and condensed in these "sayings," can best be summarized as the elevation of the fact of a historical disappointment, of desire *delayed*, into an eternalized ontological present.<sup>81</sup> The end result is the chastening of any revolutionary or reformist enthusiasm in her characters or reader.

The novel's utopian impulse seeks its gratification not *within* the field of representation, in plot and action, but *over them*, in the mastering of the materials of representation and in the representation itself, in that sententious omniscience, at once stylish and precise in its description of both objective and subjective worlds—"a control, precisely, based on sad resignation," Williams says, "a maturity constructed as that exact feeling"<sup>82</sup>—with which the narrator can tell us that "all of us are born in moral stupidity" and make us feel that individual *enlightenment*, if it ever comes, will only be for those already too world-weary to act.<sup>83</sup> As Franco Moretti argues:

in Eliot's novels the representative of humour and maturity is—the narrator. ... [M]aturity is no longer within the story, but only in the disembodied universe of discourse. And the relationship between the two levels of the text is inversely proportional: the more devastating the

characters' failure, the more impressive the narrator's self-mastery. It is the discontinuity between maturity and life that is stressed here, not their amalgam. ... [M]aturity is no longer entrusted to "actions"....<sup>84</sup>

The imagined community in *Middlemarch* is one that by 1871, in order to be believable, has to project a certain proneness to error onto the field of action, which the novel's metaphoric and syntactical codification of the social totality suggests has been usurped by a seemingly ineluctable process of production that is beginning to circumscribe the globe. Influenced by the gradualism of Darwinian evolutionary theory, with its emphasis on the slow process of variation through the "natural selection" of accidental traits over time, Eliot turns her realism into both an aesthetic and ethic: for the narrator, there are no grand narratives of progress and thus also no *realistic* utopian projects; all that matters is that we embrace our limited options and weigh our decisions thoughtfully, all while accepting that whatever success we do achieve will always be partial. The pragmatism of such pessimism is as admirable as it is without illusions; but it is also symptomatic of a bourgeois culture and liberal ideology of progress that no longer has any confidence in its own superiority. There are no longer any "great expectations," or for that matter "lost illusions." The more the fabric of the totality that binds these disparate actors together in their isolation is glimpsed and given some form of stylistic and syntactical mediation, the more closed and suffocating it seems, the more such hopes for large-scale reconciliation or transformation are expressed now from the beginning with low expectations: "Many Theresas have been born who found no epic life." In lieu of such a life, Eliot gives us not just a new kind of novel, but a new kind of prose.

## Notes

1. Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Editions* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 1041.
2. Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007) 158.
3. James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers* 1041.
4. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (London: Abacus, 1975) 64.
5. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* 88.
6. Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977) 31.
7. Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006) 2-3. To be clear, a *non-mimetic* theory of representation is not the same thing as a *non-referential* theory of representation (latter of which would be an oxymoron).
8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin—*New Left Review*, 1976) 1058-59.
9. Despite accusations of "vulgar" Marxism, it is important to preserve the metaphor of the mirror (i.e. reflection), as more so than other metaphors it firmly establishes the idea of a confluence between objective and subjective "worlds," social-historical reality and the artwork—a confluence which, far from being abstract, is rooted in everyday experience and the natural phenomenon of human perception. For a productive (if somewhat speculative) attempt to preserve and complicate the metaphor of the mirror, see Pierre Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy," *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffery Wall (London: Routledge, 2006) 117-51.
10. I am inspired here by Fredric Jameson's analysis of Theodor W. Adorno's sentences, "in which the actual machinery of sentence structure is itself pressed into service, in all its endless variety, and mobilized to convey meaning far beyond its immediate content as mere communication and denotation." Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990) 64.
11. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1971) 67, 56.
12. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Commentary on Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011) 7.
13. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* 60.
14. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation or Reality in Western Literature*, fiftieth-anniversary edition, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003) 6-7.
15. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation or Reality* 7.
16. *Mimesis: The Representation or Reality* 11-12.
17. *Mimesis: The Representation or Reality* 42-43.
18. *Mimesis: The Representation or Reality* 44.
19. Fredric Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) 3-4.
20. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994) 326.
21. Franco Moretti goes so far as to proclaim in his influential study of the European *Bildungsroman*: "George Eliot...and everything changes" — "so far, in fact, as to bring this genre to its natural conclusion." Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, new ed., trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000) 214.
22. Eliot, *Middlemarch* 418-419

23. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2006) 115.
24. *Middlemarch* 96
25. *Middlemarch* 3
26. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006) 6.
27. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 7.
28. *Imagined Communities* 24.
29. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 2006) 103.
30. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, trans. Charles P. Loomis, ed. Charles P. Loomis (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002) 37, 76.
31. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981) 12.
32. Jameson, *Representing Capital* 6. I am thus unable to agree with Louis Althusser's sentiment that a "theory of models" is alien to Marxist epistemology, and merely an empiricist fetish, what he calls an "ideology of knowledge." Louis Althusser et al., *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015) 39, 39n14.
33. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 51.
34. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 51-52. Here, Jameson specifically invokes his concept of "cognitive mapping" to describe a whole "new (and hypothetical) cultural form" yet to be seen. However, looking over Jameson's work as a whole, it is clear that he also associates the impulse to map cognitively with the "ideal of realism (traditionally in one form or another the central model of Marxist aesthetics as a narrative discourse which unites the experience of daily life with a properly cognitive, mapping, or well-nigh 'scientific' perspective)." Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 104. His call in *Postmodernism* is thus, in some respects, merely for a realism appropriate for the new era of global, multi-national capitalism, which will preserve and evolve the cognitive impulse of the older realist tradition.
35. George Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1979) 305.
36. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973) 65.
37. *Middlemarch* 3
38. *The Theory of the Novel* 41.
39. *The Theory of the Novel* 60.
40. Hans Ulrich Seeber, "Utopian Mentality in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871/72) and in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915)," *Utopian Studies* 6.1 (1995): 33.
41. "Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own." However, "Kant's starry firmament now shines only in the dark night of pure cognition, it no longer lights any solitary wanderer's path...No light radiates any longer from within into the world of events, into its vast complexity to which the soul is a stranger. And who can tell...the fitness of the action to the nature of the subject." *The Theory of the Novel* 29, 36.
42. *Middlemarch* 193
43. *Middlemarch* 141

44. *Middlemarch* 141
45. For a discussion of Coventry's early watchmakers and the importance of the clock to industrial work-discipline, see E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 66 and *passim*.
46. *Middlemarch* 96
47. Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 159-60.
48. Williams, *The Country and the City* 174.
49. *Middlemarch* 96
50. *Middlemarch* 96
51. *Middlemarch* 59-60
52. Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90.1 (2005): 63.
53. Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian" 65. Having bracketed the real by reducing it to a straw-man typicality from which the fictive text swerves away in its fictive particularity, Gallagher can only reinvest the work with meaning by making it about of the process of reading itself: "Eliot uses the gap between type and instance to create a momentum, an impulse toward the prosaic that is indistinguishable from the desire to read a fiction." "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian" 68.
54. For an interpretation in this vein, see J. Hillis Miller's influential "Narrative and History," *ELH* 41.3 (1973): 455-73.
55. Freedgood for her part compares this alienation of objects from their extra-diegetic (non-fictional) existence and their subsequent elevation into metaphors with *non-literal* meanings to what Marx calls "commodity fetishism," whereby exchange-value (i.e. fungibility of commoditized objects with other monetized objects) occludes their multifaceted connection to both production and the natural environment from which their raw materials are drawn. Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things* 111-138. I am willing to agree with Freedgood up to the point of her association of metaphor with "commodity fetishism." Eliot's narrator undoubtedly picks up and puts down objects stripped of their natural and social relationships, and this is no doubt a symptom of the increasingly reified space of Victorian consumer society. However, the metaphorization of these objects works with varying success to retrieve for reflection some image, or cognitive mapping, of the social whole from which the objects had been abstracted in the first place.
56. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin—*New Left Review*, 1973) 196-97.
57. *Middlemarch* 553
58. Karl Marx, *Capital* 251.
59. *Middlemarch* 559
60. *Middlemarch* 504
61. Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005) 17.
62. For a much different analysis of Eliot's syntactical construction of the sublime, see Neil Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), which eschews the Kantian moment of cognitive totalization, emphasizing instead the experience of engulfment and subjective dissolution that defines the Romantic sublime.
63. For Kant's discussion of the conceptualization of totality through infinity, see *Critique of Judgment*, trans.

- Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 106.
64. *Capital* 128.
  65. *Middlemarch* 250-251
  66. *Capital* 128.
  67. *Capital* 163, 128.
  68. Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978) 136.
  69. *Middlemarch* 397
  70. John M. Prest, *The Industrial Revolution in Coventry* (London: Oxford UP, 1960) xi.
  71. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* 119.
  72. *Middlemarch* 24, 148
  73. *Middlemarch* 25, 84-85
  74. Seeber "Utopian Mentality in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*" 35, 31.
  75. "Utopian Mentality in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*" 36.
  76. *Middlemarch* 832
  77. Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: The Hogarth P, 1970), 88.
  78. *Middlemarch* 838, emphasis mine
  79. *Middlemarch* 652
  80. Isobel Armstrong, "'Middlemarch': A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom,'" *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 116, 118.
  81. The tendency of the developmental arc of the realist novel to dissolve itself into an eternalized ontology of the present is examined exhaustively in Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), which contains a chapter on Eliot.
  82. *The Country and the City* 173.
  83. *Middlemarch* 194
  84. Moretti, *The Way of the World* 222.





## **Country and City in the Proletarian Realist Novel: Kang Kyŏng-ae's *From Wŏnso Pond* and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy***

Jacob Sloan

Of course, nothing would circulate inwardly either if the outward were completely solid. Outside, however, life is just as little finished as in the ego which is working on this outside. No thing could be altered in accordance with wishes if the world were closed, full of fixed, even perfected facts. Instead of these there are simply processes...The Real is process; the latter is the widely ramified mediation between present, unfinished past, and above all: possible future.

—Ernest Bloch<sup>1</sup>

Without the revelation of important traits and without an interaction of the characters with world events, objects, the forces of nature and social institutions, even the most extraordinary adventures would be empty and meaningless.

—Georg Lukács<sup>2</sup>

### **I. Country, City, and the Proletarian Realist Novel**

In the past few decades, scholars of proletarian literature have labored to extend the definition of the genre beyond its temporal and national boundaries. Moving beyond the traditional description that grounds literary proletarianism in the years surrounding the Great Depression in the United States, Jim Holstun presents us with a more genre-specific and less time- and nation-bound definition. Reminding us that "[b]ecause the capitalist mode of production is global, so too is the proletariat and the proletarian novel," Holstun defines the proletarian novel as "a fictional narrative that,

from a particular proletarian perspective, totalizes the capitalist mode of production in movement.” Holstun argues that because the genre

totalizes, it shies away from modernist *durée* or the “one-day narrative” and moves toward longer-scale narratives of capitalist crisis. For proletarian literature, time is not a flow or a slice. These crises include the primitive accumulation that founds capitalism from below, the accelerated accumulation (including imperialism) that drives capitalism from above, [and] internal capitalist dynamics like population movements and revolution.

Taking seriously the shared temporality of proletarian novels—their active portrayal of longer-scale narratives of crisis and their necessary embeddedness within a global capitalist mode of production, itself the basis of a shared experience of dispossession and exploitation—I advance, in what follows, a comparative reading of two proletarian novels. Kang Kyŏng-ae’s *From Wŏnso Pond* narrates peasants, laborers, sex workers, and factory girls in both the colonial Korean countryside and city;<sup>3</sup> Peter Abrahams’s *Mine Boy* depicts black South African miners, city dwellers, and newly dispossessed urban migrant laborers in pre-Apartheid Johannesburg and the various slums and townships surrounding it.<sup>4</sup> Separated from one another by more than a decade—Kang’s novel was published in 1934 and Abrahams’s in 1946—and by their focus on vastly different national and imperial situations, both *From Wŏnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* portray and attempt to totalize the complex relationship between capitalist countryside and capitalist city. Both novels realistically portray what Raymond Williams describes as the two signal narrative moments of “the long history of the literature of country and city”: dispossession and rural-urban migration. Cities the world over, Williams reminds us, have “drawn in...the surplus people and the uprooted laborers of the rural areas.”<sup>5</sup>

The comparative reading that I pursue here extends Barbara Foley’s typology of proletarian themes—strike novels, novels on race and antiracism, novels describing the development of class consciousness, novels focused on non-class conscious proletarians, and novels portraying daily working-class life—to include the country and city novel.<sup>6</sup> According to Michael Denning, the narrative frame of country and city, or, more specifically, of rural-urban migration is by no means absent from the history of the proletarian novel and, in fact, performs a decisive function in this history. As Denning argues in “The Novelists’ International,” a “larger historical sensibility” among proletarian writers the world over became “fully developed in the novels that grew out of the recognition that the new proletariat of the century were not simply factory workers and tenement dwellers, but were migrants from the countryside.”<sup>7</sup> The historical scope of the country and city framework, with its focus on and access to “a larger historical sensibility,” moved the narrative frame

proletarian literature as a whole beyond the “paradoxically ahistorical modernism that...tried to document the lived experience of radically new factory and tenement.”<sup>8</sup>

Denning’s linking of the proletarian novel’s move out of “ahistorical modernism” with its post-1917-1919 focus on the historical frame of rural-urban migration under capitalist pressure forms the backdrop of my comparative reading of Kang and Abrahams in this essay. If this reading demands an extension of Foley’s thematic typology, it also demands an engagement with this shift away from an “ahistorical modernism” to a country-city based realism. Indeed, while we should locate the form of both *From Wönso Pond*—a multi-protagonist social novel—and *Mine Boy*—a proletarian *Bildungsroman*—“squarely within the . . . tradition of critical realism,” it is also the case that both novels have been criticized for clinging to the supposedly naïve projects of literary mimesis and socialist commitment.<sup>9</sup> Sonja M. Kim, for example, first notes that *From Wönso Pond* “displays most clearly Kang’s use of fiction to address social issues that were pertinent to intellectuals and the underprivileged within Korea’s colonial context, issues such as peasant tenancy, exploited labor, and the victimization of women,” and then goes on to devalue the novel for its critical realism. She argues that Kang’s works after *From Wönso Pond* “are more sophisticated and less blatant in their critical realism,” linking this evolution to either “increasing censorship [on the part of the Japanese Empire] or a growing maturity in her writing.” What is immediately intriguing about this description of Kang’s oeuvre is that it posits her move away from politically committed writing as being less critically *realist* and therefore inevitably “more sophisticated.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar devaluation, Ntongela Masilela tells us that *Mine Boy* ultimately “fails as a piece of literary modernity, because it ignores and obfuscates the literary devices of modernism.” For Masilela, *Mine Boy*’s “attempt to articulate the ideologies of Marxism and Pan-Africanism as the pre-eminent political philosophies of modernity in Africa and the African diaspora” is certainly modern, but this attempt at articulation is betrayed by the novel’s “realist poetics.” According to Masilela, Abrahams, under the spell of fellow proletarian realist Richard Wright, rejects the modern and modernist techniques of writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, which Masilela dubs “a new black literary aesthetic.” Abrahams’s modern, and thus apparently inevitably modernist, ideologies, then, cannot be properly transmitted, for, according to Masilela, the novel’s anti-modernist form must necessarily stand in the way of their full articulation.<sup>11</sup> Far from advancing original positions, Kim and Masilela, in immediately and uncritically devaluing literary realism, reproduce a literary-critical commonplace. For these critics, literary realism is unworthy of in-depth critical consideration; little more than a moment of under-development, it is an unsophisticated position that leads to aesthetic and even political failure.

Foley outlines a similar trend in “the original Cold War account of 1930s literary radicalism” in the US, which “dismiss[ed] proletarian novelists as practitioners of a plodding realism, impervious to the subtleties of modernism.”<sup>12</sup> This Cold War anti-

Communist reading of the proletarian novel, and the literary left more generally, extended beyond the temporal bounds of the Cold War proper. Foley argues that “anti-Communism...retains its force because of its covert incorporation into various premises guiding postmodern theory.”<sup>13</sup> Singling out what she describes as the “postmodernist critique of novelistic realism,” Foley notes that such a critique often collides with most U.S. proletarian writers’ “intellectual commitment to a cognitivist aesthetic,” which judges works of literature on the basis of their explanatory power. Most US proletarian writers, Foley explains, valued story over propaganda and realistic representation over textual experimentation. For they were convinced that realism’s attention to the concrete and the everyday, its focus on the rounded character’s response to specific historical and material pressures, would allow them to narratively theorize the forces of social, political, material, and historical motion.<sup>14</sup> Though the proletarian cognitivist aesthetic insists on textual mediation—the investigation, reordering, and concentration of experience through language and story—its insistence on realistic representation comes up against what Foley describes as the guiding “premise of the postmodern position”: “that...the text conducts its battles against authoritarianism and repression not primarily in its partisan representation of social conflict in its ‘real-world’ referent, but through its adoption of strategies of subversion in the zone of textuality itself.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, there’s very little to differentiate this ostensibly postmodernist critique of realism from its modernist, Cold War variant. For modernism carries with it a similar form of textual politics, one which Neil Larsen succinctly indicates when he describes “left-formalist theory of aesthetic negation as constituting a new sphere of emancipatory activity after the decline of ‘politics’ in its traditional modes.”<sup>16</sup> According to this position, as Foley outlines it, “a text,” if it “wishes to query the existing order of things in a thoroughgoing way,”

must itself adopt . . . an “interrogative” form, that is, one that decenters all the putatively authoritative expressions of politics. Despite its posture of confronting and unmasking reactionary idealisms with an unflinching portraiture of “what is,” the argument goes, realism turns out to be not an ally but an antagonist to the project of literary radicalism. However left-wing their intentions, proletarian writers who work in the form of the realistic novel end up confirming the very world order they originally set out to oppose.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, literary realism is not always literary proletarianism, nor is all literary proletarianism realist in the traditional sense of the term. For every radical realist like Kang or Abrahams, there is a conservative realist like Balzac or Walter Scott. And for every proletarian realist novel like *From Wönso Pond* or *Mine Boy*, we have the more formally experimental proletarianism of something like *Christ in Concrete*,

Pietro di Donato's operatic stream-of-consciousness mediation on Italian-American bricklayers and factory workers in New York City; Cho Se-hui's *The Dwarf*, a non-linear linked-story novel about South Korean proletarians struggling under the pressures of Park Chung Hee's capitalist dictatorship of the 1970s; and the more formally adventurous collective novels produced during the golden age of proletarian literature in the US, like William Rollins's *The Shadow Before* and Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!* However, even when critics acknowledge these moments of proletarian experimentation or take into account the often tense relations between the proletarian novel and various forms of politically engaged writing produced in the 30s,<sup>18</sup> what Foley calls the "binary opposition" between "bad realism" and "good experimentalism" persists.<sup>19</sup>

The cognitivist aesthetic of the proletarian novel, because it insists on the knowability and representability of a fundamentally extra-textual reality and on the possibility of communicating this reality, has often been subsumed under the category of non-complex "bad realism." The proletarian novel's attempt at mimesis becomes, in this argument, its cardinal sin. What we have here, though, is less an argument based on textual engagement and close reading, than one based on what Raymond Williams describes as the selectivity of the modernist tradition. The problem is not that modernism selects or develops a canon, as all traditions do. Rather, Williams explains, modernism becomes a kind of "highly selective version of the modern" that "offers to appropriate the whole of modernity."<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, though, modernism also threatens to appropriate the whole of literary and representational complexity. The realist, even if contemporary, is consigned both to an abstract past and, at the same time, described as textually and representationally inadequate, even regressive.

What is necessary, then, is not the enumeration of formally diverse texts of proletarian modernism. Such an intervention, which often devolves into the mere demand that we recognize the experimental and therefore really modernist and actually complex nature of proletarian writing, fails to shift the fundamental terms of the "binary" that Foley describes. If the proletarian novel is often bound up with a cognitivist aesthetic—and if it is often, even if in an experimental way, realist therefore—we need to actually engage this realism on its own terms. Arguing for the importance and the continuing relevance of proletarian literature depends upon a concomitant project of recovering the importance and continuing relevance of literary realism.

A number of scholars have recently undertaken such a project.<sup>21</sup> However, far from unsettling the primacy of modernism and literary anti-realism, their work has largely confirmed it. For instance, in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) argues that the various literary techniques commonly associated with "the distinctive (and restricted) Euro-American literary formation typically addressed under the name of 'modernism,'" ought, in fact, to be read for their realism, that is, as the "formal registers of (semi-)

peripherality in the world-literary system.” Terming such techniques “irrealist” rather than modernist, WReC argues that “anti-linear plot lines, meta-narratorial devices, un-rounded characters, unreliable narrators, contradictory points of view, and so on” are, in fact, “discernible wherever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism’s creative destruction (or destructive creation).”<sup>22</sup> While approaches such as WReC’s have yielded invaluable literary-critical insights, they continue to privilege the literary techniques traditionally associated with modernism, almost entirely ignoring what WReC refers to as texts of “ideal-type” realism.<sup>23</sup> WReC tells us that “[w]hen pre-existing unities”—especially pre-existing modes of production—“are violently destroyed, the relative stability . . . required by realist representation of the ‘ideal type’ disappears with it.”<sup>24</sup> Such a reading, though, fails to break away from what Larsen describes as “the dominant mode of apology for modernism itself”: “the idea that modernism and modernity”—in this case, capitalist modernity—are “consubstantial categories” and that modernism is “somehow already precontained in the raw and immediate experience of contemporary life.”<sup>25</sup> Here again, realism—though now with more subtlety and nuance—is relegated to a realm of non-complexity and representational inadequacy next to the modernist values of irrealism. Even if WReC does not want to dismiss realism out of hand, then, they largely reproduce the modernist “selective tradition” that Williams critiques.

Even when realist writers and texts are mentioned in *Combined and Uneven Development*, they’re never really engaged. How could they be? For realist portrayal in general, WReC suggests, cannot possibly register the dynamism and violence of unevenly developed societies, nor can it properly represent the dislocations that occur when (semi-)peripheral societies come into contact with capitalist pressures. But this dismissal puts the critical, evaluative, and canonical cart before the literary horse. WReC refuses to actively or explicitly dismiss realism, but in focusing their work on irrealist texts only, they refuse to seriously engage with peripheral or semi-peripheral *realist* texts.

But if WReC largely avoids any direct engagement with what they describe as “ideal-type realism,” especially in the non-European periphery, they do at least gesture toward a way out of the too-direct and at times mechanistic relationship they set up between capitalist exploitation and the development of irrealism. As WReC goes on to argue, the “realisms that achieve the most full-fledged and dominant expression are . . . those associated with revolutions or liberation movements, with their investments in a conception of reality as apprehensible and accessible to realist representation springing directly from their political commitments.” Such realist texts, WReC explains, “[a]dapting Fanon’s idea of a ‘fighting phase’ in literary history,” can be described as “various ‘fighting realisms,’ whose investment is not merely in mapping present realities but in the revelation of possible futures and emergent social orders.”<sup>26</sup>

While WReC’s adoption and expansion of Fanon’s literary periodization pushes

back against their own claims about irrealism's representational primacy in the face of capitalism's unevenness, their attempt to take up Fanon's work fails to keep faith with the evaluative argument that Fanon himself makes about realism in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In Fanon's framework, realism remains the most valuable form of literary representation because of its cognitive explanatory power. It does not, as WReC suggests in their treatment of realism more generally, statically map reality, but rather attempts to understand and represent, to make knowable, reality's interrelated social, material, political, and subjective forces of motion. Indeed, Fanon opposes the "fighting phase" of literary realism to various forms of what we could describe as non-realism, anti-realism, or to take up WReC's own term, irrealism. According to Fanon, these forms divert the possibility of actually understanding, explaining, and therefore properly intervening in the struggle for liberation and in human history more generally. For him, the non-realist and non-fighting phase of literature comes to us as "a harsh style, full of images, for the image is the drawbridge which allows unconscious energies to be scattered on the surrounding meadows. It is a vigorous style, alive with rhythms, struck through and through with bursting life; it is full of color, too, bronzed, sunbaked, and violent."<sup>27</sup> As Fanon makes clear, this literary style of the violent image certainly registers specific historical conditions, including, most importantly, the writer's distance from the dynamism of revolutionary culture and the everyday life of the people. But even if it encodes this reality, such a style is a failed attempt to actually represent and come to terms with the struggle on the ground, including the historical and economic forces driving this struggle. Rather, it flattens what could be focus on historical motion into "a banal search for exoticism." Though this first phase of literary representation can include the depiction of revolution, Fanon argues that it fetishizes this violent movement, and it fails to actually portray the people themselves in movement, often reducing the struggle for liberation to the relatively unconscious reaction of a static and exotic folk tradition against colonial and capitalist modernity. In this moment, the writer "sets a high value on the customs, traditions, and appearances of his people," but these customs are turned into unchanging, unknowable, and unconscious ways of life.<sup>28</sup> WReC's misappropriation of Fanon's schema—their rewriting of his realist fighting phase as a very specific form of fighting realism—is symptomatic of the tendency in modern scholarship to partially appropriate the terms of realism in order to devalue realism as a global—and often consciously progressive—narrative project.

Far from aligning Fanon's conception of a fighting phase in literature with WReC's general theory of irrealism, we would do better align it with Lukács's account of realism. Across his oeuvre, Lukács argues for a conception of realism as that which is attuned to the nonsynchronous nature of reality under capitalism. Realism is able to both register and make sense of "the massive rupture effected at the levels of space-time continuum, lifeworld, experience and human sensorium by capitalist modernization."<sup>29</sup> In his landmark *Studies in European Realism*, Lukács shows how

realism strives to provide, “a total picture of society in motion, complete with all its determinants and antagonisms.”<sup>30</sup> Realism is fully capable of providing a temporally complex picture of capitalist society, for as Lukács reminds us, “only vulgar sociology... conceives of class structure as something static. It is a dynamic thing, containing within itself past, present, and future of the society in question.”<sup>31</sup> Realism narrates the dialectical interaction between creative human agency and objective constraint, portraying “man in the whole range of his relations to the real world.” It is able to capture “tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential.”<sup>32</sup> This focus on futurity and praxis is the true strength of the realist novel. Indeed, it is this that Fanon has in mind when he rejects the static portrayal of exoticized particularisms for the representations of the fighting phrase: “that fluctuating movement” that human beings engaged in the struggle for a more humane future are actively and consciously “giving shape to.”<sup>33</sup> The most essential moment of temporal unevenness that realism is capable of portraying is the movement of historical agents, acted upon and often impeded by the social relations in which they live, toward a different social and material future.

Taking seriously this relationship that Fanon and Lukács set up between “ideal-type” realism and revolutionary praxis, in what follows I read both Kang’s *From Wōnso Pond* and Abrahams’s *Mine Boy* as particular examples of the fighting phase that Fanon outlines. It is not only that both novels depend upon and move within the shared narrative frame of the country and city, of rural-urban migration under capitalist pressure, but also that they self-reflexively portray this narrative frame as that which can be realistically represented therefore understood. They do so, it must be emphasized, from a proletarian perspective, linking not only rural-urban migration but also processes of both accelerated primitive accumulation in the countryside and labor exploitation in the city to the demands and workings of capitalism. Both of these novels, not despite but because of their shared commitment to an “ideal-type” realism, are able to register, in the words of WReC, “the manifest incongruities, dislocations and forms of unevenness characteristic of the (semi-) periphery.”<sup>34</sup>

Decades before theorists like Williams were to attempt a historical materialist rehistoricization of both capitalist countryside and capitalist city, proletarian realist novels like *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* attempted not only to represent but also to theorize these spaces as shot through with class struggle and historical possibility. As we will see, as realist proletarian novels attuned to the concrete and everyday experiences of capitalist social relations and class struggle, *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* dereify what Williams describes as the static images of country and city that develop under capitalism: the country as the “old ‘organic society’” and the city as a space of “modernist ‘universal alienation.’”<sup>35</sup> *From Wōnso Pond* opposes itself to both the literature of the “agrarian nationalist circles,” which portrayed “idealized and pastoralist” images of rural life in colonized Korea and also the Korean “labor



reportage literature” of the late 1920s and early 1930s, with its narrow focus on “factory and other urban workers.”<sup>36</sup> Kang’s novel upsets the static images of country and city, rewriting each space as equally constrained by the overarching demands of capitalist accumulation and equally populated by human agents capable of undertaking radical, future-oriented projects. *Mine Boy* engages in a similar project of country-city materialist analysis and realist portrayal, linking intense expropriation in the South African countryside with rural-urban migration and capitalist exploitation in the Johannesburg mines. Even while engaged in such a project of totalization, *Mine Boy* also registers the importance of residual forms of non- and even anti-capitalist life, especially in its protagonist’s memories of his youth in the South African countryside. But in *Mine Boy*, hope is much more than mere nostalgia. The novel also portrays forms of experimental collectivity that arise in the city and that bring some of the non- or anti-capitalist values to it, even if only in a revised form.

## II. “A Fight against All of the Tökhos of the World”: Country and City in Kang Kyöng-ae’s *From Wönso Pond*

*From Wönso Pond* follows multiple protagonists as they come into contact with exploitation in the Korean countryside—especially as represented by the abuses of the Korean landlord and colonial collaborator, Tökho—and in the factories of the increasingly industrialized Korean city. The movement of the novel grounds itself in the stories of two propertyless laborers from the village of Yongyön: Ch’ötchae and Sönbi. Born to a poor, landless family, Ch’ötchae works as an agricultural laborer in Tökho’s fields. After participating in a food riot, Ch’ötchae can no longer find work in his own village, and even traditional forms of gleanings, such as the gathering of wood from the forest, having been suspended. Unable to support his mother and his elderly companion, Yi Söbang and suffering from hunger, Ch’ötchae moves to Seoul, and later to Inchön in order to try his luck as a day laborer. Sönbi’s movement follows a similar country-city trajectory. Some years after her father is murdered by Tökho, Sönbi finds employment in the landlord’s house as a domestic servant, working alongside an elderly and impoverished woman simply referred to as Granny. After a protracted period of exploitation and sexual abuse, during which she is both raped by Tökho and mistreated by his wife and daughter, Sönbi searches out her former friend, Kannan, who recently escaped Tökho’s sexual exploitation, and joins her in Inchön. Kannan, a communist, soon relocates to the Taedong Spinning Mill in Seoul and takes Sönbi with her. In the spinning mill, Sönbi encounters exploitation on the factory floor, the unwanted sexual advances of the factory managers, and through Kannan, communism. Ch’ötchae is also introduced to communism through his conversations with Sinch’öl—a former law student turned Marxist intellectual, and one-time companion of Tökho’s daughter, Okchöm—who is imprisoned after a failed strike in Inchön. Toward the end of the novel, Sinch’öl recants his communist beliefs, betrays his fellow activists, marries a wealthy woman, and moves to Manchuria.

But this abandonment of the class struggle on the part of Sinch'öl is paralleled by Sönbi's decision to take over for Kannan and begin organizing inside the spinning mill. The novel concludes with Sönbi's death at the hands of capital, her body driven to exhaustion by overwork.

In *The Country and the City*, Williams faults Marxist theory and, at the time, actually existing Communist states, for what he describes as its "absolute urban and industrial priority," its focus on and fetishization of the city and its concomitant dismissal of the country as a site of exploitation, class struggle, and revolutionary possibility. Tracing contemporary revolutionary movements and historical moments, from the Chinese to the Cuban revolutions, Williams notes, toying with Marx's own terms of dismissal, that "the main revolutionary force in the world" has been, "for the last forty years," the "'rural idiots' and the 'barbarians and semi-barbarians.'" <sup>37</sup> At first glance, Kang Kyöng-ae's *From Wönso Pond*, despite its complex portrayal of rural exploitation in colonized Korea, might seem to adhere to and, in some sense, uncritically adopt this widespread "industrial and urban priority." Indeed, the various forms of rural exploitation and class struggle that occupy the novel's first half eventually give way to the movement of the newly dispossessed to the city, in this case Seoul and later In'chön, and their development of class consciousness. As Samuel Perry notes, for instance, in Kang's novel, the "physical journey from country to city" that her characters make "parallels a gradual transformation of political consciousness, as different forms of community in the city offer them new lives within the industrializing urban economy of the colony and new opportunities to become underground activists." <sup>38</sup> However, I want to suggest that *From Wönso Pond* advances a much more integrative and totalizing portrayal of the relationship between countryside and city, between rural labor and urban labor, and between rural capitalism and metropolitan capitalism. For the novel does more than simply reject the static countryside in favor of the dynamic city; instead, it engages in a kind of totalization that seeks, by tracing the forced or determined movement of the typical character of the newly dispossessed rural migrant, to reunite the different forms of capitalist exploitation that color both the ostensibly divisible spheres of the rural and the urban in colonized Korea. This is not to say that *From Wönso Pond* jettisons historical and regional specificity; rather, the novel pays attention to what we could describe as the uneven or, perhaps better, nonsynchronous manifestations of capitalist exploitation in colonized Korea—from the semi-feudal yet capitalist social relations that mark the rural millet fields and the country village to the mechanized factory labor that shapes the daily lives of laborers in both Seoul and In'chön. The novel seeks to understand and provide a concrete portrayal of the common social, historical, and economic forces and relationships—namely, the imposition of capitalist social relations—that produce such ostensibly different forms of exploitation and such ostensibly different ways of life. <sup>39</sup> In *From Wönso Pond*, though, the class consciousness that characters like Sönbi, Ch'ötchae, and Kannan come to is only possible because they are able to reflect on their experiences of

exploitation in both the countryside and the city and read these experiences through one another. Thus, even if the lion's share of proletarian commitment and action takes place in the city, the novel grounds capitalist exploitation in both the country and the city, and demands a rural-urban proletarian totalization that unites these two supposedly disparate spheres. What the novel attempts to portray, then, is not a kind of retreat to either the idealized countryside or the idealized city, but rather what Peter Linebaugh forcefully describes as the common "proletarian experience of violent loss shared wherever capitalism seeks self-development by taking away subsistence."<sup>40</sup> As we shall see, *From Wŏnso Pond* accomplishes this process of totalization through both a strategy of narrative patterning, making use of a number of mirrored narrative moments that unite the country and the city, even in their difference, and a withering critique of the idealization of both countryside and city.

*From Wŏnso Pond's* overlapping narrative patterns of movement towards the city and into class consciousness does not constitute an attempt to equate life in the city with class consciousness. It is not the move as such that radicalizes characters like Sŏnbi and Ch'ŏtchae: there are many apolitical proletarians in the city. Rather what radicalizes them are processes of proletarian education and mentorship, under Kannan and Sinch'ŏl respectively. In the novel, for instance, Ch'ŏtchae's comes to class consciousness through "meeting Sinch'ŏl" and discussing concerns about labor and exploitation with him:

Ch'otache felt that there was nothing anymore that he didn't understand about the world. Everything that had puzzled him, immobilized him for half his lifetime, he could now understand clearly, as clearly as he saw this newly built road spread out before him. Even the path his life would take in the future now seemed as clear and as smooth as the newly built road...<sup>41</sup>

A similar relationship of proletarian education emerges between Kannan and Sŏnbi, as Kannan repeatedly refutes the claims made by their factory supervisors: "Just think about it, here they are making us work, sometimes all through the night, and all they give us to eat is this imported rice. ...They're only interested in getting as much work out of us as possible, even if it kills us."<sup>42</sup> Later in the novel, Sŏnbi directly connects her new understanding of the factory system, and indeed of the whole of Korea as she knows it, to Kannan's attempts to teach her. After seeing a "powerful, almost terrifying glow" in Ch'ŏtchae's eyes when she sees him on the docks, for instance, Sŏnbi "remember[s] something that Kannan was always telling her—that the world was full of enemies, people just like Tŏkho. If we want to stand up to them, we have to do it together. Somehow Sŏnbi felt suddenly empowered. Only by doing what Kannan had taught her could she ever imagine taking Ch'ŏtchae's hand into her own."<sup>43</sup> What we have here, then, is not an attempt to automatically equate spatial reorientation and

geographic movement with the development of class consciousness and proletarian empowerment, but rather the association of class consciousness and its development with human contact and agency, with collective projects of proletarian education.

However, what is most interesting about these two specific projects of proletarian education, though, is not what unites them, but rather what differentiates them. Kannan's attempt to bring Sönbi to class consciousness, for instance, depends on her attempt to link country with city through commonalities, especially through the figure of Tökho: "Sönbi! I'm telling you, the supervisors who put us to work and all those people behind them—they're hundreds and thousands of times more frightening than Tökho."<sup>44</sup> What Sönbi learns, then, is not that the world is divided into a static countryside and a dynamic city; instead, she comes to see that both spheres are linked together and are marked by similar processes and logics of dispossession and exploitation. She comes to see that the solution to all of the violence she has experienced is not retreat or movement but rather a collective struggle against capital: "There was no other choice but to bring together all those backs and all those hands and to join together in a fight against all of the Tökhos of the world. This was the only path Sönbi could now see before her."<sup>45</sup> In this particular textual moment, Kannan and Sönbi—and, through them, Kang—actively blur the division between countryside and city, and the two ostensibly distinct spheres are described as suffering under the regime of capital, under the demands of "all of the Tökhos of the world." By grounding capitalism in the figure of Tökho, then, Kang does not localize exploitation, but rather develops a far more general and totalizing critique of capitalist exploitation. Here, capitalism is not presented as a "thing;" instead, it is described as a variable and mutable "social relation of production pertaining to a particular historical social formation."<sup>46</sup> Though these social relations manifest themselves in vastly different forms, Kang and her characters actively unify experience with the expansion of Tökho into Tökhos. This totalization functions not because it attempts to read back abstract political-economic concepts onto the concrete, but rather because it is personal to Sönbi, because the complex dynamics of the capitalist mode of production can be understood through her own lived experience.

This totalizing movement, however, is largely absent from Ch'ötchae's discussions with Sinch'öl. Though Ch'ötchae's understanding of exploitation begins in the countryside, when he is separated from his land and the products of his labor, Sinch'öl never deigns to work capitalist exploitation of peasants and rural laborers like Ch'ötchae into his understanding of class struggle. When Sinch'öl asks Ch'ötchae if he has "been working as a laborer ever since" he was "young," for instance, he feels no need to correct or expand upon Ch'ötchae's negative answer: "No. I started out weeding in the fields, before doing this." Rather than working to connect this supposed form of nonlabor (weeding) with the topic of labor more generally, Sinch'öl instead romanticizes "Ch'ötchae's deep voice and unpretentious words."<sup>47</sup> Sinch'öl's inability to connect the fields of the countryside with the factory labor of the city stems

ultimately from his idealization of the countryside. For Sinch'öl, the countryside, even with all of its exploitation, remains a kind of refuge, cut off from capitalist exploitation. This romanticization comes to the fore most forcefully early in the novel when Sinch'öl is staying with Tökho. Observing a hand, obviously Sönbi's, picking squash, Sinch'öl can only bring himself to ask the following: "Whose hand is that? ...That hand! It had thick knuckles and cracked nails...he had no idea whom it could have belonged to."<sup>48</sup> Sinch'öl cannot comprehend the relationship between Sönbi's rural labor and her hands and continually idealizes her physically, even when she spends most of her time sacrificing her health to labor. For Sinch'öl the countryside remains a space of purity, a space free from the physical deformations associated with harsh labor and capitalist exploitation. One is reminded, when reading his descriptions of both Sönbi and the countryside itself, of Williams's brilliant critique of the tendency of the neo-pastoral and the country house poem to excise labor from the countryside in *The Country and the City*.<sup>49</sup> Sinch'öl's understanding of the countryside, though, does not depend on the excision of labor; it depends, rather, on the idealization of Sönbi's work. Sinch'öl describes Sönbi as a "pure, lovely figure." For "only at the place of work," Sinch'öl continues, "could one discover the truth and beauty of human beings."<sup>50</sup> When confronted with Sönbi's hands, proletarian hands, he merely creates an idealized image to take their place:

The image of thin, slender fingers came to his mind. Yes, these are Sönbi's hands! he thought. The unpleasant thought he had suffered on account of that one ugly hand were clearing up of their own accord. Yes, that was someone else's hand. How could Sönbi's hands look anything like that? Especially someone as pretty as Sönbi! That one ugly hand had caused him to make a gross mistake about Sönbi's hands—hands that he had no doubt taken unconscious note of . . . Sinch'öl's analysis of the matter complete, he now longed for Sönbi even more strongly and he wanted to postpone his departure, even by just a little.<sup>51</sup>

This image of Sönbi's idealized hands becomes the figure through which Sinch'öl understands the countryside. Indeed, his idealization of rural labor runs throughout the rest of the novel. After leaving home, for instance, Sinch'öl is described as wishing that he could abandon his city work and move to the county, where "he could spend time working the land and learning about all sorts of things alongside the farmers."<sup>52</sup> Sinch'öl's desire to return to the ostensible ease and purity of rural labor runs up against the presence of exploitation in the countryside, and also what we could describe as the accelerated primitive accumulation that, even during his idealization of the country, is dispossessing farmers through various social and economic processes. Sinch'öl's inability to recognize the countryside as a space riven by class struggle comes through in his individualistic desire to "rescue" Sönbi

“from her situation;” here, Sinch’öl rejects the possibility of transformation in the countryside, and indeed the existence of other rural laborers like Little Buddha, Ch’ötchae, Kaettong, and Granny, casting Sönbi’s mistreatment at the hands of Tökho and his family as a purely singular problem from which flight is possible, rather than as a particular manifestation of capitalist exploitation.<sup>53</sup>

The narrative structure of *From Wönso Pond* disrupts Sinch’öl’s idealization of the countryside through a process of narrative mirroring or repetition. For rather than idealizing either the countryside or the city, and thus replacing the struggle for socio-material transformation with geographical flight, this narrative patterning reveals the overarching social and material relationships of capitalism hold sway over both country and city, subjecting both rural laborers and factory workers, not to mention a growing surplus population, to exploitation and dispossession. In the novel, indeed, many of the processes of exploitation and dispossession that we observe in the rural village mirror or prefigure what we eventually see in the city and, more specifically, in the factory. The relationship of dependency that characterizes the rural laborers’ relationship to Tökho, for instance, is mirrored in the dependence of the factory girls on the urban factory. We see the germ of this shared, though indeed very different, dependency in the painful memory that flashes up as Little Buddha sings with his fellow fieldworkers. “Like a whirlwind,” we are told, “a memory had swept through his mind—the memory of borrowing grain from Tökho on outrageous terms.”<sup>54</sup> This primarily affective episode is fleshed out structurally during the scene in which Tökho comes to collect his debts from Kaettong and his fellow laborers: “Just bring seven sacks over. No, you still owe me ten won, mind you. But I know you’ve got to live on something, so I’ll let you take at least one sack home—half for your share, and half as a bonus from us. Think of it as thanks for all your good work this year,” Tökho chuckled.<sup>55</sup> This dependent relationship not only structures the work in the fields, but also the lives and labor of domestic workers like Sönbi and Granny. In a particularly poignant textual moment, Granny reflects on her inability to sustain herself without working for Tökho and his family: “No matter how long she stayed in this house, all she got out of it was more and more work, thought Granny...Maybe she’d be better off quitting come fall. But if she left this house, what could a woman liker herself do, without any children of her own to depend on? Oh, help me, I’d be better off dead.”<sup>56</sup> This rural exploitation prefigures the factory girls’ dependency on the factory itself for their “food and daily necessities.”<sup>57</sup> Sönbi, in fact, describes how, during her time at the factory, “they’d subtracted her board, as well as the cost of her shoes and her toiletries, so that now there was only about three won fifty left in her account.” This relationship of dependency even discourages her from taking a trip the “infirmery,” which, as she notes, would put her in “debt.”<sup>58</sup>

The novel also pursues this rural-urban totalization with a more labor-focused and auto-historicizing moment of narrative mirroring, using the speech of the county magistrate to prefigure the speech of the factory manager at the Taedong Spinning

Mill. However, the county magistrate's speech—much like the scenes of rural dependency above—is much more than just a setup for a later, properly capitalist and city-based speech and situation of exploitation. Indeed, in this moment Kang foregrounds the process by which the social relations specific to capitalism have come to colonize the Korean countryside, even with all of its pre-capitalist forms of peasant production and with its traditional hierarchical social structure. It is telling, for instance, that Kang introduces the figure of the county magistrate by describing his close proximity to Tōkho. He is described, for example, as sharing the same “platform” with not only the township clerks, but also with Tōkho. This proximity between the leader of the village, now made mayor of the township, and the county magistrate typifies the specifically rural manifestation of capitalism in the countryside. For even if peasant production and village hierarchy are preserved in some sense, the county magistrate makes clear that this preservation is only carried out through a form of capitalist subsumption. His advice to the peasants, for instance, has very little to do with pre-capitalist and largely extra-economic forms of appropriation; instead, it calls, in a specifically capitalist way, for intervention and innovation at the point of production. “Now,” the county magistrate begins, “it goes without saying that we all need to work diligently when it comes to farming.”<sup>59</sup> As the county magistrate soon makes obvious, this diligent work is not to be done in order to supply the needs of the peasants themselves, or even of the entire village, but rather to meet the demands of encroaching capitalism. The county magistrate has little concern for subsistence. Indeed, he goes on: “The farmer must now ask himself: How can I make my paddies yield the most grain? How can I make a small paddy yield as much grain as a big one? In other words, he must go about his work with a firm grasp on the methods of farming.”<sup>60</sup> The methods in question, though, are based largely around capitalist exploitation at the point of production. The magistrate tells the peasants, “if you all worked just a little bit harder...ah, well, what I mean is that you need to take advantage of your break time.”<sup>61</sup> What marks the mode of production specific to the village in *From Wōnso Pond*, then, is not some sort of pure pre-capitalist feudalism, but rather the formal subsumption “of labor by capital.” In her work on the agrarian origins of English capitalism, Ellen Mieszkowski Wood, drawing on the work of both Marx and E.P. Thompson, defines this specific relationship as one in which “capital appropriate[s] surplus labor from workers still engaged in traditional forms of production.” Such forms of exploitation, Wood continues, though they maintain a pre-capitalist appearance, are “driven by capitalist imperatives,” by capitalism’s “compulsions of competition and accumulation,” even if these compulsions do not initially “transform the technical process of production.”<sup>62</sup>

The factory manager's speech takes place in a more obviously capitalist setting, the urban factory, but is based on similar methods and similar pieces of advice. Much like the county magistrate, who begins from and legitimizes his demand that the peasants work through their breaks with an appeal to the abstract and unclassed collectivity

of the nation,<sup>63</sup> the factory manager concludes his speech about the spinning mill by asking the factory girls “to think of this factory” as their “very own factory.” What concerns him, though, is not the wellbeing of the factory girls themselves, but rather that they “work as efficiently as possible.” “Any slackers,” he continues, “will pay penalties, mind you, so be forewarned.”<sup>64</sup> Just like the village peasants who are told to work through their breaks, the factory girls have their own time colonized by the demands of capital.

Through this narrative patterning, *From Wŏnso Pond* offers us an integrated, though still differentiated, image of the semi-feudal yet capitalist countryside and city. What unites the two is not a necessarily synchronic manifestation of capitalism but rather the dependency upon which capitalism itself depends. As Marx argues in *Capital*, this dependency is established and extended through an ongoing process of primitive accumulation:

The capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the laborers from all property in the means by which they can realize their labor. As soon as capitalist production is once on its own legs, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a continually extending scale. The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the laborer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage laborers.<sup>65</sup>

That is to say, then, that this process removes the “means of production and subsistence” from the hand of the “immediate producer,” and converts them into the “means of exploitation and subjugation of the laborer.”<sup>66</sup> The novel itself depicts this process of accelerated primitive accumulation not only through the characters of “old man P’unghon,” whose “crops” are “seized by creditors before they were even harvested,”<sup>67</sup> and Ch’ötchae, who loses “tenant rights to his fields,”<sup>68</sup> but also through the proletarian trope of migration, through the narrative trajectory shared by Sŏnbi, Kannan, and Ch’ötchae. After Ch’ötchae loses his tenant rights, for instance, Yi Söbang suggests that he go to one of those “places in Seoul or P’yongyang they call factories, where poor folk like us can go to work and make money—earn a decent living.”<sup>69</sup> Here, then, we see one of the many results of primitive accumulation: the fact, to return to Williams’s formulation above, that “cities...[draw] in...the surplus people and the uprooted laborers of the rural areas.”

Such laborers must move within a many-sided mode of production whose “basic objective,” as Wood makes clear, “is the production and self-expansion of capital.”<sup>70</sup> This means not only that capitalism is oriented toward its own reproduction, but also that it concerns itself only with this reproduction and not with the subsistence



of the laborer. This is, indeed, the relationship that Marx describes in his chapter on the working-day in *Capital*. “Capital,” Marx writes, “is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”<sup>71</sup> Kang sometimes represents this relationship as one in which the laboring body is virtually possessed by capital. Toward the end of the novel, for instance, and shortly before her death, Sönbi is described as being unable to stop working in order to seek medical attention:

Her whole body was roasting over the intense heat of the cauldron. Her throat was parched, her heart was throbbing, even her sinuses and the sockets of her eyes felt like they were on fire. If she had her way she would have lain down right there and rested for a few minutes. Several times already she had heard the supervisor’s footsteps behind her, and each time she’d wanted to tell him that she just couldn’t work any longer because of the pain. But her lips had always remained tightly sealed, and the words simply never came out.<sup>72</sup>

Some of Sönbi’s inability, as I’ve already noted, stems from her own dependency and from her own attempt to avoid going into debt. However, her inability to signal the fact that she can no longer work is also the product of the specific forms of work discipline demanded by both the factory and by the capitalist mode of production more generally. Shortly before her death, Sönbi herself comes to understand the predatory nature of capitalist social relations. The reels in the spinning mill begin to appear to her as “giant insects slowly gnawing away at her existence.”<sup>73</sup> This predatory relationship between capital and labor eventually leads to Sönbi’s death, but even before the end of the novel, it is made clear that the lives of laborers like Sönbi are subordinated to capitalism’s ceaseless drive for profit. In a particularly forceful moment, for instance, we are told that:

Even as Sönbi cleaned the machine...it remained in operation. All the girls in this factory came to understand that a machine was something that never stopped moving. In fact, they were all so afraid they might get their hair or clothing caught in the machines that they tied their hair up with towels and made black, full-length aprons for themselves that covered them from head to toe. They had never worn these sorts of things before, but last spring one of the girls had gotten her hair caught, and had died a gruesome death when she was twisted up into a machine. Inside of the factory this was a closely guarded secret and no one was allowed to talk about it.<sup>74</sup>

Here, the demands of capitalism appear, to use Sartre’s description in *The Critique of*

*Dialectical Reason*, as a kind of “prefabricated destiny.”<sup>75</sup> Capitalism attempts to confine laborers like Sönbi—who, as propertyless workers, must sell their labor in order to sustain themselves—to an already preempted future of continued exploitation.<sup>76</sup>

What remains so interesting about characters like Sönbi, Kannan, and Ch’ötchae, who typify the dialectically interrelated processes of capitalist exploitation in the semi-feudal countryside and capitalist exploitation in the city, is that they render this relationship understandable not only by suffering it but also by themselves learning to understand it and by beginning to act within it in a future-oriented way. All of these characters are typical in the Lukácsian sense of the term. “A character is typical,” Lukács explains in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, “when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society,” and when he or she acts on or against the basis of this determination, Kang’s characters embody and are determined by the very different and yet dialectically interrelated processes of capitalist exploitation in the colonized Korean countryside and city.<sup>77</sup> This totalization through characterization disrupts the idealized image of the countryside set up by Sinch’öl, replacing his individualistic plan of “rescue”—which, through the act of ideological conversion, he repurposes in order to save himself at the end of the novel—with a collective struggle against capitalist exploitation in both the Korean countryside and city. It is Ch’ötchae’s ability to recognize the totalizing character of this struggle against capitalism, and not, as Perry suggests a kind of vulgar and “troubling workerism,”<sup>78</sup> that leads him to conclude that “Sinch’öl has many paths to follow. That’s what makes us different people!”<sup>79</sup> This realization is not driven by a mere anti-intellectualism—Ch’ötchae, as we have established, actually learns much from Sinch’öl—but rather by the realization that the emancipation of a vast section of both the Korean countryside and city, of the propertyless masses who cannot buy, recant, or marry their way out of exploitation, can only be accomplished by rejecting Sinch’öl’s acquiescence, his plan of individualistic rescue, and by struggling within and against the exploitative relationships that make up the capitalist mode of production.

### III. *Mine Boy*: A Historical Novel of the Nonsynchronous

Though the two novels chronicle very different imperial and capitalist situations, the relationship between country and city, between dispossession and rural-urban migration, that is theorized in *From Wönso Pond* reappears in and, in fact, structures Peter Abrahams’s *Mine Boy*. In this pre-apartheid proletarian novel, the protagonist, Xuma, a black small producer, who realizes that he can no longer sustain himself on his family’s land and moves from rural subsistence production to the gold mines of Johannesburg. Xuma settles in the township of Malay Camp, where a community of black city dwellers—headed by Leah, the shebeen queen, who illegally brews and sells beer in the township—takes Xuma in, giving him food and a place to sleep. Here, Xuma meets Eliza, a schoolteacher; Maisy, a domestic servant; Ma Plank, an elderly woman; and Daddy, a disillusioned activist turned alcoholic. Xuma also meets

Johannes, one of Leah's regulars and a mineworker, who finds Xuma a job as a boss-boy, a black foreman working under Paddy, a radical Irish miner, dubbed the "Red One" by the black mineworkers. Paddy encourages Xuma to protest against the inhumanity of the working conditions in the mine. Toward the end of the novel, Johannes and his white foreman, Chris, are killed when improperly maintained beams—to which Xuma and Paddy previously alerted the mine's white engineers—give way and the mine collapses. In response, Xuma and his fellow black workers refuse to return to work until the beams are repaired. Despite the death of Chris, the white miners largely refuse to take part in the action. Paddy joins Xuma, though, and is arrested in the ensuing clash with the police. After fleeing, Xuma decides to take responsibility for the strike, turn himself in in solidarity with his fellow strikers and Paddy, and commit himself to a politics of interracial proletarian struggle.

According to Michael Wade, the movement of the novel depends and comments on the moral and political divide between country and city, proposing a higher moral synthesis of these two spaces and their concomitant values through Xuma's own transformation from a naïve and displaced rural laborer to a proletarian radical. Wade describes Xuma, for instance, as "coming raw from the country to seek work on the goldmines in the big city. He undergoes a transformation in the course of the novel, from being the embodiment of everything that is rural in location and traditional in morals, to the new man, hero and leader of the new class: but his successful growth depends on the health of his former roots."<sup>80</sup> Opposing Xuma to Leah, Wade goes on to argue that "Xuma's country code is meant to embody . . . virtues like loyalty whose application may seem universal but which are rejected by even the kindly and the good in the city. The relevance of his values has to be proven afresh, but this can only happen after they have developed and been modified through participation in urban life."<sup>81</sup> But the novel doesn't traffic in the division that Wade sets up between a moral countryside and an immoral city. Rather, Abrahams' novel is structured both by a much more dialectical and historically specific relationship between the country and the city, which refuses to reify either space into some sort of geographical allegory or moral symbol, and also by an understanding of human possibility less regionally or spatially bounded than Wade suggests.

We should read *Mine Boy*, I submit, not only as a country and city novel, but also as an attempt to map and understand the relationship between socio-material constraint and creative praxis, between necessity and what we could describe, by expanding Ernst Bloch's terms out a bit, as nonsynchronous possibility. Bloch associates the nonsynchronous with the uneven development of capitalism and with the existence of different temporalities and modes of production within a single moment. Though aware of the danger of the nonsynchronous image or idea as a mechanism of deflection and, even perhaps, the root of a kind of blood and soil fascism, Bloch goes on to note that the "factors of the nonsynchronous contradiction, which are... incapable of overturning present-day contradictions, nevertheless already recalled,

sentimentally or romantically, that wholeness and liveliness from which communism draws genuine material against alienation.”<sup>82</sup> By paying attention to and representing the nonsynchronous experience of its protagonist and of those around him, *Mine Boy* avoids the easy division between idyllic and virtuous country and corrupt city, proposing, instead, a much more interesting reading of the relationship between human actors and historical circumstances. In the novel, indeed, we see the emergence of various nonsynchronous social spaces, experimental collectivities, and non- or even anti-capitalist moral economies (no matter how limited) in both Johannesburg and Xuma’s own elegiac remembrances of his youth. What we have here, then, is not the proletarian novel as pastoral idealization, but rather the proletarian novel as the complex space in which the relationships between pre-capitalist forms of sociality are portrayed in their historical interaction with the anticipatory utopian relationships subordinated within and to capitalist constraints in the present.

At first glance, of course, the division between Xuma and Leah seems profound and seems to figure the division between a kind of rural loyalty and urban self-interest. After bribing a police officer for information, for instance, Leah agrees to his suggestion that she “not tell the others” about an upcoming raid. “I look after myself,” Leah explains. After sensing Xuma’s disappointment with her decision, Leah confronts him directly, maintaining that any attempt to “tell the others” about the raid would be foolish and would undermine her own source of information. “If I tell the others,” Leah explains, “the police will know we have been warned and that will be no good.”<sup>83</sup> Later on in the novel, Leah, in a similar moment, connects her supposed self-interestedness to the city itself, setting up an argument for a kind of urban pathology: “In the city it is like this: all the time you are fighting. . . . And you look only after yourself. If you do not you are finished. If you are soft everyone will spit in your face. They will rob you and cheat and betray you. So, to live here, you must be hard. Hard as stone.”<sup>84</sup> The novel then shifts to Xuma’s image of the countryside, which he himself opposes to Leah’s description of the city and to her “hard[ness].” For Xuma, indeed, the image of the countryside is not one of “fighting,” nor one of self-interest. Though Xuma acknowledges the capitalist pressures that forced him to flee the countryside, it remains, at least in Xuma’s memories, a space of collectivity and joy. Unlike those “fighting” in city, Xuma’s “people and all other people would be sitting in front of the huge communal fire now. They would be talking and dancing. And others would be singing. The young ones would be playing and the old ones watching.” Focusing once again on the city, Xuma concludes that “here it’s so different. No one trusted anyone else. Leah said it was always fighting.”<sup>85</sup> But, as Xuma soon learns, it isn’t.

Indeed, despite this separation between rural and urban values set up by characters, the division between country and city in *Mine Boy* is much less stark. The images of the self-interested and competitive space of the city, and, on a more limited level, Leah’s hardness, are problematized by recurring images of experimental urban collectivity and solidarity. Far from only being self-interested, Leah takes Xuma into her home

and takes care of him, sustaining him with food, drink, and shelter. In the first few pages of the chapter, indeed, Leah demands that Xuma be given “food” and a place to rest because “[h]e is tired and hungry.”<sup>86</sup> A similar relationship develops, again around the division and sharing of food, between Xuma and Nana, a fellow miner. Nana not only demands that Xuma eat with him, but also “divide[s] his food” and gives Xuma “half.” In the same scene, though, Nana provides Xuma with a piece of advice that is as non-revolutionary as Leah’s own sermons on self-interest, telling him his own exploitation will become easier to bear and that his alienation will eventually dissipate as he resigns himself to the demands of capitalism:

First there is a great fear, for you work and you work and there is nothing to see for it. And you look and you look and the more you look there is nothing to see. This brings fear. But tomorrow you think, well, there will be nothing to look for and you do not look so much. The fear is less then. And the day after you look even less, and after that even less, and in the end you do not look at all. Then all the fear goes. It is so.<sup>87</sup>

“I watched them,” Xuma explains to Nana, describing the eyes of the other men in the mine, “they are like the eyes of sheep.” Nana fatalistically acknowledges, even insists, on the inevitability of their abjection, responding simply, “Are we not all sheep that talk.”<sup>88</sup> Nana’s concern with Xuma’s wellbeing, though, reaches into and disrupts his more fatalistic pronouncements about accepting the status quo, rendering him a layered character, poised between the quiet acceptance of social and material workings of capitalism and a kind of humanism, a moral economy of the mine, that takes seriously those things which capitalism does not—namely, the physical wellbeing of the laborer. Soon after, for instance, Nana’s caring is juxtaposed with the management instructions Paddy gives to Xuma: “Sometimes the men will be lazy then you must use your fist and you must kick them. It is so here, that’s why I want a strong man.”<sup>89</sup>

Much like Nana’s advice to blindly accept what “is so” blindly, Leah’s gospel of self-interest conflicts with and is problematized by some of her own social practices, especially her commitment to a kind of Stockvelt collective. At one point in the novel, for instance, Leah opens her home to the Stockvelt, to a gathering of “women who sell beer.” For “if one is arrested,” she explains, “they all come together and collect money among themselves and bail out the arrested one. They are here to collect money for those who were arrested yesterday.”<sup>90</sup> Here, then, we see a habitual and conscious practice of working-class solidarity. And Leah’s engagement in it, of course, seems to conflict with her previous advice to Xuma to “look only after yourself.”

The values that Xuma locates in the countryside—collectivity and a commitment to a non-capitalist moral economy—are not entirely absent from the “corrupt” city, nor have they been undermined by the ostensibly inescapable urban milieu with all

of its various social pathologies and forms of alienation. For we see the same kinds of collectivity and the same commitment to a kind of non-capitalist moral economy, though still embedded within and in conflict with capitalist social and material relationships, that Xuma locates in his memories of the countryside refigured within the various experimental collectives of the city. The pre-capitalist countryside, with its lifestyle of subsistence production and its commitment to collectivity, provides Xuma with an incredibly important, if still complex and contradictory, image of a non-capitalist socio-material existence. However, the novel makes clear that this existence, though it survives as a memory and a kind of longing, is being driven out of existence by an accelerated and ongoing process of primitive accumulation. Xuma tells Eliza, for instance, that his home is “far away...Between two hills and a river. And it’s quiet. Not like here. When I think of it now I long for it. At one time we had many cattle but now there are only a few and the land is poor.”<sup>91</sup> The use of “[a]t one time” here signals a moment of violent historical transition, thereby pushing the ostensibly geographical divide between Xuma’s homeland and the city into a historical, temporal divide, and into a kind of longing. Xuma’s longing reaches across a violent historical transition, conflating geographical and temporal distance—or rather subordinating the former to the latter—in the register of a kind of autobiographical folktale.

Here, Abrahams foregrounds the fact that the South African countryside is being hollowed out by capitalism, and that its former inhabitants are being forced to migrate to the city in order to sustain themselves and their families. As Patrick Hogan explains, “Xuma was part of a massive exodus from the countryside that resulted from a series of measures taken by the South African government,” including the imposition of taxes that forced rural laborers to seek jobs in the mines and other urban industries. Of course, such measures were in line with a long history of black dispossession and proletarianization in South Africa.<sup>92</sup> In *The History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa*, V.L. Allen notes that, after the dispossession of black South Africans was codified into the 1913 Native Land Act and the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act, South African small producers were limited to native reserves, which occupied only nine percent of “the total land surface of the country.” The fixed amount of land allotted to South African small producers led to “soil erosion,” for there was “insufficient land to allow any of it to lie fallow and recover.” Recruiters from the mines made use of these insufficiencies, treating native reserves as “labor reservoirs for the mines.”<sup>93</sup> Xuma’s typicality as a rural-urban migrant laborer is concretized by further evidence of these expropriations in the novel. In a subsequent conversation with Johannes, Xuma hears of the “compound” that houses the mine boys, many of them displaced rural laborers. Most of these men, Johannes explains, “are not of the city, they come from the farms and some are from the land of the Portuguese and others are from Rhodesia. The white man fetched them. And those that are fetched must live in the compounds.”<sup>94</sup>

However, certain constrained spaces also witness a reemergence of the kind of social relationships that Xuma associates with a past rural lifestyle of subsistence

collectivity. Hoopvlei (Afrikaans for Hope Valley), for instance, is a resettlement camp in the “outlying district of Johannesburg,” which the novel’s narrator describes as “another of the white man’s ventures to get the natives and the Coloureds out of the towns...in the hope of killing Vredeorp and Malay camp.”<sup>95</sup> It is here, however, that Xuma finds “laughter, free and happy as in the old days on the farms.”<sup>96</sup> The sections of *Mine Boy* set in Hoopvlei, just like those set in Johannesburg or Malay Camp, foreground the impossibility of a mere return or flight to the countryside. Xuma describes the crowd at Hoopvlei, for instance, as talking “much of the farms for the man of Maisy’s friend came from the farms and loved the farms much. He talked of going back to the farms when he had money to buy a piece of land. But when he did so his woman looked at him as one would look at a child playing with water.”<sup>97</sup> Here, then, the longing for the pre-capitalist countryside runs into capitalist constraint, and yet the possibility emerges of reestablishing spaces that are governed by the same “laughter, free and happy” that Xuma and his fellow displaced laborers remember and desire.

Thus, *Mine Boy*, as it turns its narrative gaze towards the experience of alienation determined by capitalist production for the market, and towards the processes of dispossession and forced migration determined by capitalist primitive accumulation, refuses to liquidate the forms of non- or anti-capitalist sociality that Xuma associates with the utopian image of the countryside. Indeed, these images provide Xuma with the criteria against which to define his experience and his exploitation. Xuma’s idealization of the countryside provides him with a different image of social and material circumstances that is not easily brushed aside. Indeed, in a review of Williams’s *The Country and the City*, E.P. Thompson reminds us that far from being merely nostalgic and backward-looking, the retrospective stance taken by somebody like Xuma can be the lifeblood of oppositional, and even anti-capitalist, values. “For if capitalism is the basic economic process,” Thompson writes, “there has been evidence throughout (and this is the challenge which socialist theory makes) of *human* processes that are alternatives to capitalism.” In some sense, Thompson continues, these human processes, which are themselves a form of futurity, must necessarily take on a retrospective cast, especially for those who, like Xuma, have lived through transitions from pre-capitalist economic and social relations to capitalism proper:

We have to go on to ask: what form could a human protest take against an ongoing, all-triumphant economic process unless as “retrospect”? And it is exactly this defense—of use-values against money values, of affections and loyalties against the marketing of values, of idealized old community against new competition—that we find in some of the most interesting works of English literature.<sup>98</sup>

Thompson is himself an English historian and he’s reviewing Williams here, so

the focus on England is expected and fair. But these novels remind us that the transition to capitalism is far from a specifically English, or indeed a specifically European, historical experience, nor is the retrospective experience of looking back towards pre-capitalist, and usually rural, economic formations in order to imagine, however partially, a non-capitalist future. *Mine Boy*, then, leads us to understand its characters' longing for the countryside as essentially a longing for the non- or pre-capitalist, as a kind of Romantic anti-capitalism. For as Michael Löwy notes, the "essential characteristic of Romantic anti-capitalism is a *thorough critique of modern industrial...civilization* (including the process of production and work) *in the name of certain pre-capitalist social and cultural values*."<sup>99</sup> According to Löwy, though, this Romantic dimension is by no means absent from Marxism, and it, indeed, gives to it a broader moral base from which to critique capitalism, a focus on "the degradation and de-humanization of the worker."<sup>100</sup> In *Mine Boy*, this Romantic dimension, which often asserts itself in moments of humanist concern—in a concern for the wellbeing of fellow human beings that is not subsumable within capitalist social relations as such—cannot be relegated to the past. Instead, it reappears in the mine, in Leah's place, and in the segregated enclave of Hoopvlei. *Mine Boy*, then, is not a proletarian pastoral, but a novel of the nonsynchronous. Ultimately, though, *Mine Boy* advances a nonsynchronism that chronicles not only the persistence of the past in the present, but also the prefiguration of the possible future in both of these moments.

These nonsynchronous moments provide Xuma with oppositional values and forms of experimental collectivity, but they also throw his own exploitation at the hands of capital into sharp relief, allowing him to read his work in the mines against his pre-capitalist labor in the countryside. Indeed, his statement to Nana about the sheepishness of his fellow miners is occasioned not only by the complacency that Xuma observes; it is also the product of Xuma's coming into contact with the condition of propertylessness that characterizes the worker under capitalism, and, more precisely, with alienated labor. Watching his coworkers move sand, for instance, Xuma is struck by their lack of immediate reward: "And for all their sweating and hard breathing and for the redness of their eyes and the emptiness of their stare there would be nothing to show." "It was this," we are told, "that frightened Xuma. This seeing of nothing for a man's work. This mocking of a man by the sand that was always wet and warm; by the mine-dump that would not grow; by the hard eyes of the white man who told them to hurry up."<sup>101</sup> In the *Grundrisse*, Marx explains the source of the distress that someone like Xuma would feel: though pre-capitalist relationships, like all modes of production, are mediated through specific social relations, they share a common thread of immediacy, basing themselves not only on the presupposition of the laborer's ownership of the conditions of her subsistence, but also, and by extension, on the immediacy of bodily need. In such modes of production, Marx continues, "*Property . . . means no more than a human being's relation to his natural conditions of production as belonging to him, as his, as presupposed along with his own*



being; relations to them as *natural presuppositions* of his self, which only form, so to speak, his extended body.”<sup>102</sup> In the mine, of course, the natural presuppositions that Marx describes as a kind of “extended body” are almost entirely absent. Their absence speaks not only to the separation of the producer from the conditions of production wrought by capitalist primitive accumulation, but also to the subordination of production for subsistence to production for the capitalist market. Xuma’s own sustenance is mediated by his alienated wage labor and the capitalist market itself. The various nonsynchronous moments in *Mine Boy* oppose themselves to this set of social relations, even while existing within them. These moments foreground and respond directly to bodily necessity, placing the importance of food and shelter over and above the individualizing and self-isolating logic—and, more importantly, the capitalist logic of production for exchange—that supposedly structures the entirety of the capitalist city.

As Thompson tells us in his essay on the moral economy, the action of the eighteenth-century crowd, even when it took the form of the food riot, was based on some sort of “legitimizing notion.”<sup>103</sup> Popular action, he continues, was not merely “spasmodic,” an unthinking revolt against hunger, but was, rather, “grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of the several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions... was the usual occasion for direct action.”<sup>104</sup> We can see a fairly consistent, if diffuse, kind of moral economy that runs throughout both Xuma’s remembrances of the countryside and through the various portrayals of experimental collectivity, most of them based around food and shelter. And the “legitimizing notion” underlying all of these nonsynchronous moments is the recognition of, and attempt to fulfill, bodily needs.<sup>105</sup> All of the passages I focus on above, for example, are passages in which the persistence of various forms of collectivity and human concern overwhelm, go against, or problematize the capitalist present. And these passages point not only to the image of the pre-capitalist countryside so cherished by Xuma and others, but also to the possibility of a non-capitalist future. They all, from Leah’s contradiction of her own gospel of self-interest to Nana’s care for Xuma, refuse the amorality of capitalist production and capitalist social relations more generally. Marx, for instance, in the first volume of *Capital*, explains that “Capital cares nothing for the length of life of labor-power. All that concerns it is simply and solely the maximum of labor-power, that can be rendered fluent in a working-day. It attains this end by shortening the extent of the laborer’s life.”<sup>106</sup> These disparate moments of non-capitalist care and collectivity are concretized and, indeed, made a point of action and commitment in the final scene of the novel. Johannes and Chris actualize this moral economy or nonsynchronous humanism by keeping the collapsing mine “up with their bodies” so that their fellow laborers “could get out.”<sup>107</sup> After this, Xuma, and later Paddy, not to mention the bulk of the black workers in the mine, take a stand for the wellbeing

of the human and against the wellbeing of capital. Refusing the manager's demand that they all return to work, Xuma demands that the company "fix the place up first!" "We warned them about it. They said it was all right. Now two men are dead! Good men! Let them fix it up first then we will go down!" This collective refusal is immediately connected with a kind of humanism that overrides the demands of capitalist exploitation. "We are men!" Xuma shouts. "It does not matter if our skins are black! We are not cattle to throw away our lives. We are men!"<sup>108</sup>

The nonsynchronous humanism that reappears throughout the text, which remains, with its non-market concern for the subsistence and health of the needy proletarian body, out of step with capitalism, is actively brought into what Bloch would describe as a kind of "militant optimism," a particular kind of "attitude" to the "undecided material" of history, "which can however be decided through work and concretely mediated action." Bloch's prime example of this attitude, which has not yet, he makes clear, fully succeeded, is "the revolutionary decision of the proletariat which today commits itself to the final struggle of liberation, a decision of the subjective in alliance with the objective factors of economic-material necessity."<sup>109</sup> The strike scene toward the end of *Mine Boy* embodies this shift into a militant optimism. At first glance, this scene appears to be an all-too-rapid attempt at narrative closure; it seems, in fact, to embody the ostensibly hackneyed conversion narrative of the proletarian novel (a common caricature of the proletarian novel). Bloch connects the possibility of struggling for a different future, though, to a complex and dynamic understanding of historical motion and of reality as such. For "as long as the reality has not become a completely determined one," Bloch explains, "as long as it possesses still unclosed possibilities, in the shape of new shoots and new spaces for development, then no absolute objection to utopia can be raised by merely factual reality."<sup>110</sup> Refusing both static depictions of the country and the city, along with static depictions of human beings as mere illustrations of one space or the other, *Mine Boy* illuminates these "new shoots and new spaces of development," drawing them out of Xuma's own understanding of the countryside and the other nonsynchronous, or non-capitalist, forms of sociality present across the country and city in twentieth-century South Africa. Indeed, in rendering his characters, Abrahams refuses the kind of "Idealist Marxism" denounced by Sartre in *Search for a Method*: a mechanistic materialism that claims that, "entirely determined by prior circumstances—that is, in the final analysis, by economic conditions—man is a passive product, a sum of conditioned reflexes."<sup>111</sup> All of the characters in *Mine Boy* are constrained by material circumstances and the objective socio-material relationships of capitalism, yet they are not in any way reducible to passive products. Instead, they retain, revise, and bring into being forms of sociality, and indeed various kinds of moral economies, that are at odds with, if not entirely opposed to, the capitalist drive for profit.

#### IV. Closure and Praxis in the Proletarian Realist Novel

Both *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* conclude by refusing any sort of narrative closure, and, even more importantly, by foregrounding the necessity of continued political commitment. As Perry notes, “Kang’s novel famously ends not with a successful working-class struggle, or with an eloquent denouement wrapping up all” its “loose ends.” *From Wōnso Pond*, instead, “concludes with...the precipitous death of its proletarian heroine, and an impassioned authorial interjection.”<sup>112</sup> Similarly, *Mine Boy* ends not with a successful strike, but rather with police violence, Paddy’s capture, and Xuma’s impending arrest.<sup>113</sup> And yet, in each novel present defeat breeds future possibility.

At first glance, Kang’s concluding interjection certainly seems grim: “These human problems! More than anything we need to find a solution to them. People have fought for hundreds and thousands of years in an effort to solve them. But still no one has come up with a solution! And if that’s the case, just which human begins will actually solve these problems in the future? Just who?”<sup>114</sup> After reading Kang’s novel, however, we can see that her questions here are not without answers. The collective “who” longed for here is already prefigured in the various manifestations of collective proletarian force throughout *From Wōnso Pond*, from the workers who watch “the sun rise” and the “factory girls over at the rice mill” who take “control of the siren” and get “violent” during the strike toward the end of the novel,<sup>115</sup> to the relatively non-class-conscious, or not fully class-conscious, peasants who come together to defend Kaettong’s rice from Tōkho.<sup>115</sup> In Kang’s novel, indeed, there is an incipient element of futurity, and this futurity is prefigured in the political commitment of workers like Sōnbi, Ch’ōtchae, and Kannan, and in the struggle toward consciousness, toward self-understanding and collective totalization, inaugurated by the appearance of short proletarian pamphlets, “funny scraps of paper,” among factory girls.<sup>116</sup> Sōnbi’s death at the hands of capital and Ch’ōtchae’s blinding and paralyzing grief over it at the end of the novel do not erase these other moments of collective engagement and proletarian education. Kang’s direct address places a sense of responsibility on the reader who has now, like Sōnbi and Ch’ōtchae, been educated (by the novel’s own narrative totalization) to understand the connections between capitalist exploitation in the countryside and the city and the collective path to revolution.

*Mine Boy* ends with a similar turn to future commitment, as Xuma rejects both his original impulse to “run away” from the strike-breaking police and Ma Plank’s advice to “[g]o to another city,” deciding, instead, to join Paddy in jail and to devote himself to a life of political engagement.<sup>117</sup> “It is good,” he tells Ma Plank and Maisy, “that a black man should tell the white people how we feel. And also, a black man must tell the black people how they feel and what they want. These things I must do, then I will feel like a man.”<sup>118</sup> Here, then, the very possibility of humanity, of Xuma feeling “like a man,” is yoked to a project of proletarian resistance and education, to a project not only of making demands on behalf of “black people,” but also of helping them to

realize and clarify “what they want.” Xuma’s commitment here, though, is not only to the “black people,” but also to fellow laborers, whether white or black, like Paddy. “The Red One’s in jail,” Xuma explains. “I must go there too.”<sup>119</sup>

By expanding out the canon of literary proletarianism to include these realist novels of the country and the city, these realist novels of third world proletarians coming to class consciousness and working toward political maturity, we can begin to understand not only the thematic linkages uniting proletarian novels across the globe, but also the importance of “ideal-type” realism to the project of narrative totalization and explanation. Instead of reading realism as an inevitably backward literary imposition that stands in the way of proletarian radicalism, we can begin to understand the turn to realism as a conscious aesthetic choice made by proletarian writers in order to totalize and explain the social relations—always uneven and nonsynchronous, always in conflict with pre-capitalist and emergent post-capitalist social relationships—that make up the capitalist mode of production.<sup>120</sup> Because realism insists on the lived sociality and the subjective experience of these ostensibly abstract and objective relations, it gives us a proletarianism that insists on historical specificity and historical struggle at the level of the individual and of the collective. Realism can explain the development of class consciousness and of communist political organization not as certainties, but as lived realities, as struggles, in process. The theory of class struggle developed in *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* does not paper over historical specificity with some sort of arch-theory of capitalism’s structural relationships; rather, these relationships are filtered through typical bodies and consciousnesses that attempt to grasp capitalist social relations and bend them toward different futures. For as Sartre argues, there is no political potential in Marxism without this attention to the lived reality of exploitation in all of its historical complexity:

If the material conditions which govern human relations are to become real conditions of *praxis*, they must be lived in the particularity of particular situations. The diminution of buying power would never provoke workers to make economic demands if they did not feel the diminution in their flesh in the form of a need or of a fear based on bitter experiences.<sup>121</sup>

The proletarian realist novel takes this “particularity” seriously as something to be both represented and investigated, as something to be narratively theorized. Instead of exerting some sort of blind didactic force, such proletarianism remains in touch with and cognizant of historically real possibilities and obstacles to proletarian revolution, and the historically real and difficult work that will possibly bring it into being. Indeed, as Lukács argues, a properly dialectical conception of reality, toward which the proletarian novel ought to be working at all times, is only available to us when we grasp both the incipient radical tendencies present in any given historical moment and, at the same time, the lived “obstacles” to “the upward course of the revolutionary movement.”<sup>122</sup>

As we’ve seen, both *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* attempt to portray these

struggles. The “smooth” path of class struggle that Sinch’öl imparts to Ch’ötchae is disrupted and disappointed by Sinch’öl’s project of self-rescue through betrayal and by the real, concrete, and particular way in which the demands of capital act on the bodies of even revolutionary workers like Sönbi. Similarly, the strike scene in Abrahams’s novel speaks to the necessity of cross-racial solidarity based in the needs of the proletarian body, and also to the way in which existing relationships of anti-black racism in South Africa stand in the way of this solidarity, as they so often did in the non-fictional strikes that rocked the area, and often pitted white and non-white mineworkers against each other, from the early 1910s to the historical moment that Abrahams investigates.<sup>123</sup> However, both novels refuse to fetishize these moment of failure into some sort of inevitability or guiding fate. Instead, these moments of failure are obstacles to be represented, understood, and eventually transformed through the conscious work and action of the proletariat. It is the proletarian realism of both *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* that give us this portrayal of the future as ultimately unclosed. As proletarian realist novels, they both narrate what Lukács in “Narrate or Describe?” terms the “poetry of life”: the “poetry of men in struggle, the poetry of the turbulent, active interaction of men.”<sup>124</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, these novels perform not only a diagnostic function—linking accelerated primitive accumulation in the countryside and urban exploitation to the unequal social relationships that make up capitalism—but also what we could describe as a recuperative function, rediscovering anew the importance of proletarian agency and collective praxis by portraying reality as the “dialectical interaction” of subjects and objective constraint. This refusal to, in the words of Lukács, “inflexibly and mechanistically . . . split subject from object,” provides the groundwork for the realist novel—with its commitment to representing the interaction between human agents and the social and historical pressures in which they act and by which their projects are constrained—as we know it.<sup>125</sup> This refusal ultimately allows both novels to transcend the equally limited and limiting images of the idyllic countryside and the modern or modernist city, basing their hope for a more human future not in urban modernization or the development of the productive forces, but rather in the human project of developing class consciousness. *From Wōnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* resituate the country and the city, and indeed the shared theme of rural-urban migration, within the frame of human history, thereby repopulating these ostensibly static, but now understood as dynamic, spaces with human agents and opening them up to the possibility of collective praxis. The novels work through Williams’s dialectical conception of country and city some thirty years before he writes it down. For as Williams reminds us, if “we take only the images,” and not the lived experience of the country and the city under capitalist pressure, “we can swing from one to the other, but without illumination.”<sup>126</sup> In the end, it is neither the city that will “save the country nor the country the city. Rather the long struggle within both,” the struggle against the demands and exploitative processes of capitalism must “become a general struggle.”<sup>127</sup> In the proletarian realist novel of

the country and the city, then, retreat gives way to engagement and flight gives way to the possibility of a fight. In *From Wŏnso Pond* and *Mine Boy* the future, in both the country and the city, remains unclosed, for it is not presented, in the words of Bloch, as that which “come[s] over man as fate,” but, rather, as that which is able to be transformed through “a combination of courage and knowledge.”<sup>128</sup>

## Notes

1. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT P, 1986) 196. Thanks to Jim Holstun for scholarly guidance and for introducing me to the work of Kang and Abrahams. Thanks also to my partner, Ariana Nash, for her comments and support; to Willis McCumber for his incisive suggestions; to the two anonymous reviewers for *Mediations* for their advice; and to Joe Valente, Sean Pears, and other colleagues at UB for their comments on earlier drafts of this project. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my comrades in the Living Stipend Movement, who continue to organize and fight for the subsistence of all graduate students at UB.
2. Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971) 124.
3. Kang Kyōng-ae (1906-1944) was born to a poor peasant family in Songhwa in the Hwanghae province, now North Korea. Her farm-laborer father died when she was three, and Kang's mother's remarriage two years after to a man living in Jangyeon proved to be both a source of financial stability and a stark introduction to gendered exploitation, for both Kang and her mother were treated as unwaged domestic workers. After attending school in Pyongyang and Seoul, Kang settled in the politically unstable region of Hailin, northern Manchuria, in 1927. Here, she came into sustained contact with the Communist Party of Korea and Korean nationalists, both of whom were engaged in struggles against Japanese colonial rule. She was also brought face to face with the unevenness of Japan's imperialist capitalism, which depended upon the collaboration of Korean and, in Manchuria, non-Korean landlords. A socialist, Kang lived a life of practical political commitment, establishing a night school for poor children and participating in the development a local branch of the socialist-feminist Kunuhōe in Jangyeon in 1928. Settling in Manchuria again in 1929—this time, in Kando—Kang began to devote herself to writing fiction. *From Wōnso Pond (In'gan munje)*, which draws on her own experience as an unwaged domestic servant and as a day laborer in In'chōn, was serialized in *Tonga ilbo* in 1934. With the aid of her husband, it was published as a monograph in 1949, five years after Kang's death. For more extensive biographies of Kang, see Sang-Kyung Lee's *Introduction to The Underground Village: Short Stories by Kang Kyeong-ae* (London: Honford Star, 2018) viii-xvi; Sonja M. Kim "Introduction: Crossing Borders—Manchuria, Class, and Gender in the Works of Kang Kyōng-ae," *Imperatives of Culture: Selected Essays on Korean History, Literature, and Society from the Japanese Colonial Era*, ed. C. Hanscom, W. Lew, and Y. Ryu (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2013) 132-136; and Yung-Hee Kim's biographical note on Kang in *Gendered Landscapes: Short Fiction by Modern and Contemporary Korean Women Novelists*, ed. and trans. Yung-Hee Kim (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2017) 58-62.
4. Peter Abrahams (1919-2017) was born in Vrededorp, in the city of Johannesburg. His father was an Ethiopian miner and his mother was a Colored domestic worker. After the death of his father, Abrahams's mother struggled to find work and support the family, and he spent a significant portion of his childhood with relatives like his Aunt Mattie, a brewer of illegal beer and, in all likelihood, the model for the character Leah in *Mine Boy*. Abrahams was attracted to the South African left because of what he felt to be its humanist promises of future equality and economic security for all South Africans, its commitment to interracial solidarity, and its materialist analysis of South African racism. During his time in South Africa, though, Abrahams became increasingly upset by the infighting he witnessed among Marxists, and with what he felt to be a general attitude of disinterestedness on the left toward the actual needs of the masses. After giving up his job as a teacher in the impoverished Cape Flats region in Cape Town,

Abrahams left South Africa in 1939, never to return, and moved to London in 1941. Abrahams's second and most widely read novel, *Mine Boy*, which draws from his experiences as a proletarian and as the relative and friend of other proletarians, including native mineworkers, women brewers, and domestic workers, in and around Johannesburg, was published in 1946. Abrahams relocated to Jamaica in 1956, continuing to work as a writer and a journalist. He was murdered in his home in 2017. Jean-Philippe Wade, "Peter Abrahams," *Literature and Politics Today: The Political Nature of Modern Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2015) 1-2. The most detailed accounts of Abrahams's life are to be found in his two autobiographies: *Tell Freedom* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) and *The Coyaba Chronicles: Reflections on the Black Experience in the 20th Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2000).

5. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973) 288, 287.
6. Barbara Foley, "The Proletarian Novel," *A Companion to the Modern American Novel, 1900-1950*, ed. John T. Matthews (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 357-359.
7. Michael Denning, "The Novelists' International," *The Novel: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 721.
8. Denning, "The Novelists' International" 723.
9. Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 262.
10. Kim, "Introduction: Crossing Borders" 134.
11. Ntongela Masilela, "Peter Abrahams in the Modern African World," *Current Writing* 16.2 (2004): 34-35.
12. Foley, "The Proletarian Novel" 12.
13. Foley, *Radical Representations* 7.
14. *Radical Representations* 253, 274.
15. *Radical Representations* 254.
16. Neil Larsen, "The 'Boom' Novel and the Cold War in Latin America," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38.3 (1992): 771.
17. *Radical Representations* 225.
18. Stacy I. Morgan makes much of the loss of faith in, or, to use his own terms, "revolutionary skepticism" about, the novel among social realist writers in *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2004) 239-301. For more on the debates among proletarian writers, especially in the U.S., concerning the efficacy of the novel form, literary realism, and formal experimentalism, see Foley, *Radical Representation* 86-169, 249-283. For a theory of proletarian literature that insists on formal realism, see Georg Lukács, "The Novels of Willi Bredel" and "Reportage or Portrayal?" *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT P, 1983) 23-32, 45-75.
19. *Radical Representations* 54.
20. Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkey (London and New York: Verso, 2007) 33.
21. Literary-historical surveys, collections of critical essays, and special journal issues on realism abound. See, for instance, Pam Morris's *Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); "Peripheral Realisms," ed. Jed Esty, Colleen Lye, and Joe Cleary, *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012); and "Worlding Realisms," ed. Lauren M.E. Goodlad, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49.2 (2016).



22. Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015) 51.
23. Esty and Lye also attempt a revaluation of realism. But their attempted revaluation is similarly problematic. Indeed, rather than dealing with realism as a specific literary form, and thus calling for critical attention to be paid to various texts of third world realism, Esty and Lye suggest a “retrospective critical operation” of “[r]ecoding peripheral modernisms as realist.” See “Peripheral Realisms Now” 281.
24. WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development* 72.
25. Larsen, “The ‘Boom’ Novel” 771.
26. *Combined and Uneven Development* 77.
27. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove P, 1963) 220.
28. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* 221.
29. *Combined and Uneven Development* 50.
30. Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964) 89.
31. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin, 1979) 95.
32. Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2007) 48.
33. *Wretched of the Earth* 227.
34. *Combined and Uneven Development* 62.
35. Williams, “Country and the City in the Modern Novel,” *Pretexts* 2.1 (1990): 13.
36. Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2015) 142-143.
37. *The Country and the City* 304. Here, Williams is referencing the relatively stagist model of class struggle and political-economic development advanced by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Paul Sweezy (New York: Monthly Review, 1964) 9: “The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.” As Holstun notes in an essay on Marx’s relationship to the Russian peasant commune or Mir, “‘Idiocy’ may retain the Greek sense of ‘private, personal, separate,’ but that does not eliminate the condescension.” Indeed, in his pre-1870s work, Marx tended to critique the peasantry for attempting to maintain their holdings and, by doing so, for holding back the development of the productive forces. As Holstun notes, “in his later writings, Marx himself abandoned” this “city-centered modernization narrative,” for “a theory of historical transition emphasizing the relations of production rather than the autonomously developing forces, historically particular class struggles rather than the universal and inevitable unfolding of a developmental sequence.” Holstun continues, “Marx’s new theory of history brought along with it a new respect for, even fascination with, peasant smallholders who retain the means of production.” Holstun, “Communism, George Hill and the Mir: Was Marx a Nineteenth-Century Winstanleyan?,” *Prose Studies* 22.2 (1999): 125. For a fuller picture of Marx’s late-career transition, see also Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2010) and *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review, 1983).
38. Samuel Perry, “The Context and Contradictions of Kang Kyöng-ae’s Novel *In’gan munje*” *Korean Studies* 37.1 (2013): 100.

39. In the novel itself, instances of proletarian education and organized proletarian self-activity do occur in the city, and the various instances of narrative mirroring I pursue in this section of the essay depend on the move from country to city. My argument is not that Kang ignores the political possibilities opened up by this migration under capitalist pressure and by urban life more generally. It is clear in the novel that the city offers, along with different manifestations of capitalist exploitation, various forms of class-conscious experimental collectivity and various opportunities for proletarian self-activity that are not immediately available in the countryside. In the city, indeed, we get not only the Korean Communist Party, but also the disruptive proletarian technique of the industrial strike. Rather, my argument is that Kang refuses—unlike Sinch'öl, her typification of a kind of insulated and ill-informed, though not unimportant, petty bourgeois intellectual—to write capitalist exploitation in the Korean countryside out of the equation. The very structure of *From Wönso Pond* depends on drawing fairly direct lines between rural and urban exploitation.
40. Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland: PM, 2014) 212. Park offers a historical overview of accelerated capitalist primitive accumulation in the Korean countryside, noting that “the . . . class structure of Korean rural society [became] increasingly bipolarized [after] Japan’s implementation of the rice production increase policy (1920–34). This policy’s export-oriented industrialization of Korean agriculture led to the concentration of agricultural capital in the hands of a small number of large-scale landlords and, correspondingly, brought about a decline in the number of owner cultivators and semi-peasants.” See Park, *The Proletarian Wave* 145.
41. Kang Kyöng-ae, *From Wönso Pond*, trans. Samuel Perry (New York: Feminist Press, 2009) 222.
42. *From Wönso Pond* 218.
43. *From Wönso Pond* 232.
44. *From Wönso Pond* 219.
45. *From Wönso Pond* 232.
46. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1993) 953.
47. *From Wönso Pond* 201.
48. *From Wönso Pond* 81.
49. *The Country and the City* 31–32.
50. *From Wönso Pond* 62.
51. *From Wönso Pond* 82.
52. *From Wönso Pond* 178.
53. *From Wönso Pond* 80. Ruth Barraclough explains that much of the factory girl literature produced by Korean proletarian writers, and especially the texts produced by male proletarian writers, “simplified the complex experience of factory girls into tales of seduction and rescue,” while Kang’s novel “shows how one might appropriate the resources of the social imaginary for women.” See Ruth Barraclough, “Tales of Seduction: Factory Girls in Korean Proletarian Literature,” *Positions* 14.2 (2006): 364. Drawing from and extending Barraclough, one could argue that Kang’s novel goes beyond mere appropriation, actively critiquing the individualist assumptions of a politics based on rescue through the figure of Sinch'öl.
54. *From Wönso Pond* 42.
55. *From Wönso Pond* 92.
56. *From Wönso Pond* 78.

57. *From Wönso Pond* 215.
58. *From Wönso Pond* 266.
59. *From Wönso Pond* 102.
60. *From Wönso Pond* 102-103.
61. *From Wönso Pond* 103.
62. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London and New York: Verso, 2002) 67. Moving beyond Wood's focus on the English countryside, Vivek Chibber makes a similar observation about the top down transition to capitalism in colonized societies. The "expansion of capital's economic logic," he explains, "may not require...deep cultural transformations." Rather, capitalism is often able to "meet its basic needs by relying on the very cultural forms" that seem "inimical to it—those typical and traditional political economies, suffused with outdated forms of social hierarchy and subordination." See Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2013) 52.
63. "In this land of ours called Choson, ah...farmers make up over eighty percent of the population. The truth is that the destiny of our great nation has always depended on the fortunes our farmers." *From Wönso Pond* 102.
64. *From Wönso Pond* 216.
65. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967) 714.
66. Marx, *Capital* 767.
67. *From Wönso Pond* 92.
68. *From Wönso Pond* 104.
69. *From Wönso Pond* 118.
70. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* 3.
71. Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, 233.
72. *From Wönso Pond* 265.
73. *From Wönso Pond* 264.
74. *From Wönso Pond* 261.
75. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume I, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London and New York: Verso, 2004) 233.
76. This relationship of dependency does not stop at the bounds of the field or the factory. It also structures specific instances of sexual exploitation in Kang's novel. Indeed, Sönbi's dependency leads her not only to Tökhö's house as a domestic laborer, but also, after Tohko rapes her, as a concubine. Before Sönbi is taken into Tökhö's house, Kannan migrates to the city to escape the same fate. And we see similar instances of sexual violence in the factories in the novel. Indeed, it is implied that the bonuses promised to the factory girls are often dependent upon their sexual submission to the factory managers. See *From Wönso Pond* 128, 235, and 263. Because of Kang's attention to sexual extortion and its relationship to capitalism, *From Wönso Pond* demands a reading as a literary project of feminist-socialist totalization. For work that advances such a reading, see Park 196-231 and Barraclough.
77. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 122.
78. Perry, "Context and Contradictions" 117.
79. *From Wönso Pond* 269.

80. Michael Wade, "South Africa's First Proletarian Writer," *The South African Novel in English*, ed. Kenneth Parker. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978) 96.
81. Wade, "South Africa's First Proletarian Writer" 98.
82. Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," *New German Critique* 11.11 (1977): 35. In this essay, indeed, Bloch advises caution. For though nonsynchronous contradictions can point, by locating the traces of a more humane future in the past, to unfulfilled possibilities in residual forms of life, these contradictions are easily preyed upon and turned rightward by reactionary political formations.
83. Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (New York: Collier, 1970) 30.
84. Abrahams, *Mine Boy* 58.
85. *Mine Boy* 60.
86. *Mine Boy* 11.
87. *Mine Boy* 51.
88. *Mine Boy* 51.
89. *Mine Boy* 54.
90. *Mine Boy* 56. The proletarian stakes of the Stockvelt are brought to the fore even more forcefully in Abrahams's first autobiography. Here, Abrahams's describes the collective as a "trade union of the women who deal in illicit liquor. Each pays a weekly contribution. The total amount thus collected is given to a different member each week. The union also helped arrested members. Often, a well-known 'Skokiaan Queen' was sent to prison without the option of a fine. In such cases the *Stokveld* helped with the home and children till the member came out of jail." See Abrahams, *Tell Freedom* 118-119.
91. *Mine Boy* 32.
92. Patrick Hogan, "Allegories of Political Maturity: Labor, Marxism, and the ANC in Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 6.2 (1999): 43.
93. V.L. Allen, *The History of Black Mine Workers in South Africa*, Volume I (West Yorkshire: The Moor Press, 1992) 216, 220, and 223.
94. *Mine Boy* 42.
95. *Mine Boy* 103-104.
96. *Mine Boy* 105.
97. *Mine Boy* 105.
98. E.P. Thompson, "Country and City," *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York: New Press, 1994) 250.
99. Michael Löwy, "The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization," *Theory and Society* 16.1 (1987): 891.
100. Löwy, "The Romantic and the Marxist Critique" 894.
101. *Mine Boy* 50.
102. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1973) 491.
103. E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Customs in Common* (New York: New Press, 1991) 188.
104. Thompson, "The Moral Economy" 185, 188.
105. Thompson touches directly on this relationship between the moral economy of the poor and the needy proletarian body in his longer review essay on the concept. See "The Moral Economy Reviewed," *Customs*

- in *Common*, 259-352.
106. *Capital* 265.
  107. *Mine Boy* 186.
  108. *Mine Boy* 187.
  109. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* 199.
  110. *The Principle of Hope* 197.
  111. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968) 85.
  112. "Context and Contradictions" 100-101.
  113. *Mine Boy* 188.
  114. *From Wönso Pond* 269. Rather than existing outside the bounds of literary realism, the direct address with which Kang concludes her novel may be described as a kind of self-aware performance of the experience of reading a realist text. See Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1977) 38-66.
  115. *From Wönso Pond* 240, 95.
  116. *From Wönso Pond* 219.
  117. *Mine Boy* 189.
  118. *Mine Boy* 190.
  119. *Mine Boy* 189.
  120. In *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature* (Chicago and Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991), James Murphy gives us a history of the development of proletarian literature that keeps faith with its commitment to realism as a project, not a Party directive. As Murphy shows, the commitment to realism was the product of international debates among proletarian writers, especially in light of their interpretations of Marx's and Engels's then newly discovered writings on realism. See especially 1-104 and 191-195.
  121. Sartre, *Search for a Method* 97.
  122. Lukács, "Willi Bredel" 27.
  123. *Mine Boy's* publication in 1946 coincides with one of the largest strikes of black mineworkers in South African history. As Ronald Young notes, "Nearly 1,000 black workers," led by the African Mine Workers Union, "struck, completely or partially shutting down 13 mines." Up against intense police violence, the strike failed. See Young, "Miners' Strike: South Africa 1946," *St. James Encyclopedia of Labor History Worldwide*, Volume I, ed. Neil Schlager, Willie Thompson, and Daniel Nelson (St. James Press, 2004) 638. See also Allen 358-425.
  124. Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" 126.
  125. Lukács, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. Esther Leslie (London and New York: Verso, 2000) 51, 49.
  126. *The Country and the City* 298.
  127. *The Country and the City* 301.
  128. *The Principle of Hope* 198.



## **The Historical Novel in Peru: José María Arguedas' *Yawar Fiesta***

**Ericka Beckman**

In Latin American literary studies, the flourishing of realism well into the second half of the 20th century has often been considered a sign of the region's belated literary (and economic) development, and inability to find an authentic continental voice. According to this story, realist literary currents such as indigenismo and neo-indigenismo, the 'novela de la tierra' or socialist realism employed devices that were both aesthetically outmoded and naïve, especially in contrast with the high modernism of the Boom generation. Carlos Fuentes remarks, for example, that up until the arrival of the "new novel" he champions, Latin American literature had been trapped in a naturalistic mode that made it "more like a document of protest than real creation."<sup>1</sup> The critic Gerald Martin, in turn, quips that the Peruvian novelist Ciro Alegría's epic realist novel *Ancho y ajeno es el mundo* (Broad and Alien is the World), published in 1941, is "one of Latin America's best 19th century novels."<sup>2</sup> The assumption here is that the proliferation of realisms well into the 20th century in Latin America marks the region as out of date according to some ideal (European) progression of forms.

Such preferences for modernism over realism are not restricted to Latin America. As Colleen Lye, Jed Esty and Joe Cleary have argued in a special issue of *MLQ* on "peripheral realisms," the privileging of modernism over realism as pertains to the former Third World needs to be periodized and put to new scrutiny. As Lye and Esty show, the preference for peripheral modernisms over realisms corresponds with a Cold War script that associated modernism with (Western) freedom, and realism with (Soviet) conformity, overlooking the richness of realism as a formal mode.<sup>3</sup> And as Joe Cleary shows, almost all discussions of the relationship between realism and modernism rely on European periodizations. While it is perhaps true that realism ran out of steam with larger crises of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, allowing modernism to gain a better grasp of history, the same is not necessarily true in other parts of the world, which while developing in capitalism, do not experience

the same crises in the same way.<sup>4</sup> In this manner, necessitates approaches beyond classic European case: “(w)e need, but lack, comprehensive theories and historical atlases of twentieth-century realism.”<sup>5</sup>

My contribution to the discussions of peripheral realisms opened by Lye, Esty and Cleary is to posit something like a resurgence of the realist historical novel in mid-20th century Latin America, as part of an attempt to narrate and give form to wide-scale capitalist transitions in the region, especially in their rural-agrarian guises. If, as Fredric Jameson has argued, glossing György Lukács’ *The Historical Novel*, the realist novel is “historically a narrative form generated by the passage of the old order to a bourgeois society, as well as the representation of that historical passage,” why shouldn’t realism be reborn under transitions to capitalism in different parts of the world, even when occurring at a different date and with different contours?<sup>6</sup>

Like the 19th-century Western European novels studied by Lukács, 20th-century Latin American literature is marked by an epic streak that attempts to narrate wide-scale transitions under capitalism. Works ranging from the novels composing José Lins do Rego’s “sugar cane cycle” and Jorge Amado’s “cacao cycle” in Northeastern Brazil, to Ciro Alegría and José María Arguedas’ realist epics of indigenous dispossession in Peru might be recharacterized as historical novels, a genre that, as Perry Anderson has already suggested, gained a new lease on life in the Third World.<sup>7</sup> To no small degree, the resurgence of the historical novel in mid-twentieth-century Latin America (along with, I would hazard, other parts of the world), attempts to narrate the massive, though always uneven, incorporation of predominantly agrarian societies into commodity relations.

Sensing this world-historical shift, novelists like the Peruvian José María Arguedas (1911-1969), considered below, reinvented the historical novel in Latin America. In what follows, I argue that Arguedas—who is today vaunted for his insights into the particularities of Quechua-speaking indigenous cultures—was in fact a realist who conceived of his project in a manner quite consonant with Lukács’ conceptualization of the historical novel as an (always partial) expression of a social totality under capitalism. Against the widespread assumption that realism—and on a wider level, Marxism—flattens the cultural and historical particularities of Andean society, I examine how Arguedas’ novel *Yawar Fiesta* (1941) throws those particularities into relief through its patient attention to constant historical movement. Finally, I show how realism allows Arguedas to express a vision of indigenous people and belief systems as themselves subject to historical transformation, a vision that separates his realist project in *Yawar Fiesta* from Latin America’s best-known literary current: magical realism. My objective is not to champion realist aesthetics at the expense of magical realist ones, or to argue that only realism can capture the historical dynamics of Latin American society; rather, I explore how these aesthetic modes might capture distinct moments within processes of capitalist transition in the region. By the same token, this essay is interested in the particularities of realism in Latin America, which,



as the Marxist critic Roberto Schwarz has shown for 19th-century Brazilian literature, necessarily suffers formal disjunctures when “imported” to the periphery.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, I want to place Arguedas’ fiction within a global realist tradition that emerges from within consonant—but by no means identical—historical transitions under capitalism in different parts of the world.

### The Historical Novel in Peru

By the time José María Arguedas published the second edition of *Yawar Fiesta* (1941) in 1968, the discrediting of realism was so entrenched in Latin American literary circles that the author himself felt the need to apologize for his use of the form. Although *Yawar Fiesta*, he writes, offers knowledge of an “intricate” and little-known Andean universe, it is sure to “disenchant” readers enamored by the “great formal conquests of the modern novel.”<sup>9</sup> Such an apology was surely motivated by Arguedas’ own challenging encounters with well-known authors of the Boom such as Julio Cortázar, who infamously relegated Arguedas’ fiction to the status of provincial and “folkloric” realism, in unfavorable contrast to his own “supranational” experimental writing.<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding Arguedas’ own apology, I seek to show here that his use of realist form was not simply a default mode, but rather a meaningful choice motivated precisely by the “intricacy” of the social world he sought to represent in his novels. Arguedas’ realist endeavor, that is, set out to examine, on a granular level, Andean society in all of its complexity, not as a snapshot of local color, but instead—like the great nineteenth-century realists who preceded him—as part of an effort to track historical change in moments of intense social upheaval.

The period stretching from the 1930s and 1960s, when Arguedas was active writer, was marked by nothing less than the collapse of the seigneurial hacienda system, and—most catastrophic for Arguedas—the mass expulsion of indigenous peasants from their semi-autonomous agricultural communities, or ayllus. Writing in 1960, Arguedas wrote that these shifts marked nothing less than “Peru’s most important feat since the Conquest.”<sup>11</sup> Such a dramatic transformation—ongoing since the 1930s—demanded epic treatment, which was most readily available to Arguedas in the form of the realist novel. In this manner, as I explore below, Arguedas should be studied not in spite of or in indifference to his use of realist form, but rather because of it might have been the form most adequate to his literary project. Here I follow the lead of the Peruvian historian Alberto Flores Galindo, who notes that Arguedas’ literary project as a whole evokes “the universal process that is the development of capitalism. But as lived by flesh and blood humans” in Peru (15).<sup>12</sup> Or as Lukács put it in *The Historical Novel*, Arguedas’ novels “evoke the totality of the process of social development” under capitalism in Peru, giving the impression of “an entire society in movement.”<sup>13</sup>

This invocation of Lukács to discuss Arguedas will likely be met with suspicion by contemporary critics who take for granted the inadequacy of both realism and Western Marxist critique to understanding Arguedas and, by extension, Latin

American literature. In past decades, Arguedas has become an emblematic figure within an explicitly anti-Marxist culturalism that hinges on the irreducible cultural particularity of the Andean world. Yet when speaking of the Peruvian novel as an aesthetic form, it is Arguedas himself who ends up sounding a lot like Lukács in *The Historical Novel*. In his 1950 essay “The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru,” Arguedas corrects the widespread assumption that the so-called indigenista novel as practiced in Peru is “about” indigenous people; instead, he insists, the genre seeks to conjure an entire society in “all of its elements, in its disturbing and confused human reality, in which “the Indian” (“el indio”) is only one of many different characters.”<sup>14</sup> Among the “myriad” characters, whose “different souls can only be defined through the novel,” Arguedas includes the (old) and (new) landlord, the student, and the mestizo.<sup>15</sup> These characters are not stable: the mestizo, for example, “who for the most part, does not know where he is going,” and might equally “serv(e) the landowners,” “sin(k) down into the crowd” or “identify himself with the Indians and generously sacrifice his life to defend them.”<sup>16</sup> The novel’s charge, as Arguedas sees it, is to identify and track where such characters are going, “to show how people are constantly being disconcerted by the ebb and flow of their day-to-day destiny. Such a tide, under a definition of limits that is only apparent beneath the surface, forces them to make a constant effort to accommodate, to readjust to a permanent drama.”<sup>17</sup>

Arguedas’ understanding of the Peruvian realist novel is wholly consonant, then, with Lukács’ understanding of the 19th-century European realist novels in *The Historical Novel* as “modern epics,” in which the action of “typical” characters works to uncover the hidden logic of historical movement in different moments of the development of capitalism. Arguedas, as far as I can tell, never read Lukács, and he almost certainly never read *The Historical Novel*, which was translated into Spanish in 1971, two years after Arguedas’ death. Arguedas’ understanding of realism was forged by his own reading of realist and socialist realist novels (which ranged from Victor Hugo and Herman Melville to Maxim Gorki and César Vallejo) as well as by his materialist-inflected understanding of history. It is even less likely that Lukács knew anything about Arguedas; if he had, it is entirely possible—judging from his notoriously uncharitable reading of Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Home and the World*—that he wouldn’t have approved of the Peruvian author’s use of realist techniques.

Even so, the resonance between Lukács and Arguedas’ understanding of realist form, arrived at in radically different contexts by the two writers, is mutually illuminating. On the one hand, the strong epic current that drives Arguedas’ literary project allows us to expand Lukács’ periodization of realism (which moves from England to France and finally to Russia) into still new zones, as part of the global “atlases of twentieth-century realism” Joe Cleary advocates. Conversely, placing Arguedas within a wider literary tradition—and the world history of capitalist development to which it refers—serves to wrest his works from dominant particularist and culturalist interpretations. Such interpretations, which attempt to valorize Arguedas’ writing

on their own terms (primarily with reference to indigenous culture), paradoxically confirm Julio Cortázar's view that what matters in Arguedas is the local and particular, occluding the author's own commitment to concepts such as totality and universality, and, with it, any relationship of his work to larger material structures. As I argue below, it was because of, and not in spite of Arguedas' commitment to these concepts that novels such as *Yawar Fiesta* were able to produce stunning insights into the particularities of highland Peruvian culture and society. A Marxist interpretation of Arguedas' work along the lines of *The Historical Novel*, far from flattening cultural and historical differences, throws them sharply into relief.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Yawar Fiesta*: Highland Dialectics**

*Yawar Fiesta* (1941) is set in the highland town of Puquio sometime in the 1930s. The novel focuses on the belated incursion of state power into the heavily indigenous highlands, long dominated by large, quasi-feudal landowners: a government official, recently arrived from the coast to Puquio, hears about the yawar fiesta of the title. This name, which unites the Quechua word for "blood" and the Spanish word for "festival," refers to the annual bullfight that takes place on Peruvian Independence Day, in which men from the neighboring indigenous communities fight with a bull, eventually blowing it up with a stick of dynamite. The unnamed official—fancying himself a civilized man—is scandalized at the custom, and tries to prohibit the fight, stipulating (hilariously) it be replaced with a more "modern" form of Spanish bullfighting. The rest of the novel focuses on the contradictory and unpredictable alliances that the prohibition calls forth, as on one hand, old-style landowners and indigenous communities align to preserve the fight; and, on the other, "new" landowners and indigenous migrants to the capital city, Lima, align to prohibit it.

*Yawar Fiesta* is thus a small story of conflict in an Andean town circa the 1930s, emerging when a minor state official tries to meddle in the customs of a remote highland town. At the same time, the novel invokes much larger processes of social transformation, alerting us to the much larger contours of Arguedas' project. We can begin with its expansive temporal frame, which while focusing on a single week, opens onto a much longer, indeed epic, history of expropriation and incipient commodity relations in the highlands. The novel famously opens with two introductory chapters dedicated to describing the much longer history of how the town's four indigenous communities or ayllus were dispossessed of much of their lands. In the chapter "Indian Town" (Pueblo indio) an omniscient narrator relates how, in the aftermath of the exhaustion of nearby silver mines in the seventeenth century, Spaniards dispossessed the communities to establish hacienda agriculture, pushing them higher and higher into the mountains. The communities, however, survived for centuries, and Puquio remained, as a disembodied voice interjects several times throughout the chapter, an "Indian town!" (¡Pueblo indio!).<sup>19</sup> The second chapter, titled "The Dispossession," tells how, in a moment closer to the present, demand for cattle from Lima unleashed

a further wave of dispossession of the four ayllus, as the mountaintops (punas) previously left alone were seized by landowners as grazing land. The landowners “began to make a clean sweep, once and for all, of the stone huts, of the hamlets; they began to put of stone walls and fence of the free puna with thorn bushes and stone.”<sup>20</sup> Many of the dispossessed were forced into the town, “carrying their pots, their pelts and their children.”<sup>21</sup>

It is only after establishing this long history of primitive accumulation and the incipient expansion of commodity relations—topoi par excellence of both European realism and Andean indigenismo—that the novel reopens in the third chapter to narrate events taking place in the novel’s present concerning the town’s annual bullfight. A sweeping, epic story sets up a small one; or, put alternately, a story about material dispossession and incipient commodification sets up a story about a struggle over a cultural practice. As noted, these days Arguedas is read mainly from a culturalist standpoint, and the novel’s turn to a cultural practice after the second chapter of the novel might at first glance be viewed as a turn to what the author is really interested in: the communities’ attempt to preserve their tradition. But such an interpretation is only possible if we disaggregate the material transformations outlined in the first two chapters from the unfolding of culture in the present, as if culture were a discrete entity that exists independently of the material contexts in which it emerges and transforms. In insisting upon the long history of indigenous separation from land, first through colonialism and then through the incipient emergence of an internal market, Arguedas is not just establishing a backdrop for the novel’s plot, but a set of structuring determinations that simultaneously free and constrain its characters within the bounds of the realist novel. Along these lines, it is surely not accidental that the recent commodification of cattle opens onto a story about bullfighting.

The epic story of primitive accumulation and commodification laid out in the first two chapters thus establishes the conditions for Arguedas’ granular examination of a single cultural practice as part and parcel of larger material transformations. And so, after two chapters that narrate a long process of change in Puquio, the novel “begins again,” as Horacio Legras puts it, in the third chapter to zero in on events unfolding in the novel’s present: “On the puna and on the mountains surrounding the town they were now sounding the *wakawak’ras* (trumpets).”<sup>22</sup> When they heard the *turupukllay* (bullfight song) on the country roads and in the wheat fields, Indians and townspeople spoke of that year’s bullfight.”<sup>23</sup> In classic realist fashion, a single element (the sound of the trumpet) unites separate but coeval narrative planes, as members of one ayllu discuss plans to capture a bull for the bullfight; landowners and townspeople complain about the noise; and the Vicar, saying mass, calls it “Devil’s music!”<sup>24</sup> The fact that an indigenous trumpet becomes the literal instrument through which the novel creates separate but coeval narrative planes is interesting on two levels: on the one hand, it establishes the pervasiveness of indigenous culture in

Puquio, which extends to all spheres of social life, even as these spheres are separated along lines of race and class. And whereas in a European context we might expect a clock or a calendar to mark coevalness, *Yawar Fiesta* enlists an element of indigenous culture not so much as a sign of cultural particularity, but rather to achieve a form of (mediated) objectivity on the part of the realist apparatus.

This objectivity extends into the novel's examination of the different responses to the subprefect's edict, which—as an extension of the historical unfolding established in the first two chapters of the book—creates surprising and unexpected outcomes. The most important of these are the two sets of contradictory alliances that emerge in the wake of the subprefect's edict prohibiting the yawar fiesta.

On the one side, an alliance develops between the subprefect, a subset of landowners, and a group of *chalos*, or indigenous migrants to Lima. This alliance emerges when, at a gathering at the official's house, a group of landowners excitedly relate the upcoming bullfight to him. The subprefect, every bit the pompous provincial official, is horrified at what he interprets as the barbarity of the practice. In larger terms, as others have shown, the subprefect represents the rather new presence of the state in the highlands under the Leguía administration, and its attempt to challenge the overweening power of landowners.<sup>25</sup> The subprefect, in a word, is a representative of the (quasi)bourgeois state, or rather, a state that at least on the surface seeks to reform the highlands. Immediately, a group of landowners attempt to ingratiate themselves with the official by supporting his initiative. The landowner who represents this group in the novel, Demetrio Cáceres, in spite of his own enjoyment of the festival for decades announces: “the Puquio bullfight is a disgrace to our town. It makes us look like African savages.”<sup>26</sup>

In the appeal to civilization by both the state and landlords, we have something like the ideological comedy Roberto Schwarz describes in his classic essay “Misplaced Ideas,” in which elites on the periphery have no choice but to ventriloquize “civilized” ideals, even when doing so immediately throws into relief the inappropriateness of those ideals in their local context.<sup>27</sup> In 20th-century Peru, the commercial “progress” that has begun in the highlands, bringing the state on its heels, depends upon the plunder of communal lands and relations of servitude on haciendas. In a word, it is an order that is anything but civilized.

Providing a more rather more serious indictment of the yawar fiesta is a group of *chalos*, former members or descendants of Puquio's indigenous communities who have in the past decade migrated to the capital city as domestic servants and laborers. At their social club in Lima, the *chalos* receive the subprefect's telegram inviting them to hire a Spanish bullfighter for the July 28th bullfight, which they accept on the grounds that it is a brutal practice in which their brothers die for the entertainment of the landowners. The student Escobar, an open admirer of the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, whose photograph hangs in his room in Lima, vows: “Never again shall the Indians die in the Pichk'achuri square to give those pigs pleasure!”<sup>28</sup>

On the one side, the novel calls forth a set of social forces represented by the state official, a set of landowners who ape his “civilized” values in an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the official while retaining their dominance, and a group of acculturated indigenous migrants in Lima who align with the state against the landed order. On the other side, the novel posits an equally contradictory formation that sets out to preserve the festival: old-style landowners or gamonales, represented by the largest landowner in the region, Don Julián; town mestizos like the storekeeper Don Pancho; and the indigenous communities themselves, who, tellingly, are not represented by a single character but as a collectivity (more on this in a moment). In the context of the long and bitter history of conflict between the landowners and the communities outlined in the first two chapters of the novel, the alliance between Don Julián and the indigenous communities is highly contradictory. It emerges when the landowner authorizes the K’ayau community to capture a wild bull, nicknamed Misitu, in the forest of his estate for use in the fight. Don Julián allows the community to capture the bull because he has no use for the bourgeois mores of subprefect, perhaps showing a degree of security in his power relative to smaller landowners, but on a deeper level because he doesn’t want the state meddling in town affairs. For male members of the indigenous communities, on the other hand, the yawar fiesta isn’t—as the chalos believe—a sign of subservience to the landowners, but the reverse: it affirms their manliness and strength to the misti (non-indigenous) usurpers. To this end, the narrator recalls how at last year’s bullfight, Honrao, his clothes tattered and blood oozing from his ribs, shouted: “I Pichk’achuri runakuna, k’alakuna!” [I’m a pinchk’a churi person, you outsiders].<sup>29</sup>

In the end, it is the “old” order that prevails. The Spanish bullfighter from Lima, rattled by the songs sung by the women of the ayllus, and scared senseless by the giant bull Misitu, quickly runs from the ring in fright. At that moment, the town’s mayor—previously aligned with the subprefect—suddenly authorizes the indigenous bullfighters to enter the ring. As one man is gored, blood gushing from his groin, another sticks dynamite in the bull’s face. And the novel ends as the mayor, amidst the roaring excitement of the ring, yells into the ear of the stunned subprefect: “You see, Señor Subprefect? This is how our bullfights are. The real *yawar punchay!*”<sup>30</sup>

On one level, nothing has changed. In contrast with earlier indigenista narratives, Arguedas’ included, the novel does not end with a (failed) insurrection or assault on landowner power, but rather with the preservation of a festival embraced by landowners and indigenous communities alike. The indigenous communities, much to the dismay of the chalos, act against the state but not the landowning class, in a gesture that is decidedly ambiguous (and to the chalos, incomprehensible). Landowners, in turn, fall back into their default positions, relinquishing the values of “civilization” as quickly as they had adopted them.

The modernizing state, on a basic level, has failed, and the novel’s resolution also points to the high improbability of anything like a bourgeois revolution in the

Peruvian highlands. At bottom, the state is only able to appeal to a set of cultural values with which even some landowners might concur, if only because their pronouncement does nothing to threaten basic social relations in Puquio. In this way, in its representation of the thinness of the state apparatus, the novel formalizes Mariátegui's observation in the 1920s that it was already was "too late" for a bourgeois revolution in the countryside; the only real revolution possible would be socialist, and rooted in the indigenous collectivity, as explored below.<sup>31</sup> Here we can point to the persistent references in the novel to July 28, Peruvian Independence Day, as a metonym for this weak nation state whose symbols adorn, but cannot as yet not transform, highland society.

In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács argues that this form assumes and is the result of bourgeois revolutions in England and France, cataclysms that make possible a new understanding of the historical.<sup>32</sup> *Yawar Fiesta* is a novel that not only does not assume the victory of a bourgeois revolution in Peru, but dramatizes the inability of the state to accomplish any such feat across its national territory. This is not to say that the novel unfolds as if no bourgeois revolutions had taken place: they indeed have, just not in Peru. The state, which comes off as comical and thin, is not the element from which the epic quality of the novel springs: instead, to return to the first two chapters of the novel, this epic quality lies in the relationship between the indigenous collectivity and its relationship to wider—indeed global—forces of colonialism and capitalism as forces that extend well beyond the reach of the weak peripheral state.

At the same time, these economic forces do not abruptly and inalterably change Puquio, but unfold slowly, with moments of intensity, over a long period of time. Here we might contrast what happens in *Yawar Fiesta* with what happens in Gabriel García Márquez's far better-known novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) with the sudden arrival of the foreign banana company. This arrival signals a total social upheaval so severe that it culminates in the mythical annihilation of Macondo. Returning to the question of why an author like Arguedas employs a realist mode, it might not be because he hadn't yet discovered more experimental modes, but because the realist apparatus lent itself especially well in *Yawar Fiesta* to home in on slow, uneven and therefore nearly imperceptible moments of capitalist transition in a setting like Puquio.<sup>33</sup>

Transition is slow and almost imperceptible, but present. A market imperative is in place (bringing with it the state on its heels); in this context, upon closer inspection, it is not that nothing has changed over the course of the week leading up to the bullfight. Here I would like to temper Antonio Cornejo Polar's early assertion that by the end of the novel "the traditional model of Andean society recomposes itself."<sup>34</sup> For a key result of Arguedas' realist intervention is to reveal that, beneath the surface, everything has changed--there is no going back to the way things were. This principle of constant change is expressed most powerfully on the level of the indigenous collectivity, which, as explored below, asserts its strength (and by extension submerged revolutionary

agency) at the same time as this very assertion under changing circumstances opens, dialectically, onto the possibility of the dissolution of the collective.

### **The Realist Ayllu**

To begin to explore the forces of history at work beneath the surface of *Yawar Fiesta*, it is necessary to turn to Arguedas' representation of the ayllu or indigenous agricultural commune, the social unit whose presence most distinguishes *Yawar Fiesta* from European versions of the historical novel. For Lukács, the emergence of the historical novel in England and France assumes "the separation of means of conditions of production and labour-power," and with it the creation of the bourgeois individual.<sup>35</sup> This separation freedom cannot be assumed in Peru, where the community—even as it is battered over long periods of time by colonialism, the quasi-feudal landed order, and market forces—persists and is thus immediately available as a horizon of collectivity in *Yawar Fiesta*. Against the thinness of character like the subprefect, there is a historical density and vitality within the communal organization of the indigenous ayllu, the horizon of revolutionary possibility Arguedas inherits from José Carlos Mariátegui. This possibility, as the resolution of *Yawar Fiesta* underscores, is neither immediate nor straightforward, as demonstrated by the inability of the chalos to understand why the comuneros want to preserve the festival, as well as by the comuneros' lack of interest in the chalos' Marxist politics. And yet, beneath the surface, the potential of the collectivity to change reality—and be changed by it—constitutes the core of the novel's utopian vision.

The representation of this collectivity, to be sure, provides real challenges to the realist novel as a form. As Arguedas himself noted, "there are scarcely any Indian names in *Yawar Fiesta*."<sup>36</sup> This is because members the ayllu cannot be figured as "typical" characters, because they are not individuals in a bourgeois sense. While indigenous people, always male, occasionally emerge to speak or act for a brief moment (such as Honrao getting gored by the bull), they do not develop as characters, but instead quickly recede back into the collective. More than through characterization, the contours of indigenous collectivity are captured, as John Kraniauskas has argued, through the omniscient narrator's gestures toward indigenous ways of seeing. The interjection '¡Pueblo indio!' (Indian town) in the novel's first chapter, for example, mark the ayllu as "the subject of Arguedian (literary) history."<sup>37</sup> In similar manner, the omniscient narrator draws the reader's attention to the fact to elements the mistis (the Quechua word for non-indigenous people) are unable to see and hear: "From the mountain peaks four streams descend and flow near the town; in the cascades the white water is calling, but the *mistis* do not hear it. On the hillsides, on the plains, on the mountaintops the yellow flowers dance in the wind, but the *mistis* hardly see them." The mistis, oblivious to what the comuneros have for centuries understood as a fundamental unity among all living things, get drunk, "sneeze" and "calculat(e) the weight of their steers," oblivious to what the community understands as a



fundamental unity among all living things.<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand, the *ayllu* is a stable collectivity that perseveres in the face of abuse from the time of the Spanish conquest until the present; at the same time, however, *Yawar Fiesta* submits the *ayllu* to realist examination, showing how all attempts by the community to preserve itself under new circumstances, might accelerate the decay of that very form. Marx made a similar observation about precapitalist communal structures in the *Grundrisse*:

In all these forms, the *reproduction of presupposed relations*—more or less naturally arisen or historical as well, but become traditional—of the individual to his commune, together with a *specific, objective existence, predetermined* for the individual, of his relations both to the conditions of labour and to his co-herders, fellow tribesmen etc.—are the foundation of development, which is therefore from the outset *restricted*, but which signifies decay, decline and fall once this barrier is suspended.”<sup>39</sup>

The *ayllus* of *Yawar Fiesta* are of course not precapitalist in the same sense as the ancient Romans or Incas, but instead had coexisted with and transformed under regimes of colonialism and capitalism for over 400 years. This history, rather than invalidate Marx’s observation, though, makes it even more likely that the barriers protecting the commune will be breached under the conditions of primitive accumulation and commodification outlined in *Yawar Fiesta*, even as the specific contours of the process cannot be predicted. This is why, once again, the novel—and the realist novel in particular—acquires importance in sensing the possible directions taken by history.

There are two main instances of this dialectic of preservation and decay of the *ayllu* in *Yawar Fiesta*: first, the construction of a highway from Puquio to the coast a decade earlier; and, second, the capturing of the wild bull Misitu for use in the bullfight. As we learn from the narrator, a decade earlier the *ayllu* of Puquio had built a road to the coast in an astonishing 28 days, in a friendly competition with *ayllus* from another town. Completely self-organized and autonomous, the feat demonstrates the unrivalled productive potential of the commune, which effectively achieves what the landowning class “had never dared to think about.” And so again on July 28, Peruvian Independence Day, “the first truck arrived in Puquio.”<sup>40</sup> Once built, the road acts as a possible solvent of community as it places Puquio into greater contact with faraway markets and sparks incipient migration out of the highlands.

The instability that results from the highway reverberates into the present in the guise of the novel’s main event, the Yawar Fiesta. The highway brings the state with it on its heels, which in turn crafts a new prohibition that must be fought. But once again, the attempt to preserve integrity and show strength creates the possibility of disintegration, as we see in the novel’s narration of the capture of the wild bull Misitu

and the fissures it creates among the ayllus themselves.

For members of one ayllu, the K'oñanis, the bull is a sacred and feared incarnation of an auki, or mountain deity. As legend has it, Misitu appeared suddenly one night, out of a flash of lightning on a lake. This story, the narrator intimates, emerged when Misitu—who was not part of Don Julián's herd—escaped from another ranch, “who knows whether it was from Wanakupampa, Oskonta, or farther away?”<sup>41</sup> The legend of Misitu, that is, while well-grounded in indigenous beliefs, emerges as a response to a bull's escape from one ranch to another. The story takes a new turn, though, when as a result of Misitu's fame as an auki, members of the K'ayau ayllu plan to capture him for use in the bullfight. They do not believe Misitu is an auki, and insist that he is just a ‘big *sallka*’ or big bull.<sup>42</sup> With authorization from Don Julián (who is unable to capture the bull himself), members of the K'ayau ayllu essentially raid the Koñani plain to take Misitu. At least six hundred men advance across the plain, as “The K'oñanis ran out of all the fields, little farms, and stone huts.”<sup>43</sup> The description recalls the collective building of the road years earlier, but it also uncomfortably recalls the descriptions of the misti raids of ayllu lands in the first two chapters of the novel. The chief staff bearer of the K'ayau tells the Koñanis Don Julián has ordered them to take Misitu. A sorcerer who accompanies the staff bearers, in turn, tell the Koñanis that an even higher authority, the auki himself, has mandated that Misitu belongs to K'ayau, and will give them an even wilder bull later. The narrator, it should be noted, relates this conflict in realist fashion, achieving a distance through which competing viewpoints can be observed. It is possible that the sorcerer has communicated with the auki; but it is perhaps more probable that he and the K'ayau are manipulating beliefs about the auki to secure Misitu.

While there is much to be gleaned from Arguedas' fine-grained analysis of the conflict between the two ayllus, I will limit myself to two basic points. First, the *Yawar Fiesta* simultaneously affirms the cohesion of the ayllu in opposition to misti society at the same time as it opens onto conflict and competition within the community itself. By the same token, what is on one side an affirmation of an indigenous worldview at the same time opens onto a process of desacralization that might, in the long run, erode the mythic structures that underpin collective life. For the chalos in *Yawar Fiesta*, this desacralization is a first step toward revolutionary consciousness. As the student Escobar says: “They've killed an *auki*. And the day they kill all the *aukis* who are tormenting their minds...we shall lead this country to a glory no one can imagine.”<sup>44</sup> But for Arguedas, who takes some distance from the chalos' position, desacralization expresses the possible erosion of communal structures themselves, and is therefore not automatically desirable from a socialist point of view.

Second, Arguedas' realist depiction of indigenous myth in *Yawar Fiesta* differs greatly from the better known and more critically appreciated proto-modernist current known “magical realism.” Again, a brief contrast with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is instructive. In that novel, everyone in

Macondo (the narrator included) believes that “magical” events happen, giving rise to what Franco Moretti has identified as the monological character of this novel’s narration.<sup>45</sup> When a character like Remedios La Bella ascends, there is no sense of conflicting belief structures in the town. This homogeneity vis-à-vis belief can be mapped, in turn, onto the homogeneity of Macondo’s population, which is not riven by class or race, at least until the banana company comes. Contrast this with Arguedas’ realist depiction of beliefs, in which what different sectors and even subsectors of society believe becomes a mediated expression of conflict and change. As a larger point, 20th-century realisms might be particularly adept at depicting the processes of historical transformation that so-called magical realism takes for granted, but cannot account for on the level of its own narrative apparatus. Alternatively, realism might be especially adept at marking moments of desacralization under forced modernization, while magical realism might mark the re-enchantment of the world during even more intense rounds of market pressure, often by way of the literary apparatus itself.

In Arguedas’ own literary oeuvre, the presence of indigenous myth would assert itself with ever-greater intensity in his later novels, but always in inverse relationship to the strength of the ayllu. While *Yawar Fiesta* limits itself to depicting myth in realist fashion, as what people believe; his later novels incorporate myth into the narrative apparatus on a much greater level. For example, in the novel *Todas las sangres* (*All the Bloods*, 1966), a sprawling realist epic of the collapse of the hacienda system and the imposition of imperialism in the highlands, the yawar mayu or river of blood, a millenarian symbol of renewal, really does shake the earth: even capitalists in Lima feel it. And in his final novel, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (*The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, 1971), left unfinished at the time of his death by suicide, indigenous mythic structure becomes the narrative principle of the text as a whole, as the millenarian foxes chatter to one another and morph into different human characters. Importantly, this break with realism and entry into something like what is (imperfectly) called magical realism is made possible by the relocation of members of highland indigenous communities to the industrialized port city of Chimbote in the novel, where they are no longer members of any ayllu, but atomized individuals. In this final novel, the mythic pull on narrative apparatus is the strongest, even as—as William Rowe has stressed—the novel’s characters (who have now become individuals in the full sense of the word) themselves cease to believe in myth.<sup>46</sup>

From the vantage of his larger oeuvre, *Yawar Fiesta* represents the initiation of a long process of the transformation of indigenous belief systems and social structures. More than a default choice, the realist mode Arguedas employs in this novel attempts to demonstrate how indigenous belief structures change historically, and as a result become available as aesthetic registers in later literary texts. Fredric Jameson’s still-useful definition of magical realism as an aesthetic mode that expresses the simultaneity of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production (that is, uneven and combined development) still holds; what I would like to add is that realism and

magical realism might correspond to different moments within histories of uneven and combined development.<sup>47</sup> Along with Cleary's world "atlases of twentieth-century realism," we still need literary periodizations of these moments of transition. From the vantage of our present, in the midst of the near-universal expansion of commodity relations, it remains an open question as to whether the Latin American novel, realist or non-realist, might continue to make history "appear." But before even answering this question, realists like Arguedas might help us understand what was historical in the 20th-century novel in the first place, alerting us by way of its form to a rich past that lays beneath the surface(lessness) of the present.

## Notes

1. Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (México: J. Mortiz, 1969) 11, my translation.
2. Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989) 87.
3. Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (1 Sept 2012): 277.
4. Joe Cleary, "Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (1 Sept 2012): 257.
5. Cleary, "Realism after Modernism" 256
6. Fredric Jameson, *The Antimonies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013) 271.
7. Perry Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," *London Review of Books* 33.15 (28 July 2011): 24-28. [www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe)
8. See, for example, Roberto Schwarz, "A Brazilian Breakthrough," *New Left Review* 36 (2005): 91-107.
9. José María Arguedas, "Preliminary note," in *Yawar Fiesta*, trans. Frances Horning Barraclough (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) xii.
10. On Cortázar's uncharitable characterization of regionalist realism, and Arguedas' responses, see Mauricio Ostria González, "Sobre árboles y pájaros: La polémica Arguedas-Cortázar," *Encuentros y Desencuentros, Actas del IV Congreso Internacional del C.E.L.C.I.R.P* (Universidad de la Laguna: Tenerife, 2002) 341-354.
11. Arguedas, "Discusión de la narración peruana," cited in William Rowe, *Mito e ideología en la obra de José María Arguedas*, (Lima: Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 1979) 134, my translation.
12. Alberto Flores Galindo, *Dos ensayos sobre José María Arguedas*, (Lima: Casa de Estudios del Socialismo Sur, 1992) 15.
13. György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 139.
14. Arguedas, "The Problem of Literary Expression in Peru," in *Yawar Fiesta*, xiii.
15. "Problem of Literary Expression" xv.
16. "Problem of Literary Expression" xiv.
17. "Problem of Literary Expression" xv.
18. I am indebted as well to William Rowe's excellent Lukácsian reading of Arguedas' historical novels in *Mito e ideología en la obra de José María Arguedas* (Lima: Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 1979).
19. *Yawar Fiesta* 1.
20. *Yawar Fiesta* 12.
21. *Yawar Fiesta* 15.
22. Horacio Legras, *Literature and Subjection: The Economy of Writing and Marginality in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008) 20.
23. *Yawar Fiesta* 19.
24. *Yawar Fiesta* 22.
25. See Legras, and Misha Kokotovic, "Transculturación narrativa y modernidad andina: nueva lectura de *Yawar Fiesta*" in *Jose Maria Arguedas: hacia una poetica migrante*, ed. Sergio R. Franco (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana 2006).
26. *Yawar Fiesta* 37.

27. Roberto Schwarz, "Misplaced Ideas," *Misplaced Ideas: Essays On Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso, 1992) 27-28.
28. *Yawar Fiesta* 72
29. *Yawar Fiesta* 20.
30. *Yawar Fiesta* 147
31. "In keeping with my ideological position, I believe that the moment for attempting the liberal, individualist method in Peru has already passed. Aside from reasons of doctrine, I consider-that our agrarian problem has a special character due to an indisputable and concrete factor: the survival of the Indian "community" and of elements of practical socialism in indigenous agriculture and life." José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Jorge Basadre (Austin: UT Austin Press, 1971). [www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/7-interpretive-essays/essay03.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/7-interpretive-essays/essay03.htm)
32. In the midst of 18th and 19th century bourgeois revolutions across Europe, "(m)en are able to conceive of their existence as historically conditioned" for the first time, according to Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 24.
33. Antonio Cornejo Polar makes a similar point about indigenista texts as narrating "the gradual, zigzagging but real integration of the country." *Literatura y sociedad en el Perú : La novela indigenista* (Lima, Perú: Lasontay, 1980) 87.
34. Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Los universos narrativos de José María Arguedas* (Buenos Aires:Editorial Losada, 1973) 79.
35. *The Historical Novel* 21.
36. Arguedas, "The Novel" xiv.
37. John Kraniauskas, "A Short Andean History of Photography: *Yawar Fiesta*," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 21.3 (2012): 362.
38. *Yawar Fiesta* 9.
39. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 486-7, emphasis in original.
40. *Yawar Fiesta* 60.
41. *Yawar Fiesta* 81.
42. *Yawar Fiesta* 96.
43. *Yawar Fiesta* 105.
44. *Yawar Fiesta* 121.
45. Franco Moretti, *The Modern Epic: the World-system From Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996) 246.
46. William Rowe, "No hay mensajero de nada": la modernidad andina según los Zorros de Arguedas," *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* (2010): 61-96.
47. Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12.2 (1986): 311.

## Prolegomena: Prospective Realism in a Present Without Future

Mathias Nilges

Today, the "promise of an infinite future," Boris Groys observes, "has lost its plausibility."<sup>1</sup> In our historical moment, he argues, the future along with time itself appears to be performing what has long been understood as the present's trademark trick: vanishing. According to Groys and, as I show in great detail elsewhere, according to a striking number of academics and commentators, artists and analysts, politicians and venture capitalists, our present is characterized by a general crisis of futurity.<sup>2</sup> And along with what he describes as a pervasive loss of time, Groys argues, we are also confronted with "the loss of the infinite historical perspective." We "are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future," he concludes. The problem of an expanding, timeless present that seems to absorb the future into it as a result of our inability to imagine substantive alternatives to the status quo has been discussed by a wide range of philosophers and cultural critics for roughly two decades now, and it also is a topic of great interest for literary and cultural critics. Not surprisingly, the crisis of futurity registers particularly clearly in recent speculative fiction. "Most current attempts to envision the commons of the future in fiction and film are relentlessly dystopian," writes Ursula K. Heise.<sup>3</sup> "From Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) to Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) and from Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) to Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009)," she elaborates, "speculative fiction and film tend to envision future breakdowns of democratic governance, justice, education, health systems, and civic awareness far more often than societies that are improved over present ones in any but a narrow technological sense."<sup>4</sup> The central suggestion that Heise forwards here is a familiar if not ubiquitous one by now, and it is usually expressed as a variation on a well-known diagnosis of our present: it is easier to imagine the complete breakdown of civilization or the destruction of our planet than it is to imagine an alternative to capitalism or even a modest improvement to the material logic of our present.

No doubt, Heise's account of the limits of speculative fiction in the context

of the crisis of futurity that seems to accompany our historical moment will strike many as foreshortened. After all, as I show elsewhere in some length, while the future may indeed look bleak in the novels of a notable number of white male authors, it is in other facets of speculative fiction, including Afro-Futurism, postcolonial sf, and Indigenous futurisms, where we find not only striking alternatives to the notion of a timeless present and inaccessible future, but where we also encounter strikingly historicized accounts of the sources of crises of futurity, crises that strike those who have historically been all too familiar with the erasure of futurity and denials of presence by colonialism and capitalist imperialism as decidedly not novel. Such analyses of the highly differentiated kinds of work that forms and genres accomplish in different contexts and of the different temporalities that they are able to make legible in a present that is elsewhere understood to be repressively uniform and inescapably totalizing, however, necessarily begin at a broader scale. It is worth asking some initial, broader questions, and it is in this context that Heise's suggestions are heuristically helpful. Given the widespread association of our present with a crisis of temporality and futurity, and given that we are living in a time when some suspect that even speculative fiction seems to have lost the ability to imagine alternatives to and ways of moving beyond the limits of an all-consuming, timeless present in ways that are not simply dystopian and apocalyptic, it is worth asking, for instance, what a form like realism could possibly accomplish other than reiterating the same diagnosis and confirming the crisis of futurity? If we are interested in realism today, then we should ask what happens to realism in a present without future.

In recent years, in particular in the context of discussions about "capitalist realism" and in particular in the work of Mark Fisher, as Sean Grattan points out, realism has been read and indeed at times maligned as a symptom of the limitations of the present. Capitalist realism in particular is often understood to constitute the formal confirmation of the exhaustion of future in our time. And yet, Grattan argues, it is important to note, as Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge do, that "capitalist realism is not necessarily only an exhaustive foreclosing of possibility, but that it also offers a site open to being energized critically."<sup>5</sup> More than simply an "updating of socialist realism nor simply an inversion of it," Shonkwiler and LaBerge write, capitalist realism fundamentally "calls into question *what realism is*."<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I will explore this basic relation that Grattan, Shonkwiler and La Berge foreground: what realism is determines what realism is able to do today. And if it is true that the rise in new realisms that we have been witnessing over the course of the past decade or two are about far more than yet another index of the absorption of future possibility into a non-transcendable present reality, then we must ask how exactly realism is able to serve as a form of critique in our moment in history. What is realism such that it could be able to provide us with a way to think beyond the limitations of the omnipresent instant of the era of real-time capitalism?

Sean Grattan argues that we must find utopia in genres other than sf. I will argue



in this essay that it is in realism that we can find an important key to the utopian imagination in our decidedly anti-utopian times. Possibly surprisingly and no doubt somewhat counterintuitively, it is precisely in a particular mode of contemporary realism that we can find those engagements with the present and those forms of futurity that Heise finds lacking in contemporary speculative fiction. To be sure, realism is not a singular term. Rather, it has a range of different modes, ones that assume specific functions and that are able to carry out particular kinds of work in different contexts and historical moments. I will argue for the significance of one particular lineage of realism and for the importance of a specific critical account of realism that may be isolated and highlighted as important for our moment. I shall refer to this particular mode as prospective realism. In this essay, I aim to sketch out the basic contours of what requires more detail to be elaborated fully: a theory of prospective realism. But I hope that the general assertions that follow may prove helpful both as a starting point for a discussion of a particular way of conceiving of realism that, I would argue, has received insufficient attention so far as well as for current discussions of realism more generally. This essay thus in a sense performs that of which it speaks. The term *prolegomena*, that is, refers to both the particular form of this essay and to the understanding of a specific kind of realism that I will advance here, one that insists on realism's value as a way to illuminate the gaps and repressed latencies in the now in order to allow us to read the historical present as *prolegomenon*, as prehistory of a future that may yet be, one that fulfills those demands for a better tomorrow that remain silenced or ignored by being labeled "unrealistic" in our time. I do so in keeping with accounts of the novel, most notably found in the work of Anna Kornbluh and Timothy Bewes, I would suggest, that foregrounds the value of the novel as a form of thought and as a form of critique.<sup>7</sup> The novel assumes a central role in the context of our discussions of contemporary realism and, in turn, in the context of our ability to grapple with the larger political, social, and cultural crises of the present. Framing the arguments that follow in this way, I hope to show that although the question of what realism is and does today may initially appear trivial in a time when criticism and theory as well as popular commentary bemoan our striking inability to imagine alternatives to a present whose problems confront us with ever greater urgency with each passing day, what is at stake here is nothing other than the question of how literature may be able to respond to the challenges of a seemingly omnipresent now by affording us a direly needed form of thought and form of critique that can keep alive the utopian imagination in our historical moment.

### **Novel Realisms**

In her essay "Novel Futures," Annette Van argues that contemporary concerns over the potential death of the novel—she engages in particular detail with V.S. Naipaul's infamous proclamation of its death in 1996—are possibly best understood in relation to the question of the possibility of the realist novel. Turning to Bakhtin's well-known

examination of the novel as a form characterized by its “openendedness” that is wedded to a futurism and temporality that distinguishes it from other literary forms, Van suggests that it is this temporality, most notably expressed in realism, that might stand at the center of current engagements with the novel.<sup>8</sup> “I think it’s important that we think again about what the realist novel can still do,” Van suggests. Other critics are similarly convinced that the question of realism is of great importance in our moment. Gordon Hutner, for instance, argues that our ability to “historicize the contemporary” requires us to examine “realism as a defining feature of contemporary literature.”<sup>9</sup> In recent years, George Levine notes, realism “seems to be struggling back to some of the respectability that it lost” early in the twentieth century and during the reign of postmodernism.<sup>10</sup> After the 1960s in particular, Levine argues, “the very notion of representing ‘reality’ in credible ways was taken as reprehensible *naïveté* or simple bad faith.” Today, however, things seem to have changed. Realism is back. Colleen Lye echoes Levine’s account of the return of realism and of a general concern with reality and the real in contemporary art and literature. “At one point,” she writes, “during the bygone age of postmodernism, nothing was real. Now, everything is—or at least claims to be.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, Lye, notes, the return of realism also means that we are once again faced with a series of persisting problems regarding the term’s definition. “If ‘more or less realist’ hardly suffices to capture the uncertainty that surrounds what is happening with literature itself,” she notes, “that is because there is so little agreement as to what we mean by realist.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, she adds, even “within literary critical discourse alone, the term is used in very different, even contradictory, ways.”<sup>13</sup> Lye therefore suspects that “realism well may not be a genre or even a type of literature” and that we may have to wonder if the term realism “strictly refers to a method of interpretation and not at all to any attribute of the object.”<sup>14</sup> Not only does realism seem to have found a new life in contemporary literature, but the known problem of the conceptual instability or even contradictory nature of the term itself seems to stand at the center of its re-emergence. And it may be in this sense, by paying particular attention to the ways in which realism may be said to function as a mode of interpretation, as a form of thought and of critique, and by examining the manner in which realism’s function may be said to arise precisely from its engagement with its own limits and instabilities, that we can begin to characterize one important facet of realism’s current manifestation.

In recent years, critics have been noting that some of the most interesting manifestations of contemporary realism are not straight-forward versions of what we would traditionally understand as realism. The work of Kim Stanley Robinson is an interesting case in this regard. Heise, for instance, is interested in the novels of Robinson because she finds that they are characterized by a form of realism that is designed to confront those crises of our temporal imagination that contextualize her interview with Robinson that I cite at the beginning of this essay. Although he is most well-known as a science fiction writer, Heise notes that “one of most striking aspects

of Robinson's fiction is its sustained realism." Like Levine and Lye, Heise associates the turn to realism in the work of novelists like Robinson with a decisive move beyond postmodernism. And while there is some agreement among critics that the return of literary realism over the course of the past two or three decades constitutes a clear signal of a literary historical shift that marks the exhaustion of postmodernism, they also note that this ought to be understood as a particular stage in the history of realism: contemporary realism tends to present itself as a blended form. The political and critical force of Robinson's novels, from his *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004-2007) to his most recent novel *New York 2040* (2017), lies to no small degree in its formal experimentation with realism. In order to mediate our continued inability to respond decisively to the challenges posed by climate change and environmental destruction that raise the specter of the relation between the limits of (capitalist) realism and the need for solutions derived from a speculative mode, Robinson's novels combine realism with speculative fiction in order to activate realism's critical and political force precisely by exploring its limits without weakening the fundamental commitment to realism itself. Robinson's novels illustrate the ways in which climate fiction necessitates the development of a new form of realism, one finely attuned to both its possibilities and limitations, a form of realism whose reach is expanded through its connections to other forms and genres, including speculative fiction. That is, the formal problem of realism in climate fiction is directly bound up with the question of the relation between what is considered "realistic" and what is understood to be "speculative" or "fabulist," which is to say that the formal relation between realism and speculation in novels like *New York 2140* serves as a way to critique the ways in which the limits of capitalism determine our sense of which actions and which plans for future change are to be deemed realistic or fantastically unrealistic. In this way, as becomes evident in climate or environmental realism in the context of persisting debates over the reality of climate change and ongoing quarrelling over the degree of realism of conceptions of social and political change that refuse to be bound by the limitations that capitalism imposes on our environmental imagination, realism's engagement with the limits of realism in the present constitutes not simply a self-reflexive formalist exercise but it enables realism's political function and ability to locate the root causes of current crises of our imagination in capitalism.

Similar to the work of Robinson, novels like Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) blend realism with the speculative or the fabulist, and John Wray's stunningly omnivorous novel *The Lost Time Accidents* (2016) joins realism with speculative modes and the historical novel. And just like in Robinson's novels, there is a clear sense in the work of Ozeki and Wray that what is gained in such new, more capacious forms of realism that are finely attuned to realism's limits depends on the departure from simpler, in the current context limiting rather than productive formal and generic oppositions such as that between realism and anti-realism. What we find in such novels is not simply an exercise in blurring the boundary between realism and the

speculative. After all, what would be the point of continuing to engage in this by now surely tired if not utterly clichéd attempt at formal experimentation? Rather, we see the emergence of a new kind of realism that confronts the sociopolitical and imaginative impasses and limitations of our moment precisely through the exploration of the formal limits of realism itself. Thus, more than just restoring our attention to the prickly history of the idea of realism, contemporary realism as represented by the work of Robinson, Ozeki, and Wray offers us examples of a kind of realism that is not plagued or hampered but indeed enabled and enriched by its conceptual prickliness. The complexity of realism's workings, Levine accordingly argues, may be said to lie precisely in its complicated relationship to reality. And "if it is true that realism as a full representation of the real must fail in any absolute sense," Levine concludes, then "there are ways in which the efforts of realism...continue to matter and to require not passive recording but strenuous art."<sup>15</sup> And what we find in the blended realisms of the contemporary novel is just such a commitment to strenuous art, one that, as Levin puts it, indicates to us that "once the limits of the mode are laid bare...realism remains an important, even a necessary mode of literary art."<sup>16</sup>

There is a literary historical argument here, too, however, which we need to take into account when we ask not just what realism is but when we realize that this question is best asked historically specifically. Asking what realism is in the conditions of the present means that we are not invested in determining a stable, trans-historical definition of realism but rather locate realism's ontology in its function and possibilities in the context of a particular historical moment. Asking what is realism able to do today in turn means that we ask questions about the rises and falls of realism, the waxing and waning of a concept whose meaning, function, and significance lies in the constantly changing ways in which it reinvents itself and binds itself to changing material and sociopolitical conditions. Like Lye, Heise, and Levine, Madhu Dubey shows that the return of realism in contemporary fiction indicates a shift beyond postmodernism. And yet, Dubey argues, it is important to foreground that this transition away from postmodernism and toward a new form of realism was bound up with a demand for the renewal of literature's political project: the development of a new social novel that is able to re-activate the novel's political function and its ability to critically engage with the historical present. Opposing the much-cited postmodern conviction that "the realistic novel was no longer possible," Dubey reminds us, Tom Wolfe's 1989 manifesto for "the new social novel" issues a call for writers "to take on the pressing social issues of their time."<sup>17</sup> This demand for a return to social realism, she stresses, was directly bound up with "the beginning of the end of American literary postmodernism. If postmodernism ended some time around 1990," Dubey concludes, "American fiction in the following decades...is said to be marked by a renewed engagement with the social world."<sup>18</sup> And yet, Dubey stresses, while we can point to a general return to realism after postmodernism, we also witness the return of specific manifestations thereof. Instead of the new

social realism for which Wolfe calls, for instance, novelists like Jonathan Franzen describe their own work as an expression of “tragic realism,” a form that is not aimed at change but at preservation, as Dubey shows. Such novels, she stresses, moreover indicate a form of realism that posits only “a residual function for the novel.”<sup>19</sup> The question of what kind of political work realism is able to do today must therefore be answered by identifying the ways in which particular modes of literary realism address the particular problems of our time. One of the fundamental distinctions that we can draw, then, is that between forms of realism that are preservative or conservative and that merely confirm the crisis of futurity and the perceived lack of cultural imaginaries aimed at substantive social change on one hand; and those forms of realism that aim for future change by engaging with realism’s own history and with its possibilities and limits precisely in order free us from the compulsion to accept the limits of capitalism as the limits of our imagination. I shall refer to the latter form of realism as prospective realism.

### **“Naming the Things that are Absent”**

Dubey’s account of the emergence of new forms of contemporary (social) realism is instructive for our purposes here. Implicit in Dubey’s analysis is an interest in realism not as a mode or problem of representation but rather as a form of critique—Dubey is interested in the emergence of “a new kind of fiction that once again aspires to... critique the social world.”<sup>20</sup> It is this new critical realist fiction, I would argue, that we find in the work of Robinson, Ozeki, and Wray as well as in the work of a range of young American writers, including Rachel Kushner, Jennifer Egan, Ben Lerner, and Nathaniel Rich, writers who expand our conception of what realism is and does precisely by probing its limits in the context of the temporal crises of the capitalist present. Critical engagements with these forms of realism will benefit from the aim to move beyond classic accounts, such as the work of Ernst Auerbach, that describe realism as a problem of representation and mimesis. Frankfurt School critical theory, for instance, contains accounts of realism that may model for us a different trajectory. Theodor W. Adorno, for example, insists on the importance of understanding novelistic realism in ways that are not limited to concerns with the representation of reality. “If the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are,” Adorno emphasizes, it must do so precisely by abandoning “a realism that only aids the façade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it.”<sup>21</sup> What exactly this may mean and how it may allow us to expand our conception of the work of realism emerges when we see realism with Ernst Bloch as a matter of laying bare the present’s absences more so than focusing on matters of presence or the existing, as a form that engages with the present critically in a manner that is fundamentally aimed at transcendence rather than representation. And in particular in a moment in history that is widely understood to be marked by a non-transcendable, omnipresent form of contemporaneity and by a crisis of futurity, such a prospective form of realism that

seeks to read the present historically by making legible those paths forward that exist in the present as latent, repressed possibility is able to generate a counterpoint to those accounts of realism that merely read it as confirmation of a perpetual capitalist present. “Where the prospective horizon is continuously kept in sight,” Bloch writes,

reality appears there as what it is concretely: as a network of paths (*Wegegeflecht*) of dialectical processes that take place in an unfinished world, in a world that would be totally unchangeable without the enormous future, the real possibilities within it. This includes the totality, which does not represent the isolated entirety of each part of a process, but which represents the entirety of the matter that is pending in the process in general. Therefore, it is a matter that is still tendentious and latent. This alone is realism.<sup>22</sup>

Realism thus conceived is not just an orientation toward the existing, but it is also and indeed primarily a way to uncover the present as fundamentally marked by lack, of illustrating what could have been and what may yet be by revealing what is missing from what is. Prospective realism does not merely represent reality. It establishes a critical relation to it, and in this way it positions itself as a relation of mediation that stands opposed to the immediacy that becomes the defining condition of the age of real time capitalism.

Throughout his work, Bloch argues that our ability to imagine alternatives to the existing is limited by the constricting singular, linear temporal imagination that is developed under capitalism. Recognizing the present as a fundamentally plural form of temporality, as a time that is as much defined by the existing as it is marked by the denied possibilities, silenced demands for liberation, and unheard appeals for a better life and world that continue to exist in the present as latent possibility restores our attention to the gaps in reality, to that which is missing, to the excluded and the repressed. Realism as conceived by Bloch is about laying bare reality not as a given to be represented but as an ongoing dialectical process whose totality, the plurality of timelines and paths that point beyond the existing, is made concrete by a prospective realism that is aimed at making legible the present’s gaps and latencies in part through the engagement with its own limits. In this way, prospective realism serves as a form of thought and as a form of critique that refuses the narrowing of possibility and of our imagination under capitalism. Prospective realism understands the historical present as a time defined by latency. Novels like Lydia Millett’s *How the Dead Dream* (2007) and Willy Vlautin’s *The Free* (2014) address themselves to this latency, to that which remains unrealized and deemed impossible in the present, providing us with an account of reality as an impoverished version of what is possible and of the historical present as the time of unrealized potentiality, of possibility defined within the limits of capitalism. Prospective realism marks a new moment in the political life of literature,

and it also provides us with one way of concretely understanding what it may mean to historicize the present. Thus in addition to noting the new sincerity or the new wave seriousness in contemporary literature that leaves behind postmodernism's play and irony that critics have been describing in recent years, we may be well served to remember Kojin Karatani's suggestion that the opposite of play is not seriousness but rather reality, adding that this reality is, of course, history.<sup>23</sup>

Levine is convinced that realism is "in its very nature a paradoxical form." It traditionally seeks to represent the experience of (material) reality while, for this very reason, it inevitably also runs into the persisting tension between empiricism and idealism, between mind and external nature.<sup>24</sup> And yet, those forms of contemporary realism that are aimed at a critique of the historical present also posit this investment in critique in opposition to a primary interest in experience. Prospective realism understood in the ways indicated above is fundamentally invested in a critique of immediacy, one that assumes particular significance in the age of real time capitalism in which immediacy becomes one of the fundamental material and social principles and mechanisms of valorization, exchange, and communication. Refusing the logic of immediacy that privileges experience over imagination, thought, and critique, such a form of realism highlights mediation as a necessary relation to material reality for the development of critique, one that may also be said to resolve the persisting tension between realism and subjectivism in modernism and postmodernism. Hayden White reminds us that we must understand the emergence of realism as the development of a genre of history writing and history as a concept in theoretical thought (a form of thinking time), as "the development of realism by the new focus on the present as history."<sup>25</sup> What this development requires, he stresses, is something more than the attempt to document or represent experience. "No one practices or even experiences 'history' as such," White writes, "because 'history' is an abstraction from the experience of change in society."<sup>26</sup> "While one can no doubt experience the *effects* of social change," he concludes, "this is quite another matter from the putative 'experience of history'."<sup>27</sup> And just like history is not accessible through immediate experience but only through mediation, analysis, and critique, the historical present is not a time with which prospective realism engages primarily on the plane of experience. Through its refusal of immediacy, prospective realism offers us a reading of our time, and it is in this way, not by representing reality but by establishing a relation of mediation to material reality, that it serves as a form of critique of the historical present.

One of the defining characteristics and most notable accomplishments of the nineteenth-century realist novel, Auerbach famously notes, is that it offered human beings for the first time a representation of "the full range of their everyday reality."<sup>28</sup> "It was due solely to this endeavor," he claims, the endeavor "which we call Realism, that it became possible for literature to maintain a vital connection to the other ways in which contemporary society expressed itself—to its science, its economics, and its

thoughts and desires.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense, then, contemporary realism tries to accomplish the same goal that Auerbach associates with realism’s emergence: to articulate the relation between literature and social, political, and material reality in the present. Yet, today, realism does so precisely by refusing the notion that its mission lies in the obligation or ability to capture the full range of everyday reality. Instead, realism seeks to capture the ways in which the fullness of life and of the demands for liberation and for a better world are perpetually reduced to an impoverished version of itself in the capitalist present. And in order to advance such a critique of the lack of fullness in our present, realism refuses the primacy of experience and immediacy in favor of critique and mediation. One way to express this difference on the level of narrative is that such a form of realism that mediates a negative totality, one that highlights absences and unfulfilled possibility as more significantly indicative of the historical present than the existing, is that it is invested not in point of view but in standpoint. After all, Guido Mazzoni reminds us, when literature is worth its salt and refuses the fragmentation of the social and the collective into the immediate and individual, “we follow [the heroes of narrative fiction] not so much because we are interested in the content of their desires, but because we share the form of their condition, the grammar of their existence.”<sup>30</sup>

It is worth pointing out here that a focus on a kind of realism that is mainly interested not in interiority and matters of experience but in a historical understanding of the conditions present, which is to say a shift away from immediacy and toward mediation, is interestingly linked to recent critical debates that revolve around the tension between literary reading conceived as immediate experience on one hand and reading understood as critique on the other.<sup>31</sup> Of particular note here is once more the work of Kornbluh, who argues persuasively that critique may be understood as a central characteristic of the novel form itself.<sup>32</sup> Thus, such critical discussions contain a rich resource for our analysis of prospective realism that model what Bewes describes as a practice of “reading with the grain,” which means to direct the theory and form of reading that the text itself develops back at it through our critical interrogations.<sup>33</sup> If we therefore examine the particular form of reading and critique, of making meaning of the historical present, that prospective realism forwards, then we see that what is truly at stake in prospective realism is not the degree of realistic representation, the conflict between ideas and reality, or the tension between different accounts of reality in which critical traditions of realism beginning with Auerbach are mainly interested, but rather the ways in which prospective realism is able to mediate between epistemology and material reality and the ways in which realism, understood as mediation, makes the material world knowable to us. Prospective realism provides us with a particular form of thought aimed at a critique of the limits of the present, and in doing so it provides us with an understanding of thought that may be said to continue the tradition of critical theory in artistic form: thought itself is conceived as a form of praxis. Just as “physical labour



transforms and negates the material world under changing historical circumstances,” David Held writes in his outline of the foundational principles of Frankfurt School critical theory, “so mental labour, under changing historical conditions, alters its object world through criticism.”<sup>34</sup> As always, we may turn to Adorno for a more pointed version of this foundational commitment of critical theory that, I would argue, also constitutes one of the basic commitments of prospective realism: “we are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of those things.”<sup>35</sup>

Prospective realism may thus be understood as a form of immanent critique of the present. The basic methodological operation of critical theory, immanent critique, as Held reminds us, quoting Max Horkheimer, is to assess “the breach between ideas and reality.” What this means is that immanent critique confronts “the existent, in its historical context, with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticize the relation between the two and thus transcend them.”<sup>36</sup> Aiming to investigate the social world “in the movement of its development,” as Held puts it, immanent critique examines the contradictions inherent in concepts themselves and the tension between ideas and lived reality in order to afford us a new understanding of a concept, of an object, or of reality, one that understands the object of analysis as always in flux, this aiming for the transcendence of the present. This development and mobility of the object that arises from its immanent contradictions that critique seeks to lay bare also reveals that plural temporality in the present that we may otherwise understand as history. Examining present in its development and as history in the making, immanent critique provides us with a particularly salient method with which to confront the limits and the purported immobility of our present without future, and it is prospective realism that concretely models for us this form of thought. Like immanent critique, prospective realism is aimed at reading the present in a manner that reveals the object in flux by doing a kind of work that we traditionally associate more directly with speculative fiction: through cognitive estrangement from our own present, and by laying bare the immanent contradictions as well as the latencies that exist as repressed or denied possibility in the present and that demand realization, prospective realism aims at the transcendence of the limits of the now.

Prospective realism narrates and reads the present as prehistory in order to free it from the grasp of a petrified temporal imagination. Far from simply confirming the future’s collapse into a timeless, omnipresent now, prospective realism serves as a site for imagining futurity and change via a particular relation to the present that we may understand as a form of immanent critique. In this way, it also provides us with a form of critique and a mediated relation to the now that aims to reveal and refuse immediacy as the fundamental principle of real-time capitalism. Prospective realism constitutes an important facet of realism today that warrants detailed examination, for it explores not only the political function of realism and the possibility of a new social novel but it also marks a notable moment in the history of realism. Prospective

realism foregrounds and insists upon realism's important function as a form of critique of the present that allows us to read and know our time historically, which is a particularly significant aspect of the work of literature in the context of a historical moment that is elsewhere understood to be marked by the end of history, futurity, and possibly time itself. In such a moment, in a present that is often understood as ever-expanding and broadening and that appears to absorb our imagination of future change and possibility into itself, prospective realism's insistence on the gaps and latencies in reality does an important kind of work that may be understood as continuing the tradition of immanent critique. Prospective realism may be described with Herbert Marcuse as a form of literature dedicated to "naming the things that are absent," and, as Marcuse stresses by naming the things that are absent, we are able to "break the spell of the things that are."<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

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11. Colleen Lye, "Afterword: Realism's Futures" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49:2 (2016): 343.
12. Lye, "Afterword: Realism's Futures" 343.
13. "Afterword: Realism's Futures" 343.
14. "Afterword: Realism's Futures" 343.
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16. "Literary Realism Reconsidered" 14.
17. Madhu Dubey, "Post-Postmodern Realism?" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57.3 & 57.4 (2011): 364.
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19. "Post-Postmodern Realism?" 369.
20. "Post-Postmodern Realism?" 364.
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28. Erich Auerbach, *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach* (James I. Porter, ed.)

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29. Auerbach, *Time, History, and Literature* 145.
30. Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2017): 375.
31. For a detailed discussion of these recent critical debates, see the special issue “Literary Studies After Postcritique” of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (64.4, February 2020), which contains essays on the topic by Timothy Bewes, Sheri-Marie Harrison, Andrew Hoberek, Carolyn Lesjak, Lisa Siraganian, and Clemens Spahr.
32. Kornbluh, “We Have Never Been Critical.”
33. Bewes, “Reading With the Grain.”
34. David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990): 204.
35. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. E.B. Ashton (London and New York, Continuum, 1973): 33.
36. Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* 183.
37. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002): 71.

## Climate Realism, Capitalist and Otherwise

Anna Kornbluh

What I like about *New York 2140* is that it describes something that could happen in the real world. The mechanisms are in place. Congress could make the laws and the president could enact them. It's not grossly dissimilar to what Bernie Sanders was advocating during his campaign.

—Kim Stanley Robinson

An estimated 2 billion people worldwide are currently living on land that will, in just 30 years, be either well below the high-tide line or uninhabitably hot, or both. A teensy fraction of the earth's population has lethally carbonized the atmosphere at a rapidly accelerating rate over the past couple of decades, in inverse proportion to the availability of irrefutable scientific evidence, and, in the U.S. at least, coinciding exactly with the revolutionary repeal of taxation for the wealthy. Just 8 individuals possess as much wealth as half of humanity; half of all carbon emissions originate from just 10% of the species consuming the products of just 25 corporations, and 90% of all emissions come from the rich half of the world (meaning the poor half emits almost nothing).<sup>1</sup> The limitless quest for monetary wealth daily intensifies emissions, and resultant rising atmosphere temperatures precipitate greater humidity over the world's oceans, which must be discharged as rain and snow, and which melts glaciers and polar ice caps, all netting severe water accumulations – call it a liquidity trap.

This lethal solubilization of capital flow and aquatic torrent outfits the central premise of the unabashedly big, boldly retro 2017 novel from the bestselling sci-fi great Dr. Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140*. In the novel, flooding rivers, rising oceans, and melting glaciers in our present crest in this near future in two awesome "pulses" of 10 feet and 40 feet, engulfing all planetary coastal areas, killing millions and displacing millions more. The ever aberrant island of Manhattan, capital of capital, partially persists, everything below 30th Street gone, the uber-rich migrated far north past 190th to The Cloisters, and a risky fresh investment bubble frothing in the

intertidal terrain between 30th and 40th.<sup>2</sup> The more things change, the more they stay the same - as the omniscient narration that synthesizes multiple focalized characters straight-relays Forbes Mag facts, "the four hundred richest people on the planet own half the planet's wealth, and the top one percent own fully eighty percent of the world's wealth."<sup>3</sup> Polarized accumulation, mass displacement, water emergencies, private security, and real estate hedges: the future in 2140 rings alarmingly undistant from the present in 2019. *New York 2140* presents the perpetuity of financial capitalism *even after climate Armageddon* - a wholly apparent failure of speculative fictionalizing that evokes the specter of "capitalist realism."

Ten years ago this fall, Mark Fisher defined "capitalist realism" as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." This perilous imagination deficit has frequently been synonymized with the Jamesonian/Žižekian ubiquitous adage "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." *New York 2140* presents itself as a consummate capitalist realist aesthetic, since the fundamental premise of its made world is capitalism's permanence: calamitous dissolution of life on Earth has left financial speculation and human resource extraction intact. This is something of a conundrum to behold in a text written by a Fredric Jameson doctoral advisee with nearly two dozen speculative and science fictions on his vita, a text so brimming with Marxist bromides as to rank high on the list of recent "theory novels."<sup>4</sup> Yet this novel instantiates capitalist realism as plot and setting in order to mediate it, rendering it thinkable as the style of a drowned world from which it remains possible to take distance. The chief technique of this mediation is the production of a disparity between capitalist realist style and capitalist realist attitude: 2140 is still capitalism, but everybody's having a good time.

Part of what opens this gulch is the ambiguity between style and attitude in the discourse around capitalist realism. Fisher analogizes it explicitly to "socialist realism," the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union, but then debuts less an aesthetic category than an affective disposition: a pervasive mood of nonoptimism, an unimaginativeness ultimately deadly - including for him. The few aesthetic examples he takes for touchstones of this sensibility - films like Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* and literature like Franz Kafka's *The Trial* - hardly exemplify the mode that we would ordinarily call "realism"; instead they give texture to the dispirited, dystopian ethos Fisher appropriates "realism" to name: "the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." Realism for Fisher is less a mode than a mood.

Mode has nevertheless intrigued Fisher's readers. In his lights we find, for example, frequent observations that the ruinous system and its intransigent ideology have birthed a superabundance in 21st century cultural production of apocalypse scenarios that highlight the ease with which popular media like cinema and television showcase new ice ages, human reproductive menopause, nuclear armageddon, and

alien colonization.<sup>5</sup> Disaster porn as the house style of capitalist realism – but indeed, a style with little of the affective tenor of Fisher’s original conceit, since these products so boundingly enthuse destruction, and mostly conclude with superhero exhortations like “Now let’s rebuild!”<sup>6</sup> On another channel, critics have affirmed that realism is “the aesthetic mode most intimate to capitalism” and tracked a resurgence of high realist style in visual and literary culture since the 2008 global economic crisis.<sup>7</sup> The features of this style they delineate as “omniscient narration” as well as “its mimetic and documentary registers, its assumptions about actuality, its aspirations to social totality, its uneasy rivalry with allegory, its strategies of surveillance, spectatorship, and ethnographic ‘othering’” (14), and they associate the return of these features (as well as ironization of them) with a project “to capture the real.”<sup>8</sup> To the extent that this return of realism is accorded epistemic privilege in “capturing” realities so as to foster critical consciousness, capitalist realism comes to look not at all like a depression, and much more like sociology.

Arguably a strange union of both of these varieties of capitalist realism – the apocalyptic and the banal, the end of the world and an undead aesthetic – impels *New York 2140*, since it represents horrific capitalist longevity in long-ago passé literary realism. But crucially the book severs capitalist realist mode from capitalist realist mood, since it trades depression for ebullience *apres le deluge*. *Business Insider* calls it “surprisingly fun!”<sup>9</sup> Activating Austenian irony and Dickensian omniscience and Melvillean hyperbole in a 634 page situation comedy of immortal capitalism after legion death, *New York 2140* disrupts capitalist realist affect while accepting its world-trappings; it mediates capitalist realism as world-structuration rather than world-regard. The novel thus ventilates the suffocating totalizations of capitalist realist depression with new winds of political will, denaturalizing the very medium of ecocide, atmosphere itself.

Opening breathing room in this way for a realpolitik of can-do coping amidst capitalist carnage, the novel ends rather happily. After yet another murderous and largely unpredictable superhurricane, a modest social democratic project is tentatively led by an upstart redistributionist congresswoman from the block, AOC *avant la lettre*: “finance was now for the most part a privately operated public utility”<sup>10</sup> and all the greatest hits of the welfare state in late capitalism come back on the table: “universal health care, free public education through college, a living wage, guaranteed full employment, a year of mandatory national service,” and, best of all, “bull markets appeared all over the planet.” Jubilant in its market-based finance capitalism with state regulation, the last section of the narrative concludes “there are no happy endings! Because there are no endings!” Easy to see how SF Gate, indie newsletter of the carbon hotbed, pronounced “One reaches the end of *New York 2140* with a smile and at least the momentary belief that the future might work out after all.”<sup>11</sup>

Enthusing the insufficiently radical, tragically too late retooling of finance

capitalism for the common good, *New York 2140* explicitly anticipates what has very recently come to be known as The Green New Deal, the winkingly old-fashioned big state production of public works projects for decarbonization that is humanity's only hope for a less worse eco-collapse. It is not enough, it is too late – but these are all the more reasons for it. Robinson directly identified the early drafts of this policy as his impetus for the specific aesthetic of his book. In a lecture he titled simply “Science Fiction is the Realism of Our Time” (a mantra he continues to repeat) he proclaims: “What I like about *New York 2140* is that it describes something that could happen in the real world. The mechanisms are in place. Congress could make the laws and the president could enact them. It's not grossly dissimilar to what Bernie Sanders was advocating during his campaign.” In making this “not gross dissimilarity” into an aesthetic – a flagrantly outmoded high realist style bounding from character to character, past to present, interior to exterior, focalization and relativization as only omniscient fiction can – Robinson maneuvers too-late realist form to dislodge too-late realist resignation. *New York 2140*'s atmospheric effervescence counters “left melancholy” rousing imagination from its crypt.<sup>12</sup> Too late, but still.

### Too Late Realism

Mapping capitalist realism as style in a book whose spine proclaims itself “Science Fiction” requires crossing the terrain where science fiction ends and realism begins. Realism famously thwarts modal definitions, but we might usefully in this context point to the consistent tendency to understand it as the “not genre,” at once the consummation of the novel's sublation of fixed genre hierarchies, and the diffuse background against which the sharper contours of melodrama, the gothic, detection, romance, and science fiction come in to relief. Perhaps more usefully, especially where science fiction is at issue, it seems important to mark that realism commits to worldbuilding, constructing internally consistent social matrices balancing psychic depth and societal breadth, detailed environments and persons-qua-characters; that it usually but not exclusively focuses on temporal contexts rather proximate to its time of writing; and that it exhibits lots of inquisitive energy about knowability, empiricism, probability, often by blending omniscience or impersonality with irony or avowed limitation.<sup>13</sup> Compared to science fiction, realism generally adheres to constraints of finitude, mortality, and the time-space continuum, and this thinking within constraint has often been regarded, especially by critics of Foucauldian stripes, as highly *normative* – codifying liberalism, reifying referentiality, and totalizing relationality.<sup>14</sup> As against this, Marxist critics emphasize realism's project to activate totality as a point of view rather than a content, and to speculatively probe social possibility.<sup>15</sup> Distinguishing realism from science fiction therefore depends in large part on which conceit of realism is the point of departure; by some conceits, the two are quite close after all.

“Science fiction is the realism of our time” denominates this closeness while



underlining the strangeness of our time. As a proposition, it means something like a historical event of the two modes switching places: there was a realism, in its time, which performed the Lukácsian function of “thinking in terms of totality,” while there is now some new time, our time, which assigns that office to science fiction instead.<sup>16</sup> What accounts for the difference between that time and our time, the 19th century and now, is that c19 extractive capitalism merely started what the c21 is aggressively finishing, the end of earth. Science Fiction is then the theory of totality for a world whose “transcendental homelessness” (again to invoke Lukács) is not spiritual but *material*.<sup>17</sup> “Science Fiction is the realism of our time” means as well that the two fuse: the aesthetic difference between a mode of speculative world building that embraces constraints and a mode of speculative world building that defies them has become untenable now that the political and environmental constraints are too real. Realism, too, is speculative, precisely in its embrace of constraint, in its willingness to think what is to be done when it is too late. Stuck inside the capitalist realist world of carboniferous catastrophe, the conditions of possibility for fiction for mutate. What many critics have been celebrating as an elevation of genre fiction - a new ambition, new legitimacy, and new market of zombies, fantasy, romance, dungeons and dragons - looks, in *New York 2140* like its opposite, a deflation of genre, a diminution of science fiction to realism.<sup>18</sup>

Jameson’s studies of science fiction track precisely this diminution. Where Darko Suvin influentially defines science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment,”<sup>19</sup> Jameson has observed this estrangement is more regularly a question of “when” rather than “where,” because the decline of the historical novel (1848 or 1862, depending on who’s counting) almost perfectly coincides with the advent of science fiction in Jules Verne (1863), which distinguishes itself from the former with its “nascent sense of the future” and which generally projects a future history that contrasts with high realism’s presentism or middle distance.<sup>20</sup> Whether temporal or spatial, Jameson has also lamented this gap’s recent collapse: the constitutive speculative distance of science fictions is “plagued by the perpetual reversion of difference and otherness into the same, and the discovery that our most energetic imaginative leaps into radial alternatives were little more than the projections of our own social moment and historical or subjective situation.”<sup>21</sup> If the difference between realism and science fiction might therefore not be about estranged content, Samuel Delany preserves the possibility that it inheres in estranged form, though he fascinatingly flips the script, making realism weirder than science fiction: whereas a sentence like “then her world exploded” can, in science fiction, literally refer to phenomenal combustion and through such “literalization” radically open the dimensions in which such a literalism would be possible, “mundane” realism “constrains us to read such a string of words as...muzzy metaphor.”<sup>22</sup> Science Fiction

is estranged but literal; realism is mundane but metaphorical, and their difference hinges on how much is practicably possible in the environment as it is. Realism then names constriction of the environment - only some things can be literal - and the too real carbonization of the earth's atmosphere in too late capitalism seals its generic inevitability.

Environmental closure as a property of realism is underexamined in a recent vexed intervention into this question of the separable provinces of realism and science fiction that turns precisely on climate. The novelist Amitav Ghosh contends that realism is incapable, generically, of representing climate change, since "global warming defies... common sense...events of this time have a very high degree of improbability," and realism must remain tethered to banality and probability, foreclosing extremity, volatility, and the sublime magnitude of geologic intervention.<sup>23</sup> Fictions which do accommodate the erratic poles of catastrophe are "those generic out-houses...fantasy, horror, and science fiction."<sup>24</sup> Science fiction's generic extremity equips it to directly present environmental collapse. But despite his thorough anatomy of realism's limitedness, Ghosh still considers the production of realist fiction to be an aesthetically valuable moral enterprise (he himself, after all, writes sweeping historical novels) so he appeals to what he understands as its mimetic imperative, calling for novelists to focus their realist gaze on the experiences of a ruined ecosphere. Realism with the right politics, he would have it, can modernize the "out-house" of science fiction. Since numerous critics have shown the manifold ways that realist fictions explore such climate-pertinent concepts as time scales, extraction economies, infrastructure, and human species being, it seems shortsighted of Ghosh, or anyone else, to confine its mediating faculties to immediate iteration or literal hurricanes.<sup>25</sup> Exhibit A, *New York 2140* precisely constructs a climate realism beyond calamity mimesis, since it performs too late old school realism - omniscience, social breadth and psychic depth, thinking in terms of totality, the resonance or dissonance between narration and plot, conceding the enabling limits of temporal finitude and practical physics, institutional and infrastructural imaginary, presentist scope - to suss out the potentiality within the too late.

### **Fucking New York**

The title instantly forecasts the play of familiarity and distance that comprises the book's capitalist realist submerging of science fiction. Temporally dislocated because 120ish years in the future, the novel would seem to meet the "future history" criterion, though its frequent present tense and timeless capitalism undermines this, and its decidedly not spatially dislocated: unlike many of Robinson's previous novels, it is wholly set on planet Earth. Not much geographic dislocation in the quest for the great American novel, not much cartographing of a foreign land in pursuit of a new topos, whether utopian or dys-. And more: the novel's world is deeply familiar, that most typical of fictional cities: New York City, storied epicenter of American empire,

engorged with the daily grind of getting by and the prodigious grime as its byproducts, exuberant in glittering skyline sunsets and meat cart grease stains on the lapels of the 0.1% confirming how much all of us indeed share with the temporarily embarrassed millionaires. This center of it all, this key to American mythologies, this financial district for the globe, this Iroquois home, discovered by Italians, claimed by Dutch, conquered by English, remains, after profound reshaping of the world's coasts and severe adjustment of the world's population, magically utmost. Realism's canonical commitment to contemporary time and real physical space seemingly applies; very little is estranged in the space and time depicted in *New York 2140*: even a flooded New York is still, the book indelibly inscribes in its last sentence, "Fucking New York," institutional democracy continues apace, and financial capitalism propelled by real estate derivatives remains in full force. The citizens of NYC are brash and brusque as ever, busy making a buck, guzzling traffic slapstick, hating on dimwit tourists - but discerning eyes may catch the occasional glint of communal goodwill between shoving elbows. Capitalism is eternal, and so is that New York state of mind.

New York attitude abides, but this book channels less the psychic states of its characters than their relentless action; there is no time for capitalist realist depression amid all the busyness. High realism's paradigmatic banality fills these pages. Rather than offering sweeping panoramas of the estranged setting or encyclopedic gazettes of futuristic technology, the book is intensely plot-driven. A polyfocal narrative, *New York 2140* covers 7 different characters or character-pairs. Franklin is a hedge bro, Gen is a high-ranking policewoman, Amelia is youtube star turned animal conservator, Charlotte is a civil servant, Vlade is a building super; and in the pairs, Mutt & Jeff are quants working for trading firms, while Stefan & Roberto are evidently homeless canal kids. (Note that 3 of the 7 characters come from the financial sector.) Each foci is involved in its own plot, that majority of which are wholly independent of climate catastrophe: Mutt & Jeff are kidnapped, Stefan & Roberto hunt treasure, Amelia assists animal migrations, Franklin plays the market, Inspector Gen keeps law and order, Charlotte civilly serves, Vlade maintains. Even the most adventurous of these (the kidnapping, the gold prospecting, and the polar relocating) belong to ordinary capitalist processes of appropriation, displacement, and speculation, and the less adventurous exemplify social reproduction in law, institutions, and infrastructure. The plots derive from the foundational realist paradox, the adventures of everyday life, and the novel's scope intakes the quotidian details of social reproduction: work, consumption, commuting, communication, in the great tradition of realism. Robinson has repeatedly averred that "science fiction is the realism of our time" and in *New York 2140* his practice of realism actualizes that equation: there is virtually none of the conventional nominalism of science fiction (LeGuin: "local administrative regions, called blocks"; "they called their engines and dirigibles names like Indomitable, Endurance"; "the group called themselves The Odonian Society") and virtually none of the conventional technological exposition (indeed, the future is disturbingly un-

new in this regard, powered by AppleWatches, solar panels, and boats).<sup>26</sup> This realism concerns itself with quotidian existence – eating and sleeping, dressing and traveling, working working working. As Robinson described it in a lecture in which he situated his work in the trajectory of “Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, Austen, Dickens, Eliot,” his realism upholds the “notion that literature could be about ordinary people doing ordinary things that ordinary people did...the drama of getting by in this modernizing world.”<sup>27</sup> Where science fiction might suggest great quests, realism confines itself to the odysseys of daily busyness. Among the consciousnesses focalized, the individuals are disproportionately women (while the two couples and the one first person point of view are all men). These women work as police, government, social workers, social media influencers (and hybrids thereof) and they go about the business of maintaining law, order, domestic equilibrium, and eco-awareness with no-nonsense efficiency. Everyone is so industriously well-adjusted, grateful to savor a steak at the end of a hard day’s work.

The bustle of daily life in *New York 2140* redounds to a cheerful presumption of cooperation and kindness among strangers. If it is dismally requisite for science fiction, from Octavia Butler to Stephen King, to multiply nightmarish sequences of abject terror, perpetual violence, and chronic rape – to presuppose a hell of other people – Robinson’s conjured world utterly rejects such sociopathy. None of his protagonists are bad guys, and none of the bad guys are rashly interpersonally brutal. Malevolence percolates in corporate greed and private security firms and insider trading, but not among individuals getting by on the street, who rather embrace the cooperative spirit of housing coops, Mutual Aid (as the householder’s union is named), and collective solidarity. When the disparate plots synch, bringing the many focalized individuals and pairs together, it is at moments of support, confederation, and comradeship. In the end, in grand comedic fashion there are even two new happy couples, and a new family composite. This alone, to any seasoned reader of science fiction, furnishes a surprisingly cushy ecology, much more consistent with realism’s reputed imaginary domestic resolutions to real social contradictions than with estrangement of either utopian or dystopian stripe.

In typical realist synthetic form, the multiplot unifies in two great events: a massive storm, and a big short. The storm is so significantly unforeseen as to suggest no real advances in 120 more years of climate science, or such extreme volatility in the weather as to defy predictive modeling. Coming on swiftly, a preparatory scramble and horrific aftermath actuate the unshakeable universals of cause and effect for all the characters. This unifying plot of climate attack epitomizes a vulnerability that slightly dampens the zippy proceedings. A second unifying event is the big short the 7 improbably conceive in response to a hostile takeover bid for their building. After the adventurous Moby Dickian gold quest comes true in the middle of the book, the protagonists think collectively about how best to use the billions. In the end the radical act the novel envisions is not post-capitalism after climate disaster, nor post-

capitalism before the worst of climate disaster, but continuing capitalism long after climate disaster: it champions nothing other than a *hedge*, a master's tool from the dutch cycle of accumulation, used to trigger a nationalizing bailout of the banks into public property. The unimaginative yet demonstrably ameliorative character of this radical act recalls recent history that could have been. As Robinson himself notes, this "plot is not my personal invention. It emerges from recent history"<sup>28</sup>: 2008 looms large in the novel, providing the explicit "model" for the crisis of the storm and the collective action the united protagonists pursue, as well as for the bailout of the banks that took place after both pulses.<sup>29</sup> The perpetuity in the year 2140 of the forces that caused 2008 – hyperleveraging, computer-automated high frequency trading, toxic real estate assets – instances the obscene permanence of capitalism, but simultaneously, refigures the social democracy that has so often accompanied capitalism as a life-raft: big state spending for the common good is the necessary and insufficient project now. Holding these contradictory and compromised possibilities in its jaunty, game hands, *New York 2140* cashes out realist fiction's indelible faculty for dialectics.

### Met Life Perpetuity

The capitalist realist over-proximity of the plot and context, capitalism and the big apple, present and future, transpires in a setting and form that further effect too late realism. A prime concern for conventional realist detail, setting invites description of social space – of the phenomenal, inhabitable, apprehensible terrain shaping relations. *New York 2140* of course announces its setting as the greatest and most provincial city on earth, and the novel highlights the strangeness of this choice by briefly explaining that the destroyed east coast is no longer the geographic center of U.S. political economy, between Washington D.C. as official government seat and NYC as international financial one, since most administration of this kind has relocated to Denver, Colorado. In exactly zero scenes in the novel is Denver visited or detailed (nor, forfend, is any other city in the world, coastal or not), and the citizen makes sure that the reader observes this elision: "there is no need to describe the situation in other coastal cities like watery Miami, or paraonoidly poldered London and Washington D.C. or swampy Bangkok, or nearly abandoned Buenos Aires, not to mention all the inland snoozefests called out when one says the single dread word Denver."<sup>30</sup> Unrepresented snoozefest flyover states negatively present the bygone greatness and structural irrelevance of the city of New York; choosing to set the future in the past as a genius way of domesticating or provincializing the future – everything is still the same – and of showing up the silliness of the obsession with NYC in the first place. (That the author is a quintessential Californian may also shade things here.) Topologically reoriented and economically inverted, with the poor now in lower Manhattan and the rich in its far northern point, the city remains recognizably classic in its bustle and grit. And too, the recognitions encompass a strictly contemporaneous evocation

of Manhattan Stonehenge:

that glorious slant of the light, that feeling that in certain moments lances in on that tilt – that you had been thinking you were living in a room and suddenly with a view between buildings out to the rivers, a dappled sky overhead, you are struck by the fact that you live on the side of a planet – that the great city is also a great bay on a great world. In those golden moments even the most hard-bitten citizen, the most oblivious urban creature, perhaps only pausing for a WALK sign to turn green, will be pierced by that light and take a deep breath and see the place as if for the first time, and feel, briefly but deeply, what it means to live in a place so strange and so gorgeous.<sup>31</sup>

Within this homespun megalopolis, the setting is even more restricted and wonderfully domestic: the disparate major characters who enjoy their own focalized chapters almost all reside in one building, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower. Although much classical realism takes place in invented provinces / imaginary towns/ fictive districts, respecting the space-time continuum tends to be one of realism's features, and thus it is notable that the futuristic setting of this novel is a regular, actually existing skyscraper of an actually existing insurance company. The Met Life Tower was built in 1909, almost the exact beginning of the American cycle of accumulation, but it was architecturally modeled after the Campanile in Venice, a cathedral from the Genoese cycle of accumulation. These Venetian tones echo in the figuration of the many new canals in Manhattan and the title SuperVenice for the intertidal. While somewhat ill-fated as an original (the Campanile suffered numerous structural failures, including total collapse in 1902), the building's religious ostentation evokes the theological function of insurance, a providential logic guiding so much venture finance. The world's tallest building for its first 5 years (it was surpassed by the nearby Woolworth Building) and a distinctive highpoint of the Manhattan skyline for much of the 20th century, Met Life played up this theology in depicting itself as a lighthouse, with the slogan "the light that never fails" guiding decades of its market dominance. In another stroke of literal symbolism in the realist vein, the Met Life Tower has been owned since 2013 by the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, consistent with increasing international capital control since the 1970's. In *New York 2140*, a hostile takeover bid, levied by a labyrinth of LLCs of almost untraceable provenance, once again makes of this Met real estate an easily transferable pseudo-liquid asset.

This archetype of international capital is also the device of New York provincialism for this novel, since everybody is a neighbor, everybody is constantly enjoying coincidental encounters with one another, often just in the knick of time to get out of a jam (Franklin, the most affluent of the protagonists, fortuitously happens upon Stefan & Roberto, the most indigent, saving them from drowning at least twice). Moreover,

the immediate setting furnishes the entire form of this novel, which Robinson avows is borrowed from c19 realism: “it was an experiment in form, in the genre of the French apartment novel...in my version of it, they eventually get to know each other to make the plot more interesting, rather than just a collection of short stories.”<sup>32</sup> Setting anchors plot and galvanizes form; the Met Life setting and apartment novel form indicate the realist aspirations of this novel, which expressly harken to older literary moments of realism. This activation of literary history is redoubled by its contrast with “the novel in short stories” so prominent in the high literary fiction market in the twenty-first century. For Robinson the novel is not many disjoint stories, but one - with a strong principle of connection, a unique kind of synthesizing, the common room of social space.

The building’s endurance despite its namesake’s legacy of collapse attests as well to how little has changed from the time of publication in 2017 to the time of setting in 2140. On the one hand, architectural construction materials seem to be the prime new development – there are skyscrapers 300 feet in the air thanks to superlight superstrong graphene fabrication. On the other hand, the old buildings like Met Life have stuck around, retrofitted with internal waterproofing, lower-story boat parking, green roofing, and loggia farms. All these architectural details hewing to the space-time continuum differentiate realism from science fiction and effectuate realism’s trademark infrastructural, institutional concerns.<sup>33</sup>

In dwelling on the infrastructure of old buildings and ordinary construction, *New York 2140* anchors its floating future in the current present of practicable maintenance. This immersive continuity between future and present instantiates the literary atmosphere as ubiquitous connectivity, and the diegetic conductor of that connectivity, girding setting to character, is none other than Vlade, the Met’s hyper super. Always alert, always working, always valeting, Vlade maintains the building’s water systems, parks its boats, monitors its residents, and ensures its structural soundness. Strikingly, his is the *only* point of view to feature in all eight parts of the novel. In a variable narrative, the invariant Vlade gives his orientation an infrastructural function within the novel itself, redoubling the genre’s emphasis upon setting and worldmaking, the form’s emphasis upon setting and apartment tropes, and the style’s emphasis upon setting and ordinary physical details. This gravitational force foregrounds the practical, quotidian habitus of infrastructure maintenance and mechanical engineering, of domestic vigilance and historic preservation. Right now, with these limited tools, it seems to say, these old buildings from these old accumulation cycles and old climates, these old houses of fiction, can be repurposed, retrofitted, renovated, retooled for greater hosting of human life. Not new technology but rather new commitments can acclimate the infrastructure to postcarbon modernity.

Vlade’s omnipresent infrastructural care-taking forges character from out of setting. His labor ballasts everyday life and weathers climate emergencies, and he

even plays a vital role in supporting speculative adventures by introducing Stefan and Roberto to a tugboat-dredge operator who ultimately hoovers up the treasure they've been hunting. His can-do omniscience centers the novel, and opens the hatch whereby the capitalist realist style comes up for air. For it is through the sustained normalcy provided by infrastructure that *New York 2140* uplifts its atmosphere; all that maintenance of the pile under water felicitously conditions the book's breezy dry ambience.

### Atmospheric Antics

Turning now to gauge this atmosphere in more detail, we can start by admitting that atmosphere is a foggy literary concept, befitting the steamy vapors of its etymology. As Dora Zhang helpfully notes in her study of retail atmospheres, "the problem is that we are dealing with a kind of relationality that is total, the kind that has been called ecological, global, or cosmological. This renders it ill-suited to analysis, which means the 'breaking up of a complex whole into its basic elements or constituent parts.'"

<sup>34</sup> Atmosphere, this framing of the problem suggests, cannot fully be elaborated as produced by component parts since, Gernot Böhme asserts, "atmospheres are totalities, atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole...(and thus they) have something irrational about them, in a literal sense, something inexpressible."<sup>35</sup> Inexpressible, unanalyzable, supra-elemental, an ambient envelope with too many slits. Jesse Oak Taylor explains, "atmosphere hovers around the text. Rather than lying either on the surface or concealed in the depths, atmosphere extends outward to envelop the interpenetrating contexts of composition, production, and reception as the work moves through the world, accumulating new meanings and spawning unanticipated effects."<sup>36</sup> Such outward extension often compels critics to conflate atmosphere with tone and reduce its qualities onto affect, especially reader affect. New Critical theories of tone define it as "attitude;" Russian formalists similarly plot a spectrum of tonal variation by which a text expresses orientation toward its object that either "scolds or caresses, denigrates or magnifies."<sup>37</sup> Picking up on this sense of judgement, the contemporary aesthetic theorist Sianne Ngai designates tone "a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world."<sup>38</sup> Here tone can be dephenomenalized back in to atmosphere, since Ngai emphasizes that this set toward the world is often ideology's literary guise, concluding "to speak of tone is thus to generalize, totalize, and abstract the 'world' of the literary object, in a way that seems particularly conducive to the analysis of ideology."

All caveats about its un-analyzability aside, to measure *New York 2140*'s "set toward" its world, we might take up some formal elements that mix in to its critical ideological break with capitalist realism. Fomenting atmosphere through the omniscient narrator's use of humor, through the impersonality in the interplay of this omniscience with its polyfocal structure and its copious epigraphs, and through a fishtailing dance from elision to hyperbole and back again, the novel counters



ideological melancholy with ideological mirth. For starters, there are a lot of jokes! Who knew the aftermath of ecological destruction would be so *droll*? Clever and even callous, improvisational and neologistic, the humor is on virtually every page, but here's one telling clip:

So the very disregard for the consequences of their carbon burn had unleashed the ice that caused the rise of sea level that wrecked the global distribution system and caused a depression that was even more damaging to the people of that generation than the accompanying refugee crisis, which, using the unit popular at the time, was rated at fifty katrinas... People stopped burning carbon much faster than they thought they could before the First Pulse. They closed that barn door the very second the horses had gotten out. The four horses, to be exact...People sometimes say no one saw it coming, but no, wrong, they did. Paleoclimatologists looked at the modern situation and saw CO<sub>2</sub> levels screaming up from 280 to 450 parts per million in less than three hundred years, faster than had ever happened in the Earth's entire previous five billion years (can we say "Anthropocene" class?) They searched the geological record for this unprecedented event, and they said, Whoa. They said, Holy shit. People!... They put it in bumper sticker terms...they published papers...and a few canny and deeply thoughtful sci-fi writers wrote up lurid accounts of such an eventuality, and the rest of civilization went on torching the planet like a Burning Man Pyromasterpiece.

Damning the pedantic experts and the unimaginative fiction writers and the carnival consumers in one blade-swoop, the omniscience on opiates swims through metafictional insouciance, unforgivable puns, and value theory badinage. Surprisingly fun! Extinction gallows humor conditions the book's atmosphere, introducing a disjuncture between the determinism of climate depression and political determinations of our ecology.

The humor's crack of depression's crush is also owing to its vehiculation through impersonal and abstract narration. The atmospheric epicenter is the chipper cicerone "The Citizen," the most generic of the multiple points of view, cruising omnisciently with far more historical expertise and technological insight than any of the individual characters. Epigraphs for every chapter bounce between literary history, political theory, music lyrics, and real talk, and the citizen passages work as apostrophized epigraphs, synthesizing past witticisms into present charming chatter. The impression imparted is one of amused angel of history, overseeing centuries of transformations, making cocktail party repartee reparations for the ignorance of present companions. There is a playfulness involved in smartassing the voice of history, ironizing the pomp of omniscience, and a most signature move involves the citizen telling the reader that

they can skip these sections. In its very first section, in its very first paragraph, “a citizen” announces “If you don’t care...sail ahead a page or two to resume voyeuring the sordidities of the puny primates crawling or paddling around this great bay. If you’re okay pondering the big picture, the ground truth, read on.”<sup>39</sup> And the invitation to “get back to the narrating of the antics of individual humans [by] skip[ing] to the next chapter” frequently recurs.<sup>40</sup> The trick, though, is that nothing in the book’s waters makes sense without these beacons, and that they are so very much fun that I for one think they should be bundled together and sold as their own little literary Marxist marvel.

The citizen passages counter the capitalist realist fixture of the story, the immortality of capitalism, with optimism, wit, playfulness. These paramount narrations admit their own circumventing the dystopian truths of climate hell, busily glossing over “complete psychodrama decade[s], a meltdown in history, a breakdown in society, a refugee nightmare, an eco-catastrophe, the planet gone collectively nuts.” Equally passed over is the moderately idyllic interlude after the first pulse in the mid 21st century, when decarbonization efforts surged and governments prioritized social welfare, only for capital to resurge in a new “shock doctrine” after a few decades.<sup>41</sup> Marking its elisions, the narrative lays out its atmospheric agenda: “we won’t go there now, that’s pessimistic boo-hooing and giving-upness.”<sup>42</sup>

Further diffusing the atmosphere is the book’s formally distinctive epigraphic logorrhea, a commitment to at least one and usually many epigraphs at the start of every single chapter. Given how many chapters there are, this grants lots of airtime to the voice of the epigraphs, and their total distribution throughout the book composes a veritable ecology, a floating and immersive network humectifying the history of ideas and abundant jokes. In this way, the epigraphs function as infrastructure of the atmosphere, skyways and canal bridges trussing the drowned town. Like the impersonality of infrastructure, the epigraphs voice all kinds of sentiments from all kinds of places, including literary giants, political leaders, and artists, while others lack provenances: some have a speaker but not a source, and some have neither, etherealizing literary quips, political truisms, and New York complaint. Deeper within the epigraphs themselves, sassy backtalk introduces agon and relationality – a meta voice that rises above even the epi-graph retorting “Really?” or “Supposedly.” or “Hard to believe.”<sup>43</sup> The very first epigraph for the entire book, from Henry James, establishes the vertiginous piss-taking in which this 613 page brick will effulgently indulge: “To be brief about it-”. Epitome of high realism in his theories even more than his practice, James was never, ever brief. The high literary joke at the beginning extends to countless citations of high theory throughout, composing a sensibility of erudition, projection, and synthesis, as well as hyper-deliberate telling-not-showing. With these allusions, Dr. Robinson takes his place in the recent tradition of “theory novels”; as he puts it “I’m not a theorist myself, but if you give me a theory I can turn it into a science fiction novel. I’m like a magpie.”<sup>44</sup> Hoarder of theory, accumulator

of abstraction, Robinson creates here an antic exaltation of novelistic polyphony and critical conjecture.

The epigraphs are one of the ways this novel disperses and complicates perspective, layering together historical consciousness, literary history, and embodied or disembodied points of view. The narrative's expansive focalization also does this, unfolding in two techniques first developed in the epoch of high realism: multifocalization (*The Woman in White* first go), and a split between first person and third person perspectives (*Bleak House* first go). There are 8 focal points of view, utterly uneven in kind: four individual women, two pairs of men, one individual man, one individual man in the first person, and a variform third person. None are bad guys; the first person exposes its own narcissism but harbors no malevolence. There are also 8 parts to the novel, each with a title, each featuring a lettered sequence rotating through the 8 viewpoints. But there is nothing regular about the rotation of the 8 points within the 8 parts. Only one part features all 8 points of view respectively (1). Only one point of view features in all 8 parts (Vlade). Two parts feature the plural third person twice (3 and 6). Six parts repeat a point of view twice within the part, though not distributedly (Part 2 has two Franklins, Part 3 two Citizens, Part 4 two Franklins, Part 5 two Gens, Part 6 two Citizens and two Stefan & Robertos, Part 7 two Citizens and two Gens). All this irregularity is bookended by the very first chapter of Part 1 and the very last chapter of Part 8 both belonging to Mutt & Jeff, that double-consonanted pair.

Lest the chapters devoted to the omniscient impersonal third person "a citizen" appear a stable "grandly sweeping overview" (34) alternative to the individuals, the pairs, and Franklin's personal narration, the book destabilizes such an illusion by subtracting "a citizen" from Part 2, then beginning Part 3 with "the citizen," ending Part 3 with "that citizen," recurring to "a citizen" in Part 4, "that citizen" in Part 5, "a citizen" and "the citizen redux" in Part 6, changing to "the city smartass" and finally "the city" in Part 7, and returning to "the citizen" for the penultimate section of Part 8. The progression of these omniscient passages from an indefinite "a citizen" to the definite "the city" reprises the quintessential Dickensian trope of protagonizing the city. New York is the ultimate character here, as already virtually personified in the title's subjectification. Such prioritizing of space and setting, with its attendant tropes of infrastructure and architecture and sociability, help direct the thinking this book does away from individual enterprise or character psychology and toward the more expansive aim of literary realism, the speculative projection of possible worlds. Citizenship, this changeability suggests, is fundamentally a rotational and pluralizable position, repetitive and unique, general and particular, definite and indefinite, the personification of a collective and of a collective locale, metropolitan and provincial, venerable and censurable. That this voice speaks in the present tense amplifies the resonances between the future and the present, exhorting those in the present to hear the citizen and even to affiliate themselves to citizenry. The shiftiness

of citizenship becomes thus a profound point from Aristotelian political theory about the impersonal and official character of citizenship, the purely formal rotational lieutenancy in collective sovereignty.

Even as the citizen's voice enjoys only so much dedicated primetime, these sections of the novel cohere in their zealous hyperbole, the overflowing which is, we've noted apropos economic and oceanic liquidity traps, the novel's master trope. Already there, the precise sea level rise that has already taken place in 2140 vastly exceeds what even the most pessimistic models forecast. The IPCC report calculates at the worst a possible rise of 8 feet by 2100 and 18 feet by 2150. Robinson calculates a "First Pulse" that collapses the Greenland ice sheet, followed by a "Second Pulse" breaking up Antarctica, together resulting in a rise of 50 feet. His world, in other words, is more than twice as submerged as even the worst scientific predications anticipate. Such superfluity submerges the flooding into trope, awash with the connections between financial liquidity, underwater housing, and carbon modernity.

The hyperboles are further thrown by plenteous neologisms exceeding pedestrian semantics, the inflationary grandiosity of the scale (ancient history to the future, Walter Benjamin and Giovanni Arrighi to Virginia Woolf and Fran Lebovitz), and, most strikingly, flooded syntax, the hyperbole atmospherizes its own hilarity. Paragraph after paragraph is built of appositional structures that accrue in waves, proliferating synonyms, performing possibility, Whitmanian catalogs and Melvillian "info-dumps," an Economic Optimism Index of tropological acrobatics. Here, for instance, is one of the opening passages, signature parataxis:

So it isn't all that special, this NOO YAWK of ours. And yet. And yet and yet and yet. Maybe there's something to it. Hard to believe, hard to admit, pain-in-the-ass place that it is, bunch of arrogant fuckheads, no reason for it to be anything special, a coincidence, just the luck of the landscape, the bay and the bight, the luck of the draw, space and time congealing to a history, to have come into being in its moment, accidentally growing the head, guts, and tumescent genitals of the American dream, the magnet for desperate dreamers, the place made of people from everywhere else, the city of immigrants, the people made of other people, very rude people, loudmouthed obnoxious assholes, often, but more often just oblivious and doing their own thing with no regard for you or yours, many strangers banging into each other, dodging each other, almost polite you might say, using the city-sharpened skill of looking past or through people, of not seeing the other, the crowds just background tapestries for you to play your life against, lurid backdrops providing a fake sense of drama to help you imagine you're doing more than you would be if you were in some sleepy village or Denver or really anywhere else.

Reminiscent of Dickensian/Flaubertian reality effects in their accumulation of asemantic excess, these gushes make of prose a wave train powering this long novel's strikingly fast peppy flux.

Hyperbole synthesizes the too-muchness of capitalist realism's resignation, the gross exaggeration of hurtling toward the end of the world with no imagination of anything else, or with no willingness to do anything partial. The zombie immutability of capitalist realism is its own excess; Robinson's dissonance between capitalist realist worlding and jolly-utopian atmosphere exposes the inbuilt exaggeration of foreclosed horizons.

Literary atmosphere is hard to track, and the earth's atmosphere is hard to directly perceive. But atmosphere is the precise matter of capitalogenic climate change: "carbon dioxide in the atmosphere traps heat in the atmosphere...that trapped heat in the atmosphere transfers very easily and naturally to the oceans, warming ocean water...those warmer ocean currents circulate all over."<sup>45</sup> Atmosphere is at once the result and cause of fossil capitalism; *New York 2140* dereifies it to remind us of the political project to remake it – it carbonates the carbonized, bubbling toward political transformation after all has already been done. Where any novelist must be tasked with the deliberate production of atmosphere, Robinson has explicitly thematized this task in his Mars Trilogy's infrastructural adventure of engineering habitable atmosphere, and he goes one better in this later novel, gushing the super-troping of liquidity to yield something tidally different from the blahs of capitalist realism. *New York 2140* experiments with rendering atmosphere palpable and conspicuous, constructed and contingent, offering a bobbing enthusiasm for climate science, social critique, and the collective populace which opposes the sink of capitalist realism and revolutionary purity alike.

The book's final scene, a small packed midtown intertidal dance party to "the tightest West African pop," epitomizes the atmospheric refusal of dystopian depression, gyrating away from capitalist realism to follow the up beat.<sup>46</sup> Using outmoded high realist mode to mediate capitalist realism as the mood of totalized financial ecocide, *New York 2140* makes art out of the too late, wielding the tension between content and form to effect good humored can-do-ness for modest remedies. True, in celebrating historical consciousness and collectivization projects, it offers socialist incrementalism in place of radical anti-capitalism. Like the Green New Deal, "it describes something that could happen in the real world." But that's a start, and the onliest start available right now, President Sanders or no. *New York 2140* tenders an inspiring fiction – a fiction in the radical sense of forming, making, making do, making shifts – that the future can be less worse. It is too late. But untimely fictions can continue to help us imagine collective and even statist projects that can still weld how horribly we go out. Irrational exuberance in the alluvion: do it now.

## Notes

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## **Interpretation without Method, Realism without Mimesis, Conviction without Propositions**

**Nicholas Brown**

Where matters of interpretation are concerned, "method" is the name of a mistake. Meaning is a game that is not governed by rules. Donald Davidson pointed out that even the interpretation of a simple metaphor, such as Thomas Mann's reference to Tolstoy as a "great moralizing infant," presents tremendous difficulties if we try to come up with a method that will translate the metaphor into "ordinary language," whatever we may mean by that.<sup>1</sup> But the flip side of the deflation of the problem of method is then, as an inevitable and salutary consequence, an emphasis on the act of interpretation. We do, in fact, grasp what Mann is trying to say, and we can ourselves say all kinds of useful things to help others understand it. "So too understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavor as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules" (245). Anyone who has conversed in a foreign language, played charades, taught a class, read a poem, or indeed been in any kind of substantive relationship with another human being, can find ample experiential evidence for the basic truth that meaning is a game that is not governed by rules.

The fact that language has rules, and that all kinds of social contexts in which meaning is important — including literary genres — also have rules, distracts us from this basic truth. You need rules to write a sonnet. Knowing those same rules may, plausibly, help guide my interpretation of your sonnet. But there is no method or rule that can tell me whether or not knowing those rules will help guide my interpretation. Only the poem can tell me that. This, and nothing else — certainly not a set of shapes, patterns, or relationships — is what is meant by the concept of aesthetic autonomy or "self-legislating form," what Roberto Schwarz calls "liberated form," the singular concept that names the specificity of the work of art as opposed to other kinds of cultural production.

Let us take as an example a lovely little poem by the mid-century Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar:

## Biography

In those days the obscenity of your sex perfumed the whole house

Next to me on the balcony in a porcelain crock a nature contrary to my  
own was emerging  
virid

It was about two centuries after the French Revolution

And that enormous yellow flower that sprang up in the yard next to the  
loo

pollen body blaze<sup>2</sup>

What is the French Revolution doing here? Will it help to know that Ferreira Gullar was himself a Marxist and a revolutionary? Will it help to know about the evacuation of the Portuguese court to Rio de Janeiro in the face of Napoleon's invasion of Lisbon? Will it help to know Hegel's characterization of death during the Terror as of no more significance than "cleaving a head of cabbage?" Only the poem can tell us what "the French Revolution" means *here*: the invocation of the French Revolution produces a standpoint from which human sexuality appears so atavistic and ahistorical that it is indistinguishable from the sexuality of plants — and, conversely, a standpoint from which History itself appears as distant and irrelevant to the biography of the horny poet as it does to the life-cycle of the fertile plant. And from there the poem begins to unfurl its mysteries: the flower's sexuality is "contrary" to the poet's in that only the poet's understands itself, paradoxically, as identical to the plant's — and is therefore, perhaps, not as ahistorical as it seems. One could, I think, spend much longer with this poem. But the point I am trying to make is that while "contrary" has a more or less stable definition and "French Revolution" has a more or less stable referent, only the poem can tell us what, in the poem, they mean.

This emphasis on the act of interpretation, itself a theoretical claim whose consequences I will attempt to draw out in what follows, has nothing to do with such recent (but also perennial) North American "post-critical" slogans as "surface reading," "just reading," and so on, which, when they have theoretical substance at all, attempt to deflate both method and interpretation at the same time, thereby reducing the literary work to a fetish-object whose value it proves difficult to explain. As opposed to such approaches, conservative and anti-political in that they forestall discussion and disagreement — and therefore also consensus — the impetus behind the insistence on method is generally salutary: namely, to draw out the full implications of the "socially symbolic act" that is the literary text. Think of Fredric Jameson's insistence that any

properly Marxist interpretation must move through the four medieval allegorical levels from the literal through the “allegorical” (the intervention of the intended meaning of the text into its immediate historical and political context) and the “moral” (the necessary implication, whether conscious or not, of such intervention in class conflict) to the “anagogic” (the necessary implication, whether conscious or not, of class struggle in the great dialectical succession of modes of production). But since these implications are, from a Marxist standpoint, necessary, whether conscious or not, one need not make methodological claims about interpretation, nor rely on them, to find such implications and to lead others to see them. Rather, one must only be attentive to them, which is as much as to say that one must only be a Marxist, or be willing to adopt Marxism’s fundamental axes, however provisionally. One must only understand, or be willing to entertain the possibility, that class struggle is the engine of history and that history is in the last instance the history of modes of production. To think of such attention as a “method” introduces unnecessary problems.

Let us take as exemplary just one sentence from Jameson’s major statement on literary interpretation, where he points to “nodal points implicit in the ideological system [of the literary text] which have, however, remained unrealized in the surface of the text, which have failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses.”<sup>3</sup> Note the complexity of the rhetorical operation here. The sentence, which broadly seeks to characterize the “unsaid” of the literary text, moves through four near-synonyms — “implicit,” “unrealized,” latent (as opposed to “manifest”), and, finally “repressed.” In this movement the central premise gains with each step in theoretical heft precisely what it loses in self-evidence. The sentence begins from the “implicit” — which makes only the minimal, barely theoretical claim that “socially symbolic acts,” like all acts, have entailments and presuppositions, many which are not present to mind to the actor in the act, and which might be thought of as a purely negative, Hegelian “unconscious.” It ends with the “repressed,” which invokes a positive theory of the unconscious that, like all positive theories of the subject from astrology and phrenology through Lacan and Althusser all the way to the latest popular enthusiasms about artificial intelligence and brain science, we are not obliged to take seriously. (Meanwhile, the final modal verb in “we can read as” amounts, in a Jamesonian grammar that abounds in “should”s, “must”s, and “will”s, to a kind of equivocation: why should the description of the inevitable partiality of literary presentation — indeed, of any presentation whatever — as necessarily “repressing” traumatic content take precedence over the description of the same as merely requiring — again, like any other action — “implicit” entailments and presuppositions?) The point here is not to resolve this question, though I have suggested elsewhere that Jameson’s enormous contributions (without which neither this institute nor this paper would exist) by and large do not require such a shift from a negative to a positive unconscious. Rather, I want to point out that the conundrum is produced by the insistence on a

method. “Repressed” meanings call for a method to unearth them (better, the will to method requires that meanings be repressed); “implicit” meanings simply call for interpretation.

The great Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, in his concrete practice as a literary critic, rarely fails to touch — without, however, necessarily separating them as “allegorical levels” — on all four Jamesonian analytic moments of interpretation. Take, for example, Schwarz’s essay on Kafka’s “Worries of a Family Man,” a brilliant close reading that occupies no more than five pages.<sup>4</sup> As is well known, Kafka’s story seems to center on Odradek, a strange object that looks like a spool but isn’t, since its spool-like form, covered indeed in random pieces of string, is supplemented by two crossed bars that enable it to “stand upright as though on two legs.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Odradek speaks. The immediate allegorical question would seem to be “what does Odradek stand for”? But the allegorical secret, like the secret of Kafka’s “Eleven Sons,” which Kafka confessed are “quite simply eleven stories that I am working on,” might turn out to be entirely banal. Indeed it seems likely that if “Odradek” replaces some other substantive object or category, it is most likely the story itself or the category of the work of art, of both of which it might be said that, like Odradek, it is “useless, but in its own way complete.” But Schwarz has an insight that no method, only the story itself, could prompt: Odradek is a red herring. The story is really “about” — as indeed, its title says quite plainly — its narrator and his inconsistent (but logically structured) subjective stance when confronted with the existence of Odradek: initially amused, then condescending, dismissive, anxious, and ultimately homicidal, though this last is decorously expressed.<sup>6</sup> Why should little Odradek provoke any reaction at all, much less this peculiar sequence? Whatever the allegorical content of Odradek, we know that his existence is described by the family man as self-justifying: he serves no external purpose, is, again, “useless but in his own way complete.” As such he is, in Schwarz’s words, “the precise and logical construction of the negation of bourgeois life” (23).

In a climactic moment, this logical construction, which needs no specific content, is shown to describe a “lumpenproletariat without hunger and without fear of the police” (24). And with this stroke, Schwarz touches immediately on all three of Jameson’s allegorical levels. The family man’s anxiety clearly has a class character: the story wouldn’t work if the narrator were a deliveryman or the housekeeper. But more importantly, his very anxiety hinges on the hidden fragility of a social order that depends for its survival on the distribution of violence and hunger. Meanwhile, it is these “higher” allegorical levels that fill out the content of the story’s allegory. What may, in some initial conception, have been intended as a mere allegory of the micropolitics of petty-bourgeois philistinism, turns out to require, as its structural corollary, something like the recognition that the very existence of an alternative to the bourgeois order, even in the unemphatic form of Odradek or the work of art, immediately suggests the worrying possibility of that order’s dissolution. This

threatening existence, which Schwarz names as the lumpenproletariat without fear and without hunger, is not a secret referent, since the real lumpenproletariat is hungry and does fear the police; Schwarz's formulation is a kind of paraphrase — just as much an impossible schematic construction as Odradek himself — that leads us to the truth of Kafka's formulation. The question of whether Kafka was aware of the implication, consciously or unconsciously, needn't arise.

Now of course, it is clearly the case that Schwarz proceeds in his commentary by means of a kind of "method," namely an extraordinary sensitivity to shifts in narrative voice. But this alertness cannot be considered a method in the a priori sense dismissed above: to the degree that one finds Schwarz's reading compelling, one will agree that that the logic of the story, in a certain sense its plot, indeed consists in a series of infinitesimal shifts in narrative voice. An extraordinary alertness to narrative voice will be useful elsewhere — most notably for Schwarz when reading the last great works of Machado de Assis — but not necessarily when reading Clarice Lispector. Note also that this more modest "method," namely the attempt to follow the interpretive prompts immanent to the text itself, cannot serve as even the most minimal guarantee of interpretive justice. No such guarantee is available. Interpretation is a matter of disagreement — whose ground is consensus. (One might as well say: Interpretation is a matter of consensus — whose ground is disagreement). We will return to this.

Just because meaning is not governed by rules (and therefore interpretation is not usefully guided by method), does not mean that there is nothing further to be said about what we are doing when we interpret works of art. As a way of beginning to address the question, I will turn first to a 1970 essay by the great Brazilian critic Antonio Candido, a breakthrough essay that concerns Manuel Antônio de Almeida's 1854 novel *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*.<sup>7</sup> The greater part of Antonio Candido's essay is devoted to drawing out the formal peculiarities of Almeida's novel, whose distinctive texture derives from the figure of the *malandro* or rogue. In the novel the *malandro* is not precisely a type, though he is that too and will certainly become one over the subsequent course of Brazilian literary history. Rather he is a principle of composition, a figure that passes easily between two poles that Antonio Candido labels "order" and "disorder" respectively: something recognizable as bourgeois society on one hand, with its laws, marriages, professions, and all the rest, and on the other a larger zone, difficult to qualify, that presents "twenty situations of concubinage for every marriage and a thousand chance unions to every situation of concubinage" (95). This movement, once we are attuned to it, turns out to govern the novel as a whole, such that even omnipresent Major Vidigal, the fearsome representative of order throughout the novel, turns out to obey the same logic. In a climactic scene the major, approached at home in *deshabille* by three women who seek to intervene on the hero's behalf, rushes inside and reemerges wearing his uniform dress coat — but without his pants. The major, complacently responsive to the blandishments of the ladies, appears "in regimentals from the belt up, homespun from the belt down — armoring reason in

the norms of the law and easing the solar plexus in amiable indiscipline" (95).

At a key moment, Antonio Candido's essay discerns two conflicting literary modes in Manuel Antônio de Almeida's *Memories of a Militia Sergeant*. On one hand, the novel presents a descriptive mode, mainly pertaining to local color (the example is a Lenten procession sponsored by the goldsmiths' guild). On the other, it presents a narrative mode, in which local color is subsumed into a formal logic (the example is a *capoeira* fight implicated in both sides of the order-disorder dialectic that Candido discerns as essential to the novel's form). But for Candido these two modes do not simply exist side-by-side. Rather, the second mode is the "correct" one; the first is, "if not a mistake," then structurally "imperfect" (88). The judgment is evidently sound, but on what does it rest? The "traditional norms of composition" invoked by Candido are external criteria and therefore not sufficient to the case.

Only the first mode is, strictly speaking, a mimetic mode. In the descriptive mode, the text owes its authority to facts outside the text, which the text is one way or another obliged to mirror, reflect, or represent. There are at least two related problems with this mode, one theoretical and one political. The theoretical problem is that the representation can never do justice to the object being represented. Every description is unavoidably not only partial, but in the scheme of things busies itself with a laughably small selection of possible attributes. Unavoidably some check must be placed on the potentially limitless number of descriptive attributes, and this check is either arbitrary or a matter of standpoint. And with this we have already flipped over to the ideological problem with mimesis as such. All the authority belongs to the object, which is only to be mirrored, reflected, or represented by the text. But in fact nothing of the kind is taking place; what is disavowed in the act of representation is the active role the representation plays in constructing the object itself. Presenting itself as a representation of reality, representation obscures the fact that the reality presented is its own production. The act of representation will always be characterized by an essential falsity, quite separate from whatever contingent inaccuracies might also be present. No conceivable authority could decide for us between representations without an appeal to the real that is itself no more than yet another representation, even as the force of such an appeal is to render representations irrelevant. Which is not to say that contemporary discourses will tire of presenting us with unlikely candidates. The problem is as boring as it is inescapable.

The second mode is, as odd as it might seem to say so, not mimetic, though it might involve mimesis. But here mimetic tokens are subsumed under another logic, and it is this logic, not represented reality, that carries authority. Since fidelity to a previously constituted reality is not at stake, the partiality of the description of Almeida's *capoeira* fight does not present a problem. What is significant is the way the *capoeira* fight is subsumed under the narrative, the fact that, as a disruptive act that is previously known to the police, it slides effortlessly, like everything else in the novel, between the poles of order and disorder. Because, on Candido's reading, this is

the very principle of composition that governs the construction of the plot, there is nothing hidden: the plot and its structure are, obviously, precisely what is submitted to us as subject to our judgment. Finally, as we shall see in a moment, the narrative mode introduces a criterion. If all representations are partial then there is nothing to judge them by except by comparing them to the object represented — a comparison that renders the representation irrelevant. But not all narratives are plausible.

If a work of art does not imitate reality, what is its relation to reality? We have said that authority resides not in mimetic elements but in the form, which is not, strictly speaking, mimetic. But we should not make the mistake of reproducing the problem of mimesis at the level of form: that is, of suggesting merely that relations among elements mirror or reflect or imitate relations among elements in reality. We would simply run into the same problems at a higher level of sophistication. Rather, we must understand literary form as doing something fundamentally different than more or less faithfully corresponding to forms that appear in reality. But nor is form — and while the novel under discussion is in a casual sense a realist one, I mean this to apply equally to more so-called abstract modes of art — a matter of mere virtuosity. Form is, rather, an active principle, indeed, a kind of thesis or active positing. As Schwarz puts it in a commentary on Candido's essay: "The dialectic of order and disorder is a *principle of generalization* that profoundly organizes the data of reality as well as those of fiction... giving *both* their intelligibility."<sup>8</sup> There is no "objective" correlation between fiction and reality; the correlation is rather a claim made by the novel itself. "In other words, before it was intuited and made objective by the novelist, the form that the critic studies was produced by the social process, even if nobody knew it." (141). But this, again, is not a fact that can be ascertained by recourse to historical data: this is, rather, the very claim the novel makes. (Truth claims, of course, are not mimetic; otherwise the first half of this sentence would have been hard to write). Novels do not contain truth claims (or rather, what truth claims they contain are subordinated to the movement of the whole). Rather, they are truth claims: "Things stand so," where "things," "stand," and "so" all come to be understood in the course of interpreting the work.

What I mean by this might be clarified by returning briefly to Georg Lukács's 1936 essay "Narrate or Describe?" which, if I am not mistaken, is presupposed by both Candido's and Schwarz's contributions. There as elsewhere, Lukács uses the unfortunate word *Widerspiegelung*, reflection or mirroring, to characterize the essence of narrative art. But the first occurrence of the word in that essay modifies it to a "dynamic, artistic reflection," and a little later, in an expression so paradoxical it should stop us in our tracks, he refers to the "art of the novel" as a subset of epic art, which presents society with a "clearer, more intense mirror-image" of itself.<sup>9</sup> This mirror-image achieves its heightened intensity, moreover, through "a proper distribution of emphasis and... a just accentuation of what is essential" (213). "Proper" and "just" are normative terms: they have not only no equivalent but no possible

equivalent in whatever aspect of reality is to be “mirrored.” One might be forgiven for thinking that the normative standpoint is simply Lukács’s: what is “proper” and “just” is what agrees with his conception of reality, most particularly his conception of historical change. But while his preference for epic content in all the arts inescapably colors his judgment, I do not believe that is what Lukács means here. Indeed, the criterion Lukács has in mind follows immediately: “A work becomes compelling and universal... when it appears not as an ingenious product of the artist’s virtuosity, but as a natural development; as something not invented, but simply discovered” (213). In other words, narrative art is always submitted to our judgment, and the criterion by which we are to judge it is not whether it was simply discovered — an obvious impossibility — but whether its content appears as if simply discovered. As Hegel had it before him, for art we require “a kind of liveliness wherein the universal is not available as law and maxim, but rather gives the impression of being inseparable from feeling and sensuous experience.”<sup>10</sup> (As a parenthesis I will suggest that this is the missing link between Lukács, indeed of the German Idealist sequence of which he is both critic and culmination, and Friedland’s anti-theatricality). That is to say, narrative art invites judgment by the criterion of plausibility. Plausibility is a higher criterion than mimetic justice, which is impossible to achieve and for that reason without value. The criterion of plausibility — that the meaning of a work appear as something “not invented but discovered” — requires that every aspect of the work appear to us to be, in its way, *right* — even if the author does not consciously or explicitly understand its rightness.

Art makes of each of its creations a thousand-eyed Argus; inner soul and spirit become visible at every point. Not only bodily form and mien, gesture and comportment, but equally actions and events, speech and tone of voice — art has everywhere, as such externals make their way through the varying conditions in which they appear, to allow each of them to become an eye, in which the free soul can be discerned in its inner infinity. (V 203-4, A 153-4)

By “free soul” Hegel is referring to something like character, but the words apply equally well to setting, tone, color, depth, harmonic development, whatever. This is what it means for artistic meaning to be “inseparable from feeling and sensuous experience.” The moment this inseparability fails, we are left with something “invented,” something available elsewhere as a law or a maxim, and worthless as art no matter how true or right the law or maxim might be. Odradek’s interlocutor, the family man, presents an “impression of reality” that strikes us with “the force of conviction,” even though Odradek himself is a fabulous invention. The family man’s reaction is, in some way we feel with certainty but without conscious awareness of the reasons for that certainty, right. The critic’s job is to bring those reasons to light.



Candido points out that Almeida's *Memoirs* achieves the standpoint of totality by means of a radical constriction of viewpoint. The book presents an "impression of reality" (89) that strikes us with the "force of conviction" (88) despite the near absence of both slaves and landholders in early 19th-century Brazil, which is to say the near absence of both the labor force and the ruling class (87). "In suppressing the slave, [Almeida] suppressed labor almost totally; in suppressing the ruling classes, he suppressed the controls of power" (95). Despite ignoring the two major candidates for forces actually shaping Brazilian society of the period, namely labor and governmental power, the novel "suggests the lively presence of a society that seems to us quite coherent and existent" (86). A failure by any mimetic standard appears in this case to be a precondition for the novel's ability to compel conviction. Almeida's novel, and in particular its formal principle of oscillation between order and disorder, allows us "to intuit, beyond the fragments described, certain principles constitutive of society — a hidden element that acts as a totalizer of all these partial aspects" (89).

But this "feeling of reality" (96) is a purely subjective — though, as we will explore more thoroughly below, modally universal — judgment. What is the "reality" whose presence we feel? While social form here pertains to the real, it is not a fact. Form is rather imposed upon facts of two different orders: both the facts of lived experience and the historical record, and the fictional facts that belong only to the novel. This is what Schwarz means by the "near-total" separation of the real and fictional orders: fact does not relate to fact, but both sets of facts are subjected to the same logic, "thanks to which the two series, real and fictitious, are rendered coherent" (96). Second, while this is clearly a cognitive process, it is a cognitive process of a special kind. As we have seen, Antonio Candido's categories of judgment are expressly subjective: the "sense" (*senso*) or "feeling" (*sentimento*) or "impression" of reality, which carries a greater or lesser "force of conviction." But if plausibility is a subjective determination, its mode is nonetheless universal: if we disagree about the "feeling of reality" produced by a work of fiction, we do not simply have different opinions or different taste: we in fact disagree about whether salient aspects of the work are, in fact, *right*. We should not be shocked or disappointed that this modality of judgment ultimately rests on nothing more solid than argument and consensus. (So does politics). Since Kant, aesthetic judgment has been understood as, only apparently paradoxically, both subjective and universal. The ground of this mode of judgment, which we will return to shortly, is an inchoate set of implicit and possibly unconscious convictions without which experience would not be intelligible in the first place. Recall that for Schwarz, as we saw above, a social form can, apparently paradoxically, be recognized without having been previously known. For these reasons, realism inheres in works that, like *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, appear very far from the high realist tradition.

At a climactic moment in "Narrate or Describe?" Lukács insists: "Without a world-view, there is no composition" (228). Or, as he has it elsewhere in the same essay, the artistic essence of composition is a "world-view objectified as form" (227). (At another

level of abstraction, Lukács is repeating a claim made by Schelling: “aesthetic intuition is just intellectual intuition become objective”).<sup>11</sup> What is at stake, in other words, in the claim that works of art do not mimic reality, but rather constitute claims about it, is a conception of consciousness as an active principle: what Hegel called negativity, the autonomous relation to external conditions that are otherwise determining. Marx may have, as Engels had it, put the Hegelian tradition back on its feet. But Marxism is, nonetheless, the surviving legacy of the sequence that runs from Kant through Fichte and Schelling to Hegel. We live in a peculiar moment when anti-humanism is both, fifty years after its moment of triumph over the dialectical tradition in France, still, astonishingly, the hallmark of advanced critical theory on the left; the avowed consequence of market ideology on the right and so-called center-left; and the unreflective presupposition of mainstream cognitive and computational science. Schelling, in 1800, decried the demand that art justify itself by utility, a demand that could only be made “in an age for whom the highest efforts of human spirit consist in discoveries with directly economic application.” To this sentence he at some point scrawled in the margin of his own published copy the helpful addendum, “beets.”<sup>12</sup> The demand that art express its value in the same form as agronomy would not surprise an upper-level university administrator today; today, a upper-level university administrator might make it herself. I have argued elsewhere that the problem of meaning, the problem of consciousness as something that cannot be understood in computational terms, is under particular pressure in our period, a period in which various discourses from neoliberal economics to object oriented ontology to affect theory have sought to topple the concept of consciousness as an active principle, and that the stakes of defending such an understanding of consciousness, such a robust and expansive sense of meaning and interpretation, is today of broad political significance — indeed, that defending an expansive sense of interpretation is itself a defense of politics as such. I would argue the same today. But one can imagine — I for one would like to live in — a world where consciousness, meaning, and interpretation were not under such pressure. Such a world would be more different than ours than it might initially appear, but the point for now is that it is eminently possible. And in such a world — a world where something like Hegelian negativity, something like human freedom, something like politics, something like reason, were hegemonically acknowledged as central to human affairs — the particular political valence I attribute to art in the current dispensation would wither away.

If works of art are complex truth claims, and interpretation is what we do when we attempt to understand and, inseparably from this, evaluate them, we are left with the question of art’s cognitive dignity. I don’t need to waste any breath dispensing with the idea, common enough in the cultural pages, that the value of art lies not only in its equivalence to beetroots but also in the “stories we tell ourselves.” If that were the case, any story would do as any other as long as it satisfied whatever credulity we were currently in the market to indulge. The question is rather: can art say things that

systematic knowledge cannot? As Hegel understood, the stakes of this question are, in our own limited domain, high. If we answer in the negative, we have cast our lots with Hegel's claim that art is "a thing of the past," a claim that, to remind ourselves, has nothing to do with the historical disappearance of art, a secular decline in its quality, or the empirical subsumption of the production and circulation of art into some other logic, but rather with a normative lack of faith that art can any longer perform for us its "highest vocation" (V 25, A 11). If at least some of us in this room have not lost that faith, it is clear that such entities as university presidents and boards of trustees generally have, and so Hegel's concern with the "end of art" is directly relevant to us.

Robert Pippin has recently and persuasively argued that the "end of art" for Hegel is inextricably bound up with what one might call Hegel's big mistake: namely (I am summarizing wildly here) the presumption that emergent bourgeois institutions would come to mediate social conflict so successfully and so explicitly that society would come to have a degree of transparency to itself that would render art's "highest vocation" obsolete.<sup>13</sup> This is not far from Lukács's Hegel, and to fill in Pippin's sketch with a Lukácsian brush it would only remain to say (again summarizing wildly) that the reason bourgeois institutions fail to produce such transparency is that the capital-labor relation is a subject-object relationship and it is so irreducibly, not contingently. That is, the capital-labor relation can be suppressed or managed, but to transform it into a subject-subject relationship would be to supersede the labor-capital relation altogether. On Lukács's account, the betrayal of the working class by the bourgeoisie in 1848 marks both the end of illusions about the universality of bourgeois institutions and the beginning of modernism as art's abdication of its responsibility to the whole or, more sympathetically, art's acknowledgment that it can henceforth no longer understand itself as able to fulfil that responsibility except in modes that are, broadly speaking, ironic.

Pippin's understanding is, in other words, not only broadly convincing on its own account but also broadly compatible with at least one powerful strand of Marxist historicism. However, Hegel formulates the question in terms that may not be entirely reducible to the coordinates of his big mistake. The kernel of Hegel's argument is that "If a truth is to be an appropriate matter for art, its own specific character must allow it to be sensuously expressible, and moreover to be, in sensuous form, adequate to itself" (V 23, A 9). Note that the second demand is much more stringent than the first. Some mathematical truths can be expressed in sensuous form, but in that form they are not, strictly speaking, mathematical; they are not, in sensuous form, "adequate to themselves" as mathematical truths. For art to have a vocation at all, in other words, it must correspond to some form of knowledge that is not expressed more adequately otherwise. This is that the reason that, as we have already seen, "for artistic interest as much as for artistic production itself, we generally require a kind of liveliness wherein the universal is not available as law and maxim, but rather gives the impression of being inseparable from feeling and sensuous experience." (V 25, A 10).

The sentiment is virtually the same one that Lukács expresses a century later, cited above, wherein a work “becomes compelling... when it appears... as something not invented [by the artist], but merely discovered”: not, in other words, as an illustration of something existing in the mind of the artist, but as already present in sensuous experience itself. If we wanted to know exactly what Hegel meant we would want to look closely at his words. But since what we have are lecture notes we don’t have his exact words, and for now you’ll have to take my word that the closer we look at the words we have, the less certain we are precisely what Hegel means. For example, what I translated as “gives the impression” is the verb *wirken*, maybe more literally something like “works as,” “does for,” or “passes as.” But is this impression merely an impression, or are certain meanings indeed inseparable from feeling and sensuous experience? Are we dealing with a rhetoric or a form of truth? The whole sense of these pages is that art is for Hegel a mode of presentation, but does not correspond to a mode of truth. The impression of being bound up with sensuous appearances is only, on one hand, an artistic effect or, on the other, a deficit in explicit knowledge. There is, I think, an implicit “yet” in Hegel’s criterion: art has a place where “the universal is not [yet] available as law and maxim.” That is, artistic meaning only attains its highest vocation when, for whatever reason, systematic knowledge of the material has not been attained. Otherwise, the artist merely produces the impression that a certain kind of truth claim emerges from her material rather than from outside it. (Certainly artists strive for this effect, but Hegel’s suggestion seems to be that in the modern period such effects are merely effects and not, as Pippin has it, “sensible-affective markers of truth” [135]). On one hand, systematic knowledge has not yet been achieved, and the aesthetically acquired knowledge will be, eventually if not today, rendered obsolete and merely illustrative by some systematic discipline. On the other, already existing systematic knowledge will have been bypassed in favor of sensuous representation, and we are left with something like a propaedeutic. Neither of these possibilities is, from the standpoint of art’s cognitive dignity, satisfactory.

The problem Hegel alerts us to, one that clearly remains germane today, is that of the normative form taken by knowledge in societies like ours. It is not that, in an age that rightly prizes systematic knowledge, the artist is thereby “tempted to bring more thoughts into her work.”

Rather, our whole spiritual formation is such that the artist herself stands within a world thus characterized by reflection, with all that entails. No artist could, merely by resoluteness and force of will, abstract herself from it. (V 25, A 11).

Art will no doubt continue as decoration, stimulant, soporific, timewaster, and so on; that was never in doubt and was never of any interest. More than this, it will continue to preserve some cognitive dignity as propaedeutic and prolegomenon to systematic

knowledge. But as long as systematic knowledge remains our horizon — and let's hope it does — art's "highest vocation" would appear to be at an end.

But certain kinds of knowledge are, without being mystically untranslatable into systematic knowledge, only directly accessible to us in embodied form. Musical intervals are all simply ratios — directly expressible as simple, mathematical relationships. When you hear an octave, you might know you are hearing the ratio 2:1, but you do not hear the ratio 2:1. Someone who knows how to recognize an octave can train someone who doesn't in a minute or two. Neither of them needs to know that they are hearing the ratio 2:1; indeed, such knowledge is not helpful to their project of teaching and learning what an octave sounds like.

Beethoven's violin concerto in D begins with the tympani announcing the key — five beats on D — and the next eight measures center emphatically on D major. But in the tenth measure (about twenty seconds in) the first violins, quiet but exposed, play four beats on D-sharp, echoing the rhythm of the tympani but, apparently, in a completely unrelated key.<sup>14</sup> In short order (measure twelve), the violas join the violins in their insistence on D-sharp. The first time you hear it, the effect is astonishing; it takes nothing more than the habitual training we all have from living in a world saturated with the western tonal system to recognize that the D-sharp "doesn't fit," that it "comes out of nowhere," or at least from another century — that it seems very distant from the key of D major. If we know what to expect from a Beethoven concerto, we might trust that its meaning will become clear to us in time, but it is not yet. After this enigmatic presentation of D-sharp, the orchestra settles comfortably into D, passing dramatically but briefly into D minor (m. 28-42), returning to D major to repeat the theme, then subjecting the theme itself to a parallel modulation into D minor (m. 51-56), with a lovely misleading cadence that leads, twice, briefly to F (the relative major of D minor) before returning quickly both times to D minor (57-63). In other words, we are for the next stretch very much centered around D. But in measure 65 (something over two minutes in), the D-sharp pattern returns unexpectedly though not without anticipation in the violins, with the rest of the strings supplying part of a diminished chord underneath it and emerging from the D-sharp pattern to form a chord (an inverted and therefore somewhat veiled A7) that is strongly related to D major — effectively hinting at a place for D-sharp in D major. Over the next five bars, in a dramatic crescendo, Beethoven teaches us where D-sharp fits into D major, first hammering on the D-sharp — the violins literally spelling out the diminished chord it anchors — and then leading us climactically and naturally through an inverted E minor to A7 to D major.<sup>15</sup>

Now, one can sit down with the score and puzzle all this out to arrive at a technical understanding of how Beethoven ties D-sharp to D major. But what I want to emphasize is that this technical explanation would be true, but not convincing. "You can bring D-sharp into D major by passing through the related key of E minor" is, on the evidence, true. You can put it in a textbook and use it in other compositions. But

the evidence is what you hear, and no amount of technical elaboration would render its translation into propositional language plausible (or for that matter implausible), even though this translation is faithful and in its own way complete. Even if you were one of the few people in the world who can hear a score in your head just by reading it, you would still have to hear it in your head to be convinced by it. For the rest of us, hearing is believing. By the time we hear the D-sharp pattern again, accompanying the soloist in measure 111, it sounds almost natural: not because we have gotten used to it, but because we know what it means and have a sense of where it might be going, even if that knowledge and that sense are things that, in the listening, we do not pose explicitly.

I want to suggest that this is the order of truth that pertains to art: that there are truths that are more or less easily translatable into propositional language, but whose assertion can only be persuasive in sensuous form. Such a truth is, “in sensuous form, adequate to itself.” Demonstrations of such truth call on our knowledge as embodied, worlded, self-positing, social, linguistic, temporal (and so on ad infinitum — in this case, habitually tonal) beings. (It is as subjects formed in capitalist societies that we feel the rightness of Kafka’s family man). Such truth claims cannot be made persuasive in propositional form, even though their translation into propositional form need not pose any tremendous problems. The statement “Philistinism is a form of appearance of the fragility of bourgeois order” may be true, but it is not convincing in that form, and it is hard to imagine any argument — survey research? — other than a commentary on Kafka that would make it so. The “poetry of sensuous representation [*Vorstellung*]” cannot in these cases be superseded by “the prose of thinking.” (V 123, A 89).

Sensuous presentation is in such cases neither prologemenon nor propaedeutic. Hegel is simply wrong that, as a general proposition, “thought and reflection have soared beyond fine art.” (V 24, A 10). This is related to his overestimation of the universality of bourgeois institutions, but it seems to me not to be reducible to it. There is nothing wrong, for example, with the discipline of musicology. It’s just that in musicology (as opposed to, say, physics) the propositional translation is supplemental to the sensuous idea and not the reverse. Of course, Beethoven’s violin concerto is a specialized case, pertaining in the exposition I have given it exclusively to the realm of music itself. It may be that in this passage Beethoven has more to teach us. If it is true that in his sketchbooks Beethoven initially wrote the violins’ D-sharp as an E-flat, then he himself did not yet know how it related to the key of D, and what we are hearing is also a kind of narration of Beethoven’s own discovery of that relationship.<sup>16</sup> In that case, these passages have something to say about the structure of action itself, the subsumption of the given into an intentional structure. Be that as it may in the musical case, the past ten years of writing on photography has insisted that contemporary photography has a great deal to say about the structure of intentional action, and it may be that art has always been and will continue to be better than philosophy at laying bare the paradoxes, ironies, and ruses that underlie human action. Similarly

Ben Lerner's *10:04* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* may have more to say about the relation of art to the culture industry than a shelf of perfectly good sociological analyses.

But as Marxists we may, like Lukács, be forgiven for looking to art for something more epic in significance (which is not to say that the structure of intention or the relation of art to the culture industry are irrelevant to Left politics). Here I want to turn once again to the work of Roberto Schwarz, in particular his magnificent reading of Bertolt Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*.<sup>17</sup> As is well known, Brecht set store by the didactic content of his plays, in the case of *St. Joan* certain lessons about labor organization and about the operation of monopolies and commodities markets. But these types of knowledge are readily available in reflexive, abstract, systematic form, principally though not exclusively in the Marxist classics themselves. Thought and reflection have indeed in this case "soared beyond fine art," and it is not obvious what advantage such knowledge might gain from being expressed in sensuous form. As Adorno pointed out rather damningly, it is not obvious that such lessons even remain true when expressed in sensuous form. The proscription on valorizing individual over collective action, for example, rings hollow when dramatized in a play, which necessarily develops through the actions of individuals. "Thus," says Schwarz, "against claims to the contrary, the truth of the plays would not lie in the lessons passed on, in the theorems concerning class conflict, but rather in the objective dynamic of the whole" (44).

Schwarz's reading is extraordinarily illuminating and I will concentrate here on only two aspects of it. First, which I have touched on elsewhere, is Schwarz's observation that throughout *St. Joan*, Brecht pastiches classics of German Romanticism, thereby setting up a kind of deflationary equivalence between the sublime risk of a human world without divine sanction — as found, for example, in Hölderlin's "Hyperion's Song of Destiny" — and the risk assumed by an investor or imposed on a worker. "Unheroic as bourgeois society is," writes Marx, "it nonetheless required heroism, terror, civil war, and the subjugation of nations to bring it into being."<sup>18</sup> Speaking of the canned-meat monopolist in *St. Joan*, Schwarz remarks that "Brecht wanted to demonstrate that something of Mauler already existed in Faust, but not that the grandeur of the Enlightenment continued to live in speculations on the stock exchange" (56). A perceptive critic can translate Brecht's "demonstration" into expository form; but it is only persuasive in expository form as a commentary — that is, it is only persuasive because the play is persuasive. It is hard to see how the demonstration of the identity between Romantic existential risk and bourgeois economic risk could be made in any other than poetic form.

But this demonstration is still about poetry, even if it is about poetry's relationship to history and to class. The second aspect Schwarz highlights concerns the role of economic logic in the play. Schwarz notes that it is not exactly what one would expect from a Marxist. Marx famously remarks, in terms that are coincidentally apt, that

“the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations.”<sup>19</sup> Marx’s point, surely true, is that the logic of capitalism exerts a coercive force that supervenes any merely individual motivations on the part of the capitalist. But Schwarz shows that in *St. Joan* “Brecht preferred to situate himself... a step this side of the complete delegation of social energy to the market” (56). That is, Mauler is not merely the personification of the ownership of capital: there is something excessive in his character. His desire to win, to bury the competition no matter what the cost — repeatedly risking taking down the whole system including himself — exceeds merely economic logic. “It is as if there existed an imperative, or constitutional defect, demanding that nothing be done in which cunning does not have a hand” (55-56). This might seem to suggest a retreat from Marx’s insight in favor of a Shakespearean tragic flaw, a merely ethical critique of the ruthlessness of particular capitalists.

But the excess does not inhere in Mauler’s character, but in capitalist economic relations themselves. Capitalism’s logic is competitive, true enough: in order to live as a capitalist, the capitalist must compete. But the immanent objective of competition is not life, but victory; Mauler competes, perfectly logically, not to survive, but to win. Within this logic, risks beckon that would otherwise seem too monstrous to contemplate. Immanent to and necessary for the reproduction of capitalism is a drive that exceeds the reproduction of capital and that is, potentially, inimical to it. But unlike capitalism’s gravediggers, the tendency of this stupid, drive-like competitiveness is not to bury capitalism but to bury us all at once. As Schwarz puts it, “What is on the stage, under the sign of crisis, is a transformation of the cunning of capital into reflexes that are counterproductive, one would almost say antediluvian” (54). The competitive logic that capitalism presumes and encourages becomes something like a death-drive internal to capitalism itself. “The contrast between the gambling that takes place in the stock exchange and everyone’s panic facing the ups and downs of the economy recalls in fact a loss of judgment on a species-wide scale” (54).

I hope you agree that there’s a certain logical coherence to my gloss on Schwarz’s reading. But does this logic pertain to the real? *St. Joan* makes a claim: things stand so. Capitalism is not simply “prone to crises” because of a set of immanent contradictions. That is Marx’s account, and it is correct but — because contradictions are at least in the abstract always manageable — incomplete. Rather, because capitalism mobilizes a desire for crisis — the purely competitive desire to pull off the more daring coup, the riskier play, the bigger bet — it is a crisis machine that can never be fully managed. It’s hard to see where one would turn for evidence for such a claim. Certainly an economist might feel that she has understood economic crises tolerably well, and that if given levers long enough she could forestall them with tolerable reliability, without recourse to such concepts as death-drive, and indeed the quasi-freudian terms I have used metaphorically in my commentary don’t make a lot of sense when applied literally to a mode of production. The questions we are left with are literary-



critical. Is *St. Joan* persuasive? Does it produce a “feeling of reality” that strikes us with the “force of conviction”? On some of the most substantial uncertainties we face, questions like these are not only the only available ones, but the only possible ones.

## Notes

1. Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) 245-264. It might seem to complicate matters that Davidson insists that what a metaphor is meant to bring to our attention "is not meaning" (256). This seems to me a bizarre "restraint in using the word 'meaning,'" and indeed Davidson himself seems to have come to the same conclusion, later writing that "I was stupidly stubborn about the word meaning when all I cared about was the primacy of first meaning." ("Locating Literary Language," in *Truth, Language, and History* [Oxford: Clarendon, 2005] 167-181, 173n7). By "first meaning" Davidson means something very like literal meaning: signification that "has a systematic place in the language of the author" (173). If we are using restraint in employing the word "meaning" in the current context, it will be to the aspect of meaning that does *not* have a systematic place in the language of the author: in other words, to the aspect of artworks that calls for the discipline of interpretation.
2. Biografia  
Naquela época a obscenidade de teu sexo recendia por toda a casa  
A meu lado na varanda num jarro de louça uma natureza contrária à minha emergência  
virente  
Estávamos há quase dois séculos da Revolução Francesa  
E aquela enorme flor amarela que nasceu no quintal junto ao banheiro  
pólen corpo incêndio  
Ferreira Gullar, *Toda poesia* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 2015) 115.
3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca: Cornell, 1981) 48.
4. Roberto Schwarz, "Worries of a Family Man," trans. Nicholas Brown, *Mediations* 23.1 (Fall 2007) 21-25.
5. Franz Kafka, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," in *Erzählungen* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1965) 171.
6. Roberto Schwarz, "Worries of a Family Man," 26.
7. Antonio Candido, "Dialética da malandragem," *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros* 8 (June 1970): 67-89.
8. Roberto Schwarz, "Pressupostos, salvo engano, de 'Dialética da malandragem,'" in *Que horas são?* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002) 133.
9. Georg Lukács, "Erzählen oder beschreiben?" in *Georg Lukács Werke Vol. 4, Essays über Realismus* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1971) 207.
10. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Vol. 1, *Werke* Vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 25; *Hegel's Aesthetics*, Vol. I, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 10. Hereafter the German text is cited as V, and corresponding pages in the English translation are cited as A.
11. Friedrich Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2000) 296.
12. Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* 293-4.
13. Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2014).
14. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major*, Op. 61, in *Great Romantic Violin Concertos in Full Score* (New York: Dover, 1985) 1-6, reprint from *Ludwig van Beethovens Werke*, Serie 4: Violine mit Orchester, Nr. 29 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Hartel, 1862-1865).
15. A brilliant performance by Hilary Hahn and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leonard Slatkin, is available on youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCg\\_ojepxow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCg_ojepxow)
16. E-flat and D-sharp are enharmonics of each other, which means they represent the same note in a 12-

tone equal tempered scale like a piano keyboard. E minor is written in sharps; the leading tone to the tonic would always be written as a D-sharp, never as an E-flat. If Beethoven had something in mind like the harmonic structure we have been discussing when he sketched those four beats, he would not have written them as E-flats.

17. Roberto Schwarz, "The Relevance of Brecht: High Points and Low," trans. Emilio Sauri, *Mediations* 23.1 (Fall 2007) 27-61.
18. Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx/Engels: Werke*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Dietz, 1960) 116.
19. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Erster Band*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx/Engels: Werke*, vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 2008) 100.



## Introduction: Reading *Capitalist Realism*, Ten Years On

Matthew Flisfeder

### Of Which Realism May We Speak?

Today, in the interregnum of the post-crisis, austerity-driven, global neoliberal capitalist society we are confronted with a range of contradictions potentially threatening our very way of life on Earth. From looming ecological catastrophes and the threat of the capitalocene, to the rise of artificial intelligence and digital automation threatening stagnation, to refugee crises and culture wars, and even to a resurgence of new economic crises unforeseen by mainstream economists, it would appear as though it is more necessary than ever to challenge the old Thatcherite dogma that "there is no alternative" (TINA) to the existing system. That hopeless, cynical claim that even if capitalism is full of flaws and fissures, it is still the least bad system we've got, so grin and bear it... But resisting this reified and disavowed root of the conundrum in the very capitalism that the TINA formula defends – if we are to confront these problems head on – perhaps it is time for us on the Left to be somewhat more pragmatic about what or how we even envision the future of the post-capitalist world. We need, perhaps, to be much more *realistic*; but in what sense?

In his commentary on the Brecht-Lukács debate on the aesthetic conflict between modernism and realism in the 1930s, Fredric Jameson proposes that in the context of the rising postmodernism of the late 1970s and early 1980s "it may be Lukács – wrong as he was in the 1930s – who has some provisional last word for us today."<sup>1</sup> But he goes on to claim that if it is Lukács who is to be the retroactive winner in this debate then it comes with a caveat: that the version of realism that Jameson champions in Lukács is one that would be written in the terms of his *History and Class Consciousness*. That is, the version of realism that Jameson feels most adequate to the task of confronting postmodern capitalism is one expressed through the categories of reification and totality.

The Brechtian "estrangement" no longer carries the same kind of critical weight that it might have had (if it ever really did) in the period of high modernism, or even

in the period of new avant-gardes in the post-Structuralist movements of the *Tel quel* group or the “screen theorists” of the 1970s. Estrangement or distancing – the radical ideological break with the text and reality – becomes increasingly difficult and limited at the moment of the postmodern colonization of the commodity. When the commodity becomes everything, estrangement as a radical ethics begins to wane. Where there exists nowhere outside of the commodity then no distance is fully attainable or possible.

Jameson concludes by saying in defense of Lukács that he cannot at all suggest which particular conception of realism works best for conceiving our historical present. But he proposes that “the study of realism makes it impossible not to feel the obligation to reinvent one” – that is, to invent a new category of realism.<sup>2</sup> What he has in mind here is a conception of realism capable of identifying the totality of our social relations under late capitalism, set within the context of our historical present. A concept of realism, that is, which helps us to locate and understand the reified consciousness of capitalism that is itself set within a rationalist mode according to *its own* realisms. What we require, according to Jameson, is a concept capable of providing adequate cognitive mapping of our present conditions.

As we will see in the texts that follow in this dossier, Mark Fisher’s now canonical book, *Capitalist Realism*, does precisely that; and, it is on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Mark’s impactful and influential short book that this dossier has been assembled to commemorate. But before I introduce the texts included in this dossier, I would like to offer some of my own reflections on Mark’s book and the impression it has left on me.

### Reading Mark

Mark’s *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* was published in 2009. When I first read the book, I was just a few short months away from finishing my doctoral thesis on the relevance of Slavoj Žižek for contemporary film theory. I had also been writing about Žižek using a lens largely influenced by Jameson. Readers and celebrants of Mark’s book may therefore find no surprise by the fact that I immediately became enamoured with his book, and for very obvious reasons. I am probably not alone in expressing how impactful Mark’s writing, both in *Capitalist Realism*, and his subsequent texts – *Ghosts of My Life* and *The Weird and the Eerie* – has been on my own more recent work, as well as my cultural and political outlook and sensibilities more generally.<sup>3</sup> Like many others, I was shocked and saddened by the news of his sudden passing in January 2017.<sup>4</sup> Mark was a critic, theorist, and activist whose voice will truly be missed. These sentiments are only amplified when we read pieces in the recently published and highly acclaimed collection of Mark’s unpublished writings and blog posts, *K-Punk*, and especially the concluding piece to the collection, Mark’s draft introduction to his final project, *Acid Communism*.<sup>5</sup> Reading the unpublished introduction to *Acid Communism* we realize that Mark did see forward a realistic

vision of life beyond *capitalist realism* (a Communist Realism), and it is in this vein that a number of relevant projects on the Left are now devoted – that is, the project of what some call luxury communism.<sup>6</sup>

As readers of course know, Mark begins *Capitalist Realism* with a nod to Žižek and Jameson – and I probably don't have to repeat here the phrase which he attributes to both, that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."<sup>7</sup> But as much as this phrase is repeated today it expresses very clearly what Mark had in mind with his conception of "capitalist realism." Noting that the phrase had previously been used by the art and culture critic, Michael Schudson, to look at the ideological dimensions of advertising – the term contrasts with Socialist Realism – Mark appropriates it to address the rhetorical form of the reigning neoliberal ideology.

Although the book is based on several of Mark's *K-Punk* blog posts from around 2005-2008, it captures quite well the affective and ideological dimensions of the neoliberal period, especially in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, in exactly the way that Jameson had hoped for with his vision of postmodern cognitive mapping.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it could be claimed that "capitalist realism" – as a functional worldview – has in some ways become a much more potent ideology *following* the crisis. For it denotes the widespread sense that there is still no alternative to capitalism, even (or, perhaps, especially so) against the background of constantly looming crises. At the same time, "capitalist realism" offers exactly the kind of cognitive mapping that has helped to solidify and build solidarity around a number of emancipatory projects on the Left even *since* the crisis. It is almost as if Mark's naming and pointing the finger at "capitalist realism" allowed radical movements to congeal around a common objective (as opposed to merely subjective) enemy found within the relations of capitalist exploitation.

Žižek writes in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* that the first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by the bookended events of 9/11 and the financial credit crisis of 2008.<sup>9</sup> The first occurred midway through my undergraduate studies; the second occurred midway through my doctoral studies. It was the first event that initially opened for me a global crisis in the liberal worldview and drew me to the Marxist critique of ideology, as well as to several activist circles in Toronto for various different causes on the Left; but it was with the second that my comprehension of the inherent structural contradictions of capitalism was honed. *Capitalist Realism* was for me, then, quite timely. Mark's book spoke to me in a way that I'd not identified in anything else I'd read previously. It provided a real sense of the kind of cognitive mapping needed for me to face the crisis. It is a book that has only radicalized my worldview even further.

Reading *Capitalist Realism* for the first time, I felt an overwhelming affinity towards Mark. I had read posts from his *K-Punk* blog a few times prior, but at that point remained largely unfamiliar with his writing. *Capitalist Realism* is a product of what Jeremy Gilbert has called Mark's Žižek-Lacan period, and it is quite clear that even in his conception of capitalist realism – that is, as a critical-ideological concept – Žižek's

earliest theories of ideology shine through.<sup>10</sup>

But it wasn't only in his uses of Žižek and Jameson that I felt inspired by Mark. It was of course, as many will still share, his style and manner of expression: his seamless and cogent prose; his practice of mixing theory and fiction (or "Theory-Fiction," which we find even early on in his doctoral thesis, *Flatline Constructs*); his references to popular culture, electronic music, sci-fi, and cyberpunk; as well as his astute writing about the interpassive and jacked-in dimensions of new media, and the somnambulist trance of late modern (or postmodern) "sugar-coated" and caffeine-drenched, greasy and hyper-stimulated screen culture of twenty-first century capitalism, that drew me into his unique way of expressing and visualizing the most deleterious yet mesmerizing aspects of our present.<sup>11</sup> There was a youthful and angsty, yet contemporary aspect to his writing – the kind I'd felt the first time I listened to Nirvana; Mark's writing on Kurt Cobain, of course, in the opening pages of *Capitalist Realism*, also clearly pulled me in further. Reading Mark's book was, for me, an experience like reading punk sci-fi. It was Cyberpunk as theory.

Recently re-reading Benjamin's essay, "Paris: Capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," I was struck by how much it reminded me of Mark (a point made by all the contributors in this dossier, comparing him to cultural critics like Benjamin and John Berger). Mark's writing about digital and popular culture certainly has a Benjaminian quality to it, and *Capitalist Realism* has become part of the twenty-first century cultural zeitgeist in the same way that Benjamin's artwork essay had in the century prior. In it, Mark combines the kind of intrigue we find in Benjamin's writing about his book collection with even the shrewd awareness that Guy Debord brought to the level of appearances in the capitalist spectacle. Mark harkens back slightly to the pessimism of Adorno and Marcuse's Freudo-Marxism, not to mention the gothic materialism of Deleuze and Guattari, but still, in the end, presents the kind of utopianism we now might identify with the neo-Communist projects of Jodi Dean, Hardt and Negri, Alain Badiou, and a range of Left accelerationists. Through the text, Mark appears as a modern day flâneur – one suited to the age of the internet. Rather than strolling through the Paris Arcades, Mark presented with keen precision the contours of the virtual public-private-commercial spaces of modern day communicative capitalism. *Capitalist Realism* displays his ability to synthesize the abstract lenses of Theory with the practical and performative contradictions of neoliberalism, making his descriptions feel eerily familiar (and at times all too...well...real) to his readers.

Since my first encounter with *Capitalist Realism*, I have not been able to read or interpret anything else in the aesthetic dimension or the political-ideological register without a copy of the book by my side. TV series like Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011-) and Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* (2015-), music, such as Father John Misty's *Pure Comedy* (2017), and recent films like Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*, all seem like they would be inconceivable before *Capitalist Realism*, and it is no doubt that the book bears an influence in my own writing on these texts. Over the past decade, I've found



myself returning to the book, not only for the pleasure of the text, but also because of the way he so magnificently blended and developed his own critical concepts, which he used to unearth some of the major ideological conundrums we now face. The book clearly demonstrates his acuity for theorizing the new, and for writing theory, not as something simply to be studied, but also as something to be enjoyed.

### **Mapping *Capitalist Realism***

Part of this enjoyment lies in Mark's ability to name and coin new terms and concepts useful in the arsenal of contemporary critical theory, capable of bringing aesthetic rigour to our envisioning of the problem. This is a trait that we find in *Capitalist Realism*, as well as across his entire oeuvre. Beginning, even, with "capitalist realism," itself, as a term that names the ideological predicament of the cynical realism of the present, Mark also identified two of the central intersecting and contradictory dimensions of our times. What he calls "reflexive impotence" and "depressive hedonia" identify the psychological dead-ends of neoliberal capitalism. What he describes is the condition of those subjects tied up to the postmodern vision of the "end of history" or the "end of the world" (which it seems easier to imagine than...). Reflexive impotence and depressive hedonia describe the affective dimensions of the postmodern "demise of symbolic efficiency" or the "breakdown of the signifying chain," described by Žižek, Jameson, and Dean, coupled with the consumerist logic of endless pleasure and the superego injunction to "Enjoy!," as well as a strong sense of the Deleuzian control society embedded in our everyday way of living the perpetual present of the digital culture. People, today, see no future towards which they can strive, and because of this the more we are enjoined to enjoy the more we feel depressed, anxious, and stressed out of our minds.

Alongside these psychological conditions, Mark identifies the contradictory forms of "market Stalinism" designed around a "business ontology." The dilemma here is that, according to its rhetoric, neoliberalism was meant to do away with state bureaucracy, leaving everything up to the invisible hand of the market. However, instead, bureaucratic mechanisms, like extreme internal auditing culture, did not disappear; rather, they have proliferated in the interests of supporting a business agenda. Just as Boltanski and Chiapello have shown in their *New Spirit of Capitalism*, or more recently in Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski's *People's Republic of Walmart*, the mechanisms of domination have not gone away under the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism.<sup>12</sup> Domination and bureaucracy have simply proliferated horizontally and rhizomatically. Despite claims regarding the demise of the big Other, the Lacanian Symbolic order, auditing culture, for instance, and the proliferation of information as public relations, the context of a largely cynical and ironic public only attests to the continued existence of this agency (the big Other) as the only virtual regulator of our common culture.

Mark's inspiring conclusion was thus to return to grand narratives apparently

swept under the rug by postmodern criticism. Grand narratives like Marxism provide adequate cognitive mapping for our present conditions – here we can re-posit the Symbolic order through the mechanism of critical and interrogative historical interpretation. This is a project that I see continued in Mark’s controversial essay, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” as well as the draft introduction to *Acid Communism*. Mark’s later writings pivot in this direction, to solve, first, the problem in capitalist realism of the variety of cynical resignations leading to reflexive impotence and depressive hedonia. Then, second, we need to, he suggests, reconceive political action according to the specific techno-bureaucratic context of post-Fordist market Stalinism. What we require, in other words, is a new Communist realism.

### Ten Years On

It seems clear from the short essays collected here that, for most of his readers, Mark’s writing oscillated between the feelings of crisis and despair brought about by the very fissures in capitalism that “capitalist realism” was meant to describe, and the polar opposite portrayal of hope and utopia beyond the limits of the present. If the realism of capitalist realism is one that reifies and forecloses the future – a reified utopia of the capitalist present – then the utopianism of the future beyond capitalism is the authentic communist realism that drives and propels us further.<sup>13</sup>

In her essay, “Capitalism and the End of the World” – a transcription of her talk delivered at the second annual Mark Fisher memorial lecture at Goldsmiths University, London – Jodi Dean explores Mark’s book as an avenue for reading the possibilities of communist desire in the twenty-first century. Dean reads *Capitalist Realism* alongside Mark’s “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” and Dorris Lessing’s 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*. She identifies four features of capitalist realism that explain the concept as one denoting the reflexive impotence of the Left. But what makes the “Vampire Castle” essay so poignant for her is the way Mark describes the need for a resurgence of collective class politics, emphasizing comradeship and solidarity, themes she writes that are drawn out in another way in Lessing’s novel. *The Golden Notebook*, according to Dean, depicts the familiar world – the post-1956, post-1968, and post-1989 exhaustion that, as Terry Eagleton has described, has for the Left created a feeling of defeat where none had actually taken place – of a tired old return and resetting of liberalism.<sup>14</sup> It is a world, Dean writes, of an end of comradeship and a disorienting incoherence for the Left. For her, capitalist realism, then, denotes an ideology so obsessed with the end that it forestalls and forecloses any new beginnings.

In his reading of the book, Benjamin Noys opines that awareness of Mark’s coinage of “capitalist realism” risks obscuring the substance of the book, which for him is in fact a call towards building a new collective order beyond the one oriented to value under capitalism. *Capitalist Realism* is for Noys more than simply an analysis of the limits of the neoliberal capitalist ideology. There is a dual substance to the book, that addresses the limits of capitalist realism, while also offering something of a way out.

*Capitalist Realism* is, instead, a piece about education – educating our desires – to free us from the constraints of capitalism. It’s Mark’s writing style – a style that places it into the cannon of educational manifestos – that for Noys explains the book’s appeal to students, and explains perhaps why the book has been particularly invigorating for young socialists, communists, and activists seeking a new kind of cognitive mapping for the post-crisis era.

Recounting her first meeting with Mark, Leigh Claire La Berge recalls explaining to him some of the difficulties involved in American electoral politics that often and sometimes inevitably use the barrier of pragmatic realism to bring us down to Earth from our utopian reveries. Mark’s response: but “there is no time. That’s how they get you.” This very line shows just how much, even in the timelessness of depression – Mark’s as well as our own, a symptom of capitalist realism – the slightest awareness of limited time – time for organizing, time for planning – can be a sign of a utopian, if somewhat paradoxical urgency. La Berge, reads *Capitalist Realism* as an “undead text,” one whose claims are not limited by the boundaries of discipline, and in this capacity we can see just how significant Mark’s writing was as a public intellectual on the Left. Engaging the structural crises of the present, intertwined with cultural criticism of popular culture and music, Mark was a critic, she writes, who had the ability to *build publics* by cultivating rather than merely curating.

Kai Heron writes about the ultimately accelerationist ethos in Mark’s writing about capitalism. But as he points out, this is part of an accelerationist project rooted deeply in the Marxist tradition. He means this precisely insofar as the very communist desire we seek to build a post-capitalist world lies dormant already within our hijacked libidinal energies blocked and misguided by the supposed pragmatism of capitalist realism. Capitalist realism, Heron points out, is not an ideology about the greatness of capitalism; rather, its point is that, like it or not, capitalism is at best the least worst of all possible systems. Its logic is not meant to prop up the existing system, but to block *a priori* any alternatives that might present themselves. But as Heron reads Fisher, the point in his writing about a communist or post-capitalist desire, is to see the groundwork for life beyond capitalism already dormant within the existing system. On this, he refers to Mark’s writing on Starbucks, a corollary to Fredric Jameson’s utopianism about Walmart.<sup>15</sup> Recalling Lenin on the capitalist financial system and banking as forming the infrastructure for an emergent socialist system, Fisher’s accelerationism and his post-capitalist desire for red plenty and communist luxury help us to envision a way beyond the limits of capitalist realism by replacing the failed capitalist desire with a communist one.

And just as Mark was capable of reading the most utopian dimensions contained within some of the most ardently capitalist institutions, like Starbucks, so too did he possess an uncanny ability to discover the radical utopian elements of some of our most ideological texts in the mainstream culture industry of capitalist popular culture. His cultural criticism shows up some of the best of what the project of Cultural

Studies, railing against the elitism of the Frankfurt School, was at its origins designed to be. This is an observation made clear in Dan Hassler-Forest's contribution. Detailing the force of Mark's ideological criticism of popular cinema in films like *Children of Men* and *Wall-E*, *Capitalist Realism* is as much a cultural text as it is a political one. As Hassler-Forest points out, Mark's ideological criticism was often paired with the uncovering of a counter-narrative laying within texts produced by some of our most powerful cultural producers, like Disney. Hassler-Forest applies Mark's critical astuteness to a reading of recent blockbusters, such as *Black Panther* and *The Last Jedi*, examining them in a way that pays homage to Mark and to his critical voice.

The pieces collected here therefore identify some of the reasons why the book has had such a monumental influence on political and cultural criticism, broadly speaking, over the past decade, since its publication. Mark's talent to recognize and identify both the *limits* to emancipatory politics, but also to envision a desire to transcend these limits is what makes both this book and his own legacy so revealing and liberating. As the book shows, the foundations for a new world are already with us, and the only thing preventing their realization are the political and ideological constraints that preserve the plenty for the few. In honor of Mark's work, and the legacy of *Capitalist Realism*, perhaps it is time (because we haven't got any left) to make the realism of communist desire our rallying call against the reified realism of capital.

## Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," in Theodor Adorno, et. al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2007) 212.
2. Jameson, "Reflections" 213.
3. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014); Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2017).
4. Although the purpose of this dossier is to commemorate the tenth anniversary of *Capitalist Realism*, it is difficult not to at the same time want to eulogize Mark. Interested readers are directed to read some of the following eulogies and op-eds about Mark and his legacy in the following sources: "In Memoriam: Mark Fisher," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (March 11, 2017). [www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/in-memoriam-mark-fisher/](http://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/in-memoriam-mark-fisher/) See also, Simon Reynolds, "Mark Fisher's K-Punk Blogs Were Required Reading for a Generation," *The Guardian* (January 18, 2017). [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/18/mark-fisher-k-punk-blogs-did-48-politics](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/18/mark-fisher-k-punk-blogs-did-48-politics) Nina Power, "In Memorium: Mark Fisher, January 13th," *Nina Power* (January 13, 2017). [www.ninapower.net/2018/01/13/in-memoriam-mark-fisher-january-13th/](http://www.ninapower.net/2018/01/13/in-memoriam-mark-fisher-january-13th/)
5. Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater Books, 2018).
6. See also the published conversation between Mark and Judy Thorne, "Luxury Communism: A Conversation Between Judy Thorne and Mark Fisher" in *Futures and Fictions*, edited by Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed, and Simon O'Sullivan (London: Repeater Books, 2017).
7. This line was first iterated by Jameson in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) xii – "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism." Žižek later, in reference to Jameson, writes that "it seems easier to imagine the 'end of the world' than a far more modest change in the mode of production, as if liberal capitalism is the 'real' that will somehow survive even under conditions of global ecological catastrophe." Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1994) 1.
8. Fisher, *K-Punk*.
9. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009) 1.
10. Jeremy Gilbert, "My Friend Mark," n.d., Accessed March 13, 2019. [www.jeremygilbertwriting.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/my-friend-mark40.pdf](http://www.jeremygilbertwriting.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/my-friend-mark40.pdf)
11. Mark Fisher, *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction* (New York: Exmilitary Press, 2018).
12. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2007); Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski, *People's Republic of Walmart* (New York: Verso, 2019).
13. See "Acid Communism" in *K-Punk*.
14. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 19.
15. And we can add to this Phillips and Rozworski's recently published, *People's Republic of Walmart*.



# Capitalism is the End of the World<sup>1</sup>

Jodi Dean

## Introduction

Many associate Fredric Jameson's remark, "it's easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" with Mark Fisher. For good reason: Fisher's account of capitalist realism confronts us with capitalism's unbearable yet unavoidable horrors. From the genocidal destruction of settler colonialism, through the demolition of cultures and modes of life that accompanies commodity production and exchange, to planet-altering anthropogenic climate change, capital subsumes the world. We can easily imagine an end to the world because under capitalism most of us confront it every day as we are forced to choose our exploitation, dispossession, and confinement. It's easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism because capitalism is the end of the world. We witness and endure it in the ruins of everyday life—lost lives, lives of loss.

This essay salvages possibilities of communist desire from the ruins of capitalism. I begin by drawing out the key features of capitalist realism. I then use Fisher's essay, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," to introduce comradeship and solidarity, understanding both as indispensable to the possibility of a communist world. This lets me consider the loss of comradeship and what regaining it may enable. I explore this idea via Doris Lessing's 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*.

## Capitalist Realism

Capitalist realism has four basic features. First, it is a response to the inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism, the name for a "reflective impotence."<sup>2</sup> Capitalist realism is more than the sense that there is no alternative to capitalism. It's a response to that sense, a reaction to the loss of a sense of possibility, a resignation or fatalism. Capitalism is all there is and it's here to stay. Fisher's point is that capitalism persists whether or not people think it is legitimate, good, or efficient: "The operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief."<sup>3</sup> Capitalist realism

thus designates an unbearable stuckness in an unbearable system that we can't imagine getting beyond.

Second, capitalist realism is a pathology of the left.<sup>4</sup> It is left acceptance of defeat, the left giving up and giving in. Fisher explains that "it is the left which has had to tell itself the story that there's no point struggling for an alternative to capitalism."<sup>5</sup> I would add that this tends to be accompanied by left concession to anti-communism that the lesson of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that anything other than capitalism is death. That capitalism is itself death is denied, displaced, ignored. This concession to anti-communism may or may not be fully conscious. It's present, though, in left practice, which leads to the third feature of capitalist realism.

Third, capitalist realism is a matter of what we do. We lower our expectations. We substitute spectacle for organizing. We may think that capitalism is an awful, exploitative system that damns most of us to selling ourselves to survive in a setting where there are ever fewer buyers – but our actions go along with the game. And this encompasses not just our economic actions, but our political ones. Anti-capitalism functions as a hipster gesture, a cynical nihilism in a knowing, more-radical-than-thou insistence that capitalism is so bad and holds us so tightly that politics can do little more than stage our misery as a spectacle.

Fourth, capitalist realism is an effect of the collapse in the belief in collective politics. This aspect of capitalist realism comes through in Fisher's critique of the privatization of stress. Individuals are made "to resolve their own psychological distress" even though such distress is widespread.<sup>6</sup> That capitalist realism is an effect of the collapse of belief in collective politics is further implied in Mark's critique of the "chemico-biologization of mental illness."<sup>7</sup> This association of suffering with brain chemistry, he tells us, "reinforces Capital's drive towards atomistic individualization."<sup>8</sup> Finally, this dimension of loss of a belief in collective politics underpins Fisher's critique of the "consensual sentimentality of Live Aid" that "replaced the antagonism of the Miners' Strike."<sup>9</sup> What's at stake in this replacement is the absence of a collective subject, a subject that demands to be constructed.

In sum, Fisher's concept of capitalist realism names that reflective impotence which overloads a left unable to imagine an end to capitalism, embedding it in pointless activities that sustain its self-entrapment. Once the left has no horizon beyond capitalism, once it has lost its capacity to imagine another future, it no longer believes that collective politics matters. So it sinks into individualism, aestheticism, privatization, and moralism, gesturing left without hope of getting anywhere at all.

### **Class, Comrades, Solidarity**

In "Exiting the Vampire Castle," Fisher extends the capitalist realism argument. He links the moralism, individualism, and privatization characteristic of capitalist realism to the disavowal of class. The loss of collectivity is the result of the abandonment of the working class, the deflection and pre-emption of class as a topic, the eclipse of



class consciousness as a matter of left politics. “Bourgeois modes of subjectivity” come to dominate the movement. The underlying vision is of self-oriented individuals, politics as possession, transformation reduced to attitudinal change, and a fixed, naturalized sphere of privilege and oppression. Anchored in a view of identity as the primary vector of politics, political energy shifts away from strategic organizational and tactical questions and onto prior attitudinal litmus tests, precluding from the start the collectivity necessary for revolutionary left politics. Reasserting class provides a way out. Fisher writes:

A left that does not have class at its core can only be a liberal pressure group. Class consciousness is always double: it involves a simultaneous knowledge of the way in which class frames and shapes all experience, and a knowledge of the particular position that we occupy in the class structure. It must be remembered that the aim of our struggle is not recognition by the bourgeoisie, nor even the destruction of the bourgeoisie itself. It is the class structure – a structure that wounds everyone, even those who materially profit from it – that must be destroyed. The interests of the working class are the interests of all; the interests of the bourgeoisie are the interests of capital, which are the interests of no-one. Our struggle must be towards the construction of a new and surprising world, not the preservation of identities shaped and distorted by capital.<sup>10</sup>

Acknowledging class is acknowledging the dimension of economic situatedness – placement in the social and economic structure by virtue of one’s function in capitalist production. The goal is abolishing this structure. We aren’t trying to get it to include or recognize us. We are trying to destroy it.

Fisher associates the return to class with the reinvigoration of comradeship and solidarity. How do we hold each other to account in ways that let us go forward? How do we address and change practices of disrespect within the movement? Through comradeship and solidarity. Fisher writes, “We need to learn, or re-learn, how to build comradeship and solidarity instead of doing capital’s work for it by condemning and abusing each other.” We have to teach and encourage each other, be patient, encouraging, maybe even forgiving—especially of those who are on our side. If we aren’t comrades, we can’t fight the long fight. And even if we could, without comrades there’s not a world to win.

### **Let Us Be Comrades**

The importance of Fisher’s emphasis on building comradeship and solidarity is born out in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. The novel depicts the decline and exodus that spread throughout the communist world in the wake of Khrushchev’s revelations regarding the purges, arrests, imprisonments, and executions occurring under Stalin. The novel provides an origin story for our present, for the loss of a world born from

common struggle.

Lessing's picture of the collapse of the symbolic order of mid-century communism is a picture of the end of the world. The end of comradeship is the unraveling of a common language, of the shared sense of the meaning of words and their relation to the world. Like Fisher, Lessing refuses to privatize mental illness: for her, the dissolution of confidence in the Party, that is, in collective struggle with communism as its horizon, expresses itself as psychosis. The scene is one of exhaustion, cynicism, hopelessness, and disarray: the best I can hope for when you are not my comrade, when there are no comrades, is a tired old liberalism.

The novel begins in 1957 with a conversation that introduces the major characters: Anna, the author of one successful novel whose notebooks constitute the bulk of the novel; Anna's friend Molly, a minor actress recently returned from a year's travel in Europe; Molly's ex-husband Richard, and their twenty-year old son, Tommy. Richard is bothered by the fact that Tommy is suffering from "a paralysis of the will."<sup>11</sup> Tommy just sits around brooding. Richard attributes Tommy's malaise to the collapse of the Communist Party. The impact of the last year – Khrushchev's speech, the invasion of Hungary, the Suez crisis – has been severe. "It's not an easy time to be a socialist."<sup>12</sup> Richard pushes the point: "And now what? Russia's in the doghouse and what price the comrades now? Most of them having nervous breakdowns or making a lot of money, as far as I can make out."<sup>13</sup> Collapse and capitalism: this captures the sense of many of those who left the Party in the wake of Khrushchev's revelations, the non-options available to them in a world thrown into chaos. Collapse and capitalism: our present of anxiety, depression, and despair in the extremes of climate change, inequality, and the worry that we may no longer be able to afford to live.

Molly and Anna have already started to distance themselves from the Party and their former comrades. Previously, Molly was always "rushing off to organize something, full of life and enthusiasm."<sup>14</sup> Now she feels no obligation to continue doing political work. Anna still feels something, yet she is exhausted, confused, wrapped up in trying to understand the loss of a "great dream."<sup>15</sup> Anna collects newspaper clippings documenting international tension and horror: the war in Korea, the detonation of the H-bomb, the anti-communist witch-hunt in the US, purges in the Soviet bloc, and so on. The Communist Party is awful and yet it seems the only barrier to US nuclear aggression. Britain explodes an atomic weapon. The McCarran Act authorizes the US Attorney-General to create detention centers for people who might engage in conspiracy or espionage. Mau Mau rise up in Kenya. Communist leaders are hanged in Prague. Defending the Soviet Union at all costs, the Party doesn't provide a space for grappling with the truth of the world, yet without it the world feels bereft, meaningless, condemned to a façade of liberalism that masks imperialism, authoritarianism, and colonialism. The Party hold open a gap of possibility – we aren't doomed to an eternal capitalism – but only negatively, a negation of capitalism not a positive promise.

Tommy confronts Anna about her abandonment of her Party work. Anna says that middle-aged women can't be expected to hold on to "youthful certainties and slogans and battle-cries."<sup>16</sup> But she dislikes what she hears coming out of her mouth: "I sound like a tired old liberal."<sup>17</sup> Tommy observes that Anna "used to live by a philosophy," taunts her for referring to "the communist myth," and demands to know what she lives by now.<sup>18</sup> Anna's reply is positive, hopeful. She describes a world capable of forward movement, a dream kept alive for a new generation of people. Tommy makes it clear that he won't be that generation. He shoots himself. This segment of the book ends with the likelihood that he will die before morning.

A subsequent section goes back in time, to a meeting of Anna's writers' group in 1952. The group tries to discuss an unreadable pamphlet on linguistics written by Stalin. Anna observes a tone in their conversation that makes her uncomfortable, a tone associated with making excuses, "of course you have to remember their legal traditions are very different from ours."<sup>19</sup> She recalls that she once caught herself speaking this way and "started to stammer. I usually don't stammer."<sup>20</sup> Anna also notes an increasingly familiar mood: "words lose their meaning suddenly. I find myself listening to a sentence, a phrase, a group of words, as if they are in a foreign language—the gap between what they are supposed to mean, and what in fact they say seems unbridgeable."<sup>21</sup> Comrades fail to say what they all know to be true: Stalin's pamphlet is a symptom of "a general uneasiness about language."<sup>22</sup> But as comrades they can no longer speak together. They are caught in a situation where the words they can say are inadequate to what needs to be said. Anna observes that she's prepared to believe that Stalin "is mad and a murderer;" nevertheless, she likes "to hear people use that tone of simple, friendly respect for him. Because if that tone were to be thrown aside, something very important would go with it, paradoxically enough, a faith in the possibilities of democracy, of decency. A dream would be dead – for our time, at least."<sup>23</sup> The tone of respect points to comradeship, to being on the same side. It's not the same as the tone of excuses. Using the tone of respect when speaking of Stalin isn't a sign that one is a Stalinist. It doesn't indicate that one makes excuses for purges and camps. It indicates belief in collective struggle for a better world. And the thing is, even anti-Stalinist skeptics have to admit this much is right: the end of the twentieth century socialist experiment destroyed democracy.

Anna decides to leave the Party after she realizes that she can no longer do her Party work, which is lecturing on art. Her typical lecture involves a critique of the egotism of bourgeois art. In the middle of a lecture several months before leaving the Party, she "began to stammer and couldn't finish." Anna continues: "I have not given any more lectures. I know what that stammer means."<sup>24</sup> Her decision to leave the Party is an effect, not a cause, of the dissolution of the connection between words and meaning. In a conversation with a comrade and coworkers, she experiences this loss: again, "words lose their meaning;" she can hear their voices, but the words "don't mean anything."<sup>25</sup> In the place of words, she sees images – "scenes of death, torture,

cross-examination and so on” – that connect not to the words being used but to the reality they disavow. Images without meaning, a convergence of the imaginary and the Real – what Žižek describes as the decline of the symbolic.

Tommy lives – but blind. Youth continues, unwilling and unable to keep a communist dream alive. But how could it? The sense of the world that it once provided is crumbling, along with the practices of comradeship that had previously supported it. Tommy becomes a dominating “blind but all-conscious presence” in Molly’s house. Molly is trapped, both by him and a new sense that life has become a matter of “getting used to things that are really intolerable.”<sup>26</sup> Although slow and careful, “like some kind of zombie,” Tommy seems happy. Molly describes him as “all in one piece for the first time in his life” – yet she is horrified by her own words, “matching them against the truth of that mutilation.”<sup>27</sup> The truth is that “He enjoys it.”<sup>28</sup> Tommy no longer has to choose; he no longer has to feel compelled to find a way forward. He can be where he is, fully occupying that place without having to analyze, understand, or see it. It’s as if blindness gives Tommy the capacity to force a maternal scene onto Molly, to envelope her into an infantile oneness that makes him complete at the cost of her misery. I should add that Molly and Tommy don’t remain intertwined. He attaches to his step-mother and then to a wife, drifting into an incoherent, formless politics of spontaneous crowds and expressive students.

Anna feels herself breaking down. “Words mean nothing.”<sup>29</sup> They are more and more just “a series of meaningless sounds, like nursery talk.”<sup>30</sup> Anna falls in love with Saul Green, an American socialist boarding in her house. Saul is himself breaking down. Saul talks compulsively, saying nothing. Anna writes, “I was listening for the word *I* in what he said. I, I, I, I – I began to feel as if the word *I* was being shot at me like bullets from a machine gun.”<sup>31</sup> This compulsive talking, this I, I, I, I becomes a mark of Saul’s madness. It sometimes carries streams of political jargon that Anna can identify by time and tendency: “Trotskyist, American, early 19-fifties. Premature anti-Stalinist, 1954.”<sup>32</sup> Anna herself becomes sicker and sicker, obsessed with Saul and spending more time sleeping and dreaming. They begin to call each other comrade, using the word “with an ironical nostalgia” born of “disbelief and destruction.”<sup>33</sup> Saul observes: “As I crack up out of that 100 per cent revolutionary, I notice I crack up into aspects of everything I hate.”<sup>34</sup> He wants more than anything to return to the happiness of a time where he believed with others that they could change the world. Saul begins again with the compulsive “I, I, I like a machine-gun ejaculating regularly.”<sup>35</sup> Anna writes: “I was listening and not listening, as if to a speech I had written someone else was delivering. Yes, that was me, that was everyone, the I, I, I, I. I am. I am. I am going to. I won’t be. I shall. I want. I.”<sup>36</sup> At one point, Saul cries out, “My God, what we’ve lost, what we’ve lost, what we’ve lost, how can we ever get back to it, how can we get back to it again.”<sup>37</sup> Then he switches back to the I, I, I, I, as Anna curls up in a sick and drunken ball of pain.

The book ends with Tommy going into business with father (that is, moving from

collapse to capitalism). Tommy embraces the class privilege patriarchy affords. He rationalizes his decision by saying that “the world is going to be changed by the efforts of progressive big business and putting pressure on Government departments.”<sup>38</sup> Molly gets married. Anna works as a marriage counselor. It’s as if Lessing knew Thatcherism was coming: “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” The loss of the Party, of the organizing role of communism in twentieth century life, is the loss of a perspective that lets society be seen. Tommy, his generation, can’t see the world his mother and Anna saw. Former comrades turn to private life as the space and possibility of politics contracts to ethics and economics.

The world that Lessing depicts is the world of the Left not just after 1956 but also after 1968 and 1989. It’s our world that seems too exhausted even for tired, old, liberalism. The end of comradeship is the end of the world: non-meaning, incoherence, madness, and the pointless, disorienting, insistence on the I.

## Conclusion

From the loss of comradeship Lessing describes, we can salvage the comrade as form of political relation among those who desire collectivity, who see themselves as on the same side of a struggle for communism. As a generic, abstract figure of political belonging, comrade promises alienation and fulfillment: liberation from the constraints of racist patriarchal capitalism and a new relation born of collective political work toward an emancipatory egalitarian future. Exceeding a sense of politics as individual conviction and choice, comrade points to expectations of solidarity as indispensable to political action. When we do things out of comradeship, we show up to meetings we would miss, do political work we would avoid, and try to live up to our responsibilities to each other. We experience the joy of committed struggle, of learning through practice. We overcome fears that might overwhelm us had we no choice but to confront them alone. My comrades make me better, stronger, than I could ever be on my own.

Some on the Left are skeptical of such political belonging. Seeing comradely discipline only as constraint rather than as a decision to build collective capacity, they substitute the fantasy that politics can be individual for the actuality of political struggle and movement. This substitution evades the fact that comradeship is a choice. It also ignores the liberating quality of discipline: when we have comrades, we are freed from the obligation to be and know and do everything – there is a larger collective with a line, program, and set of tasks and goals; we are freed from the cynicism that parades as maturity because of the practical optimism that faithful work engenders. Discipline provides the support that frees us to make mistakes, learn, and grow. When we err – and each of us will – our comrades will be there to catch us, dust us off, and set us right. We aren’t abandoned to go it alone.

Disorganized Leftists too often remain entranced by the illusion of everyday people

spontaneously creating new forms of life that will usher in a glorious future. This illusion fails to acknowledge the deprivations and decapitations that forty years of neoliberalism have inflicted. If it were true that austerity, debt, the collapse of institutional infrastructures, and capital flight enabled the spontaneous emergence of egalitarian forms of life, we would not see the enormous economic inequalities, intensification of racialized violence, declines in life expectancy, slow death, undrinkable water, contaminated soil, militarized policing and surveillance, and desolate urban and suburban neighborhoods that are now commonplace. Exhaustion of resources includes the exhaustion of human resources. People often want to do something, but they don't know what to do or how to do it. They may be isolated in non-unionized workplaces, over-burdened by multiple flex-time positions, stretched thin caring for friends and family. Disciplined organization, the discipline of comrades committed to common struggle for an emancipatory egalitarian future, can help here. Sometimes we want and need someone to tell us what to do because we are too tired and over-extended to figure it out for ourselves. Sometimes when we are given a task, we feel like our small efforts have larger meaning and purpose, maybe even world-historical significance in the age-old fight of the people against oppression. Sometimes just knowing that we have comrades who share our commitments, our joys, and our efforts to learn from defeats makes political work possible where it was not before.

Some Leftists agree with everything I've said thus far...and add "but." But won't we end up disappointed and betrayed? Won't it all ultimately fail (as it has so many times)? What about the harms comrades have inflicted on each other in the name of comradeship? What about the persistence of sexism and racism, bigotry and bias? What happens when we are no longer on the same side, when we cannot say "we" or acknowledge a side? The critical tendency to reject an idea because of a slew of possible future failures is widespread in left milieus. An intellectual façade masks a failure of political will that would be unconvincing in any other context – don't meet that person for coffee in case you fall in love and later have an expensive and hateful divorce. Worries about the end foreclose possibilities of beginning. Relationships end. Failures happen. But failure is nothing to fear – it's something to learn from, a next step. We lose our comrades. The fact of an end should not forestall beginning.

### Notes

1. This paper was originally delivered on January 18th, 2019, as the second annual Mark Fisher memorial lecture, Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths University, London.
2. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (UK: Zero Books, 2009) 21.
3. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 13.
4. Jodi Dean and Mark Fisher "We Can't Afford to Be Realists: A Conversation," *Reading Capitalist Realism*, eds. Leigh Claire LaBerge (Des Moines: University of Iowa Press, 2014) 27.
5. Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, "Capitalist Realism/Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue," *New Formations* 80/81 (Autumn/Winter 2013): 89-101, 90 – 91.

6. *Capitalist Realism* 19.
7. *Capitalist Realism* 37.
8. *Capitalist Realism* 37.
9. *Capitalist Realism* 66.
10. Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle" (24 November 2013), openDemocracyUK. Originally published in *The North Star*.
11. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) 223.
12. Lessing, *Golden Notebook* 24.
13. *Golden Notebook* 24.
14. *Golden Notebook* 136.
15. *Golden Notebook* 51.
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28. *Golden Notebook* 323.
29. *Golden Notebook* 407.
30. *Golden Notebook* 407.
31. *Golden Notebook* 475.
32. *Golden Notebook* 504.
33. *Golden Notebook* 533.
34. *Golden Notebook* 533.
35. *Golden Notebook* 537.
36. *Golden Notebook* 537.
37. *Golden Notebook* 538.
38. *Golden Notebook* 567.





## The Breakdown of Capitalist Realism

Benjamin Noys

*Capitalist Realism*, the book, has, in ten years, become a phrase: "what Mark Fisher calls 'capitalist realism'" or 'as Mark Fisher has described, "capitalist realism."' Fisher's diagnosis is accepted but the risk is that the substance of *Capitalist Realism* the book is uncannily absent. The success of the title is at the expense of the book. That is why I want to return to the "substance" of the book, but in a particular fashion. The substance of the book is not simply the substance of capitalist realism. Certainly, few could be as devastating as Fisher in making resonant and felt the "political phenomenology of late capitalism," in which we experience "a system that is unresponsive, impersonal, centreless, abstract and fragmentary."<sup>1</sup> There is, however, another "substance" at work in the book, which is those desires, experiences and lived moments that call to another collective order not oriented to value. This call, as we will see, involves a process of the education of desire to both free us from capitalist realism and to develop a non-capitalist life. As with the Walter Benjamin of "The Life of Students," Mark Fisher is a writer for students.<sup>2</sup> This is not in a patronizing fashion of condescending to them. In Fisher's statement for the Zero Books series, in which *Capitalist Realism* appeared, Fisher declares the need to go beyond "interpassive stupor" to achieve another kind of discourse: "intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist."<sup>3</sup> This is writing for students, on their behalf, and for us all as students.

The dual form of this substance is why it is important to consider the breakdown of capitalist realism in a dual sense. It first refers to our experience of crisis and austerity, which capitalist realism is supposed to naturalize and justify. Capitalist realism appears to be stretched to its limit as in our increasingly apocalyptic present alternatives seem more likely to take fascist forms than communist. Capitalism, for Fisher, is consonant if not coterminous with catastrophe: "Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics."<sup>4</sup> The breakdown of capitalist realism seems to coincide with the breakdown of capitalism. The second sense of the breakdown of capitalist realism is one of turning

the breakdown of capitalist realism into a *breakthrough*, as R. D. Laing would have said. No longer would we simply be trapped in capitalist realism as the naturalization of capitalist catastrophe, but instead we could go beyond capitalist realism. I wish to pursue this task by re-reading *Capitalist Realism* together with Fisher's writing on cultural politics,<sup>5</sup> his posthumous book *The Weird and the Eerie*,<sup>6</sup> and the collection of his writings that include a fragment of the uncompleted project *Acid Communism*.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Fisher's mordant brilliance at capturing the worst of the present moment, he did not cease in thinking the better. Fisher's writing could often oscillate between despair and elation, something in the style of Franco "Bifo" Berardi.<sup>8</sup> This oscillation reflects Fisher's own tendency to split the interiority of capitalist culture from the "outside" that refuses integration. The interiority of capitalist culture merits Fisher's acidic skills of diagnosis, and a sense of despair, while the "outside" offers weird possibilities and a sense of elation. Fisher's "substance", this peculiar Spinozism, tries to move beyond the "sad passions" of the attachment to this interiority towards this "outside."<sup>9</sup> This divided substance, a substance in tension, is what accounts for the oscillation present in Fisher's work.

Central to Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism are the issues of mental health and education. This is one reason why the book *Capitalist Realism* resonates with students, but also why the central insight of the book pertains to how we experience crisis as it runs through self-reproduction. In terms of mental health, the breakdown of capitalist realism is not only a social breakdown, but also a psychic breakdown that condenses the forms and processes of the continual series of breakdowns and crises that compose capitalism. While "Capitalist realism insists on treating mental health as if it were a natural fact, like weather (but, then again, weather is no longer a natural fact so much as a political-economic effect)",<sup>10</sup> the effect of crisis is to further estrange and de-naturalize capitalism, mental health, and, of course, the weather. Overlapping forms of breakdown strike at the very heart of the usual ideological mechanism, central to the analysis of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, of treating what is cultural as natural.<sup>11</sup> Now, with the widespread recognition and reality of climate catastrophe, even nature is no longer natural.

The response to this situation, Fisher argues, is to politicize mental health. Mental health is not 'natural' fact, a 'genetic' disorder, requiring treatment by pharmacology and mechanisms of adjustment. This is not to say no such factors could be in play, something Fisher's interest in the neurological attests to, but such forms of explanation deny any social causation. As Fisher states: "[i]t goes without saying that all mental illnesses are neurologically *instantiated*, but this says nothing about their *causation*."<sup>12</sup> If this politicization refuses capitalist naturalism it also refuses the script of Deleuze and Guattari's anti-psychiatric path of celebrating the figure of the "schiz" as revolutionary. Rather than tracing some signature disorder as a sign of immersion or exit from capitalism, Fisher preferred to focus on the ambient suffering of stress, tiredness (TATT – Tired All the Time), and anxiety. Fisher's move is deflationary, away

from “high” anti-psychiatry, but at the same time attentive to everyday suffering and its intimate connection to capitalist forms. The psychic landscape of high capitalism is chaotic, and, for Fisher, “as production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems.”<sup>13</sup> Precarity is a lived psychic experience that fragments the possibilities of the future.

This is, however, not only a negative phenomenology. Staying true to Deleuze and Guattari, Fisher considers capitalism as a “desire machine.” Adapting their question about fascism, Fisher asks why we desire capitalism? Why do we displace our desires to capitalism and “launder our libidos”?<sup>14</sup> The phenomenology of high capitalism is a phenomenology of our libidinal investment in high capitalism. Here is where the problem of education turns into one of the education of desire. I am reminded of Fredric Jameson’s contention that our problem “lies in trying to figure out what we really want in the first place.”<sup>15</sup> Utopias are negative lessons, finally, that teach us the limits of our imagination in the face of the addictive culture of capitalism. It is only, Jameson insists, once the utopia has impoverished us, undertaken an act of “world reduction,” that we can undertake a “desiring to desire, a learning to desire, the invention of the desire called Utopia in the first place.”<sup>16</sup>

While Jameson, in the text I am quoting from, sought this experience of impoverishment and the birth of desire in Andrei Platonov’s communist modernist novel, *Chevenгур*, Fisher sought such experiences in popular culture – the weird and the eerie, the remnants of 1970s social democracy, and in the inventiveness of dance music culture. The television series *Sapphire and Steel* (1979-1982) incarnates a low budget temporal weird.<sup>17</sup> This story of time detectives, played by Joanna Lumley and David McCallum, is one of emotional austerity as these detectives investigate temporal anomalies and, finally, the stopping of time. This moment allegorizes neo-liberal capitalism as the cancellation of the future. Yet, the melancholy apprehension of the end of time is also the coding of desires and futures lost, or better cancelled. To watch *Sapphire and Steel* with Fisher is to undergo an education in desire brought to an end, but also a world reduction that would force us to re-invent desire. In Jameson and Fisher we see a project of education, a teaching of the “desire to desire” out of an act of “world reduction.”<sup>18</sup>

Fisher argued that: “the most powerful forms of desire are precisely cravings for the strange, the unexpected, the weird.”<sup>19</sup> He saw in the weird and eerie, as detailed in the book of that name, experiences of estrangement that not only registered the forms of high capitalism in their psychic dimensions but that also promised us liberation from them. The breakdown of capitalist realism is not only a breakdown of capitalism but also a breakdown of *realism*. Unlike the various contemporary projects that aim to re-think the possibilities of critical realism, in the wake of Lukács and Jameson, Fisher remained attached to the possibilities of the surreal and, in his unfinished work on “acid communism,” the psychedelic.<sup>20</sup>

We should note that even these projects of critical realism are articulated to engage

with the phantasmagoric and “irreal” as key constituents of the fabric of capitalism.<sup>21</sup> Fisher directly engages with the weird as the promise of a liberation from capitalist realism. This brings him into proximity with the work of China Miéville, whose novel *The Last Days of New Paris* (2016) evinces a surprising belief in the powers of surrealism. In both cases, these acts of recovery are not blind to the different historical contexts in which these experiences are being re-activated. In the case of Miéville’s novel, the form of endless conflict that has resulted from the detonation of the S-blast, a surrealist weapon that unleashes their fictional creations into “reality,” does not carry the air of liberation. Internal to the text is a sense of surrealism as the interruption of history, but also the risk of a suspension that is cut off from history and an endless repetition of surrealist estrangement. It is perhaps for this reason that the novel remains “thin” and unsatisfactory. In a similar fashion, Fisher’s “hauntological” reconstructions of the weird charge carried by forms of cultural production marked by British social democracy suggest the temporal disruption these unfollowed paths might cause.<sup>22</sup> As we have seen with *Sapphire and Steel*, its ending on a moment of suspension prefigures the birth of neoliberal capitalism, while its strange melancholy encodes lost desires. The return to the past notes its limits, but also the possibilities of a leap into the future.

The utopias that Fisher implies are established in the ruins and fragments of capitalist modernity, which echo something like the prehistoric monument of Stonehenge: “For the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away, and in a sense what we witness here is the unintelligibility and the inscrutability of the Real itself.”<sup>23</sup> If the prehistoric past lacks an intelligible Symbolic that can be reconstructed, confronting us with the Real as remnant, then the “ruins and relics” of high capitalism in which all is rendered as value, confronts us with another form of the Real as remnant. The “eeriness” of the places of high capitalism needs to be rendered and outbid by the weird opening to the outside. Again, this is the “world reduction” that Jameson suggests, a levelling in which we can reconstruct and educate our future desires by educating us into a desire for the future.

At the same time, this “outside” is an equivocal figure of externality, which serves to deny the “closed” vision of abstract capitalism as desiring machine. Here lies a tension or oscillation that is not explicitly confronted or resolved. There is a split between the interiority of capital that reaches down into the nervous system and an “outside” that is another, different, form of liberation into the inhuman. The substance of capitalist realism remains split between inside and outside and not articulated. It is in the coordination of the “hauntological” and the “accelerationist” moments of Fisher’s work that an articulation is attempted: reaching back to those moments of haunting that can then be activated and accelerated to realize a “missed” future.<sup>24</sup> Yet, this articulation remains often limited and fantasmatic, and here is where the project of the education of desire might have been fleshed out to think a phenomenology of capital that could also trace its fractures without supposing a

leap into a great “outside.” The project of a phenomenology of capitalism needs to be supplemented, in the Derridean sense of a necessary addition, with a project of education and reconstruction.

The elaboration of the project of the education of desire remains one of the losses caused by Mark Fisher’s death. It is a project that remains to be reconstructed, from the complete collection of his writings, but also to be collectively constructed. Fisher’s own work as a teacher, both within and without educational institutions, was central to his phenomenology of high capitalism and to the alternative forms of “substance,” of desire, that were possible. We might speak, considering the influence of psychoanalysis, of a project of “unconsciousness raising” as well as “consciousness raising.”<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true of the project of “acid communism.” Earlier Fisher had identified psychedelia with “the denial of the existence of the Symbolic order as such,” as a “psychotic” regression that fails to register sociality at all.<sup>26</sup> At this point Fisher remains within the punk moment of “never trust a hippie,” and the dismissal of psychedelia as “flabby” regression. The fragment of acid communism tries to re-evaluate experiments in consciousness change, now as visions beyond or outside capitalist realism. The tensions remain, however, between an interior world of capital that is embedded in the nervous system or the unconscious and a psychedelic “outside” that we can somehow reach.

It is also important to consider Marx’s third thesis on Feuerbach, which suggests “it is essential to educate the educator,” and that: “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.”<sup>27</sup> If Fisher is writing largely outside of this context, as are we all, then we still have to consider this problem of education and self-education. The various attempts made at educational forms “outside” neo-liberal capitalist forms are often equivocal, even reproducing those forms in the dream of the “private”. Perhaps the closest we have to such experiments arise in the “teach-ins” or “outs” that have arisen in various struggles against privatizing education. These, however, remain temporary and are limited in addressing questions of self-reproduction in the context outside the wage. There is no simple solution to the problem and the difficulty of even sketching such forms speaks to our moment.

It is this project of education that remains before us and is left implied as the true substance of which “capitalist realism” is the truncated and mutilated form. To make good on this project we would need to articulate the weird “outside” with the eerie spaces of “absence,” of the fractures and dialectical tensions of capitalism with its empty appearance. This is the difficult bridge to be forged that is marked in the joining and divide of *The Weird and the Eerie*. Whether the acid or psychedelic would have been the sufficient mediator remains a question, and one which any continuation of Fisher’s project would have to suggest. I would argue, however, that any such project of education needs to abandon the conceptualization of inside and outside for a more dialectical grasping of the “interior” limits of capitalism and the articulation of those

“limits” and their possibilities with that “interior.” This is where Fisher’s project requires urgent re-thinking.

Amongst the utopian suggestions of Jameson is one that seems resonant to me for Fisher’s project: “a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature.”<sup>28</sup> This, it seems to me, is something of what Fisher’s work implies: a “wild” substance, a “wild” desire, which, as *Capitalism Realism* insisted, was not oddly foreign to forms of discipline and organization. This is another tension, hopefully a productive one, which marks Fisher’s oeuvre: an attention to dynamics of liberation, which is also a considered reflection on the missteps and failures of liberation. It is in and out of this tension, perhaps, that we might find the possibilities of the education of desire today.

## Notes

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009) 64.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Life of Students," *Selected Writings Volume 1 (1913-1926)*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) 37-47.
3. Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018) 103.
4. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 4.
5. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).
6. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2016).
7. Mark Fisher, *K-Punk*. The fragment on "Acid Communism," 751-770.
8. In particular, see Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Heroes* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).
9. *K-Punk* 695-699.
10. *Capitalist Realism* 19.
11. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973).
12. *K-Punk* 436.
13. *Capitalist Realism* 34.
14. *Capitalist Realism*, 15.
15. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 75.
16. Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* 90.
17. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 2-6.
18. On Jameson as educator, see Robert T. Tally, *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism* (London: Pluto Books, 2014).
19. *Capitalist Realism*, 76.
20. See Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015); David Cunningham, "Capitalist Epics: Abstraction, Totality, and the Theory of the Novel," *Radical Philosophy* 163 (2010): 11-23 and "Here Comes the New: Deadwood and the Historiography of Capitalism," *Radical Philosophy* 180 (2013): 8-24; Fredric Jameson, "Marx and Montage," *New Left Review* 58 (2009): 109-117.
21. For "irrealism," see WReC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
22. *Ghosts of My Life*; *K-Punk*.
23. *The Weird and the Eerie*.
24. For my criticisms of accelerationism and its own forms of nostalgia, see Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).
25. *K-Punk* 764.
26. *K-Punk* 83.
27. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, intro. Lucio Colletti, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1975) 422.
28. *The Seeds of Time* 99.





## **"Is There No Time?" A Conversation with Mark Fisher**

**Leigh Claire La Berge**

I met Mark Fisher some years after Alison Shonkwiler and I were lucky enough to have the opportunity to include his work in our edited volume, itself a very Fisher-derived project, *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa, 2014). I was in Cambridge, England at a conference on aesthetics and politics and Mark had come down for the day from London. This was the spring of 2016. In the United States, the presidential primaries were in full swing and, following the logic of American cultural imperialism, they were the talk of, well, the storied dining halls of the University of Cambridge. Like many progressive and Leftist onlookers, both in the United States and abroad, Mark was particularly excited about the candidacy of Bernie Sanders. Could it be? He wondered. Was it possible?

I said I thought it was doubtful. Not because, I, the native informant, explained Bernie didn't have popular support. I was sure then, and remain so now, that many of Bernie's ideas were quite popular and would be broadly endorsed were they ever to see the light of day. But, of course, voting in the United States is its own labyrinthine procedure. Observers outside the country rarely understand this; indeed, observers inside the country struggle with it, too. Every state, and we have 50, has its own voting rules. Primary elections, as opposed to general, elections have their own rules. Votes don't count equally. Before the primary election even started, a substantial minority of super delegates—remember those? Mostly lobbyists who buy seats in the upper echelons of the Democratic party—had already pledged their support for Hillary. Then you have to find your polling station. It may have moved without notification, as mine did that year. You may not be registered to vote. Even if you are registered, it still might not work. Technical issues, voting irregularities. And this is only the primary! In the general election, the difficulties expand considerably, as people of color are regularly "scrubbed," or removed, from voting lists. The more conservative the state, the less likely people of color will be able to vote. Formerly or currently incarcerated people can't vote. Identification requirements change. With a system like this, the philosopher Dehlia Hannah once said, you don't need a conspiracy.<sup>1</sup>

Mark looked amazed. “The thing is,” he said, “there is no time. That’s how they get you.” When he said that, I understood it in response to my explication of American voting impasses. And it’s true: it does take time to vote. It takes energy. It takes frustration. And it still doesn’t work. But that’s not all he meant. He hoped to indicate, too, an attenuation of time as possibility, time as community, time as both a feeling of access to the present—to respond, organize, and critique—as well as access to the past, to understand history. Likewise, time forms our conduit to the future and in it we might plan how things could be different. Of course, one thinks of Marx’s famous line from *The Germany Ideology* as perhaps the ur-ideal of how “having time” might take a social form:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.<sup>2</sup>

Mark did function in various capacities: teacher, critic, editor, blogger (back when that was a term), academic, theorist. But perhaps better he occupied a role increasingly needed and uncommon on the Left: that of public intellectual. And I don’t mean, it must be said, liberal intellectual. We do have plenty of those, and their thoughts occupy the pages of *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian*, among others. Mark’s critical interests were not directed toward carbon credits or public-private partnerships; he was engaged in systemic and structural criticism of our present. There was another distinguishing difference of Mark’s critical production: not only was he a public intellectual of the Left, but his subject area was, of course popular culture, particularly music — a “post-rave John Berger” he was once called by Simon Reynolds.<sup>3</sup> We might also call him a pre-Facebook internet critic.

What I mean with that comment is that, in retrospect, Mark’s editorial work and organizational work was at least as important as his theoretical work. To be a public intellectual means not only that one’s work circulates in public; it means now, and probably always has meant, rather, that one creates publics for one’s own work as well as the work of others to circulate in. Publics do not come to us pre-formed; the work of the intellectual is thus not to curate but to cultivate. Mark of course cultivated critique after critique and discursive space after discursive space from the consumerist effluvia in which we, the “consumer-spectator,” to use his term, find ourselves always-already immersed.

Rereading *Capitalist Realism* some years after its publication is then to be reminded, almost randomly it feels, of some of the more idiosyncratic content that continues to attest to the truth of Deleuze and Guattari’s famous claim that capitalism is a

“motley painting of everything that has ever been believed.”<sup>4</sup> They meant ideology, but this haunting of the discarded past permeates popular culture as well. As I re-read Mark’s book in preparation for this *dossier*, I can honestly say that I had not thought of Kurt Cobain or Nirvana once since, well, I last read the book. The re-emergence and stabilization of the very effluvia that destroys history is one of the risks inherent in the kind of methodology that Mark pursued. Now, again, I’m thinking about Nirvana. Object as symptom, symptom as readable, readable object as potentially utopian object.

We know this method, of course; it seems a mix of Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, the former provides the site for periodization; the latter offers the introduction of subject “supposed to” do any number of things: know, recycle, consume, experience anxiety and/or depression. Any account of Mark’s legacy, of course, must grapple with this question: does the methodology work? Is its critical apparatus realized? Mark’s gambit in *Capitalist Realism* was that, as suffocating and penetrating as the real was – presented by Jameson in his 1984 essay, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” – things have now gotten worse. That ethical inflection is not presented as such, of course. Rather it is presented as a narrative of an expanding capitalism that, somehow, always manages to be a little more totalizing.

For me, that argument has never been persuasive. It wasn’t when Jameson made it, and it wasn’t when Mark updated it. Jameson had already said, as Alison Shonkwiler and I noted in our own introduction to *Reading Capitalist Realism*, that “those precapitalist enclaves of nature and the unconscious” have now, too, entered into circuits of production and reproduction. That would seem to be all of it, right? No more time, no more nature, no more unconscious. Mark would then add that the future, too, had been colonized by capital. Thus, citing Jameson and Žižek, he recycles the line that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Mark qualifies the sentiment by noting that “it is *now* impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative,” to such a state of affairs (2, italics mine.). In the postmodern 1980s, he tells us, “there were still, at least in name, political alternatives to capitalism” (7). Even as Mark does provide more specificity of social texture than Jameson, for example his discussions of higher education in the UK, he too does endorse an overarching narrative of totalizing decline.

I see in this claim, however, a foreshortening not of the object of criticism, i.e., capitalism, but rather a foreshortening of criticism itself. This kind of argument confuses registers of historical time, narrative time, and argumentative sequence. It all too easily becomes yet another sacrifice on the altar of Leftist melancholia, Walter Benjamin’s well-known worry that an over-attachment to various forms of Leftist impossibility, as well as the pleasure sustained from the critique of them, may assume the place of the political and critical operation itself. Perhaps more to the point is Benjamin’s trenchant if unheeded caution in *The Arcades Project* that: “There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be ‘modern’ in the sense of eccentric, and did

not believe itself to be standing directly before the abyss.”<sup>5</sup> There is little currency to be found critically in attempting to supersede another epoch’s abyss; all abysses are abysmal. More interesting, I think, remains the catalytic force through which multiple registers of the present are culled together and juxtaposed. And that, in its best moments, is what *Capitalist Realism* does.

Why has this book endured? Looking back, one thing we can certainly say about Mark’s book is that it’s short. I mean that as a compliment. It’s easy to read, and it has circulated with ease across multiple continents and locations. We might encounter it at a museum, a gallery, an activist space, a community bookstore. And it uses a sonic and felicitous term, *capitalist realism*, to tell us directly something that many of us already know, or already think we know, even if we’re not sure how or why we know it. Namely, that what is real is always pre-selected, thus it is *realism*, and that the social forces doing the selecting hope that the selecting itself will be a site of capitalization, that they will engender and re-engender an object and subject of capital. Thus, it is *capitalist realism*. It hardly matters that the term wasn’t Mark’s originally; it became his.

What kind of book is *Capitalist Realism*? Perhaps the historian of science Lorraine Daston and the literary critic Sharon Marcus might provide a clue. They have recently introduced the idea of the “undead text,” which they define as a text whose claims resonate beyond its autochthonous discipline — that may even have become outdated in its original disciplinary setting — yet continues to live a transdisciplinary life.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is one such example, they suggest. Kuhn’s book is short, essayistic, lacking in long scholarly engagements as often found in cumbersome footnotes; in its first printing, it even lacked an index. An undead text seems in retrospect to be oriented around a single claim, a big claim, one that often resonates in a single phrase. Kuhn offered “the paradigm shift” to explain how scientific knowledge is structured historically. Benedict Anderson, another of their examples, offered the “imagined community.” Simone de Beauvoir suggested that women were “the second sex,” yet noted that “one is not born but becomes a woman.”<sup>7</sup>

It seems to me now that *Capitalist Realism* might very well join this august pantheon of undead texts. In what discipline should we place Mark’s book? Cultural Studies? Media Studies? Literature? Film Studies? A cursory glance around the internet shows it appearing on courses in each of these disciplines. In fact, I located it on a political science syllabus as well. Indeed, I actually found a class simply called “Capitalist Realism.” It seems to have many homes. But it could also have no homes. This is the risk and the pleasure of making the big claim, of generalizing, of refusing the genres of so much academic writing and then, of course, of refusing the genres that separate our own habits of thought, otherwise known as academic disciplines. These habits Mark refused, and we are all better for it.

But of course, Mark was not simply struggling against history even though, as Jameson has said, “history puts its worse foot forward.” He was also fighting the

feeling that contemporary history generates in so many of us, those who intercept its worse foot. We, or at least I, can't know the vicissitudes of his depression, but, his work encouraged us to consider the fact that there is certainly something deeply impersonal, un-individual, and deeply uninteresting about depression. And this, I think, relates to time. Depression often generates the feeling of an endless time that is accompanied by an acute enervation. When will this feeling dissipate? Hopefully in the future. But there is no future as depressive time doesn't seem to advance; it stalls. In the midst of a depression, there is no access to a reparative past nor is there the fantasy of a reparative future. But capitalism has a cure for that. Perhaps there is no better illustration of the real of the capitalist realist than the doctor who shows up to cure the pain, for a price, of course.

One of our most-cited popular (non-medical) studies of depression, namely Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon*, is deserving of more study in this regard.<sup>8</sup> The author relates his own struggles with severe depression and shows us—indeed tells us—again and again, that money saved him. Fittingly, Solomon's father was the CEO of a large pharmaceutical company that distributed, among other things, antidepressants. Solomon's Wikipedia page is instructive:

Solomon is the oldest son of Carolyn Bower Solomon and Howard Solomon, former chairman of Forest Laboratories and founder of Hildred Capital Partners; he is brother to David Solomon, also of Hildred Capital Partners. Solomon's subsequent depression, eventually managed with psychotherapy and antidepressant medications, inspired his father to secure FDA approval to market citalopram (Celexa) in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of his best-selling and prize-winning book, Solomon became and continues to be a kind of progressive public intellectual who claims, among other things, that depression is a real disease, it is not the subject's "fault," and that, with the proper medical treatment, it can be managed. More can and should be written about this liberal narrative of depression. I introduce it here to demonstrate a certain possibility and freedom to be found in Mark's own writings about depression and to show, again, that it is possible to cleave the boundaries of capitalist realism.

Echoing what he had written in *Capitalist Realism*, Mark noted in *The Guardian* that "depression is the shadow side of entrepreneurial culture, what happens when magical voluntarism confronts limited opportunities. We need to reverse the privatization of stress and recognise that mental health is a political issue."<sup>10</sup> He there cited the late David Smail who he called a "radical therapist" and who was part of the anti-psychiatry movement.

Smail talked of friendship and support as the mechanism for managing depression. He himself was an anti-establishment thinker. But we need not be too quick to condemn the master. In fact, Freud himself once said, in a letter to Karl Jung, that "psychoanalysis is in essence a cure through love." But love takes time and, as we all know, time is money.

### Notes

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## **We Still Have a World to Win: From Capitalist Realism to Post-Capitalist Desire**

Kai Heron

Today, *Capitalist Realism* makes for an uncanny read.<sup>1</sup> The past decade has been nothing if not eventful — crushing austerity, war, famine, environmental collapse, Trump, Brexit, and so much more — and yet Fisher’s words still hold the power to isolate and then break through the malaise that he so effectively gave name to back in 2009. Only the greater distance between ourselves and the book’s cultural references (*Wall-E*, *Children of Men*, *Live 8*) stand to remind us that it was not published yesterday, but rather in the immediate wake of the global financial crash. This, of course, was Fisher’s point. As he put it, one of the consequences of capitalist realism is that “life continues but time has somehow stopped.”<sup>2</sup> Things happen – sometimes momentous things – but nothing changes. The future has been cancelled.

To read *Capitalist Realism* today is also to be grasped by an immeasurable sadness. With Fisher’s tragic death in 2017 we lost not only one of the most important cultural critics of a generation but a guiding voice on the Left. Sometimes controversial, always iconoclastic and vaticinal, Fisher could see clearly what the rest of us saw only obliquely, if at all. His writing style, at once dizzying and crystalline, vulnerable and self-assured, has that rare quality of making the reader feel as if they have been invited to participate in a shared intellectual and political project. Fisher knew that it would take a collective effort to shatter the edifice of our capitalist realist condition, to build a new world out of the old, and so his texts employ a properly communist ethos. To read him is to be called on to think with and alongside him. It is to inhabit a politics.

And so it is in this vein that I return to *Capitalist Realism*. If the book has lost none of its urgency since 2009, it is because the questions it asked back then are still our questions today. Chief among them, of course, is how to put an end to capitalist realism itself. Here, I trace one of Fisher’s responses to this question with the help of *Capitalist Realism* and a text that, in retrospect, I cannot help but read as its separately published final chapter: the short essay “Post-Capitalist Desire.”<sup>3</sup> Together, these texts develop a sophisticated analysis of the role desire plays both in defeating capitalist realism

and in building a communist future. What Fisher proposes is nothing less than to find the traces of a post-capitalist future right here among us today.

### Capitalist Realism Versus Red Plenty

Fisher defines capitalist realism as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now almost impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>4</sup> The concept incorporates both Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History Thesis” and the often-repeated maxim, attributed to both Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” In fact, Fisher says that this “slogan captures precisely” what he means by capitalist realism.<sup>5</sup> Yet as his argument proceeds, the concept takes on a much more all-encompassing character. No longer narrowly about the imagination, it begins to have a quasi-ontological sense. To borrow a phrase from Raymond Williams, it becomes a shared “structure of feeling.”<sup>6</sup> Impersonal, comprehensive, unconscious and insidious, capitalist realism names the naturalization of neoliberalism as an ineradicable fact of life.

But — and this is crucial for Fisher — capitalist realism is only *quasi*-ontological. However hard it might be for us to imagine the end of capitalism, the perception that we live at the end of history is nothing more than a highly successful class project in need of constant reinforcement by the bourgeoisie. Their principal weapon in this respect is the manipulation of desire, or what Fisher would later call “libidinal engineering.”<sup>7</sup> The trick of capitalist realism is not to make people think that capitalism is the perfect system (it clearly isn’t) but that it is the most *realistic* system. Its function is to suppress post-capitalist imaginaries and working-class power. Its ultimate aim is to make it unthinkable that a post-capitalist world might create a richer and more fulfilling life for the majority of people than capitalism will ever be able to muster.

For Fisher, the only way to combat a class project at the level of desire is with an opposing class project at the level of desire. What the Left needs is a politics that can compete with capitalism at a libidinal level and win. As Fisher sees it, the historic failure of the Left in this respect is as much to blame for the spread of capitalist realism as the Right’s successes. Fisher admonishes the Left for failing to keep up with the desires unleashed among the working classes in the wake of 1968: “If neoliberalism triumphed by incorporating the desires of the post 68 working class, a new left could begin by building on the desires which neoliberalism has generated but which it has been unable to satisfy.”<sup>8</sup> This “New Left” is a Left that has nothing to gain from moralistically denouncing the luxuries of consumer capitalism. It is a Left that must give up the nostalgic figure of the disciplined Fordist factory worker and that cannot aim for an “anti-libidinal dampening” but that must instead construct a “counter-libido.”<sup>9</sup> In short, it is a Left that must provide its own communal luxuries to combat the highly individualized pleasures of consumer capitalism.

What does this mean? If “bread for all, and roses too” was an essential slogan of



the 1900s — a slogan that pointed towards the worker's demands for the basics of life (bread) and for luxury too (roses), then Fisher teaches us that the slogans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be something like: "Everything for Everybody," "Communal Luxury Now!," and "Red Plenty."<sup>10</sup> Simply put, capitalism cannot be allowed to maintain its self-proclaimed monopoly on desire.

This conviction leads Fisher to pose a question that runs sharply against the grain of large sections of today's Left: "Where is the left," he asks, "that can speak confidently in the name of an alien future, that can openly celebrate, rather than mourn, the disintegration of existing socialities and territorialities?"<sup>11</sup> In other words, where is the Left that resolutely rejects the fantasy of a return to some non-existent holism, to a national neo-Keynesian industrial strategy, to a ready-made revolutionary working class, and that will compete with capitalism at the level of desire? Where is the Left that dares to see in capitalist desires, practices, infrastructures and institutions, a nascent but corrupted desire for post-capitalism?

If this sounds a bit like accelerationism, that's because it is. For Fisher, "Marxism is nothing if it is not accelerationist."<sup>12</sup> But by this he does not mean that we must vote for Trump, use innumerable plastic straws, and donate to Pegida. Fisher has in mind a more respectable communist current that begins with Marx and runs through Lenin, to Jameson, and finally to Fisher himself. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, for instance, Marx and Engels reproach early luddite attacks on the forces of production for attempting — understandably but uselessly — to work against the tides of history.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, they lambast "reactionary socialists" for trying to maintain a compromise solution between the new industrial era and pre-industrial relations of production and morality: "Nothing is easier than to give a Christian asceticism a socialist tinge."<sup>14</sup> For Marx, then, a true communist rejects nostalgic moralism and projects their desires into the present to tease out a possible post-capitalist future. As he explained in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, communism will *have* to emerge in and against capitalism.<sup>15</sup> It will need to see in the structures of capitalist society an emergent communist society.

Recall Lenin's claim that the capitalist banking system provides the "skeleton" for a socialist system of book-keeping and distribution that need only be taken "ready-made" and "democratized" by the proletariat.<sup>16</sup> Lenin's proposal isolates what Frederic Jameson calls the "dialectical ambivalence" of capitalism.<sup>17</sup> The desire for a smoothly functioning book-keeping system is hardly unique to capitalism and would be fundamental to any successful project of central planning in 1917. The challenge, then, is to turn form against content, to see how what functions as an exploitative behemoth today could be repurposed for liberatory ends tomorrow. As Jameson says, even "the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish-fulfilments".<sup>18</sup>

Jameson turns to the noxious phenomena of Walmart. While acknowledging the expected criticisms of the corporation, Jameson underlines Walmart's properly

dialectical and ambivalent character. As he says, “its capacity to reduce inflation and hold down or even lower prices to make life affordable for the poorest Americans is also the very source of their poverty and the prime mover in the dissolution of American industrial productivity”.<sup>19</sup> Jameson wrote his essay in 2009. Today, we might want to apply the same logic to Amazon – a company whose monopoly has put an end to free market competition in its sector while undeniably resolving the problem of distribution via a now globalized system of planning, storage, transportation, and delivery. Jameson’s provocation — very much in the vein of Marx and Lenin before him — is to get us to imagine Amazon as both ruthlessly capitalist *and* as perhaps the most communist business in existence today. To paraphrase Lenin, once it has been put into the hands of the workers, a nationalized, or internationalized, Amazon may prove to be the skeleton of a twenty-first century socialist society; a socialism that is entirely reconcilable with today’s desire for almost instantaneous satisfaction of our wants and needs.

In “Post-Capitalist Desire,” Fisher situates himself firmly in this tradition of thought. Drawing explicitly from Jameson, he explores the dialectical ambivalence of another capitalist monstrosity: Starbucks. Ingeniously, Fisher turns the accusations that communism is generic and homogenous back onto one of the archetypal capitalist corporations: is not Starbucks *itself* generic and homogenous? Can we not go to any Starbucks in the world, and order the same dry falafel salad, the same mediocre overpriced coffee, and sit in the same inoffensively decorated interiors? Fisher’s bold claim is that Starbucks is not successful because it satisfies supposedly capitalist desires but because it is in fact satisfying a “thwarted desire for communism,” for a shared “third space” that is neither the home nor workplace, and that is increasingly under attack, enclosed, and privatized in today’s capitalist societies.<sup>20</sup> Once we make this shift in perspective, we can see the masses of people sitting alone in Starbucks with their laptops and coffee as participating in a sad and diminished reflection of a fuller, richer, practice of being and desiring in common. Capitalism becomes a threat to our desires rather than their precondition.

The ambivalence of Walmart, Amazon, and Starbucks is already apparent in their customers. No one actually *likes* shopping at Walmart or Amazon, no one *enjoys* Starbucks coffee, without at the same time being critical of their capitalist content: they don’t pay their taxes, they don’t permit unions, it’s too expensive, the supply chain is ethically unacceptable, and so on. While we could take the Žižekian route and say that this is precisely how capitalist ideology works — by maintaining a gap between the subject and the Big Other — Fisher asks whether it might be more politically salient to also try to imagine this as a nascent and corrupted desire for something fundamentally better: the same form but with a different, explicitly post-capitalist, content.

We can push this logic further. In the UK there is a chain of pubs called Wetherspoons. Wetherspoons’ chairman, Tim Martin, is a right-wing, pro-Brexit, millionaire. The

company's business model is to take historic buildings that might otherwise be destroyed and to turn them into standardized pubs. The result is an incongruous mixture of frequently beautiful buildings with drab, miserable, replicated interiors. It's immensely popular. It's popular among the elderly, among stag and hen parties, students, and young professionals. It's probably one of the few places in the UK where you see these groups intermingling in the same space. And why is this? It can't just be the cheap alcohol — although that helps. It can't just be the food — which is unremarkable at best. It must also be because we put a premium on collectivity and sociality that is everywhere suppressed. Even the British, the possessors of a culture that is infamously emotionally repressed and withdrawn desire this kind of space. Wetherspoons holds open the thwarted promise of a collective experience, of a collective enjoyment, of red plenty.

During the Brexit campaign, Wetherspoons issued beermats with right-wing pro-Brexit slogans on them leading to some parts of the left boycotting the chain. But rather than resorting to this strategy — which was clearly doomed to fail since it was premised on coming between people and a cheap pint — why not see this for what it is: a remarkable strategy in an ongoing class struggle? What we need, as the organization Plan C has suggested, is a Wetherspoons of the left.<sup>21</sup> What we need is a dialectical attunement to already existing infrastructures and practices whose form can be read against their content. We should be able to imagine providing a better version of this highly successful generic, homogenous, and standardized space than capitalism has thus far provided for us.

Fisher's call to annex the form of capitalist infrastructures and practices to use them against their content is a fundamentally Marxist gesture that is applicable in more ways than today's dominant Leftist currents have thus far dared to imagine. Could we not, for instance, follow this logic to its end and say that capitalism's dialectical ambivalence extends up to and includes the state? This was Lenin's point in *The State and Revolution*.<sup>22</sup> The capitalist state is systematically used in the interests of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. But what kind of a desire does the state make possible when it is taken into the hands of the proletariat?

The rise of Jeremy Corbyn has perhaps given us a taste of this ambivalence. Corbyn's presence in national politics holds open a space of desire that the ruling classes know to be a threat. How else are we to make sense of Theresa May's full-throated defense of capitalism in September 2017 as "the greatest agent of collective human progress ever created"?<sup>23</sup> Such a speech would have been simply unimaginable when *Capitalist Realism* was first published. Perhaps one of Fisher's challenges to us today, then, is to find the post-capitalist kernel in Corbyn's social-democratic project, bearing in mind, as Fisher warns in his conclusion to *Capitalist Realism*, that capitalist realism might outlast neoliberalism by compromising with precisely such social-democratic projects.<sup>24</sup>

### We Still Have A World to Win

What does it mean to read *Capitalist Realism* today? What political valences does it offer us? A decade after *Capitalism Realism*'s initial publication, as wildfires rip through California, as UK-sponsored famines tear apart Yemen, as ice sheets spin off into the mid-Atlantic, and as the Right is everywhere in resurgence, it might seem truer than ever that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But if *Capitalist Realism* has taught us anything, it is that now is not the time to give way on our post-capitalist desires. With Fisher, we must ask ourselves: what would happen if we organized a protest and everyone came?<sup>25</sup> And how do we sustain the traces of post-capitalist desire already here among us? To read *Capitalist Realism* today, then, is to ask ourselves whether it is still the case that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Could it not be that the Left has allowed it to become more *enjoyable* to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism? That we are guilty of a kind of disavowed left melancholia? Not the kind that Wendy Brown speaks of when she describes a Left that is "attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal... than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present"<sup>26</sup> but the kind that Jodi Dean speaks of when she says that the Left has ceded on its desire, that it has given up and sold out — to which I would add with Fisher that it has renounced the responsibility to think the dialectical ambivalence of capitalism.<sup>27</sup> This is what it means to read *Capitalist Realism* today. It is to feel the wind at our backs, urging us to think, inciting us to act in the face of almost impossible odds... because the impossible happens. Above all, it is a reminder that we still have a world to win. Fisher's contribution — and it is the most we could ever ask for — was to give us a new set of tools to win it with and another comrade, tragically taken from us, in whose name to win it.

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## Setting Fire to Wet Blankets: Radical Politics and Hollywood Franchises

Dan Hassler-Forest

There’s an awakening from hedonic depressive slumber, and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* is not merely in tune with that, it’s amplifying it. Explosion in the heart of the commodity? Yes, and fire causes more fire ...

— Mark Fisher<sup>1</sup>

One of the most exciting things about Mark Fisher’s writing was the unpredictability of his critical response to big Hollywood movies. As one of our age’s most sensitive, acute, and politically impassioned cultural theorists, his reviews of popular blockbusters were as refined as they were counterintuitive. Rather than mere knee-jerk think-pieces, his blog entries and published film reviews offered thoughtful reflections on the relationship between politics, ideology, and popular culture.

Thus, Mark’s “k-punk” blog entry on the blockbuster sequel *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Lawrence US 2013) gave an infectious account of the film’s political direction, all but forcing us to view Suzanne Collins’s politically ambivalent YA fiction as the “counter-narrative to capitalist realism” his effusive review made it out to be. Like Walter Benjamin responding to the latest Charlie Chaplin feature with uncontrollable joy, Fisher’s written pieces like “Remember Who The Enemy Is,” seemed to transform the object of analysis by sheer force of will. And having read his explosive review, it’s impossible not to look upon the film with similar fondness, even if we may remain skeptical about this franchise’s actual ability to “corrode the commodity culture that frames it.”<sup>2</sup>

One of Fisher’s most productive obsessions was indeed this contradictory relationship between ideology and popular entertainment. Always critical of coyly “edgy” or “subversive” movies like *The Dark Knight* (2008), he could also be bowled over by the radical energy of a dystopian action movie and its uncanny ability to allegorize the monstrous logic of global capitalism. In the decade that has passed

since *Capitalist Realism* was first published, this contradiction has only intensified, as the growing power of global entertainment conglomerates like the Walt Disney Company has been accompanied by an increasing presence of progressive politics — from the anti-imperialism of *Black Panther* (2018) to the explicit anti-fascism of the recent *Star Wars* movies. But at the same time, these entertainment commodities remain deadlocked by their status as entries in ongoing serialized franchises, which ultimately defeats any attempt to follow up on their occasional suggestions of radical political change.

Writing as someone with a similarly conflicted passion for popular fantastic cinema, my own reading of the popular culture that has accumulated in the decade since *Capitalist Realism* was first published has become more complicated than ever. For in coining a term that has an irresistibly totalizing power, Mark's own instincts — as his *Catching Fire* review illustrates so vividly — were to search incessantly for exceptions to the rule: movies, albums, novels, TV shows that somehow managed to offer an alternative within a global order that violently denied the existence of any such thing. Or, to put it differently: his writing engaged the eternal problem of how to separate out meaningfully progressive or even radical ideological meanings from a text that was itself a commodity circulating within a global capitalist economy without an outside or an alternative.

In this sense, ideology criticism was at least somewhat more straightforward in the era of mass media, mainstream audiences, and “dominant ideology.” It was fairly easy to criticize a relatively homogeneous culture industry for the ways in which it incorporated and mythologized the most basic values of patriarchal capitalism — just as critics could simultaneously distinguish, describe, and celebrate more subversive texts that emerged from “underground” or independent film industries. But one of Mark's major contributions to the vocabulary of cultural theory and ideology criticism was of course that the historical era of global capitalism has shifted the ground under those cultural critics' feet. Thus, he points out memorably that seemingly anti-capitalist films like *V for Vendetta* (2005) or *WALL·E* (2008) are in fact tailor-made for a system of cultural production where lifestyle and consumption choices stand in all too easily for political engagement.

Capitalism's uncanny ability to incorporate an unlimited variety of texts, practices, and meanings into its system, for which Mark so memorably uses the shape-shifting monster in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1981) as an uncanny signifier, has clearly developed even further in recent years. Consider, for instance, how Disney-owned entertainment franchises like *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe have pivoted towards socially and politically engaged storytelling forms, or how something like *The LEGO™ Movie* (2014) initiated a cross-platform transmedia franchise that somehow combined a feature-length toy commercial with a celebrated work of cultural criticism, that has even been used by some to teach Frankfurt School critical theory to undergraduate students.



If media studies theorists were trained to consider the culture industry as a central site of the production of ideological messages that served industrial and patriarchal capitalism, Mark's introduction of capitalist realism as a critical term remapped those coordinates dramatically: for if there was truly no outside to the cultural, social, and economic logic of global capitalism, then ideological analysis seems almost pointless. In other words, if ideology has been reduced to a range of commodified lifestyle choices, what is the point of ideology critique?

This is where it could be helpful to distinguish between the different, or even contradictory, functions and forms of value embodied by popular texts. On the one hand, these texts are produced and distributed as commodities within a capitalist system, explicitly designed and planned to generate financial profits in a variety of ways. On the other hand, they are also highly visible cultural objects that connect to social, political, and cultural struggles and debates, more or less separately from their basic commodity status. One of the odd particularities of the neoliberal era then seems to be that the ideological messaging of these texts no longer seems as fully constrained by the ideological frameworks of patriarchal capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

Consider, for instance, the movie *Black Panther*. A massive commercial success as part of Marvel Studios' ongoing film franchise, the film generated enormous value (in the form of commercial profits) as a commodity. At the same time, the cultural work it performed as a superhero blockbuster that was entirely focused on questions of race and colonialism made the film a meaningful cultural text outside of its commodity status, and in ways that do not seem to map directly onto the Walt Disney Company's central objectives as a diversified entertainment brand. There are, of course, two ways of reading the success of *Black Panther*, which we could translate into a narrative of triumph and a competing narrative of despair. In the triumphant narrative, the film's Afrofuturist iconography and majority-black cast represent an important transformation of a film franchise and entertainment brand that had been historically oriented entirely towards white characters, and dominated by storytelling frameworks centered on heterosexual masculinity. In this narrative, the film's success can be connected directly to the vital ongoing struggles of anti-racist activists for access to and visibility in mass media productions, and *Black Panther's* financial and critical success legitimizes and strengthens this struggle. The flip side of this coin is of course the narrative in which this important cultural and political work has once again been seamlessly absorbed by a massively powerful transnational media corporation, which is in the process of revising its brand by incorporating convenient expressions of progressive ideological messaging that appeal to an affluent liberal audience eager to spend some of its disposable income on this particular brand.

The same logic holds for the recent revival of the *Star Wars* franchise — another global entertainment franchise now owned by Disney. To the much-publicized dismay of many fans, the new films have transformed the earlier films' overwhelming focus on white male characters, largely supplanting them with new protagonists who are

ethnically diverse, while women occupy central roles in the storyworld. As with *Black Panther*, the visibility of meaningfully diverse characters and role models that these films bring inarguably perform important cultural work by supporting the values of feminist and anti-racist activists. And since both racism and misogyny are deeply embedded within the power structures of capitalism as a system of social relations, this kind of work can even be considered as contributions to anti-capitalist movements — though, as with *Catching Fire*, we might not wish to exaggerate those claims too much.

And again, the counternarrative in this case would point out again that questions of identity (including race, gender, and sexual orientation) are ultimately meaningless to the larger forces of capital: if Lucasfilm and/or Disney sees a market for commercial narratives about women, or black superheroes, they will produce them, more or less irrespective of ideological concerns. Or at least, we might observe that they will make them *as long as they do not present themselves as “political” in ways that directly challenge or critique the organization of capitalist accumulation*. Thus, the utopian nation-state of Wakanda is a hierarchically organized kingdom rather than a communist collective, while the representative of the American CIA is presented as a benevolent ally in their struggle.

One cannot help but wonder what Mark would have made of these debates. Would he be as excited by *Black Panther* as he was by that *Hunger Games* movie? Would he celebrate a *Star Wars* movie like *Rogue One* (2016) for how it connects ethnic diversity to anti-fascist revolutionary struggles? Or would he see them only as further evidence of capitalist realism’s stranglehold on our culture, and dismiss them as the kind of “identitarian” war of positions that he was so contemptuous of in his notorious “Exiting the Vampire Castle” essay? Would he respond with ecstatic delight to *The Last Jedi*’s (2017) determination that forging precarious networks of solidarity is what will ultimately defeat authoritarian networks of power? Or would his self-confessed blind spots for issues of gender and race lead him to criticize it for its failure to address class consciousness more explicitly?

It’s a deeply saddening question to ponder, having lost Mark’s voice so recently. But whatever his critical response to any given film, we know for sure that his sensitive and sharply-honed critical eye would always try to foreground the big issues that were at stake in the larger struggle for a more just, more equitable, more livable world. And we also know that his contribution to cultural theory and ideology critique has already made us better equipped to deal with the sometimes-baffling contradictions of media production in the age of global capitalism.

As the more recent work of critical thinkers like Christian Fuchs has taught us, we must in any case be willing to work harder to make sense of the interaction between ideology and political economy in the 21st century. As tempting as it may be to adopt an “either/or” perspective, in which we strategically foreground either the nice things about commercially-produced entertainment or on the ugly face of capitalist

exploitation lurking behind the curtains, we should instead do both simultaneously, seeking not a choice between ideology critique and political economy, but a well-balanced combination of the two.<sup>4</sup>

This combination, in fact, is where the legacy of *Capitalist Realism* — as well as the recent publication of Mark's collected blog writings in *K-Punk* (2018) — helps conceptualize and solidify the weird and increasingly counter-intuitive intersection between ideology and political economy. Firstly, his insistent focus on the contradictory nature of capitalism's cultural logic foregrounds not just its lack of coherence, but even its fundamental lack of ideological substance. The most accurate way of describing capitalism would therefore be, as Slavoj Žižek has put it, as a wholly vapid, even "worldless" ideological system: "the first socio-economic order which detotalizes meaning."<sup>5</sup> What this helps us articulate and understand is that — counter to the most common twentieth-century forms of political economy — there is no basic relationship between capitalist culture and the ideological meanings it generates.

Therefore, the implications of the term "capitalist realism" for the current era express the most basic logic of media production: *that anything can (and most likely will) be produced as long as it can create value for capital without explicitly questioning its continued existence*. This dynamic goes beyond Robert Pfaller's concept of interpassivity, which Fisher described as "the role of capitalist ideology is not to make an explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively held belief."<sup>6</sup> What we are seeing in recent years is, in fact, a stronger emphasis on entertainment commodities that actually do mobilize forms of action, as various strands of fan culture actively connect media texts to social and political campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

So part of what we are seeing now, as the power of transnational media conglomerates like The Walt Disney Company continues to grow, is that the ideological messages within popular franchises will continue to proliferate and diversify. With the emphasis shifting from individual texts to never-ending entertainment properties like Marvel and *Star Wars*, explaining what a text like *The Dark Knight Rises* (2011) or *Children of Men* (2006) means is perhaps a little less relevant. For if films aren't merely installments in a numbered series, but entries in a complexly organized storytelling system like Marvel's, then every event, every decision, every cathartic moment can (and most likely will) be reversed by a subsequent episode.<sup>8</sup>

While the work of traditional ideology critique may have become less central in a media-industrial context of global franchising and complex serialization, a critical framework provided by capitalist realism has become all the more central. In this sense, it is as depressing as it is predictable that Mark's most basic insight into the cultural logic of global capitalism has become more and more pervasive in the decade since the book's publication. Indeed, if we now find ourselves in an age we might describe as "Capitalist Realism 2.0," this means simply that most forms of anti-capitalist criticism have become their own business model. For what is the "outrage

industry” of 24-hour cable news, far-right podcasts, and YouTube conspiracy theorists but a field of cultural production that taps into a common vein of anti-capitalist — or, at the very least, anti-neoliberal — rage?<sup>9</sup>

This is the point where the true constraints of capitalist realism (in its most literal sense) become visible in the corporate ownership of not just the studios and production companies that provide the vast majority of our cultural texts, but also of the infrastructures through which we communicate about them. Leaving aside for the moment the cultural footprint of a movie like *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman*, or *The Last Jedi*, the ways in which we interpret these texts become irrelevant if the main form of value we create is by our engagement via privately-owned digital networks like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. One might even observe that our corporate overlords have an obvious incentive to invest in the production of texts that are designed to be in some way polarizing, as the cultural conversation this creates yields invaluable data that translates directly to other forms of profit and value.

To return then, finally, to Mark’s rapturous response to a blockbuster like *Catching Fire*, we may observe that we have seen a growing number of this very kind of phenomenon: movies, television and VOD series, video games, and other “woke” popular media that express once-subversive and seemingly progressive values, narratives, and/or images. But without trivializing their cultural work or condescending to their makers or their audiences, we must also note that the cultural and economic context in which these commodities circulate are strongly overdetermined by privately owned for-profit digital networks. Therefore, while we are only beginning to understand the implications of this seemingly all-encompassing digital infrastructure, we must in any case continue to absorb, embrace, and extend Mark’s critical and intellectual legacy. Not just because we need to keep reminding ourselves of who the enemy is. But also because we must remember to celebrate the moments of inspiration we can salvage from the accumulating wreckage of capitalist realism.

## Notes

1. Mark Fisher, *K-Punk* (London: Repeater Books, 2018) 227.
2. Fisher, *K-Punk*.
3. See Jeremy Gilbert, *Anti-Capitalism and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).
4. Christian Fuchs, "Dallas Smythe Today — The Audience Commodity, the Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory. Prolegomena to a Digital Labour Theory of Value," in *Marx and the Political Economy of the Media*, eds. Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 527.
5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London and New York: Verso, 2012) 55.
6. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (London: Zero Books, 2009) 12-13.
7. See Henry Jenkins, "What 'Black Panther' Can Teach Us About the Civic Imagination," *Global-E* 11:27 (2018). [www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/may-2018/what-black-panther-can-teach-us-about-civic-imagination](http://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/may-2018/what-black-panther-can-teach-us-about-civic-imagination)
8. See Gerry Canavan, "The Limits of *Black Panther's* Afrofuturism," *Frieze* (February 27, 2018). [www.frieze.com/article/limits-black-panthers-afrofuturism](http://www.frieze.com/article/limits-black-panthers-afrofuturism)
9. See Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).



*Adorno's Poetics of Form*

Josh Robinson

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## Reading Adorno

Robert Ryan

In the introduction to *Late Style*, Edward Said remarks that "no one needs reminding that Adorno is immensely difficult to read."<sup>1</sup> Said here gestures toward a sort of implied scholarly consensus that extends well beyond his own brief commentary. Indeed, in his monograph dedicated to Adorno, Fredric Jameson focuses at various stages on the "protean intelligence" and rebarbative structure of Adorno's sentences, "which turn on themselves like the solar system, together in a larger sequence or passage of textual time."<sup>2</sup> In defense of her own difficult writing, Judith Butler appeals to the Adorno of *Minima Moralia* straight away.<sup>3</sup>

It is this sort of critical atmosphere that makes Josh Robinson's *Adorno's Poetics of Form* so welcome. Because most readers, Adornoians and otherwise, have a tendency to highlight the *difficulty* of Adorno, both the urgency and utility of Adorno's work gets shrouded in an aura of modernist performance. Contra the cult of difficulty, Robinson seeks to meet Adorno on and with his own terms and think carefully and directly about his theoretical interventions.

Robinson's title neatly states the book's manifold premise. First, Robinson wants to draw out a theory of form from the wide breadth of Adorno's work. In their own words, they want to "make a case for the mutual implication of philosophical reflection and literary criticism, by means of the investigation of the terms and concepts with which we make such judgments about literature" (12). For Robinson, then, form is specifically *literary* form. Offering a brilliantly summative reading of the New Formalism at the book's beginning, and contemporary formalist critics throughout, Robinson pointedly distinguishes themselves among the burgeoning formalist and

formalist-adjacent scholarship in the field. Rather than highlighting the availability of literary form to social projects like, for instance, Caroline Levine's *Forms*, or the morass of sociologically-inflected formalism of Latourian Actor-Network Theory, Robinson's investment in Adorno's formalism puts aesthetics first. This leads into the second ambition of the monograph. If form is the monograph's conceptual signature, the work this term will do falls under the rubric of poetics. Poetics, though, is a bit harder to pin down, emerging from a tradition rooted in philosophical discourse (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and so on) and participating in a more contemporary field of literary studies. The book emerges from the meeting of these two traditions.

In their own terms, Robinson "attempts to examine the implications of the way in which Adorno reflects on, deploys, and alludes to one particular concept of aesthetics and poetics in his discussions of literature in particular, and of art and artworks in general—that of form" (13). Form is thus the term of art shared between literature and aesthetics; and it is the concept that gives Robinson's investigation ballast and orientation. As such, the book is organized along five radiating axes, each of which are given a thorough and ranging chapter: "Form and Content," "Form and Expression," "Form and Genre," "Form and Material," and "Artistic Form and the Commodity Form." These chapters each serve to collect and arrange a distinct set of Adornian concerns, calling out and upon the breadth of the terms at use. Form becomes prismatic: the angle at which it is held refracts a distinct intellectual itinerary.

Indeed, much of the appeal of Robinson's book is how it draws out and brings to coherence the various Adornos. While Adorno has some obvious and abiding concerns that form through lines in his work (the critique of commodity culture, modernism, anti-fascism) his wide reach of intellectual interests is part of the reason he is so often regarded as forbiddingly difficult. Adorno, after all, was a thinker of tremendous expanse: literature and the history of ideas, music and sociology, philology and philosophy. There is the Adorno of *Aesthetic Theory*, who comes with all the conceptual armature of a philosopher, and the Adorno of *Philosophy of New Music* a skilled listener and theorist of orchestral music. But then there is Adorno the memoirist of *Minima Moralia* and perhaps, best known of all, Adorno the collaborator, who with Max Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To wrest these otherwise wilding and sometimes-antagonistic disciplinary formations into coherence and conversation is no mean feat.

Robinson's willingness (and ability) to confront the range of Adorno's thinking will make their book of equal interest to scholars across a wide berth of the humanities. That said, the book is published through SUNY Press's series in continental philosophy, and Robinson is, as noted above, attentive to a primarily literary audience. The poetics of form may be at bottom a philosophical problem, but Robinson hews closely to literary scholarship in order to scaffold his thought. What kind of book does this make *Adorno's Poetics of Form*? While ample in both citation and readings, it doesn't follow a traditional path of either straightforward argumentation or explication, but



rather casts into increasingly useful and unexpected shape Adorno's collected works. The chapter "Form and Content," to take an example ready to hand, is a chapter of poetics through-and-through, one that takes Adorno's writing on Holderlin (and so Heidegger) as its exemplar. Robinson is remarkably deft at transcoding Adorno and Heidegger, generating explications of decidedly thorny texts on one and the others' terms. Here we find the notorious anti-formalist Heidegger placed in the context of a form-matter distinction, and we find Adorno as a thinker of "thing-character."

Most useful, though, is that this chapter introduces one of the books more understated motifs: the ongoing (i.e., contemporary) urgency of philological interpretation. Throughout, Robinson comments on the relative suitability of one translation or another, generally to great utility. And this concern comes from Adorno himself. In a long reading of Adorno-on-Heidegger-on-Holderlin, Robinson cites Adorno's own restriction of philology—"the philological method is restricted in relation to the truth content"—before offering up an Adornian counterpoint: philology "is necessary in order to be able to attain the point at which poetry demands philosophical interpretation" (37). The dual-questions of the monograph, of translation and explication, philosophy and poetry, can be stated here with relative ease. Poetry "demands" philosophy, but only when properly routed through philology. That is, Robinson finds a series of priorities in Adorno's reading practice, and this series offers a helpful guide to both the history of thought and contemporaneous formal readings offered.

Robinson's solution is a properly Adornian strategy: elevating contradiction to the level of conceptual necessity. The chapter on genre is most instructive in this regard. "Form and Genre" is potentially the thorniest chapter of the monograph, if only because the terms it takes up are so often confused. Whereas material, content, and expression are all more-or-less plausibly other to form, genre shares more than a little conceptual real estate. As Sandra MacPherson has argued, form and genre are strange bedfellows, at some points exchangeable, at others antithetical.<sup>4</sup> While not putting the problem in precisely these terms, Robinson is not unaware of the similarities between form and genre. In Adorno, Robinson suggests, "form offers a way of thinking both the singularity of the individual work *and* the shared characteristics of different works" (95, emphasis mine). While not foregrounding this particular distinction as much as they maybe could have, Robinson does transform the problem into a more familiar one: the thoroughgoing dialectic of the particular and universal. This dialectic entails first a sort of aesthetic history—"the singular form of the individual work comes into conflict with the artistic form that is established by previous works, a conflict that is played out at the level of the artistic subject" (107)—but also, inventively, Robinson suggests that the problem starts to look like Hegelian formulation of the relation between form and content. This then becomes a byway that productively into the many sides of Adornoian sedimentation.

The book culminates and finds clearest expression in what may be its most valuable

chapter, the concluding study of aesthetic form and commodity form. This chapter synthesizes much of the labor of the preceding chapters and presents the Adorno most immediately familiar to readers. Much of the work is an extended reading of *Aesthetic Theory* inflected by *Negative Dialectics* and some of the less familiar (at least to readers of literature) text on music. Here, Robinson sets the preceding theorizing of “form” to work, now including most explicitly the political-economic conditions that always mediate the work.

the concept of form that becomes apparent through close analysis of Adorno’s writings on literary artworks in particular reflects (and, indeed, results from) the peculiar nature of these works’ connection to the reality from which their content and material are taken and which they oppose. The apparent conceptual looseness mirrors the recursive nature of the artwork’s relationship to reality. Form thus helps render this complex relationship thinkable, and what appear as inconsistencies within the concept reveal something of its intricacy. (179)

This, at last, resonates as an apt summation. We have form as dependent on (that is, only intelligible through) its relation to content and material. We have the enduring question of “reality” and the artwork’s opposition to it. Consummate dialectician that he is, Adorno (as Robinson presents him) maintains these oppositions and relations *in motion*, turning “conceptual looseness” into “intricacy.” This move is convincing and well supported by careful readings of the Adornoian canon.

For instance, in their fifth chapter Robinson unfolds the thorny problem of the commodity form from his long preceding discussion of form more generally throughout the book. Robinson writes, “the contradictions and tensions that exist within the concept of form can be seen as constituting a reflection or encapsulation of the antagonisms that permeate bourgeois society.” Robinson then turns to the famous “On Commitment” essay by way of *Aesthetic Theory*. In “On Commitment,” Robinson suggests, “the relationship between art and politics...” inheres in “political potency of art consists in the ideal of the autonomous artwork—of art for its own sake—which exhibits a radical potential because of the autonomous work’s refusal to submit to the logic of commodity society...” (164-165). Thus, *Aesthetic Theory* becomes important in its claim that the artwork “wants to interrupt the eternal exchange of need and satisfaction, and not to offend by providing ersatz-satisfaction of unmet needs” (163). Taking a synoptic view of Adorno’s career, Robinson folds all of Adorno into the more contemporary question of the commodity and aesthetic form.

At this phase of the book, Robinson could be read in productive conversation with Nicholas Brown’s *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Duke 2019) and the ongoing work of the *nonsite.org* editorial collective. Adorno’s relationship, the question of autonomy is addressed throughout the text, generally by way of

his voluminous references in *Aesthetic Theory* or “On Commitment.” Where Brown understands autonomy as the moment of suspension of capitalist logic, Robinson is careful to draw out the tensions of Adorno’s privileging of art’s autonomy and its “rejection” of capitalist instrumentality. Art here is what Brown calls capitalist society’s “unemphatic other” (9). But Robinson is also careful to draw out the “significant tensions” in Adorno’s account of autonomy. “There is something jarring” Robinson admits, about art’s more or less historical “emergence out of cultic praxis in the process of its secularization” existing at the same time as “its...epiphenomenal existence alongside an economy based on commodity exchange” (180-81).

The above is paradigmatic of Robinson’s expository mode throughout. Aside the philological work a different, more comprehensive, sort of translation at work throughout much of the book that merits commentary. With a book of this sort, the necessity of paraphrase, ventriloquism, transcoding is apparent. But with the sometimes hazy translation of Adorno into Robinson, Robinson into Adorno, it is easy to get lost in the weeds. Without a traditional style of argument, it is sometimes difficult to know where Adorno leaves off and Robinson picks up. Adorno’s sentences are so carefully calibrated, so precisely wrought, that producing summations is an unenviable task.

This could be said to be one of *Adorno’s Poetics of Form’s* limitations, though it is not necessarily Robinson’s fault. The book is written in clear (one might say un-Adornoian) prose and organized with obvious intention. The limitations admitted are simply a necessity in this particular type of study. *Poetics of Form* is at once a kind of casebook (Robinson has read a lot of Adorno so you don’t have to) and a critical work (Robinson has drawn out implicit Adornoian concerns and drawn together a constellation of formal concerns). Taken together, this simply means that *Poetics of Form* invites (and deserves) the same kind of attention it gives to its collection of texts.

### Notes

1. Edward Said *Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2004) 14.
2. Frederic Jameson *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso 1990) 19.
3. Judith Butler, “A ‘Bad Writer’ Bites Back” *New York Times* 20 March 1999 np.
4. Sandra MacPherson, “A Little Formalism,” *ELH* 82.2 (2015).



Jessica Hurley. "Neoliberalism Then, Now, and Then Again." *Mediations* 33.1-2 (Fall 2019-Spring 2020) 195-200.  
[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/novel-shocks-review](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/novel-shocks-review)

*Novel Shocks: Urban Renewal and the Origins of Neoliberalism*

Myka Tucker-Abramson

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## Neoliberalism Then, Now, and Then Again

Jessica Hurley

Does neoliberalism create neoliberal subjects, or did neoliberal subjects create neoliberalism? In the most usual version of this story, the new economic reality of unrestrained free market capitalism creates a new subjectivity in a process that begins in the 1970s and ends somewhere in our present (are we still neoliberal subjects? How would we know?). In their recent introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, for instance, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith describe neoliberalism as moving from an economic phenomenon beginning in 1971 with the undoing of Bretton Woods, to a political ideology under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, to a sociocultural norm after the end of the Cold War, before finally becoming internalized, sometime in the new millennium, as an ontology, "a mode of existence defined by individual self-responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximization of human capital."<sup>1</sup> While debate remains fervent about *what* neoliberalism is, and perhaps even *whether* it is (see, for instance, Bruce Robbins' recent review of Huehls and Smith's collection), the question of *when* it is remains relatively uncontroversial.<sup>2</sup>

Into this charged if sometimes sludgy set of debates steps Myka Tucker-Abramson's *Novel Shocks: Urban Renewal and the Origins of Neoliberalism*, a short, sharp book that radically resituates the emergence of the proto-neoliberal subject much earlier in the twentieth century. Taking as its object of analysis the relationship between the long, highly contested process of urban renewal in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s and the mid-century American novel, Tucker-Abramson tells a very different story, one in which neoliberalism is an emergent force even in the heyday of Keynesian economics.

Urban renewal, the process by which state funds and forces were used to open up urban space as newly accessible to capital, becomes visible in *Novel Shocks* as an early microcosm of what would later be known as neoliberalism. At the same time, Tucker-Abramson's focus on the mid-century New York novel allows her to analyze the lived experience of urban renewal as producing the constellation of affects and ideologies that would later become known as "the neoliberal subject." In so doing, Tucker-Abramson restores a much needed dialectical analysis to the story of neoliberalism, in which it is the contradictions of Keynesian economics that produce a proto-neoliberal economic reality in urban space, which in turn produces a lived experience within which the later, fuller emergence of neoliberalism in all its aspects will appear natural, like common sense.

*Novel Shocks* moves productively between urban studies, political economy, and literary studies to analyze how urban space became the locus for the emergence of a proto-neoliberal subject formation in the mid-twentieth century. In Tucker-Abramson's analysis, mid-century urban renewal produced a particular set of landscapes ("prosperous, private, white suburbs" and "poor, public, black cities") and subjectivities (entrepreneurial, capitalized, atomized) which would, in Tucker-Abramson's pleasingly bucolic metaphor, "nourish the roots of neoliberalism."<sup>3</sup> In an elegant double turn, Tucker-Abramson shifts our attention away from the ideas and ideologies of proto-neoliberal thinkers to offer a prehistory of neoliberalism that is at once more materialist and more attuned to what Raymond Williams would call the "structure of feeling" that made neoliberalism's rise to hegemony possible.<sup>4</sup> Tucker-Abramson convincingly locates neoliberalism's emergence in the mid-century urban renewal movement and the ways that it made both cities and subjects newly available as frontiers for capital, while at the same adding a global perspective by showing the continuities between capital's expansion into American cities and its expansion into extra-territorial spaces across the globe. While histories of neoliberalism often point to the takeover of New York by capital in the 1970s as a key point of emergence for a new economic mode, Tucker-Abramson shows that the idea of the city as "an important space for renewed capital accumulation" began much earlier, as fantasies of a de-slummed, un-blighted downtown core that would make money for private enterprise motivated the catastrophic destruction of urban life that marched under the banner of "urban renewal."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time as it disrupts the received historical narrative of neoliberalism, *Novel Shocks* also troubles one of the founding distinctions of urban studies: the opposition between urban and suburban space. While classic histories of white flight have shown that suburbs were imagined as the "crabgrass frontier" for people and capital, Tucker-Abramson shows that this was only one half of a more dialectical relationship between city and suburb: as capital fled to the crabgrass frontier, the city, imagined now as a blighted, empty wilderness, itself became available as a frontier that required taming by the mixture of financialization and racialized policing that

would come to define neoliberalism.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one of the most welcome contributions of *Novel Shocks* is the way that it reconceptualizes the relationship between urban and suburban space: where urban studies tends to see two distinct spaces in a relation of binary opposition, Tucker-Abramson sees a metropolitan region composed of city and suburb in which both are necessary to produce the ideal conditions for the new American subject—and especially the new American woman. Compelling readings of Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* show how the ability to move within and across this space is what allows the working-class woman (even the queer working-class woman) to shake off her limiting class, ethnic, and sexual markers, while access to the city-as-frontier allows the white suburban woman to exist beyond the Cold War housewife paradigm while still maintaining the privileges of her class and race.

Urban renewal's transformation of urban space into frontier chronotope thus catalyzes, in Tucker-Abramson's account, the transformation of the older frontier character type into the new entrepreneurial subject. In perhaps the strongest chapter in the book, Tucker-Abramson reads Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* not as the key to all neoliberal mythologies (as accounts of its centrality to the minds of Alan Greenspan and Paul Ryan tend to do) but rather as an urban novel that lays out "in the most naked and clear-eyed manner...the cynical ways that a small group of elites can systematically hollow out and destroy urban infrastructure in order to take it over for capital."<sup>7</sup> On this reading, *Atlas Shrugged* is a drama of identification that takes place within urban space, in which the reader who feels trapped by their classed and raced subject position becomes identified with the crumbling city as "jungle", the welfare state, and the apocalyptic destruction of all kinds of freedom, while only the reader who can identify with capital is granted freedom, futurity, and access to the city as frontier. The entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism is not, then, an abstract form shaped only by its orientation towards self-improvement, but rather a subjectivity shaped by the material processes of urban renewal and especially by the racial structures that urban renewal encodes. If the old, naturalist city is both disempowered and racialized, then the new, capitalist frontier city requires a subject who identifies fully with what Cheryl Harris has called "whiteness as property."<sup>8</sup> The irony is, of course, that identifying with whiteness becomes identical with identifying with capital, and identifying with capital works actively against people's class interests; as Tucker-Abramson points out, there is no actual class mobility in the book. Capital and its eight or nine avatars win; everybody else loses. But for the readers who come to identify closely with the book, this loss feels like a victory: capital has won, and so I have too.

The process by which this transformation of the subject takes place in *Atlas Shrugged*, as in the other novels that Tucker-Abramson analyzes, is one of *shock*. The novel shock in *Novel Shocks* is another of the book's major contributions, accounting for the shift in social meaning from the proto-revolutionary experience of shock in Frankfurt School modernism to the profitable shocks of creative destruction in late

capitalism. Each of the novels examined by the book has shock at its center, from the literal electric shock treatments in *The Bell Jar*, *Atlas Shrugged*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, to the drug-induced consciousness shocks of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, to the more traditional modernist shock of the encounter with the city in *The Price of Salt*. As Tucker-Abramson shows, however, the city of urban renewal is not the shock-producing metropolis of Benjamin or Adorno, in which the reified world is unmade leaving room for the emergence of a revolutionary perception of how things are. In the city of urban renewal, the moment of shock—the accident, the disaster, the encounter with history—is precisely the moment where capital finds entry. And as with the city, so with the subject: in the postwar era, shock both urban and mental “was refigured from a traumatic event to a therapeutic treatment that, while painful, would bring the city, the subject, and the nation through their frontiers and out the other side.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas the modernist subject was destabilized by the experience of shock as trauma, the mid-century proto-neoliberal subject was entrained (by, among other things, the mid-century novel) to experience shock as therapy, producing a newly stable and rational subject who is themselves a frontier and a tool for capital.

As my description thus far suggests, the concept of the frontier is central to Tucker-Abramson's analysis. The frontier is everywhere: it's how urban planners and suburban subjects understood their respective spaces; it's a genre through which people understood their lives within urban renewal, as we see in the constant resurgence of the Western as hauntology in the mid-century novel; and it's a trope by which certain spaces are marked by writers as appropriate for the renewal of the enervated subject, as when the clinic that successfully treats Esther in *The Bell Jar* “is connected to Native American history—such that, when she arrives, a ‘handsome white-haired doctor’ explains to her ‘about the Pilgrims and the Indians and who had the land after them, and what rivers ran nearby.’”<sup>10</sup> Within a book that is so dedicated to historicizing a particular set of property relations, however, it is striking that the frontier as a historical property relation that still determines the present remains relatively absent from the text. We learn much about the historical function of the frontier as an open space for capital and as a “West cure” for the exhausted subject of modernity, and much about the genre history of the Western as a cultural mechanism for imagining escape and renewal. Yet the term “settler colonialism” does not appear in the text, and you would not know from reading *Novel Shocks* that the urban and suburban regions of the Northeast on which the book focuses are colonized land: that they are literally, as well as figuratively, frontier spaces of colonial extraction.

One of the great strengths of *Novel Shocks* is its interdisciplinarity. Tucker-Abramson is as masterful when talking about Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs in the mode of urban studies as she is when discussing the limits of the containment culture model for thinking about Cold War literature or performing razor-sharp close readings of mid-century novels, and her clear-eyed understanding of political economy works across her multidisciplinary approach to provide a unified framework



within which her materialist analyses of urban and suburban space are clearly articulated with her literary analyses of form, genre, and subjectivity. The book also offers a sustained racial analysis of whiteness as a function of value, which is itself a valuable contribution to an often “race-blind” discourse around neoliberalism and its origins, as well as provocatively connecting the opening of domestic urban space to capital with America’s neocolonial adventures abroad. Yet I cannot help but wonder what might have become visible in this project if it had also taken seriously the actuality of the United States as a settler-colonial nation state, and the impacts of that actuality on the historical development of neoliberalism across the twentieth century. The neoliberal subject is marked by whiteness, as Tucker-Abramson makes clear. But that subjectivity is also a settler-colonial one, and neoliberalism itself is a new(ish) development of an ongoing economy of conquest in what is now and for now the United States. My question here is, perhaps, more one about the nature and range of the field than it is solely about Tucker-Abramson’s valuable contribution to it. What might urban studies look like if we took both seriously and literally what William Jamal Richardson calls “the city as a settler colonial structure”: the genocidal conquest that cleared the land of America’s cities for settlement, and the ongoing dispossession that maintains them?<sup>11</sup> As Tucker-Abramson writes in her closing consideration of Black urban resistance movements and theorists, “the city was the other space in which the United States was fighting its imperial wars.”<sup>12</sup> These wars, however, include the Indian Wars, still ongoing, and still incomplete. Accounting for the spaces and subjectivities of the city within this ongoing process of colonial dispossession must be the next great reorientation of urban studies if it hopes adequately to describe anything to do with land and economy in the United States.

If I find myself contemplating what *Novel Shocks* does not do, however, it is only because the book does so much that it leaves me wanting more. Tucker-Abramson’s book does an extraordinary amount of work in its 183 pages and showcases the best elements of literary criticism as an active participant in interdisciplinary conversations, using incisive analyses of literary forms to reveal the cultural and economic dynamics at work far beyond literary texts. *Novel Shocks* is an indispensable intervention into the narrative of neoliberalism, the impact of urban renewal on the emergence of neoliberalism, the racialized nature of neoliberal subjectivity, the relationship between urban renewal at home and America’s neocolonial actions abroad, and the Cold War novel; I expect that readers of *Mediations* will, as I did, gain a great deal from this deeply-researched and intellectually provocative book.

**Notes**

1. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, eds. *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017) 9.
2. Bruce Robbins, "Everything Is Not Neoliberalism." *American Literary History* 31.4 (2019).
3. Myka Tucker-Abramson, *Novel Shocks: Urban Renewal and the Origins of Neoliberalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019) 3.
4. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
5. Tucker-Abramson, *Novel Shocks* 16.
6. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
7. *Novel Shocks* 102.
8. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, 106:8 (1993): 1707-91.
9. *Novel Shocks* 20.
10. *Novel Shocks* 119.
11. William Jamal Richardson, "Understanding the City as a Settler Colonial Structure," (27 June 2017). [www.willjrichardson.com/2017/06/27/understanding-the-city-as-a-settler-colonial-structure/](http://www.willjrichardson.com/2017/06/27/understanding-the-city-as-a-settler-colonial-structure/)
12. *Novel Shocks* 137.

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