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CHRIS REITZ

Making it ()hole

The Aesthetics of "Structural Adjustment" in the Literature, Economics, and Culture of Neoliberalism

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But surely we are forgiven / for hardening our strophes / against the marketplace / in an epoch whose novelty lies / in the precise arrangement of its word / cloud titrated forth / from other epochs and after all / one traverses an era / as one passes the Dogana point / that is to say rather quickly / […] / and this restless motion marks / the adventure of value / set loose in the circuits / and unable to know itself / without arriving headlong / at the price briefly valorized / a pause eros a sum on paper / then crashing onward / into the orbits sweet / with longing like Francesca / circling immaterial / through the fifth Canto / able to fling a phrase / or two at most before hurrying on / […] / the Comedian as the letter C / in the general formula MCM' / that crawled ashore on the sea / flecked lip / of the world / system not far from Rimini / where Francesca died and Sigismondo / lived and died / but across the peninsula / at the Casa San Giorgio with its rule / so discreet and sophisticated / that historians for a long time / failed to notice it / but it was here the young formula / […] / and scrawled its spirals / from Genoa Amsterdam / Londonopolis each imperial canto / unspooling a bit / broader than the last / and each with its own forms / and its own anxious fogs / from the Mediterranean / […] / to the brume air of the nineteenth / nervous century meeting / the yellow smoke of London / like a little bookkeeper grown old / and now the dead / white fog of Suisun Bay / midmorning amid metaphors / of the Pacifico / where a weary hegemon / heaves up on Benicia's beaches / ten thousand cars / paratactically abandoned / […] / and they all hunch / in the weak sun too tired / to launch into the circuits / and some say this is a crisis / of overproduction / and some say / this is a crisis of accumulation / and some say this is the most / beautiful sight the dark earth offers / and some say / they should all be driven / into the Pacific / […] / in hopes we can start / again in the factorial haze / of the Pearl River Delta / among the TVEs and the pop / up cities or maybe / we'll be rescued by / the new totalizers from the moon / but as the formula / sinks downward to darkness / on extended credit / discouraged and disemployed / I have heard late the chants / of the option-wallahs / and the end of days / traders and the armchair / Austrian fanboys singing / marginal songs / in the comment fields of the republic / where the endgame / of the lyric turns to the language / of value and who will take the owners of debt / and make them whole / and who will take the shareholders / and make them whole / and who will take / the debauched and defaulted / and make them whole / and who will take / our brothers and sisters in the equity / and the mezzanine tranches / and make them whole /and when will this end and really /what will be money's Jena / […]

Joshua Clover, Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis, 6–9

Note on Translations

Throughout this study, secondary sources – particularly theoretical works – are cited in English translation to ensure readability, except where no translation is available or where reference to the original wording is necessary because important semantic nuances would otherwise be lost. Literary texts are generally quoted in their original language, with some exceptions in cases where the language is one I do not speak and where the texts are only discussed briefly.

I Representing a "()hole Complex"

"The Global *Zeitenwende*," "New Cold War," "Great-Power Competition" – in the discourses of power, the 2020s are certainly not imagined as the heyday of political or economic stability.[1] The *Belle Époque* of the "rules-based order," "Free World," and "Pax Americana" has faded, it seems, into a faint nostalgic object. In such hasty conclusions, however, there is always the danger of historical amnesia. The talk of crisis risks suppressing secular tendencies. By contrast, this study hypothesizes that the epistemic function and operating principle of "crisis" has shifted across the last decades. Sure, it still is invested with the grand representational promise of acting as a moment of synthesis through which a complex society might emerge as a narratable, intelligible whole. At once, the construction of a sudden epochal break tends to reify the short-term. As such, it blends well into the micro-timescales of election or business cycles. It fits ideologies of "disruption" in which the old is incessantly destroyed, gladly making the past a blank slate, to open new venues for "growth" or "competitivity." Besides, it omits that through its inflationary use the descriptor "crisis" increasingly stops to simply name an event limited in time and space. The press may have compartmentalized the overlapping emergencies of the early 21st century into regional hotspots or standalone incidents and issues (Greek crisis, wage-price spiral, local weather events, etc.). Ultimately, though, it is the ubiquity of "special crises,"[2] overextending the (narrative) containment measures of crisis-management, that indicates a new permanence of crisis on a global scale – alternately reflected in declinist narratives, urges to adapt to a "new normal," yearnings for "creative destruction," or palingenetic visions of national rebirth.

1 Olaf Scholz. "The Global *Zeitenwende*." *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/olaf-scholz-global-zeitenwende-how-avoid-new-cold-war [last accessed 05.02.2023]; Uri Friedmann. "The New Concept Everyone in Washington is talking about." *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/ [last accessed 05.05.2022].

2 Cf. Jürgen Link. *Normalismus und Antagonismus in der Postmoderne: Krisen, New Normal, Populismus*. Göttingen. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 263.

If a prevailing "structure of feeling" (Raymond Williams) in the 2020s, then, is one of permacrisis, the key literary texts examined in this study can be read as registering its longer genealogy, tracing its emergence across the first decades of the 21st century. The entry point of my analysis will be the 2003 novella *Cosmopolis* authored by Don DeLillo (*1936), since it negotiates the thwarted immunization of capitalism against systemic crises. Turning the market's technologies of invisibility – "pretend[ing] not to see the horror and death at the end of the schemes it builds"[3] – into the subject of representation, the financial epic brings into focus an "end of history" narrative characterized through and through by the suppression of contradiction. In a similar vein, the prose of the Austrian writer Kathrin Röggla (*1971) unearths in the language of the New Economy, the start-up jargon moulded in the post-Cold War decade, a dystopian kernel that comes into its own in the austerity programs after the 2007–9 recession. She decodes this sequence of protracted crisis-management as a "löcherstopfsystem"[4] that can be traced back to the increasing importance of risk-capital to the global economy since the onset of the neoliberal era. Finally, almost inversely to DeLillo, the 2014 novel *Tram 83* written by the Congolese writer Fiston Mwanza Mujila (*1981) brings into view exactly the horror and death at the other end of global value-chains. Counteracting the mythical identification of trade with peace, the novel tells the story of a Katangese mining frontier taken apart by neoliberal programs of "structural adjustment" (Robert McNamara) respectively "shock therapy" (Jeffrey Sachs) wherein it is precisely a rules-based market order that acts as the medium of disenfranchisement and lethal force.

The literary constellation at the heart of this project, hence, makes world capitalism emerge – to put it in the words of Reza Negarestani – as a "()hole complex (with an evaporative W)" in which the surface appearances of political economy incessantly strive to exclude the dis-

3 Don DeLillo. 2003/2011. *Cosmopolis*. New York: Picador. 91.
4 Kathrin Röggla. "draußen tobt die dunkelziffer." *besser wäre: keine: Essays und Theater*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer. 271.

cordant forces that it at once depends on "to architectonically survive."[5] Constructed as a "book[] about holes," DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* represents the "techniques of charting" whereby the economy is made to appear as a "wholeness."[6] Röggla, again, negotiates the systematic plugging of liquidity gaps but also plot holes in the "()hole complex" of global capitalism, notably the expressive means whereby the "hinterbliebenen"[7] of permanent crisis become invisible. Her prose brings forward the in-built amnesia ("betriebsalzheimer") of a bailout capitalism in which the primacy of intervening *in medias res* – "Auf Sicht fahren" as Angela Merkel put it – exactly lends itself to the foreclosure of structural realities. Last but not least, Mujila's account of the violence carried out in the name of the free market re-inscribes a (neo-)colonial history of dispossession into the core of the capitalist project and, thereby, reflects on the obfuscated material basis that subtends a seemingly post-industrial economy. His writing fundamentally challenges the all-too easy split between a supposed state of normality and a state of exception. Putting the "tradition of the oppressed" at the centre of literary representation, *Tram 83* suggests that "the 'emergency situation' in which we live" has long been "the rule"[8] of capitalist globalization and it is folding in from the margins to the centre. In the texts at hand, crisis emerges as an ordinary occurrence. It is not framed as an exogenous shock to an otherwise healthy system. Rather, it gestates within the status quo whose repressive mechanisms DeLillo, Röggla, and Mujila retrace in their "drama[s] of adjustment."[9] They trace, as Joshua Clover would have it, the attempts of the capitalist powers-that-be to "make […] whole" again "the owners of debt," "the shareholders," the "debauched and defaulted," or "our

5 Reza Negarestani. *Cyclonopedia. Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Melbourne: re:press. 48, 44. The inaudible orthographic difference between whole and hole sums up Negarestani's notion that "void excludes solid, but solid must include void to architectonically survive." Exploiting a gap in language, the *double entendre* suggest that the whole never just *is* but is inherently thwarted.

6 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 190, 85, 89, 91.

7 Kathrin Röggla. *die alarmbereiten*. Frankfurt a. M.: fischer taschenbuch verlag. 186.

8 Walter Benjamin. "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings. Vol. 4 – 1938–1940*. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Eds.). Edmund Jephcott et al. (Transl.). Cambridge/London: Belknap Press. 392.

9 Lauren Berlant. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham/London: Duke University Press. 77.

brothers and sisters in the equity / and the mezzanine tranches."[10] Bringing into view capitalism as a leaking whole, the literary texts analysed in this study work on the representability of early 21st century capitalism precisely in and through the displacement of systemic contradictions at the heart of the recent past and present. In documenting the adaptive effects of a regime of crisis-management which has been taking shape already before the compounding crises of the 2020s, they depict the making and updating of a dispositive of structural adjustment. That said, this introduction is going to address four pivotal aspects of this study: 1) it will offer an approximate definition and contextualization of "structural adjustment" in the recent history and *longue durée* of capitalism, which naturally requires a brief excursion into the more general features of that social formation; 2) it hopes to establish the issue of representation as integral to the making of capitalism in general and "structural adjustment" specifically, in light of which literature can be explored as a "socially symbolic act"[11] that is ambiguously placed within bourgeois society; 3) it wishes to delineate the space of literature in/against the neoliberal turn; and 4) it figures recent literature as a sensorium for the historical trajectory of neoliberalism. Finally, I argue that the works examined in my close readings register the authoritarian transformation of the 2020s as an actualization of long-term tendencies latent in the "family of neoliberalisms."[12]

1 The New Normal?

In reading from literature to the broader historical context, then, a certain "capitalist catastrophism"[13] comes to the fore that points toward a regime of accumulation and power that governs through the management of threat multipliers. As Donald Rumsfeld put it in the early days

10 Joshua Clover. "Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis." *Red Epic*. Oakland: Commune Editions. 8–9.
11 Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Oxon: Routledge.
12 Dieter Plehwe et al. "Introduction." *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique*. ibid. (Eds.). New York: Routledge. 2.
13 Kai Heron. "Capitalist Catastrophism." *ROAR 10*. https://roarmag.org/magazine/capitalist-catastrophism/ [last accessed 10.05.2023].

of the War on Terror, strategic thinking has become occupied with the "unknown unknown,"[14] that is, a condition of objective uncertainty in which control cannot be established via linear cause-and-effect patterns but only by "captur[ing] chance."[15] In military theory, hence, the governance of disorder becomes paramount, while urban studies are enthralled by the "terminal condition"[16] of the modern metropolis. At times, military and civil management even coalesce in the elaboration of counter-insurgency models to the "challenge of slums"[17] that project the surge of social unrest in a warming world.[18] Complementarily, the discipline of logistics – the key sector of just-in-time economics – is traversed by notions of "resilience" concerned with infrastructural vulnerability that increasingly assume "a future of inevitable and worsening crisis"[19] which can only be minimized in its effects. In economics, again, the expectation that a crisis will soon hit is now a constant feature. If the years leading up to the Crash of 1929 or the dotcom crisis of the early 2000s were marked by a myopic euphoria – an "irrational exuberance"[20] in the words of former Fed chairman Alan Greenspan – the frail upturn of the 2010s[21] is steadily haunted by the prospect of bursting bubbles. Every boom is considered a ticking timebomb, a temporary "bezzle," wherein "what appear[s] to be a virtuous cycle" is no more

14 Donald Rumsfeld. 2002. *Department of Defense New Briefing, February 12*. https://archive.ph/20180320091111/http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636 [last accessed 16.03.2023].

15 David S. Alberts and Richard E. Hayes. *Power to the Edge*. Washington D.C.: CCRP Publication Series. 213; See also Brian Massumi. *Ontopower*. Durham/London: Duke University Press. 101.

16 Rem Koolhaas. "To Lagos." *Mutations*. Bordeaux/Barcelona: Actar/Arc en Rêve. 652.

17 UN-Habitat. 2003. *The Challenge of Slums. Global Report on Human Settlements*. London: Earthscan Publications. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/The%20Challenge%20of%20Slums%20-%20Global%20Report%20on%20Human%20Settlements%202003.pdf [last accessed 05.07.2022].

18 Cf. David Kilcullen. *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerilla*. London: C. Hurst & Co. 102ff.

19 Stephanie Wakefield. "Infrastructures of Liberal Life: From Modernity and Progress to Resilience and Ruins." *Geography Compass*. 6.

20 Alan Greenspan. *The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society*. Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute. https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/the-challenge-of-central-banking-in-a-democratic-society/ [last accessed 03.09.2022].

21 Cf. Aaron Benanav. "Crisis and Recovery." *Phenomenal World*. https://www.phenomenalworld.org/analysis/crisis-and-recovery/ [last accessed 03.05.2023].

than "a vicious cycle"[22] prone to implode. Meanwhile, climate change is taken for granted as a new condition of capitalist competition. It is subjected to a cost/benefit logic in which environmental risks are financialized in the form of "carbon markets," "green" or "catastrophe bonds,"[23] and exploited for geostrategic wagers in imperialist expansion scenarios.[24]

The early 21st century, it seems, has given way to expert or elite discourses that resort to or take to task "crisis" as a ubiquitous category of strategic analysis. From Dick Cheney through McKinsey and Xi Jinping to Sebastian Kurz and Jens Stoltenberg: visions of a "new normal" have become commonsensical since 9/11 and the dotcom crash up through the decade following the Great Recession until the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, and on.[25] As epitomized in the 2023 World Economic Forum that was placed under the motto of "polycrisis,"[26] the current moment is recognized as the conjuncture of multiple interlinked global emergencies. In this, a change in the very nature of crisis becomes apparent. It morphs from a concept of discontinuity into a concept of temporal permanence. Eva Horn, therefore, introduces the notion of a "meta-crisis" – "a *catastrophe without event*" – to account for this transfiguration of the term into a vision of catastrophic continuity.[27] What is meant by crisis, here, is not a rupture but the continuation of the status quo. In a sense, the view that crisis is the true essence of capitalist development is not reserved anymore for radical leftists such as Walter Benjamin. The perspective of breakdown is integrated into the

22 Michael Pettis. "Why the Bezzle matters to the Economy." *Carnegie*. https://carnegieendowment.org/china-financial-markets/2024/02/why-the-bezzle-matters-to-the-economy [last accessed 06.04.2026].
23 Éric Alliez and Maurizzio Lazzarato. *Wars and Capital*. Ames Hodges (Transl.). Pasedana: Semiotext(e). 359–360.
24 Kai Heron et al. "For an Anti-Imperialist Ecological Modernity." *Journal of Labour and Society*. 2ff.
25 Cf. Suman Gupta. *Political Catchphrases and Contemporary History: A Critique of New Normals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 11–45; See also Link, *Normalismus und Antagonismus in der Postmoderne*, 280–281.
26 Simon Torkington. "Polycrisis." *World Economic Forum*. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/polycrisis-global-risks-report-cost-of-living/ [last accessed 15.02.2023].
27 Eva Horn. *The Future as Catastrophe. Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age.* Valentine Pakis (Transl.). New York: Columbia University Press. 8.

discourses of power. It is hence that a certain logic of failure containment, which breaks with modern semantics of progress, takes over. At the latest during the 2010s "adaptation,"[28] as against prevention, crystallizes as a new societal leitmotif, which competes for hegemony with ideologies of coercive rupture celebrated by Musk, Milei & Co or the likes of Björn Höcke and their threat of a "wohltemperierte Grausamkeit"[29] – both articulating rival strategies for enforcing adjustment to intensified competitive pressures and/or systemic impasses.

In that regard, however, the notion of crisis is fundamentally disconnected from the moment of critique so central to the temporal logic of bourgeois society studied in Reinhardt Koselleck's engagement with crisis as the "structural signature of modernity."[30] It is dissolved in an apocalyptic movement without revelation (from *apokálupsis* [revelation, disclosure]). If, etymologically speaking, the notion of crisis designates an event that cuts through chronological time (from *krínein*, [to cut, to separate]), it now rather functions like an epochal term in the sense of *epokhé* (stoppage, fixed point of time). Under this aspect, though, there might be a need to take an analytic distance from the inflationary usage of the term. In a context in which capitalism "functions through crisis and even feeds on it,"[31] it might be more precise to identify and denote the operational logic underlying the mode of social domination in question. The "dramas of adjustment" played out in the key literary texts inspected in this treatise bring us on the right track in that respect. Working through the "tics and tremors"[32] in the vernacular of crisis-management, these pieces bring into view the current era of capitalism as one of perpetual "structural adjustment." Hereby, of course, a central concept of the neoliberal tradition is evoked – theorized by Friedrich A. von Hayek and his disciples ("order is adjustment"[33]) and most crucially enforced by the IMF and World Bank as

28 Cf. Philipp Staab. *Anpassung. Leitmotiv der nächsten Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Suhrkamp. 13, 16ff.
29 Björn Höcke. *Nie zweimal in denselben Fluss*. Lüdinghausen/Berlin. Manuscriptum. 254.
30 Reinhart Koselleck. "Crisis." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67:2. 372, 374.
31 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. "Empire. Twenty Years On." *New Left Review* 120. 67.
32 John Cunningham. "Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis." *Anguish Language: Writing and Crisis*. John Cunningham et al. (Eds.). Berlin: Archive Books. 5.
33 Jan Tumlir. "National Sovereignty, Power and Interest." *Ordo* 31. 24.

a doctrine of governance during the debt crises that swept the Global South at the turn to the 1980s.[34] In that regard, the ubiquity of crisis idioms in the language of contemporary power shows genealogical links to the governmental framework of neoliberalism which is most concisely expressed by the recurring "there is no alternative" formula coined by Margareth Thatcher and the "end of history" thesis spread at the end of the Cold War. The normalization of crisis as a natural fact of the global order is situated in the general eternalization of the capitalism pushed by the neoliberal project.

Few have expressed this more acutely than Francis Fukuyama himself, who famously claimed that capitalism had rid itself of all "fundamental contradiction[s]."[35] Constructing an ad-hoc teleology around the date of 1989, Fukuyama contended that it is not state socialism but democratic capitalism that has, eventually, made true on the promises of the Marxist-Leninist vanguard: it "represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx."[36] The basic point of the neo-Hegelian philosopher, therefore, did not consist in denying "novelty" or significant events but in that there will be no "change to the deep blueprints of politics and social structure."[37] The post-historic condition described by Fukuyama is a society without systemic alternatives in that the global order which emerges in the aftermath of the global U.S.-Soviet clash is characterized by the disappearance of "competing visions"[38] concerning the essentials of socio-economic organization. It is an epoch without "fundamental contradiction" in which everything that is left to do is adaptation to the market.[39] As Tony Blair postulated

34 Cf. Staab, *Anpassung*, 8, 51–52.

35 Francis Fukuyama. "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 3. 9.

36 Fukuyama, "The End of History," 9. Fukuyama sees the defeat of communism pre-meditated in Gorbachev's pronouncement in 1988 that "the essence of socialism" is "competition." Thereby, the last General Secretary of the CPSU had already ceased the terrain of struggle to capital before the "Iron Curtain" had even come down.

37 Alex Hochuli, George Hoare, Philip Cunliffe. *The End of the End of History. Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. Winchester/Washington: zero books. 22.

38 Hochuli/Hoare/Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History*, 24.

39 See also Link, *Normalismus und Antagonismus in der Postmoderne*, 122–124. This is not a statement about the reality of state socialism but that the conflict itself was real. Link connects this repression of antagonism to the "postmodern," which he proposes to define as an epoch in which "elites" presume that all systemic antagonisms have been overcome

in a variation of the mantra that there is no alternative: "You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer."[40] Foreclosing the "conflictual historical development" that preceded the end of the Cold War, at times the very "notion that we lived in a system called 'capitalism' receded from view."[41] The global economic order is treated like a natural "environment"[42] that one cannot transcend but only adjust to. In the capitalist *posthistoire*, the idea of the end loses its finality. Under this aspect, the crisis-management of the recent past appears as the epitome of a mature neoliberal society in which capitalism, deemed too big to fail, is immortalized and crisis appears as a natural disaster that one must acquiesce to in another grand structural adjustment.

and any remaining conflicts do not touch the deep structures of the global system. He differentiates "geno-antagonisms" (system-immanent contradictions that are at once irreconcilable and generative of a system as such) from mere "pheno-antagonisms" which are in principle open to compromise. In that sense, he reckons that most "post"-compound nouns at the very least implicate the waning of (geno-)antagonisms. As such, the prefix "post" symptomizes the dawning of a supposed post-historical era. My analysis tends to agree with Link's symptomatic reading. However, I argue that "neoliberalism" is a more accurate analytic category since it offers a sociological account of the underlying historical changes and attests more precisely to the specific strategic compendium but also ideological and material underpinnings of the ruling mode of governance that Link only vaguely refers to by way of "elites."

40 Tony Blair. *Keynote Speech*. Labour Party Conference. Brighton.

41 Hochuli/Hoare/Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History*, 5.

42 Cf. Frank Ruda. "How to Act as if One Were Not Free. A Contemporary Defense of Fatalism." *Crisis & Critique* 3. 189–190. Contrasting Badiou and Heidegger, Ruda argues that the market is treated like an environment today: "A world is a product – at least of projections and collective endeavors – whereas an environment is how it is; no transformation of it can be envisaged from within it. […]. Environments are natural and if the world […] becomes an environment it also becomes a de-historicised entity – an entity without (and possibility) of history."

2 Capitalism in the Long Run: The Moving Contradiction

> Every civilization and every epoch have had their ends to history.
> — Deleuze/Guattari, "Capitalism and Desire," 266.[43]

In historicizing the present, however, it is important not to lose sight of the long-term era of capitalism. For denominations such as structural adjustment or neoliberalism "can end up obscuring more than they explain" if they are "taken as descriptors of a qualitatively new historical moment, rather than as extensions of previous phases of capitalist development."[44] Jacques Derrida, in that sense, recalls – in an early critique of Fukuyama – that "the eschatological themes of the 'end of history' […] were in the 1950s […] our daily bread"[45] already. The eternalization of capitalism, he notes, is a permanent feature of the system which has always aimed at exorcizing the spectres of an alternative society: a "future-to-come."[46] As it were, the young Marx already remarked upon the "eternal laws"[47] invoked in the naturalization of the bourgeois order. In *Das Kapital*, too, he returns again and again to the mythologies of political economy. He satirizes the fondness for "Robinson Crusoe stories" or stories of "so-called primitive accumulation"[48] in bourgeois economics, both vindicating the unequal distribution of wealth by way of a morality play which contrives fictive origins for capitalism. In a similar line, still, Roland Barthes considers the conversion of "History into Nature" an emergent property of capitalism that is neither "illusory" nor "accidental."[49] Describing the bourgeoisie "as the social class

43 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. "Capitalism and Desire." *Desert Island and other Texts* (1953–1974). M. Taormina (Transl.). New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press.
44 Barbara Foley. *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*. London: Pluto Press. xiv.
45 Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx*. Peggy Kamuf (Transl.). New York/London: Routledge. 16, 37.
46 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 28.
47 Karl Marx. "The Poverty of Philosophy." *Karl Marx & Frederick Engels Collected Works Vol. 6 (1845–1848)*. Frida Knight (Transl.). London: Lawrence Wishart. 174.
48 Karl Marx. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1*. Ben Fowkes (Transl.). London: Penguin Books. 169, 873.
49 Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Richard Howard & Annette Lavers (Transl.). New York: Hill & Wang. 250–254.

which does not want to be named," he notes a process of "exnomination" through which the bourgeoisie's conditions of existence present themselves as those of society as a whole.[50] That way, the continual transformation of social relations by capital's productive edifice is reconciled with the apparently "unchangeable" character of capitalist domination. This gesture of eternalization found its most violent expression in colonial ideology which imposed the history of the Western bourgeoisie onto the rest of the world by reducing the figure of the non-European "savage" to a "mirror image of its own past," that is, a primitive stage in the manifest destiny of capitalist rule as the *telos* of history.[51] The perspective of "belated" or "catch-up modernization" at the heart of the "end of history" thesis still echoes this. It posits the emulation of the "developed countries" of the "Global North" as the "teleological norm" of human civilization: "the best of all possible worlds."[52] In the deflated imaginary of structural-adjustment-policy, the stageism of bourgeois historiography is spatialized insofar it is "measured by the accessibility of space(s) to global capital investment."[53] The neoliberal *posthistoire* is, thus, far from static. Rather, it is governed by local teleologies of capitalist development in which variously peripheralized zones are incessantly "shock-therapized" or "reformed" into the world-market.

There is, then, an argument to be made that "structural adjustment" expresses and exacerbates core tendencies of the capitalist system which over the course of its history has well and truly remoulded the planet "after its own image."[54] The historical trajectory of capitalism has been characterized by its unique expansive drive, creating everywhere the socio-economic conditions of surplus-production all while enforcing the permanent adaptation to the "mute compulsions [*stummer*

50 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 250–254.
51 Alfonso M. Iacono. *The History and Theory of Fetishism*. Viktoria Tchernichova and Monica Boria (Transl.). London: Palgrave Macmillan. 72.
52 Sami Khatib. "No Future: The Space of Capital and the Time of Dying." *Former West. Art and the Contemporary after 1989*. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Eds.). Cambridge/London: MIT Press. 640–642.
53 Khatib. "No Future." 640–642.
54 Karl Marx. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." *Karl Marx & Frederick Engels Collected Works Vol. 6 (1845–1848)*. Samuel Moore (Transl.). London: Lawrence Wishart. 488.

Zwang]"[55] of capitalist economics. In that regard, narratives of "primitive accumulation" do not only whitewash power relations but prove effective in the real expansion of capitalism whose spatial horizon is always the world-market.[56] There is, however, not only a geographical dimension to the structural adjustment of global populations to the rigours of surplus-value. The movement of "exo-colonization," in which capital encounters a social exteriority or spatial outside into which it can expand, is complemented or followed by dynamics of "endo-colonization," in which the "remainders of noncommodified or nonexploited dimensions of existence *internal* to capitalist societies" are transformed "into relations for capital."[57] In Marxian parlance, this two-fold dynamic is crucially encapsulated in the couplet of "formal" respectively "real subsumption."[58] Capitalism designates a structure-in-motion that continually revolutionizes not only pre-capitalist social relations but also the existing institutions of capitalist society. Truly, as the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter put it, "a stationary capitalism would be *contradictio in adjectio*."[59] Insofar it "makes the unlimitedness of money

55 Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 899; Søren Mau. *Mute Compulsion. A Marxist Theory of Economic Power*. London/New York: Verso. 3n8. In this, I follow Mau's critique of the misleading English translation "silent compulsion."

56 Cf. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. *The Politics of Operations*. Durham/London: Duke University Press. 63.

57 Jason Read. *The Micro-Politics of Capital*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 27, 133 (emphasis added).

58 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 645; Read, *Micro-Politics of Capital*, 133. Endnotes argue that in the early 1970s authors like Jacques Camatte proceeded to consider formal and real subsumption not only as different ways of appropriating the surpluses of the labour process but periodizing terms. Thus, "real subsumption" came to name a historical stage in which capital expanded beyond the factory to penetrate the social substance itself (Endnotes. "The History of Subsumption." *Endnotes* 2. 130–131). Schuller has re-traced that over and above the specific concept of "real subsumption," this hypothesis has been shared in the following years by the likes of Fredric Jameson, Immanuel Wallerstein or Mark Fisher but also anti-Marxists such as Peter Sloterdijk or Gilles Lipovertsky (Sebastian Schuller. *Realismus des Kapitals*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag. 166–170). The growing prominence of the term "commodification" itself, that only takes hold in the last decades of the 20th century, points toward an increased concern with the absolutization of capitalism. (Leigh Claire La Berge. "Periodizing Capitalist Transformation." *After Marx*. Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 86ff.)

59 Joseph A. Schumpeter. *Essays*. Richard V. Clemence (Ed.). Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing. 293.

its principle of organization,"[60] the social formation is inscribed with a historically unique propulsion to continually go beyond its limits and revolutionize its conditions of existence.

The imperative of growth is not optional in a capitalist economy. Most acutely, of course, it is the intra- and inter-branch competition between capitalists themselves which acts as the "transmitter of compulsory commands."[61] Generating global standards that individual capitalists (but also national economies) must live up to so as to remain competitive, it imposes a movement of structural adjustment since failure to do so comes at the risk of ruin respectively expropriation by superior contenders for market shares. Competition and the development of productive forces mutually reinforce each other in an ever-quicker and crisis-prone pace of accumulation. Mau, in this sense, describes crisis as "the compressed and temporary *intensification*"[62] of the vicissitudes of competition that buttress the expansive drive of the system as it harnesses the mayhem caused by the disruption of social life. As such, crises may trigger unrest but, at once, they present opportunities for capital to reinforce its hold over society. They act as catalysts for power shifts already underway while accelerating new economic trends or the generalization of organizational innovations. The Long Depression from 1873–1896 cannot be severed from the age of high imperialism and an increasingly national organization of capital, whereas the Great Depression of the 1930s witnesses the emergence of a more and more total state that supplements economic force to keep pace in large-scale imperialistic competition. Historically speaking, the major crises of the modern era have constituted interregna in which conflicts over the future organization of capitalism have been fought out.

In tracking capital's historical dynamic, it would, however, be deceptive to block out the antagonistic logic that has haunted it since its emergence. Capitalism does not arise simply from the circulation of money

60 Lazzarato/Alliez, *Wars and Capital*, 42.

61 Mau, *Mute Compulsions*, 216. Marx argues that "[c]ompetition executes the inner laws of capital; makes them into compulsory laws towards the individual capital, but […] does not invent them. It realizes them" (See also Karl Marx. *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin. 752).

62 Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 315.

and commodities. It requires a historical process that separates people from the means of producing their own livelihoods and institutes class antagonism as a constitutive condition of social reproduction. On one side, the conditions of production and subsistence become capital; on the other, the majority is reduced to wage dependency, owning no significant wealth, and forced to sell their labour-power to participate in society. Once this separation is established, domination no longer needs to rely primarily on overt coercion. Instead, it is built into social reproduction itself: power is exercised through property relations, market dependence, and the money-form. The pressure to submit to capital operates as an impersonal, systemic constraint rather than as a continuous act of force.[63] Exploitation under capitalism depends on this prior class structure. Capitalists can extract surplus-value due to the essential exclusion of a vast group of people from the conditions of social reproduction.[64] Capitalist accumulation continually reproduces this dispossession, making the existence of a propertyless, wage-dependent class a permanent condition of the system. As it enters the production process, though, labour is re-organized not merely as individual effort but as a coordinated, collective activity. As Marx observes, cooperation generates a new productive force that does not belong to any worker taken alone but arises from their combination.[65] However, this collectively produced power is appropriated by capital and as such appears as its productive capacity rather than as the social force of workers themselves. Surplus extraction rests not only on longer or more intense labour but capital's control over the conditions that organize cooperation and convert its collective power into value.[66] In this sense, "capital

63 Cf. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 114–115.
64 Cf. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 129.
65 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 443.
66 See also Michel Foucault. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Alan Sheridan (Transl.). New York: Vintage Books. 163ff., 206; Pierre Macherey. "The Productive Subject." *Viewpoint Magazine*. Tijana Okić et al. (Transl.). https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/the-productive-subject/ [last accessed 11.05.2023]. Foucault identifies in Marx's analysis of "relative surplus-value" the contours of bourgeois power. His reading points out that *Arbeitskraft* in the Marxian sense refers to an abstract capacity (*Vermögen*) whose productivity can be multiplied precisely by separating – abstracting – it from the individual body and entering it into a system of labour division that enables the optimization of forces. The

is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation"[67] defined by an irreducible, ongoing antagonistic logic.

According to Lazzarato/Alliez, it can therefore not be understood without reference to war. Capital did not form without external warfare, be it colonial conquest or interstate conflict, nor without the conduct of internal wars that re-organized social life itself, producing a complexly differentiated global class society stratified via racializing and gendered procedures. The violence of separation, thus, extends beyond the destruction of material conditions of existence to the dismantling and re-adjustment of "existential territories" among colonized populations and the paupers in the imperialist cores.[68] These "wars of subjectivity" are not peripheral but constitute a central feature of capitalist domination, targeting indigenous communities, women, queer subjects, vagrants, disabled people, the working poor, and other populations deemed "dangerous" or "deficient" in order to shape conduct compatible with capitalist accumulation.[69]

However, this violent development has never gone unanswered. Karl Polanyi, in fact, speaks of a "double movement"[70] in that capital's expansive drive steadily provokes countertendencies that fight back against the total subsumption of social life and concomitant hierarchies of value. In response, though, capital adapts to the oppositional forces that stand in its way. Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, therefore, go so far to claim that anti-systemic critique plays a critical role in the stabilization of capitalist relations. Insofar monetary accumulation is marked by a "lack of concern for norms [*indifférence normative*]," capitalism rejuvenates itself by internalizing the critiques of "its enemies […] to find the moral supports it lacks."[71] Yet, this recuperative capacity only

production of surplus-value rests in a collective-but-divided production linking the combined forces of living labour to a technologized co-operative work process able to generate outputs greater than the sum of its parts.

67 Karl Marx. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 3*. David Fernbach (Transl.). London: Penguin. 953.

68 Lazzarato/Alliez, *Wars and Capital*, 52.

69 Lazzarato/Alliez, *Wars and Capital*, 44–56.

70 Karl Polanyi. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon. 130.

71 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Gregory Elliott (Transl.). London: Verso. 27.

ever produces provisional forms of stability. Beverly Silver has explored this pendular dynamic via the emblematic sectors of the 19th and 20th century respectively: the textile and the automobile industry. In *Forces of Labor* (2003), she traces the spatial and sectoral movements of capital as it is propelled by recurring crises of "profitability" and "legitimacy," each of which "can only be resolved by measures that eventually bring about the other type of crisis."[72] Wherever "capital goes, conflict goes."[73] The dynamic of real subsumption or endo-colonization is fundamentally underwritten by an "antagonistic logic" through which it becomes "possible to read the development of the capitalist mode of production as something other than its continual self-perfection."[74] One would reproduce the standpoint of capital if one merely considered it "in terms of its most abstract and fantastical manifestations,"[75] while effacing this inherent antagonistic motion. By contrast, a more "autonomist hypothesis" holds that the class of the dispossessed, the proletariat, is inside and against: "*dentro e contro*"[76] as Mario Tronti puts it. In this sense, capital veritably proves a "moving contradiction [*prozessierender Widerspruch*]"[77] marked by a complex dialectic of struggle and integration.

72 Cf. Beverly J. Silver. *Forces of Labor.* New York: Cambridge University Press. 20.

73 Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 41. Silver shows that dissent follows the flight of capital across international supply-chains. Be it the assembly-line factories established under Ford in early 20th century Detroit, the move to lower-cost facilities in the American South, or the exploitation of authoritarian labour laws under Apartheid South-Africa and the military dictatorships of Brazil and South Korea: each re-location initiates new sequences of struggle.

74 Read, *Micro-Politics of Capital*, 17. Mau points out that the development of productive forces is never simply about increasing productivity or technical efficiency: "it is a power technique, a mechanism for reproducing the capitalist relations of production." The history of capitalism is seamed by technologies and organizational forms "chosen despite the fact that cheaper and more productive alternatives were available." (Mau, *Mute Compulsion,* 235–237) Silver, in this sense, argues that the "core of Volume I can be read as a history of the dialectic between worker's resistance to exploitation at the point of production and the efforts of capital to overcome that resistance by constantly revolutionizing production and social relations." (Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 19)

75 Jordy Rosenberg and Britt Rusert. "Framing Finance. Rebellion, Dispossession, and the Geopolitics of Enclosure in Samuel R. Delany's *Nevèrÿon* Series." *Radical History Review* 118. 66.

76 Cf. Mario Tronti. *Workers and Capital*. David Broder (Transl.). London/New York: Verso. 137–138.

77 Marx, *Grundrisse,* 706. Dialectics, in this sense, does not just mean "interaction, mutual presupposition, reciprocity, nor simply contradiction." Rather, it names "a process in which a concrete totality reveals itself to contain its own negation as one of its moments." (Mau,

Under these aspects, the program of structural adjustment (SAP) can be placed in the *longue durée* of capitalism. Dubbed so by World Bank president McNamara in 1979, it codifies the neoliberal mode of governance that prevailed across that decade in reaction to stagnating growth rates, inflation, the limits posed to accumulation by organized labour, and the challenge posed to the core capitalist countries by a decolonizing Global South. In this respect, it is significant that the stabilization of capitalist power takes place by harnessing (instead of curbing) the vicissitudes of crisis: it exploits the debt and unemployment wave of the 1970s to cancel protectionist policies, restructure value-chains away from sites of accumulated resistance, and enforce the liberalization of trade (privatization, tax reductions for corporations, de-regulated prices and labour legislations).[78] Symptomatically, in that period, the notion of "*recovery*" all but disappears from World Bank language, all while an abstract "semantics of crisis" takes over that de-specifies crisis-management in an indefinite adaptation to abstract parameters such as debt balances or competitiveness.[79] Indicating a crisis response that potentiates the "mute compulsions" of the market, "structural adjustment" functions as a key signifier in a critical adaptation of capitalist institutions to a simultaneous crisis of profitability and legitimacy. As such, the effort to "encase"[80] capital markets from popular intervention finds itself reflected in a representational system that separates economic processes from political agency and hides its antagonistic character by purportedly delegating decision-making power to impersonal structures.

Mute Compulsion, 106) It is, thus, that Marx remarks in the preface to his *Critique of Political Economy* that the dialectical representation of capitalism "includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation." (Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 103)

78 Cf. Lazzarato/Alliez, *Wars and Capital*, 332. Lazzarato/Alliez speak of the continuation of war "by other means."

79 Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre. "The Language of World Bank Reports." *New Left Review* 92:3. 87.

80 Quinn Slobodian. *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 5, 16–17.

3 Appearance and Representation: The Making of the Economy

Interestingly, the optic of holes and wholes filtered out in recent literature's response to capitalist crisis-management can also be observed in the vocabulary of neoliberalism, which emerges to make whole again global capitalism at the end of classical imperialism. The geo-economic strategist Thomas P. M. Barnett argues in *The Pentagon's New Map* that the "Non-Integrating Gap" shall be assimilated into the "Functioning Core" of the world-economy.[81] Hayek, again, transcodes the territorial connotations of the hole into the social figure of "the non-domesticated barbarians in our midst, who call themselves 'alienated.'"[82] Structural adjustment respectively the eradication of "disconnectedness"[83], as Barnett puts it, displays in this sense a macro- and micro-economic dimension. In accordance with the neoliberal notion that "order" means "adjustment," the so-called "end of history" is not only presupposed but re-enacted – that is: enforced – again and again, be it on the domestic or international front. The injunction to fill in the holes in the whole captures the two-fold dynamic of endo- and exocolonization marking the structural adjustment program.

It becomes evident that the "fixing" of the capitalist order expounded here is also an imminently representational problem. The market cannot that easily be dissociated from the representational systems deployed to track it. Economic models and financial instruments act "simultaneously [as] representations of and forces materially producing the world as they conceptualize it."[84] The making of the economy involves representational techniques capable of "establishing agency and efficacy for an abstraction."[85] In referring to market actors in depersonalized,

81 Thomas P.M. Barnett. *The Pentagon's New Map.* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 8.
82 Friedrich A. von Hayek. "The Atavism of Social Justice." *Social Justice, Socialism, and Democracy*. Turramurra: Centre for Independent Studies. 15.
83 Barnett: *The Pentagon's New Map*, 3.
84 Max Haiven. 2014. *Cultures of Financialization. Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 20.
85 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle. *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Winchester/Washington: zero books. 33. See also Susan Buck-Morss. "Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display." *Critical Inquiry* 21:2. 440.

aggregated form (e.g., the "Dow Jones," the "Dollar," the "NASDAQ 100") or by psychologizing the ups and downs of exchange rates as if markets were abstract positive beings subject to mood swings (e. g., "worried investors," "market anxiety"), the language of finance for instance contributes to the appearance of structural-adjustment-policy as an effect of passive forces.[86] In this sense, it is operational precisely in the technocratic de-politicization of the economy – epitomized by central bank independence – that obscures the political content of monetary policy and reduces decision-making to a *Standortentscheidung* in an auto-piloted global system in which key systemic choices are delegated to anonymous forces. It is, thus, that the abstraction called "the Economy"[87] (communicated via growth-rates, debt-to-GDP ratios, budget deficits, etc.) has turned across the second half of the 20th century into the hegemonic way of rating the wellbeing of a country and comput-

86 Cf. Karl Marx. "Results of the Direct Production Process." *Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol. 34*. London: Lawrence & Wishart. 490. Incidentally, Marx already pointed toward the telling fact that "in doubly-entre book-keeping he [the capitalist] constantly figures twice, e. g. as a debtor to his own capital," such that the capitalist is represented to hold "power" only insofar he acts "as the personification of capital."

87 Cf. Timothy Mitchell. 2007. "Dreamland." *Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism. Evil Paradises*. Mikes Davis and Daniel B. Monk (Eds.). New York/London: New Press. 1. See also Quinn Slobodian. "How to see the World Economy: Statistics, Maps, and Schumpeter's Camera in the First Age of Globalization." *Journal of Global History* 10. 308–313. German and Austrian economists/geographers already by the mid-19th century made attempts to identify the (world) economy as "a measurable entity." Responding to the reality of global interdependence revealed in the "Gründerkrach" of 1873, they proposed to craft a mode of seeing that allowed to navigate the excesses of scale posed by the "Weltwirtschaft." Organicist metaphors or tropes of interconnection such as "Verkehr," "Fäden," "Gewebe," "Netze" (taken from new communication technologies or leading economic sectors such as the textile industry) were used to "recast" the economy as a "manageable" whole. It is interesting that up until the British war economy of the 1940s, "the" economy (with the definite article) did not figure in Anglo-Saxon debates, while the term "Weltwirtschaft" did not exist in any major world language outside German-speaking academia before the 1920s. Slobodian sees the roots for this discrepancy in the unevenness of capitalism, as the notion of "Weltwirtschaft" responded specifically to the hegemony of the British Empire. It is not surprising that the strategic concepts elaborated in this context "resonated in countries with similar experiences." Indeed, Slobodian argues that the "German concept of the world economy as a historically constituted space of unequal exchange was translated into 1920s India and 1930s South America and underwrote the dependency theory of Raul Prébisch in the 1950s." More so, the centre/periphery binary found "in the world-systems theories of Samir Amin, André Gunder Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein w[as] first used by the historical economist Werner Sombart in the 1920s."

ing the future trajectory of state policy. Financial indices such as the "Deutscher Aktienindex" (DAX) – measuring the performance of Germany's top 40 companies – function like synecdochic representations of economic health as such. In a sense, each aggregate carries within itself a narrative of development, performance, or competitivity that glosses over the gaps in the global or national valuation of money and necessarily conceals underlying antagonisms. The construction of the economy proves dependent on the exclusion of elements that do not fit the bill.[88]

Interestingly, Adam Smith's metaphor of the "invisible hand" already had a similar effect. It smooths over the fissures in the fabric of bourgeois society by re-framing the inequality that follows labour division into a vision of higher-scale equilibrium: "*private vices – publick benefits*" as Mandeville originally put in in his *Fable of the Bees* (1714). Smith's image comes with the promise of reconciling social imbalances and grievances with the idea of a self-harmonizing whole in which the self-interested subject is "led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention."[89] Curiously, the trope does not even recur that frequently across *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). But it pops up precisely "at the point where [Smith] slides over the logical gaps" in his argumentation:

> it is easy to understand why many [therefore] have dismissed it as a ruse, a legitimating gloss over (bourgeois) class interests. But being merely this would not explain its tenacity within the discourse of political economy. This unseen hand opens up a blind spot in the social field, yet holds the whole together.[90]

The crux of the metaphor can be discerned in Smith's excursions on famines, in which the "subsistence of the labourer" is subordinated to

88 Mitchell, "Dreamland," 21, 24. Mitchell speaks of so-called "externalities" (e. g. pollution, informal labour).

89 Adam Smith. *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. Vol. I.* Edwin Cannan (Ed.): New York. 485.

90 Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital," 449–450. The *Wealth of Nations* is pervaded by "shifts in focus" that "[w]ith the wave of a hand" redefine "the victim of the division of labor [as] its beneficiary." Even if the metaphor of the "invisible hand," then, features rarely in Smith's writing, "the conception behind this term operates frequently."

the virtue of greed precisely on the grounds that the system of supply and demand may require such a "calamity" to self-regulate.[91] The market is conceived as a natural order, which, as Warren Montag notes, is "necro-economic" through and through as "it not only allows death, [but] demands that death be allowed"[92] for the economy to function properly. This still resonates in the language of boom-and-bust spoken by the tradition of neo-classical economics undergirding the neoliberal compact. In that regard, it is especially Schumpeter's notion of "creative destruction" which effects the neutralization of capital's dissolutive forces into a functional element of the economic process. Positing the destruction of the old to create the new as the "essential fact about capitalism,"[93] it updates Léon Walras' reconciliation of macro-economic fluctuations with a theory of general equilibrium and, thereby, offers a positive reformulation of Marx's dictum that in capitalism "all new-formed [relations] become antiquated before they can ossify."[94] Thus, the view presented by Smith that market competition exerts a regulative function epitomises the curious transfer of theodicean schemata into the moral philosophy of liberalism and by extension the work of the original theoreticians of neoliberalism, first and foremost Ludwig von Mises' and Hayek's transcendentalization of the market. Introducing the neologism "oikodicy,"[95] Joseph Vogl, in this sense, notes that liberal economics emerges as an ideology of equilibrium that is ingrained into the very *modus operandi* of capitalism and persists up until the "efficient-market-hypothesis" coded into the algorithms of late 20th and early 21st century financial markets. As such, it does not only rationalize inequality by safeguarding property relations in the name of entrepreneurial freedom. More fundamentally, it points toward capitalism's ability to obscure or incorporate its inherent negativity as the market

91 Smith, *Wealth of Nations Vol. 1*, 75.
92 Warren Montag. "Necro-Economics. Adam Smith and Death." *Radical Philosophy* 134. 16.
93 Joseph Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London/New York Routledge. 82–83.
94 Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 487.
95 Joseph Vogl. *The Specter of Capital*. Joachim Redner/Robert Savage (Transl.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

is posited as the condition of life itself which periodically rations death to be restored and support life again.[96]

It is fair to argue, then, that "the ideology of the market" cannot be shrugged off as "some supplementary ideational or representational luxury or embellishment that can be removed from the economic problem."[97] Rather, it stands to reason that it is "generated by the thing itself, as its objectively necessary afterimage."[98] The vitalization of the Economy/Market as a positive being can be considered an emergent feature or spontaneous ideology of the fetishist character of capitalist production in which the "*social character of the conditions of labour*" confronts social actors as a "capitalist arrangement [that] is inflicted upon them."[99] The most "flagrant" expression of this "capital fetish [*Kapitalfetisch*]" is, of course, found in the abstractions of finance which appear to breed money without the expenditure of labour.[100] It is as if accumulation took place in "representations themselves."[101] But the obfuscation of capital's antagonistic logic is the norm in all commodity production. Everywhere "the process is extinguished in the product"[102] such that the monetary and fixed capital accumulated in the labour process is transubstantiated into a power that opposes the worker as something alien: "[…] the development of the social productive powers of labour and the conditions for this development appear as the *work of capital*, and not only does the individual worker relate passively to this work, it also takes place in antagonism to him."[103]

96 Cf. Montag, "Necro-Economics," 16.
97 Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press. 260.
98 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 260.
99 Marx, "Results of the Direct Production Process," 489–490.
100 Marx, *Capital. Vol. 3*. 516, 506.
101 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*. Tom Bottomore et al. (Transl.). London/New York: Routledge. 192.
102 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 287.
103 Marx, "Results of the Direct Production Process," 489–490. Marx argues that cooperation under capitalism happens behind the backs of social agents. It "appears as something entirely autonomous, which exists independently of the worker as a *mode of capital's existence*, and therefore also as something arranged by the capitalists independently of the workers. […]. But the relation becomes still more complex – and apparently more mysterious – in that, with the development of the specifically capitalist mode of production, […] the social forms of labour appear as *forms of the development* of capital, and therefore the

Abstraction, in this context, takes on a double meaning. For one thing, it refers to the mystification – the representational abstraction – of capital as an autonomous subject without antagonism. At once, the surplus of existence ascribed to it is related back to material processes of abstraction – surplus extraction – in which appearance functions as a "*mode of disappearance*"[104] (e.g., the commodity and the price ascribed to it say nothing of the conditions under which it was produced). Capitalist fetishization is therefore irreducible to mere illusion. It takes on the character of a "real abstraction"[105] as Alfred Sohn-Rethel phrases it. The redoubling of the "complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour" at the heart of surplus-production at once proves effective in the mute compulsions of capitalist society which are "the more real the more […] labour capacity is itself modified by these forms, so that it becomes powerless when it stands alone […].[106]

productive powers of social labour, thus developed, appear as *productive powers of capital*. As such social forces they are '*capitalised*' vis-à-vis labour. In fact, […] combination in the division of labour, the application of the forces of nature and science, as well as the products of labour in the shape of *machinery*, are all things which confront the individual workers as *alien, objective*, and *present in advance*, without their assistance, and often against them, independent of them […]."

104 Andrew Cole. *The Birth of Theory*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. 97.

105 Alfred Sohn-Rethel. 1970/1978. *Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology*. London: Macmillan. 21. Bini Adamczak offers a compelling allegory to explicate the notion of real abstraction: "To play the [Ouija] game, a group of people sits in a circle around a board with a glass in the middle. All the letters of the alphabet are written on the board. Everyone puts a hand or finger on the glass, and because everybody is unconsciously trembling a tiny bit, the glass begins to move, as if pushed by an invisible hand, slowly, from one letter to the next. The people don't realize that they moved the glass themselves, because their individual trembling could never have moved it alone. Instead, they think it was a spirit channeling some kind of message through them. The Ouija board illustrates pretty well how life works under capitalism. As a matter of fact, the people playing the game are pushing the magically moving glass all by themselves, although not one of them could do it alone. The glass moves only because people act together rather than separately. But they don't even notice they are cooperating. Their own cooperation happens secretly, behind their backs, so to speak." (Bini Adamczak. *Communism for Kids*. Jacob Blumenfeld and Sophie Lewis (Transl.). Cambridge/London: MIT Press. 6–7)

106 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 874; Marx, "Results of the Direct Production Process," 489.

4 Recuperation and that Strange Institution Called Literature

Literature, now, has historically taken on an ambivalent character when it comes to the making of the capitalist system. In early bourgeois society, as Mary Poovey points out, literary imagination played a notable part in weaving the new logic of accumulation into the social imaginary.[107] Economic genres and imaginative writing were, in fact, not yet fully differentiated from each other up until the turn to the 19th century, forming a "continuum of writing"[108] that mediated the new modalities of profit-making. This relationship might have been repressed in the process as the abstractions of capital have more and more been taken for granted. But, as Franco Moretti insists, a certain "bourgeois prose"[109] has remained integral to the naturalization of capitalist existence. Michael McKeon, in that regard, argues that the English novel constitutes a uniquely adaptable "explanatory and problem-solving mode" which responded to a profound destabilization of social and aesthetic norms.[110] It provided a space where the ethical and epistemological crises of the early modern period – that feudal or absolutist modes of intercourse proved unable to tame – could be negotiated. Concerning the French context, again, Jameson links the novel to the production of bourgeois subjectivity, gradually unfolding from the rotating character centres of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* (where the atomized individual is not yet fully developed) to the monadic closure of narrative perspective in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.[111] Taking on a more transnational perspective, Vogl connects the novel overall, especially the so-called *Bildungsroman*, to the invention of a new type of economic man. In line with his analysis of capitalist theodicy, he brings into view the relation of literary prose to other forms of knowledge. He notes that it

107 Cf. Mary Poovey. *Genres of the Credit Economy*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press. 1–2.
108 Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy,* 2.
109 Franco Moretti. *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*. London/New York: Verso. 18, 100, 130.
110 Michael McKeon. *The Origins of the English Novel*. Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press. 21–22.
111 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 147.

gives shape to the leitmotifs of liberalism by plotting the education of a monadic subject that masters – like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* – the contingencies of the world and is ultimately reconciled, as if by an invisible hand, with a discordant totality.[112]

Expressive of the "grammar of *growth*"[113] that Moretti dissects in bourgeois prose, the market is narrativized as the primordial site of social order wherein the bourgeois individual is integrated into society precisely due to its lack of sociability, that is, its pursuit of private vices. This shift, of course, did not escape contemporary commentators who themselves noted the peculiar "transposition of the objective into the subjective"[114] whereby literary prose confers onto bourgeois society an air of impartiality. The free indirect style pioneered in the European novel has marked a quintessential laboratory for the elaboration of an "intermediate, almost neutral voice"[115] that internalizes the social concerns of a rising "middling" class as a sort of second nature. Thus, the novel has constituted a versatile form through which the capitalist order could both assert itself as the way of the world and camouflage the class power of the bourgeoisie. Jameson, in that respect, considers the form part of a "properly bourgeois cultural revolution" as it decodes "inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms" all while:

> producing as though for the first time that very life world, that very 'referent'—the newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence, the new rhythms of measurable time, the new secular and 'disenchanted' object world of the commodity system […]—of which this new narrative discourse will then claim to be the realistic reflection.[116]

Literature can, hence, be considered a socially symbolic act. As it already reads in the *Manifesto,* "world-literature" is crucially entan-

112 Cf. Joseph Vogl. "Poetik des Ökonomischen Menschen." *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* XVII. 557.
113 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 56.
114 Cf. Charles Bally. "Le Style Indirecte Libre en Français Moderne." *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*. 603.
115 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 96.
116 Jameson, *The Political* Unconscious, 138.

gled in the "world-market" which "as in material, so also in intellectual production" remakes the planet as a world for capital.[117] Instead of considering the economic and the aesthetic as autonomous spheres, the idea is that "neither is outside the materialization of the other."[118] In that sense, though, the literary is traversed by all the irreconcilabilities of the social. As a "symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic," the work of art is irreducibly encoded with a "political unconscious" that might just as well register the inherent negativity of the capitalist order.[119] Indeed, as Erich Auerbach insists, the novel-form that emerges in the 19th century already in itself presents a revolt against the hierarchies of representation encoded in the classical "Stiltrennung" by opening the realm of "serious" representation for the common people.[120] Along similar lines, Michel Foucault's *The Lives of Infamous Men* (1977) attests to the literature of the modern era an "injunction to ferret out the most nocturnal and quotidian elements of existence,"[121] as it gradually lowers the threshold of describable lives and, thereby, undermines narrative paradigms vested in histories of Great Men. There emerges a literature that acts "as a kind of symptomology" which "explains the surface by subterranean layers."[122] Herein, the Situationist International recognizes the avant-gardist impulse to challenge all evidentialities and to estrange or defamiliarize the sign

117 Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 488; See also Schuller, *Realismus des Kapitals*, 190ff.

118 Peter Hitchcock. "Accumulating Fictions." *Representations* 126:1. 137.

119 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 63–64.

120 Cf. Erich Auerbach. "Über die ernste Nachahmung des Alltäglichen." *Geschichte und Aktualität eines Europäischen Philologen*. Karl-Heinz Barck and Martin Treml (Eds.). Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos. 451ff.

121 Michel Foucault. "Lives of Infamous Men." *Archives of Infamy*. Nany Luxon (Ed.). Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press. 83–84. He argues that literature – "determined to seek out the quotidian beneath the quotidian itself" – is connected "the discourse of 'infamy': it has the duty of saying what is most resistant to being said […]." In this, though, he notes a proximity to the shift of state power to the governance of everyday life.

122 Jacques Rancière. T*he Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. Gabriel Rockhill (Ed. & Transl.). London: Bloomsbury. 29. As in Victor Hugo, it is now the sewers that come to reveal a civilization.

systems "working on behalf of the ruling organization of life"[123] so as to make them refuse service or force the dominant culture to confess to its own voids. Literature might be a cultural form endemic to bourgeois society. But its hidden normative force may be subverted and turned against the self-certainties of capitalist relations. It proves a potential site where the structural others of modernity resurge, or perceptual shocks are unleashed against workaday life.

As a relatively new discursive mode, "this strange institution called literature" (Derrida) manifests as an acutely contradictory phenomenon. Emancipated from the cultic or socio-political functions that art traditionally performed in pre-capitalist times, aesthetic production emerges in early modernity as a separate, special sphere of society from which the ruling "distribution of the sensible" can be challenged.[124] But in the face of "the horrid laws of political economy,"[125] as already Edgar Allan Poe put it, the autonomy of literary writing and other modes of artistic expression has always been fraught with tension. Terry Eagleton, therefore, insists upon the dual role of the aesthetic in capitalist society. Literature and other arts figure at once "as a genuinely emancipatory force" and signal "a kind of 'internalised oppression'" in which the mute compulsions of capitalism are naturalized.[126] In a more dynamic way, the Situs argue that art oscillates, on the one hand, between the hijacking or transgression of hegemonic modes of representation ("détournement") and, on the other, movements of "récuperation" in which subversive aesthetics are sterilized or absorbed into the PR of commodity culture. In the dialectic of integration and negation traversing the capital-relation, literature can, thus, be considered to play a role just as well in the making as in the unmaking of the prevailing social system.

However, the conception of art as a reservoir of autonomy or anti-systemic dissent has been increasingly disputed in the last dec-

123 Situationist International. "Editorial Notes: All the King's Men." *Guy Debord and the Situationist International. Texts and Documents*. Tom McDonough (Ed. & Transl.). Cambridge/London: MIT Press. 153.

124 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9–10.

125 Edgar Allan Poe. *Essays and Reviews*. G. R. Thompson (Ed.). New York: Library of America. 211.

126 Terry Eagleton. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishers. 28.

ades of the 20th century. Analysts such as David Harvey[127] or Boltanski/Chiapello[128] consider the annexation of the avant-garde's transgressive impulses essential to the neoliberal project, first and foremost the reconstruction of capitalist work culture in response to the countercultural challenge to industrial life. Key points of reference are the infamous 1975 *Report on the Ungovernability of Democracies* by the Trilateral Commission and a follow-up report, which both suggest redirecting the "excess of democracy" expressed in the social struggles of the period toward the restauration of the legitimacy of labour relations by "replacing authoritarian management" with (seemingly) less hierarchical forms of employee participation.[129] If up until the 1960s experimental cultures inspired or participated in the revolt against capitalist monotony, paternalism, and alienation, the "artistic critique"[130] of factory-life is deemed to have lost its critical edge against the backdrop of new managerial ideologies invested in creativity, autonomy, participation, and self-fulfilment. Taking up the Situationist critique of cooption, theorists such as Ulrich Bröckling[131] or Mark Fisher therefore consider "the old struggle between *détournement* and recuperation […] to have played out."[132] Instead, to rephrase Eagleton, the emancipatory force of the aesthetic itself is regarded to have become conductive to the internalization of oppression characteristic of capitalist society.

127 Cf. David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge/Oxford: Blackwell. 37.
128 Cf. Boltanski/Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 419ff.
129 Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki. *The Crisis of Democracy. Report on the Ungovernability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press. 113; Benjamin C. Roberts, Hideaki Okamoto and George C. Lodge. "Collective Bargaining and Employee Participation in Western Europe, North America and Japan. Trilateral Task Force on Industrial Relations." *Task Force Reports: 15–1.,* New York University Press: New York. 231; Boltanski/Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 188ff.
130 Boltanski/Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 170.
131 Cf. Ulrich Bröckling. "Jenseits des kapitalistischen Realismus: Anders anders sein." *Kapitalistischer Realismus. Von der Kunstaktion zur Gesellschaftskritik*. Sighard Neckel (Ed.). Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag. 281–283.
132 Cf. Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism. Is there no Alternative?* London/New York: Verso. 9; See also Peter Bürger. *Nach der Avantgarde*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft. 10–15. According to Bürger, the contemporary scene has been alienated from the avantgarde, first, insofar the prevailing zeitgeist has consigned the idea of a revolutionary transformation to the dustbin of history and, second, concerning the trivialization of the anti-institutional thrust of the movement. The discomfort posed by the collective singular "Avantgarde" is particularly symptomatic in that regard. Dissociated from the historical context in which

5 Structural Adjustment and Antagonism in Recent Literature

There is, then, in the present conjuncture the grave suspicion that the capitalist machine downright feeds on vanguard aesthetics and theory.[133] In light of this, one of my wagers is that the vision of structural adjustment and recuperation come to coincide: Reflection on the demise of the aesthetic avantgarde turns into a *mise-en-abyme* of the waning of the political vanguard and vice versa. The turn to the representational stratagems of capital in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* is somewhat trend-setting in that regard. The financial epic precisely sets in by taking up the re-imagination of the market as the revolutionary force *par excellence*, absorbing avant-gardist subversion into the "creative destruction" wrought in the boom-and-bust cycle. My hypothesis, in that regard, is that the novella negotiates these shifts by taking on a future-is-now approach. Registering the historical relationship between finance and the tech-industry, the novella harks back to cyberspace fiction as a particularly pertinent repertoire for the representation of capital's totalizing tendencies. The introductory chapter will, therefore, first turn to some of the key scenes of cyberpunk, foremost the chief stylist of the genre William Gibson whose speculative fiction comes with the claim to compose a literature of cybernetic transformation. In tracking this lineage, I suggest that cyberpunk devises a "dream image of the neoliberal world," albeit not only insofar it is invested with "fantasies of a post-state corporate global order"[134] but to the extent it emplots the neoliberal logic of disruption and adjustment. For that purpose, *Neu-*

it emerged, the aesthetic vanguard, it seems, can only be grasped by means of its pluralization into a multiplicity of labels. Isolated motives may still resonate, but only insofar the legacy of the movement is made amenable for the marketplace of ideas and styles.

133 Jasper Bernes. *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. 35, 156. Art could pose a challenge to the wage-system insofar work "was defined as exclusive of art." When this divide waned, the critical potential of art was also put into question: "the corporate recuperation of the artistic critique used the end of art to cancel out the end of labor, developing new affective relationships to work and new psychological incentives through and as art that were able to extend rather than end labor […]."

134 Evan Calder Williams. *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*. Winchester/Washington: zero books. 17.

romancer stages cybernetics as a quintessential technology of recuperation. It dreams up a corporate internet that steers individual behaviour by billions of invisible data threads and promotes even Hayek's "non-domesticated barbarians" toward an end which is no part of their intention. By tracing the inversion of sci-fi into an anti-utopian genre, I hope to lay open a certain narrative production of alternativelessness. Coupled with a reading of Gibson's later novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003) – which registers the general commodification of life as an inherently traumatic process by narrativizing the confluence of market and science-fictional speculation – the analysis of cyberpunk will, hence, serve as an alley into the culture wars of neoliberalism.

From there, I propose casting a fresh look on *Cosmopolis* as it traces out fiat-currency as the original virtual reality. In DeLillo's fiction, we encounter a system that ostentatiously puts on show that it is no longer afraid of anti-systemic challenges. Based on this, I investigate the ways *Cosmopolis* engages in a representation of the conditions of possibility of the "end of history" ideologeme and makes it emerge as an objective representational effect rooted in the mortgaging of the future at the heart of finance. The text interrogates what abstraction itself represents.[135] It is, here, specifically where the novella's debt to cyberpunk comes into play, because it relates the experience of de-materialization conveyed by the genre to a dwarfing of the subject which is irreducibly positioned at the "Edge of the Construct"[136] while the social totality retreats from view. According to my reading, *Cosmopolis* evinces that the neoliberal figure of the market as a subjectless process is potentiated in its effects by finance's spectacle of abstraction. Revising the fantasies of "wholeness" implicated in the making of the economy, it situates cyberpunk in a bubble culture that plugs the plot holes in the supposed "end of history." On this basis, I suggest that *Cosmopolis* recommends an approach to the field of contemporary literature which investigates the relationship that creative writing entertains to the larger imaginary of the economy. Situating itself at the crossroads of literary fiction and

135 Cf. Leigh Claire La Berge. "Rules of Abstraction." *Radical History Review.* 118.
136 Joshua Clover. *The Matrix*. London: bfi Publishing. 8.

financial speculation, it forces readers to look into the immanent aesthetics of the economic system.

At once, I want to carve out through the example of *Cosmopolis* – a period-defining text of early 21st century American literature – in how far a critical aesthetic can itself reproduce the internal mythologies of capitalist economics. My aim is to show how the subversion of the epistemology of efficient markets in DeLillo's novella is expressed in a jargon of "constitutional ignorance"[137] reminiscent of Hayek. In challenging a certain econometric "pretence of knowledge,"[138] that is, the critical perspective offered by the text ultimately risks encasing crisis away from explanation and affirming the neoliberal removal of the economy from intervention. The circulation of neoliberal rationales in one of the most canonical texts of recent American literature is of course striking. However, it indexes a continuum of writing between literature and finance that traces back to the 1980s when key debates concerning the representability of stock-exchange occurred in mainstream outlets of the financial press:

> as the descriptions and representations of finance circulated through financial print culture [e. g. *Wall Street Journal*], and as financial print culture was represented in different aesthetic modes and remediated back into itself through reviews […] both finance and the spaces of its representation were transformed.[139]

But if there is a case for the participation of literature in the mythologies of finance, there is also an argument to subject the neoliberal period's policy-making vernacular itself to a "literary enquiry."[140] Across

137 Friedrich August von Hayek. "Individualism: True and False." *Individualism and Economic Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 32.
138 Friedrich A. von Hayek. "The Pretence of Knowledge." *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*. F. A. Hayek (Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
139 Leigh Claire La Berge. *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 11, 14.
140 Ian Bruff and Kathryn Starnes. "Framing the Neoliberal Canon." *Globalizations* 16:3. 246.

my analysis, I propose to upset the presumed "division of knowledge"[141] between literary writing and economics by probing the operational aesthetics of the marketplace. Not least, since the importance to read the "neoliberals themselves" almost imposes itself, if one wants to avoid dressing up a strawman version of neoliberalism that not only misses the mark but fails to reckon "with the contributions of neoliberals themselves to the categories of our criticism."[142]

Throughout, my readings will therefore be interspersed by excurses into the self-described neo/ordoliberal tradition from the Chicago (e.g., Gary Becker, Milton Friedman), Vienna (e.g., Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich A. von Hayek), or Freiburg School (e.g., Walter Eucken, Franz Böhm). Albeit my attention will primarily lie on Hayek whose fusion of cybernetics and neo-classical economics most distinctively articulates a genuine aesthetics of the market. In that vein, I aim to work out a certain "aesthetic contemporaneity"[143] in literary fiction, culture, economics and social theory that already can be observed in the recirculation of key neoliberal dogma such as "creative destruction," "there is no society," or "there is no alternative" across these discursive forms. It follows from this that I want to tie in the issue of representability with the consideration of literary praxis as a socially symbolic act. That is, I wish to disentangle some of the feedback circuits of neoliberal culture and ascertain the proximities between the proper aesthetic exploits of a neoliberal project mired in a semantics of adjustment and an assertedly critical aesthetic that is always on the verge of becoming "a mirror of the power it describes."[144]

The middle part of this study, which crucially circles around the prose of Kathrin Röggla, will pick up from here as I argue that the Austrian writer traces a culture of crisis-management that promotes the individualization of risk into a sort of second nature and pervades even the deep structures of language. The short-story volume *die alarmbe-*

141 Friedrich A. von Hayek. "Economics and Knowledge." *Economica. New Series 4. 50.*
142 Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian. "Reading Like Neoliberals." *American Literary History*. 10, 11.
143 Brian McHale. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London: Routledge. 225.
144 Jean Baudrillard. *Forget Foucault*. Nicole Dufresne (Transl.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 30.

reiten tracks the diffusion of the motif of adaptation into daily life, such that traces of it can be found in settings or discourses that are *prima facie* about very different things. In that regard, Röggla's work can be related to Mark Fisher's quintessential account of the "end of history" in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), which precisely does not figure neoliberalism as a "coherent discourse" but weaves through "numerous cultural products"[145] to comprehend the current-day naturalization of capital's mute compulsions. Similarly, in my opinion, Röggla does not necessarily look for structural adjustment "being mentioned directly or tangentially."[146] It points to its infusion into ordinary language and the narrative schemas of expert discourses. The critical impetus of her work consists in revising the contemporary ubiquity of risk discourses all while resisting the narrative compartmentalization that is at once undertaken by dividing this looming threat-environment into separate contingencies dealt with *in medias res*. Taking to task the shipwreck of diagnostic tools wherein structural realities dissolve into "dunkelziffer[n],"[147] Röggla instead compiles these special crises into a panoramic "meta-crisis" narrative that tries to establish the underlying nexus of these disaster scenarios. By curating the vernacular of crisis-management, *die alarmbereiten* echoes *Cosmopolis*' engagement with the market's technologies of representation. Tracing a condition of steady adjustment, it depicts a sort of linguistic overproduction that – analogous to the mechanisms of bailout – intends to close the gaps in the capitalist status quo. At once, however, her prose registers the merger of neoliberal re-adjustment with nationalist fears of decline.

The chapter concluding this study turns to the oeuvre of Fiston Mwanza Mujila which inflects current crisis discourses through a sub-Saharan history of dispossession and exploitation. Scrutinizing the "language of black holes and failed states, of a fall out of history"[148] that underpins much developmental policy debates in the neoliberal era, it is foremost the author's debut *Tram 83* which interests me in that

145 Suman Gupta. "Crisis of the Novel and the Novel of Crisis." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*. 464–465.
146 Gupta, "Novel of Crisis," 465.
147 Röggla, "draußen tobt die dunkelziffer," 254.
148 Fredric Jameson. *Valences of Dialectic*. New York: Verso. 578.

regard. The novel confronts the epistemic challenge posed by the interface of neoliberalism and the postcolonial condition by bringing into view an extraction enclave that might well be described as a risk-society on steroids in that it is fully placed within the volatilities of global price markets and, at once, gives a necro-economic twist to the neoliberal regime of precarity documented in *Cosmopolis* and *die alarmbereiten*. Through my reading, therefore, I hope to retrace in how far Mujila's writing reflects on capitalist globalization from the standpoint of extraction in sub-Saharan Africa. Concerned with the invisible links of global capitalism, *Tram 83* brings forward the morbid underside of today's economy in the form of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's deeply antagonistic position in the world-market: the resource wealth of the DRC has been essential to every wave of industrialization, all while it remains one of the five poorest countries on the planet. Against this backdrop, my reading will establish that *Tram 83* figures the context of post-independence as a laboratory for the program of structural re-adjustment. As a consequence, the novel conjures the *longue durée* of imperialist domination and probes the legacies of anti-colonialism, be it Antillean critical theory from Frantz Fanon to Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant or the contentious memory of Patrice Lumumba who served as the first prime minister of the DRC. *Tram 83* interrogates the crushed memory of what one of the protagonists repeatedly calls the "Afrique des Possibles" – the futures of an anti-colonial project that did not come to happen. Through the historical vicissitudes of the mining frontier, the text traces the dialectics of revolution and counter-revolution at work in liberation struggles, which veritably haunt the scene of action like a "construction […] inachevée"[149] as is repeated time and again. In that vein, *Tram 83* refuses to "abandon the past" and challenges the temporal politics of structural adjustment with its "dream of the clean slate."[150] The text can be seen to accumulate the origin stories circulated in neoliberal policy debates – headmost the so-called "resource curse" thesis dominating talks on extractionism in the Global

149 Fiston Mwanza Mujila. *Tram 83*. Paris: Édition Métailié. 13.
150 Naomi Klein. *The Shock-Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism.* New York: Metropolitan Books. 374.

South – against which it erects a refrain-like structure of repetition that resists the historical *tabula rasa* carried out by shock-therapy. The novel crafts a necro-aesthetics, as I term it, that brings into the open the economic warfare wrought by structural adjustment and simultaneously defies the neo-colonial erasure of history by accruing the unrealized utopian energies of past struggles.

The works of DeLillo, Röggla, and Mujila – writers who at first seem unrelated but prove connected via innumerable threads – provide a constellation through which to probe the field of recent literature and its insertion into the current capitalist moment. Indeed, my triangulation of these authors is underwritten by an attempt to "make history appear" in and through literary form, which, as Jameson and Lesjak put it, is itself a critical act in a context marked by a waning sense of historicity.[151] Against the prevailing totalization of capital's recuperative powers, a key aspect of literary criticism would, then, consist in undoing the reification of the short-term. Such "immediatism" – confined to intervene *in media res* – might be an understandable "reaction to crisis" but this "reflex […] is ultimately crisis-continuous."[152] My focus in this study, therefore, lies on literary articulations that try to "remediate immediacy."[153] For that reason, it is a certain representation of representation that intrigues me: the literary negotiation of the apparatuses of representation whereby the illegibility of capital, the foreclosure of antagonism, and the waning of history is facilitated. In one way or another, DeLillo, Röggla, or Mujila envisage the "war on totality"[154] that complements the neoliberal assault on the infrastructures of social life. For that "there's no such thing as society," as Margareth Thatcher infamously postulated, not only erases society from the realm of rep-

151 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 528, 585; Carolyn Lesjak. "Reading Dialectically." *Criticism* 55:2. 233.

152 Anna Kornbluh. *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso. 18. Lesja cites an acute example: "the meaning of the Abu Ghraib images […] are far from 'obvious, transparent, and there for the taking.'" The truth of these pictures is not "readily available on the surface." This violence, too, "require[s] interpretation" to avoid decoupling it from the larger apparatus that facilitated the torture. (Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," 246)

153 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 22.

154 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 400.

resentation. It also summarizes capital's readiness "to destroy society to continue as capital."[155] This peculiar confluence will be elaborated across all chapters. But it will also be the subject of a proper, intermediate chapter – an interlude – in which I precisely will try to read from literature to neoliberal theory and back.

In any case, my wager is that recent literature helps describe neoliberalism as the social form out of which the authoritarian acceleration of the 2020s emerges. Whether this formation has reached or might reach a critical threshold across that decade so as to require a new name remains an open question and cannot yet be answered definitively. For that reason, this study prefers to focus on the prehistory of the present by confronting key literary touchstones of the 2000s and 2010s and engaging in a detour into the early phase of neoliberalism by way of cyberpunk (which spells out much of the fantasies that the tech-right abides to). DeLillo's prose, negotiating the many smaller crises of the 1990s and early 2000s, precipitates the big recession that hit capitalist economies at the end of the decade. In Röggla, again, security discourses and economic risk-management merge, adumbrating the permutation of national security thinking in the War on Terror into calls for de-risking from world-market vulnerabilities. And Mujila has much to teach when it comes to the critical representation of "structural adjustment" as the chainsaw reforms of late apply "Shock and Awe" tactics to the capitalist cores. This study, then, follows an implicit narrative arc through which I hope to foreground a certain cultural production of alternativelessness that is essential to the neoliberal project, and which is inseparable from the now-dominant presumption of capitalism's irrepresentability. The vernacular of permacrisis curated throughout my readings will therefore mediate between literary representation and capitalist self-descriptions. My objective consists in tracing the metastasis of structural adjustment into a ubiquitous "recognizable aesthetic form," as one may put it with La Berge, who urges that "finance capital is not a process without a subject, and it is in the space of representation

155 Loren Goldner. "Revolution or Recomposition." *Insurgent Notes* 1. https://libcom.org/article/historical-moment-produced-us-global-revolution-or-recomposition-capital-loren-goldner [last accessed 05.02.2023].

and culture that its effects are amplified, contested, and, indeed, made efficacious."[156] By reading from the novelistic expressions at hand to the larger neoliberal context, the present study wishes to get on the track of "a cultural and theoretical 'bubble' which has yet to burst"[157] and to work through the neoliberal imbrication of our categories of critique.

In that respect, the texts constellated in this study raise the problem of representability as an essential site of political struggle. They turn literary discourse – via the short-circuiting of structural adjustment and recuperation – into a site where a more general crisis of critique is acted out: "a battle fought yesterday over the promises of emancipation and the illusions and disillusions of history continue today on aesthetic terrain."[158] It seems to me, therefore, that the place of critical literary theory consists in salvaging articulations and cultivating reading practices that challenge this topsy-turvy world by insisting on the holes in the whole. In tracking the mutual implications of economics and literature, it is thus not my intention to equate the two. On the contrary, the present analysis is precisely concerned with the ways literature registers, accentuates, displaces, or conceals the antagonistic logic of the current capitalist compact.

As a matter of fact, a key assumption of this enquiry is that critical literature today is occupied with resisting the historical forgetfulness induced by the "clean slates" and reactionary intensifications of structural adjustment. From the vision of techno-oligarchic takeover anticipated in cyberpunk fiction and the sociopathic fantasies of "creative destruction" spelled out in DeLillo's finance novella, up through the mixture of right-populist and crisis-management rhetoric dissected in

156 La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction*, 14.

157 Benjamin Noys. "Apocalypse, Tendency, Crisis." *Mute*. https://www.eurozine.com/apocalypse-tendency-crisis/ [last accessed 27.03.2026].

158 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 3–4. According to Rancière, it is Jean-François Lyotard's work that illustrates most pointedly "the way in which 'aesthetics' has become, in the last twenty years, the privileged site where the tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning. The reinterpretation of the Kantian analysis of the sublime […] make[s] art a witness to an encounter with the unrepresentable that cripples all thought […]. In this way, reflection on art became the site where a mise-en-scène of the original abyss of thought and the disaster of its misrecognition continued after the proclamation of the end of political utopias."

Röggla's *die alarmbereiten*, to the panorama of global commodity wars that emerges in Mujila's work and other Congolese literature: my study makes readable the neoliberal project as a program of restauration that mutates and becomes more authoritarian along an ongoing effort to encase the capitalist order from mass democracy and make it whole again. In financial jargon, the term "make-whole" refers to compensating a party, typically a creditor or bondholder, for a loss. It is a technical mechanism of reparation that means to restore the affected party to the economic position they would have occupied had the original agreement been honored in full. But the expression carries a semantic implication that transcends its immediate transactional use. Evoking the idea of a state of balance, it encapsulates more than indemnification. It gestures to (neo)liberal ideologies of equilibrium and the idea of "healing" ruptures in the economic fabric to render it functional and trustworthy again. This study explores literary counterpoints to these narratives of wholeness, homeostasis, and inevitability. Of course, the differentiation between a critical aesthetic of capitalism and a properly capitalist aesthetic that represents the world as a world for capital is always a tightrope walk.[159] If the work of historicization is indispensable, there is therefore also no way around close reading. Using the hole/whole couplet as a heuristic, the following chapters examine how certain strands of recent literature negotiate the production of alternativelessness all while insisting on the "persistence of the negative"[160] in contemporary aesthetics. To coin a catchy phrase, I aim to investigate literary strategies that make capitalism ()hole again.

159 Cf. Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 182. See also Marx, Capital Vol. I, 741; La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction*, 28. Following La Berge, one might, here, also think of what Marx calls the "expenses of representation" implicated in making the world amenable to the logic of profit.

160 Benjamin Noys. *The Persistence of the Negative. A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 162ff.

II "Order is Adjustment": The Narrative Production of Alternativelessness

> "You know what capitalism produces. According to Marx and Engels." "Its own grave-diggers," he said. "But these are not the grave-diggers. This is the free market. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside. […] The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system."
>
> — DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 89–90.

This conversation ensues approximately halfway through Don DeLillo's infamous 2003 finance epic *Cosmopolis*. It takes place between the presumed protagonist of the novella, the 28-year-old multi-billionaire investor Eric Packer, and his market analyst Vija Kinski, while caught with a limousine in a traffic jam caused by a rioting and ad-busting mass that "loos[es] battalions of rats in restaurants and lobbies" inspired by a line from Zbigniew Herbert's 1983 *Report from a Besieged City*: "A RAT BECAME THE UNIT OF CURRENCY."[1] The scene comes after a longer elaboration on the fateful merger of "technology and capital. The inseparability"[2] in contemporary financial markets, where it seems as if "money [were] talking to itself" – autonomous, detached, free-floating – creating abstract "wealth for its own sake," unconcerned with the "borders of perception" as it moves in "nanosecond[s]," "zeptoseconds," "Yoctoseconds. One septillionth of a second."[3] Switching between the internal monologue of the billionaire investor reminiscing about the

1 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 89, 97; Zbigniew Herbert. "Report from the Besieged City." *Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*. John & Bogdana Carpanter (Transl.). New York: Ecco.

2 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 23.

3 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79.

"pure power" of economic "forecasting" and on/off dialogues with a changing cast of characters, be it his wife, an affair, his security chief, or his "chief of theory," this episode is embedded in a larger historical narrative that projects "cyber-capital" not only as the highest, most abstract form of capital – "now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world" – but a disruptive, ontological force that is "effectively making history" as "time" has turned into "a corporate asset now."[4]

The quote in question leads us immediately into the curious financial epistemology that has been identified as the novella's core motif in the introduction. Bringing together visions of "recuperation" and "structural adjustment" by emplotting the neoliberal concept of "creative destruction," it situates the reduction of anti-capitalist struggle to a market-generated fantasy in a historically-specific form of knowledge production that crafts capital as a historical totalizer. In the following, then, I want to explore how *Cosmopolis* represents capital's apparent reconciliation with its inner crisis tendencies such that it appears as an "eerie" agency capable of "exert[ing] more influence than any allegedly substantial entity."[5]

It is fitting, in this sense, that the novella again and again invokes economic abstractions in terms of a religious vocabulary. Financial "data" appears "soulful and glowing" to the stock-exchange trader, as it articulates a "digital imperative that define[s] every breath of the planet's living billions."[6] By "touting" or "blessing" certain stocks, the market is supposed to call entire strata of reality into being.[7] Betting on the exchange rate of the Japanese Yen, Eric Packer frantically exclaims that "[i]t's cyber-capital that creates the future" – a future which according to him, or rather the algorithms monitoring high-frequency trading, "is always a wholeness, a sameness."[8] But "[w]hat is happening" in these abstract realms "doesn't chart"[9] as the currency analyst of Packer Capi-

4 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79, 82, 78, 24, 75.
5 Mark Fisher. *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books. 11.
6 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 24.
7 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 75.
8 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79, 91.
9 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 21.

tal puts it. The enigmatic ways of financial trade are not depicted in any direct, tangible way but appear always-already mediated via technical interfaces that propose to map the "wholeness" of market price fluctuations. As readers, we are merely left with representations of "techniques of charting" employed to track finance capital: ticker monitors and screens that assume an "affinity between market movements and the natural world" as they purport to predict the "foreseeable trends" of price markets or "the movements of money itself."[10] In these 3rd order abstractions, which collapse the data streams of "[f]inancial news, stock prices, currency markets" into two-dimensional "figural diagrams," the performance of financial value appears "knowable and whole."[11] The digital aesthetics of finance capital are portrayed to materialize a naturalizing ideology that offers less a representation than a redoubling of financial abstraction. Inscribed with fantasies of self-regulating markets, the "techniques of charting" traversed in the finance novella are depicted as technologies of invisibility that foreclose the structural instabilities – the holes in the whole – haunting the fetishization of cyber-capital as a totalizing, posthuman entity.

In fact, this movement of foreclosure seems to me a key reading experience regarding *Cosmopolis*. Throughout, the text is fraught with indices of urban breakdown, news of lethal violence, or signifiers of anti-capitalist resistance appearing at the edges of Packer's mobile office as he is chauffeured through Manhattan in a high-risk ride that is slowly but surely caught up with by the economic and political ramifications of bursting speculation bubbles. There is the assassination of the director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the murder of a Russian oligarch, or a bomb explosion near an investment bank. Eric Packer himself falls victim to a pie attack early on and, eventually, is killed by the hands of a former employee. Meanwhile, the novella repeatedly testifies to the struggle between residual and emerging forms of capital exchange. It contrasts, for instance, the digital trade in currencies to Manhattan's "diamond district" with its supposed bartering in hard metals instilling in Packer the sense of New York's "Lower East

10 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 86, 85, 75.
11 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 80, 24.

Side of the 1920s."[12] The car trip time and again passes the "[e]nforced destruction" wrought by capital which is paraphrased as follows by Vija Kinski: "New markets have to be forcibly claimed."[13] Throughout, the accumulation of capital is, thus, made to appear as a disruptive process that violently produces the conditions for further market expansion. More than once, this is expressed with recourse to a vocabulary of wastepipes that casts the abstractions of finance in a language quite different from the religious aura enveloping the interfaces of speculation: "The force of cyber-capital that will send people into the gutter to retch and die."[14] In this sense, the text represents the production of obsolescence as the negative, the unseen structural violence, of capital's apparent free-floating self-expansion. There are, therefore, good reasons to read *Cosmopolis*, taking a formulation from the novella itself, as a "book[] about holes"[15] and the ideological representations blocking access to the contradictions generated by the profit-system. Bringing into view "the negativity that capitalism simultaneously produces and forecloses,"[16] the novella's narrative edifice enacts a dynamic of withdrawal and reappropriation that purports to recreate a dynamic inherent to the accumulation process itself.

This is the in-text context of the quote prefacing this chapter. *Cosmopolis* unfolds a kind of "end of history" narrative that is modelled after the inverted, speculative temporality of financial accumulation. Cyber-capital is imagined as a real science-fiction that "becomes insistent"[17] in the present by mortgaging the offshoots of future production. Under this assumption, the demonstrators seem to be up against a quasi-transcendental force, engaging in "a protest against the future" that futilely attempts to "keep it from overwhelming the present."[18] Observing the proceedings via a set of TV screens while sitting in an armoured vehicle, Packer is enabled to consume this event like a spectacle ("He

12 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 64.
13 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 92–93.
14 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*,. 90.
15 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 190.
16 Samo Tomšič. *The Capitalist Unconscious. Marx and Lacan*. London/New York: Verso. 5.
17 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79.
18 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 91.

was enjoying it"), all while glorifying himself as an *Übermensch* figure that descends like an "astronaut" upon an alien "planet of pure flatus."[19] In this vein, readers are led to acknowledge the second-handedness of the protests: "It's not an original."[20] Even the self-immolation of a man, after a moment of hesitation, is perceived as "an appropriation."[21] The multi-billionaire asset manager and his chief of theory proceed to invert the communist vocabulary of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves in that the so-called gravedigger of capital – the proletariat: supposed to incarnate the negation of class society – is reconceptualized as a false antagonistic subject that merely acts out the disruptive, self-renewal of the system. Eventually, the faint sound of a "specter haunting the world," which resonates again and again throughout the episode in question ("voices out of sync, shouting something about *a specter*"), is not rounded off with the expected invocation of communism but later revealed to be "THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM,"[22] driving out any premonition of its systemic rival. From the standpoint of Packer and his business analyst, there is hence "something theatrical about the protests,"[23] which are allusively modelled after the alter-globalization movement that took the stage in the 1999 Seattle WTO protests or the G8 protests in Genoa 2001 with their horizontal forms of urban struggle. Indeed, they go so far to categorize the alter-globalist challenge to capitalist unipolarity in terms of a cathartic release, "a form of systemic hygiene," as they absolutize capital's "ability to shape itself to its own flexible ends, absorbing everything around it," while blending out the system of violence that puts them at a safe distance in the first place, as it ensures that another world remains impossible.[24]

19 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 89, 96.
20 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 100.
21 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 100.
22 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 89, 74,
23 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 99.
24 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 99.

1 Financialization and "End of History" Narratives

Against that background, this episode, in fact, appears as a sort of theoretical-literary scene that captures something of a broader consensus operating in artistic and sociological representations of recent capitalism: "The market culture is total"[25] as Packer's business analyst claims. If one follows Maurizio Lazzarato, this quasi-ontological statement constitutes the essential "storytelling"[26] element of the "end of history" narrative that has persisted in social thinking at the very latest since the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in 1989–91. Sure enough, the first name that comes to mind, in that regard, is the author of *The End of History* (1992) himself, Francis Fukuyama. Yet, there is also a "post-sixty-eight version of the 'end of history'"[27] that resonates in DeLillo's academized dialogue and largely predates the capitalist teleology intoned by the liberal-conservative philosopher. The dismissal of the gravediggers of capitalism in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* recalls the programmatic *Adieu au Prolétariat* (1980) uttered by André Gorz and other post-Marxist theorists of the period, who under the impression of a de-industrializing economy declared the crisis of revolutionary theory (e.g., Stefan Breuer) or the end of class struggle as a political strategy *tout court* (e.g., Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe).[28] That in mind, it is fair to say that the quote from DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* preluding this chapter remediates an ide-

25 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 90.

26 Maurizio Lazzarato. *Capital Hates Everyone. Fascism or Revolution*. Robert Hurley (Transl.). South Pasadena: Semiotext(e). 200.

27 Lazzarato, *Capital Hates Everyone*, 154.

28 Though the most brutal inversion of "The Desire Named Marx" probably came from Jean-Francois Lyotard, who in his self-allegedly "evil book" *Libidinal Economy* (1974) breaks with his militant past as a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1949–1967) by rendering the "alienation" of the "capitalist labourer" as a source of enjoyment. (cf. Jean-François Lyotard. *Peregrinations, Law, Form, Event*. New York: Columbia University Press. 13) The proletarian subject, he claims, desires its "investment in the system as such." It makes "the *desire of capital*" its own: "the English unemployed did not become workers to survive, they – hang on tight and spit on me – *enjoyed* [*ils ont joui de*] the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of *hanging on* in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolution of their families

ologeme that is intrinsic to the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism in the late 20th century. The novel spells out the broad lines of a certain narrative production of alternativelessness, wherein an ever-more abstract capital – capable of absorbing any serious antagonisms – is plotted as the exclusive mover of history via a narrative appropriation of the past that re-defines the "historical failure of an 'alternative'" as an "always-already failed alternative."[29] The sense that resistance is a market-driven fantasy, uttered by Kinski, gives expression to the idea that capital has come to enshrine itself as the "quasi cause"[30] of history.

But, as cautions Alenka Zupančič, this "realist image" of capital's pre-emptive powers must itself be taken as an "appearance […] whose realism is part of the image."[31] By its very realism, this narrative of the false act – the assertion that there is no and never was an alternative to capitalism – blocks "access to the gap that the principle of power relies on for its functioning."[32] Tracing the ideological representation of "cyber-capital" as a "wholeness," *Cosmopolis* is constantly pervaded by the question as to whether there is no "outside." The text interrogates in how far the tale of precorporation precisely constitutes a narrative production of powerlessness that fills in the gaps in the appearance of cyber-capital. It is in this vein that I propose to read the novella as a traversal of what Samo Tomšič terms the "logic of fantasy" inhering the capitalist mode of production, namely "the fictional hypothesis of a subject without negativity."[33] As the novel suggests, the abstractness of finance gives way to a capital fetish in which the multiplication of money appears autonomous from the rest of society. Take Packer whose speculations on the Yen are driven by a naturalizing ideology

and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous *anonymity* of the suburbs and the pubs in the morning and evening." (Jean-François Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*. Iain Hamilton Grant (Transl.). Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 110–112)

29 Alenka Zupančič. "Power in the Closet (and its coming out)." *Lacan, Psychoanalysis and Comedy*. Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkohler (Eds.). New York: Cambridge University Press. 222.

30 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Robert Hurley et al. (Transl.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 10.

31 Zupančič, "Power in the Closet," 229.

32 Zupančič, "Power in the Closet," 229.

33 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 5.

that views the ups and downs of currency rates in the homeostatic terms of self-calibrating markets, blanking out the instabilities of financial exchange in his idealist representation of money flows. In this sense, DeLillo does not merely represent the stock-market in terms of dematerialization. Rather, he accounts for the ideological phantasmagorias secreted by (finance/cyber) capital.

2 Representing Capital's Technologies of Representation

For that purpose, the novella curates an expansive vernacular of finance whereby it establishes "correspondences between discourse and history without settling into direct historical referentiality."[34] In this, it notably negotiates the "hyperanalyzing"[35] surrounding the infamous 1996 speech by Alan Greenspan on the dot-com boom, especially his invocation of an "irrational exuberance" on markets that might "unduly escalat[e]"[36] into an asset value bubble driven by the stock market launch of enterprises such as Yahoo! or Cisco. This becomes particularly clear during a conversation in the first half of the book on "a rumor […] involving the finance minister […] about a misconstrued comment" that has triggered unrest among investors, who now engage in a close hermeneutics of the "grammar and syntax of this comment."[37] The bubble dynamics of finance find themselves mirrored in a literary language that reflects upon a "financialization of discourse" in which minuscule utterances may become the site of "a speculative overabundance of signification."[38] Another example of this kind can be found in Packer's seemingly spontaneous urge to "get a haircut,"[39] re-calling Wall Street jargon for measuring the market spread of an asset, that drives him through New York to visit his boyhood hair salon. Along the way, he

34 Alison Shonkwiler. *The Financial Imaginary. Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press. 95.
35 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 94.
36 Greenspan, *The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society*, Online.
37 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 47–48.
38 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 94–95.
39 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 7.

stumbles upon the collateral costs of the speculative fervour that has taken hold of foreign exchange. The hit that he takes on the market by betting against the Yen materializes in real-time in the loss of his limousine and the death of his security staff. The plotline, if you will, concretizes abstract financial terminology.

The most notorious piece of financial discourse repurposed in the novella, though, is encapsulated in the apocryphal spectre-of-capital-slogan chanted by protesters, who unwittingly repeat former U.S. Treasury functionary Larry Summer's paraphrase of the *Communist Manifesto* on the occasion of the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis: "[A] spectre is haunting the world's governments: that of the global capital market whose advances they cannot resist, whose sudden rejections they cannot survive […]."[40] Taking up this displacement of the "Red Scare" by financial power, DeLillo seems to dissect in the speech of executive economics an affirmation of the disruptiveness of capital movements which do not accord with national development plans. *Cosmopolis*, thus, re-circulates some of the major language events of 1990s economic history to make them serve as key descriptors of the period, insofar they disclose an economic discourse beset by a tacit knowledge of capitalism's crisis-ridden dynamics.

Owing to these short-circuits between expert idioms and narrative fiction, *Cosmopolis* veritably reads like a theory buzz novella. This is not always favourably remarked upon by critics. Some, in fact, fear the diminishment of literature. For instance, John Updike stresses the alienated communicativity of DeLillo's characters who "spout smart, swift essays at one another."[41] Albeit with less critical intent, Johannes Voelz, too, observes that "the device of the 'chief of theory' pushes this tendency to self-reflexive extremes."[42] By contrast, Shonkwiler argues that "*Cosmopolis* becomes considerably more interesting when we treat it as an experiment in form" that interrogates the "adequacies of our

40 Lawrence H. Summers. "Go With the Flow." *Financial Times* 03/11/1998.
41 John Updike. "One-Way Street." *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/31/one-way-street [last accessed 01.09.2022].
42 Johannes Voelz. "In the Future, Toward Death: Finance Capitalism and Security in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." *Finance and Society* 4:1. 83.

representations of capitalism in its dimensions and effects"[43] precisely by way of such found signifiers or ideologemes. My emphasis, here, is a similar one. The quasi-theoretical nature of the text is precisely the point. *Cosmopolis* takes seriously economics as a form of "*enacted theory*"[44] and, hence, an operational aesthetics that bets on the adjustment of reality to speculative market models. In recirculating post-industrial monetary theories and the "end of history" subvarieties ("Information Age," "New Economy," etc.) *en vogue* around the turn of the millennium, the novella proposes to traverse the ideological hypotheses animating financial markets in the neoliberal era. The novella, I want to argue, suggests that the way to get to the abstract rule of (cyber-)capital is via a representation of representation, be it the economic theorems which rule financial practices, or the "logic of fantasy" materialized in the operating systems of trade, production, and the stock-market.

Under this aspect, it becomes particularly interesting to consider the novella as a period work. As a matter of fact, *Cosmopolis* seems to engage in a veritable "novelization of recent history."[45] Interestingly situated between the 2000 dot-com crash and the financial crisis of 2007–09, it "recognize[s] the present as historical," [46] especially concerning the distinctive politics of time marking this peculiar era. In this, the finance epic seems to express the sense of "a late historical condition."[47] It is, of course, true, as notes Peter Boxall, that "DeLillo's entire oeuvre is shaped […] by his dramatization of a historical passage, throughout the post-war decades of the twentieth century, towards a looming apoc-

43 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 98.

44 Joseph Vogl. *Kapital und Ressentiment. Eine kurze Theorie der Gegenwart*. München: C.H. Beck. 47; Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, x. In his book on the cultural logic of late capitalism, Jameson notes that one of the "striking features" of this constellation consists in "the way in which, in it, a whole range of tendential analyses of hitherto very different kinds – economic forecasts, marketing studies, culture critiques, new therapies, the (generally official) jeremiad about drugs or permissiveness, reviews of art shows or national film festivals, religious 'revivals' or cults have all coalesced into a new discursive genre, which we might as well call 'postmodernism theory.'"

45 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 93.

46 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 93.

47 Peter Boxall. *Twenty-First-Century Fiction. A Critical Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 23.

alypse"[48] – literalized in the Cold War nuclear wastelands figuring in the epilogue of his 1997 maximalist novel *Underworld*.[49] Yet, in *Cosmopolis* and DeLillo's other works of the 2000s, he observes a shift away from the "exterminist"[50] logic of the atomic age towards a preoccupation with the abstract "texture of the contemporary real," emerging modes of posthuman "embodiment,"[51] and the "otherworldly temporality"[52] of a crisis-prone financial system in steady re-adjustment. There is a different "sense of an ending"[53] tied to the inverted and disruptive temporal regime of a bubble economy that mines the future to compensate for liquidity squeezes in the present. It is in this vein, as I have delineated so far, that the novella purports to bring forward a certain "metanarrative […] of the financial era," namely the fetishization of cyber-capital "as an historical agent"[54] that feeds on crisis and assimilates all opposition.

In this, DeLillo's work is underwritten by a peculiar future-is-now approach. It is driven by the idea that cyber-capital is no longer the object of science-fiction but "invades the present from the future."[55] To

48 Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 23.
49 Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 23, 27.
50 E.P. Thompson. "Notes on Exterminism, The Last Stage of Civilization." *New Left Review* 1:121. 3–31.
51 Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 9–10.
52 Boxall takes the notion of an "otherworldly temporality" from Paul Virilio. *Open Sky*. Julie Rose (Transl.). London/New York: Verso. 4.
53 Frank Kermode. *Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 98.
54 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 93.
55 Nick Land. "Machinic Desire." *Textual Practice* 7:8. 479–480. This formulation is taken from Nick Land, whose theoretical edifice is characterized by a grim synthesis of techno music, SF and idiosyncratic readings of Deleuze/Guattari into a radical apology of capital that pits the disintegrating dynamics of the market against the stagnations of state-planned economies. In this regard, socialism appears as nothing but a "nostalgic diatribe against underdeveloped capitalism." In his account, real capitalism has never been tried: "Only proto-capitalism has ever been critiqued." Hence, capitalist productive forces must be liberated from state regulations to unleash their full potential: "Machinic revolution," as Land calls it in a selective reading of Deleuze/Guattari, should "press towards ever more uninhibited marketization of the processes that are tearing down the social field, 'still further' with the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization.'" As far as he is concerned, "'one can never go far enough in the direction of deterritorialization: you haven't seen anything yet.'" His philosophy, thus, is founded in a cultish invocation of a purified capitalism that desires the complete and utter immersion of the social into a "planetary technocapital singularity." Unsurprisingly, Land's advocacy for the anti-humanism of capital resonates strongly with the axiomatics of neoliberal economics, which similarly invoke the higher

map the profound changes in the nature of abstraction, labour, subjectivity, and the meaning of capitalist crisis that transpire in its vicinities, the text, therefore, turns to the "semiotic ghosts"[56] of cyberpunk. It, thus, suggests itself to read the narrativization of cyber-capital in *Cosmopolis* through the prism of the anti-utopian turn of late 20th century SF. Indeed, it is particularly the aesthetics of cyberpunk that has captivated the imagination of high-tech capitalism since the late 1970s and early 1980s despite its historically particular context of emergence. Pioneered in blockbuster films à la *Blade Runner* (1982), manga such as *Akira* (1982) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1989–1991), or in the contributions of John Shirley, Bruce Bethke,[57] and Bruce Sterling[58] to the magazine *Cheap Truth*, the imagery of technology, finance, and corporate futurity elaborated in the work of the cyberpunks has proven extremely persistent.[59] However, it is William Gibson's classic *Neuromancer* – introducing notions such as "cyberspace" or the "matrix" into popular discourse –

artificial intelligence of the market to argue for a break with the Keynesian mixed economy. Since, Land has turned into a far-right influencer who re-mixes libertarian critiques of democracy with the idea of racial differences in intelligence into a neo-reactionary ideology that views the Elon Musk-led colonization of Mars as the great filtering process of humanity.

56 Peio Aguirre. "Semiotic Ghosts: Science-fiction and Historicism." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 28. 125.

57 The term 'cyberpunk' itself was coined by a science-fiction story of the same name written by Bruce Bethke.

58 Cf. Bruce Sterling. "Introduction." *Mirror Shades. The Cyberpunk Anthology*. New York: Ace. x. Bruce Sterling argues that the "work of the cyberpunks is paralleled throughout the Eighties pop culture: in rock video; in the hacker underground; in the jarring street tech of hip-hop and scratch music; in the synthesizer rock of London and Tokyo." That is, he considers cyberpunk the "literary incarnation" of a cultural "dynamic" with "a global range."

59 Cf. Benjamin Noys. *Malign Velocities. Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Winchester/Washington: zero books. 49ff. Another archetypal moment of "cyberpunk phuturism," according to Noys, is Detroit Techno, which fittingly emerged in the former epicentre of Fordistic mass production. Most prominently associated with Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May, the sound experiments coming out of this current can be characterized as musical cartographies of the de-industrialized social space of Detroit. They undertake it to eliminate the soundscape of the industrial factory system to replace it with the mimicry of robotized assembly-lines. Detroit Techno, thus, does not evoke the romanticist image of a past worker's culture but rather indulges in an affirmation of automation. Envisaging the radical computerization of the aesthetic, the genre breaks with human sound material as the basis of musical production. Its relation to the future, however, remains highly ambivalent as the escape from wage labour into the future of technical abstractions is always haunted by its uncanny doppelganger: the collapse of the future into a permanent status of unemployment and bankrupt inner-cities such as present-day Detroit.

that is most expressive of the genre's peculiar "synthesis" of "high" and "low" culture.[60] In any case, what might now be called the "cyberpunk moment"[61] in popular culture, literature, and social theory has turned into a major vehicle for the imagination of post-industrial mega-cities – what Gibson famously terms "The Sprawl"[62] – where exotic tokyoesque aesthetics form an unholy alliance with the opaque world of quasi-sovereign corporations and digitalization. Often discussed in terms of a "realism about the hyperreal,"[63] it is, therefore, not difficult to discern the echoes of the genre in the aesthetic and theoretical figuration of cyber-capital in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*.

Before returning to the finance epic, then, I propose a lengthy detour through the milieu of cyberpunk and its historical context – following the hypothesis that it functions as a "vanishing"[64] or "displaced mediator"[65] which negotiates crucial shifts in the representability of capital in the age of digitalization and financialization. In doing so, I suggest reading the genre as a sensorium for the neoliberal turn of capitalism. What is more, I will consider cyberpunk in terms of a socially symbolic act in and through which the cultural logic of neoliberalism is enacted. My focus, in that regard, will be on the resonances respectively continuities between cyberpunk's contestation of the utopian inheritances of sci-fi and the historical specificity of the neoliberal principle of capitalist alternativelessness. Thereby, I do not only wish to explore the complicities between the aesthetic and the economic. Moreover, this case study will assess in how far "structural adjustment" – a key concept and policy-tool of the neoliberal order – finds itself reflected in aesthetic and narrative patterns that recur throughout popular culture but also in the sense of impossibility that takes hold of critical theory. Gibson's work has something exemplary in that respect, not least concerning

60 Sterling, *Mirror Shades*, ix.
61 Noys, "Apocalypse, Tendency, Crisis," Online.
62 William Gibson. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace. 5.
63 Iain Hamilton Grant, Quoted after Mark Fisher. 1999/2018. *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction*. New York: Exmilitary Press. 138.
64 Fredric Jameson. "The Vanishing Mediator." *The Ideologies of Theory*. London/New York: Verso. 331ff.
65 Jodi Dean. *Blog Theory. Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Cambridge: polity press. 26ff.

the translation of science-fictional speculation into market diagnostics that his later near-future fiction *Pattern Recognition* performs. My reading of cyberpunk's transmutations will, thus, be interspersed with deliberations on the disintegration of the nexus between crisis and critique in late 20th and early 21st century languages of resistance. That way, the financial meta-narrative plotted in *Cosmopolis* can be placed in a certain genealogy in which a novel like *Neuromancer* has provided an early, formidable representation to the recuperative powers of capitalist markets. Hence, it is only after a longer historical survey that I will come back to DeLillo's finance epic. In this manner, the narrative of precorporation that has just been outlined can be contextualized against the backdrop of a larger neoliberal culture all while we can dissect the subtle changes in the paradigm of structural adjustment that the novella tries to account for as it negotiates the creeping notion that crisis might be the new normal.

3 Gibson and Hayek: Neoliberal (Anti-)Utopias

> It came on, again, gradually, a flickering, non-linear flood of fact and sensory data, a kind of narrative conveyed in surreal jump cuts and juxtapositions. It was vaguely like riding a rollercoaster that phased in and out of existence at random, impossibly rapid intervals, changing altitudes, at-tack, and direction with each pulse of nothingness, except that the shifts had nothing to do with any physical orientation, but rather with lightning alternations in paradigm and symbol system. The data had never been intended for human input.
>
> — Gibson, *Count Zero*, 33.

In the *Neuromancer* trilogy, there is a fundamental sense that literary representation is irrevocably positioned at the "Edge of the Construct," condemned to resign itself to the interfaces of a post-anthropomorphic digital economy. Textually, this downsizing of narrative perspective is embodied in a strangely naturalistic language. From the very first

sentence, the first volume in the series aims to capture the alienated experience of the characters populating these digitized networks with a granular attention to the texture of reality in this unfamiliar lifeworld: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel."[66] In a sort of aesthetic shock-and-awe strategy, readers are literally introduced to a world in which the "natural" takes on the properties of the technological. Here, electronic interfaces do not merely represent alternative, immersive environments but have everted into the analogue reality.[67] The opening line leads into a universe wherein electronic media have become environmental. In painting the sky after a static TV screen set to a signal-free channel, the novel "brazenly announces that henceforth everything here, even the sky […], will be a mediated *second nature*."[68]

When readers are introduced to the hacker-protagonist, Case, they encounter a character whose flow of experience is entirely tinged in a digitized aesthetics: "bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void."[69] Plotwise, this conflation of the analogue and the virtual is intensified by the special fact that Case has been forcefully unplugged from "the matrix," as it is called, but "still dream[s] of cyberspace"[70] day in day out, even though he cannot re-connect with online computer circuits. His inner monologue is codified like that of a tech-addict unable to physically withdraw from "the console."[71] It is irreducibly wired into the language of electronic grids. His "Home […] BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis,"[72] a veritable mega-city that spans the entire North American east coast, appears to him in the image of high-speed information sharing. The narrator, in this sense, invites readers to visualize this centreless urban space in terms of a cybernetic allegory:

66 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 3.
67 Cf. Fisher, *Flatline* Constructs, 56.
68 Andrew Ross. "Cyberpunk in Boystown." *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*. London/New York: Verso. 155.
69 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 4–5.
70 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 4.
71 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 5.
72 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 47.

> Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. […]. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta …[73]

The picture of the metropolis that is thus constructed is modelled after the visual imagery of moving bar charts. In the corporate, cybernetic landscapes of the middle-term future imagined by *Neuromancer*, it is not only that the seeming immediacy of tangible sense-data is deceitful, betraying an infinitely more complex system. Moreover, the inhabitants of this urban conglomerate experience concrete reality as always-already abstract, akin to data circuits, in which the formerly spatially distinct cores of Manhattan or Atlanta dissolve like individual pixels in an undifferentiated data flux. In this excess of scale, everything seems to "burn solid white," "to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your stimulation."[74] Interestingly, this simile between urban and digital space is taken up again in the characterization of "Cyberspace" as a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions […] in every nation […],"[75] whose description, actually, does not sound that different from the data-like urban structures of the reality ostensibly outside the computer simulations: "Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, cluster and constellations of data. *Like city lights, receding*…"[76] If physical spaces are figured to behave like information networks in *Neuromancer*, then the datascapes of the digital sphere appear like afterimages of the vanishing traces of urban traffic. In this sense, the "consensual hallucination" is not confined to cyberspace in the narrow sense of the word. Rather, it seems to comprise both. The realm of cyber-spatial simulation might at first be received as the sign of an alternate reality, but ultimately the novel's descriptive apparatus

73 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 47.
74 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 47.
75 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 56.
76 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 56 (emphasis added).

dissolves any illusion of in- or outside: the digital and the analogue collapse into one another.[77]

Under this aspect, the image of digital media projected in and through the mixture of naturalist and cybernetic language in Gibson's prose is less one of dematerialization than one that signals the concretization of the abstract. More precisely, *Neuromancer* envisions a corporate future in which cyberspace is figured as the embodiment of market relations that take material shape in electronic interfaces mapping the circulation of and competitive process between monetary signifiers, brand names, and logos. When Case first goes online after his damaged neuronal network has been repaired, he is overwhelmed by "a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information" in which company structures, trademarks, and corporate ratings superimpose each other as if in a "transparent 3-D chessboard extending to infinity."[78] In this vein, we again and again see characters navigating through a posthuman space of data generated by complex procedures of third-order abstraction purporting to provide visual representation to the relational field of finance in which corporate agencies constantly re-valuate their position vis-à-vis other economic entities:

> Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.[79]

The space of the "matrix" in the novel, hence, is made up from three-dimensional representations of data patterns that are themselves already "statistical abstractions" of financial traffic on a massive scale: "A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in

77 See also Brent Ryan Bellamy. "Neuromancer: The Cultural Logic of Late Fossil Capital?" *Open Library of Humanities* 5(1):54. 13. Proposing to read the novel "for its fuel signifiers," Bellamy expands this view of the interconnection between material infrastructure and information technology: "Gibson extrapolates a vision of the future of automobility that, from the vantage of the present, seems like it must rely on extensively mapped terrain with a vast overlay of information – consumer GPS in the 80s."

78 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 57.

79 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 57.

the human system."[80] More than a realistic simulation of a city, the novel narrates cyberspace as an "architectural plan"[81] of capital exchange: a "second-order observation"[82] of the stock market, which itself already marks a spatiotemporal condensation – an abstraction – of multitudinous economic transactions into the form of price signals. Truly, the novel does not indulge in a spatial overview of the differential complexity of cyberspace. Instead, the matrix is imaged as an objectified marketplace, that is, a "totality, not of things, but of the relationship between things, and indeed of the relationships between those relationships."[83] The cybernetic setting of *Neuromancer* marks out a textual space that is in-itself representational. It gives material form to the essentially relational character of the global finance and data system.

So far, I have tried to delineate the literary finesses, especially the cybernetic re-working of naturalistic aesthetics, feeding into the cyberpunk world-building of Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Up to now, though, the role of jargon played in creating the aesthetic awe and terror at a datafied experience has been side-lined. "The Sprawl," "the console," "livewire voodoo," "the Flatline's construct," "simstim" (short for '*sim*ulated *stim*ulation'), "zaibatsu" (a Japanese term supposed to name a corporation)[84] – these are some of the bewildering sociolects or neologisms that are re-circulated with a great sense of self-evidence throughout the dialogues and thought processes of the characters.[85] Much of this and other technical jargon is not elaborated upon in any detail, which is

80 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 56.
81 Cf. Fredric Jameson. "A Global Neuromancer." *The Ancients and the Postmoderns. On the Historicity of Form*. London/New York: Verso. 228.
82 Urs Stäheli. *Spectacular Speculation. Thrills, the Economy, and Popular Discourse*. Eric Savoth (Ed.). Berlin et al.: De Gruyter. 21.
83 Jameson, "A Global Neuromancer," 230.
84 Actually, "zaibatsu" (jap. 財閥, "financial clique") issues from the pre-WW2 Meji period in Japan where it denominated a vertically integrated business conglomerate, both in industrial and financial terms. In the post-war context, though, the so-called "keiretsu" (jap. 系列, "grouping of enterprises") system became prevalent, which designates a more shareholder-based organizational scheme that could either be grouped around interlocking horizontal business networks linking different industries and banks or vertical distribution-systems interconnecting manufacturers of one branch. It is not clear why Gibson opted for the older term, more akin to Western notions of monopoly capital, to name the corporate entities that preside over the cyberpunk futures devised in *Neuromancer*.
85 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 5, 54, 60, 242.

supposed to index the utter naturalness of the new posthuman condition.[86] Gibson himself, at one point, notes that he seeks to craft a certain "super-specificity"[87] in his writing to intensify the future-shock induced by the cyberspace scenarios projected in his novels. Here, one might follow the genre studies of Carl Freedman, Marc Angenot, Darko Suvin, or Peter Stockwell, who in their different ways all remark that the language of science-fiction is co-extensive with the onto-epistemological presuppositions of its word-building.[88] In many respects, science-fiction is essentially a "semiotic practice" whose "aesthetic goal" consists primordially in the construction of "a remote, estranged, and yet intelligible 'world.'"[89] The linguistic properties of cyberpunk, foremost the "fictive words"[90] or "syntagmatic partners" that it assembles, create "new concepts, things, perceptions and sensations."[91]

That said, one can discern the influence of "the neologistic prowess of William Burroughs"[92] on *Neuromancer*. Gibson, in fact, detects in the cut/up technique – in his words "the primal act of pop poetics"[93] – something of a corresponding aesthetic device to the "unthinkable complexity" of the technological sphere that his writing seeks to convey. The moniker "cyberspace" itself marks a syntagmatic partner *par excellence* in that regard, as this "[n]eologic spasm" proposes a literal imitation of Burroughs' fold-in technique as it is "[a]ssembled […] from small and readily available components of language" and then "folded" to

86 Gerald E. Miller. *Exploring the Limits of the Human through Science Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 112.
87 Larry McCaffery. "An Interview with William Gibson." *Mississippi Review* 16.1:2. 222.
88 Carl Freedman. *Critical Theory and Science-fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; Marc Angenot. "The Absent Paradigm. An Introduction to the Semiotics of Science-fiction." *Science-fiction Studies* 6:1. 9–19; Darko Suvin. *Metamorphoses of Science-fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Peter Stockwell. 2000. *The Poetics of Science-fiction*. Harlow: Longman.
89 Angenot, *The Absent Paradigm*, 10.
90 Angenot, *The Absent Paradigm*, 12.
91 Sean McQueen. *Deleuze & Baudrillard. From Cyberpunk to Biopunk*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 3
92 Scott Bukatman. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press. 146.
93 William Gibson. "Academy Leader." *Cyberspace*. Michael Benedikt (Ed.). Cambridge: MIT Press. 27.

receive a novel meaning capable of expressing a new reality.[94] The idea is that when technology becomes more and more strange, the written word, too, must become alien to remain timely. If language is the means whereby literature entertains a relation to reality, then cyberpunk purports to explore what this language might look like when faced with the "asignifying semiotics"[95] of cyber-capital sprawling into ever-new levels of abstraction. In a sense, the readers of the *Neuromancer* trilogy are put into a position not that dissimilar from that of the characters – at the "edge of the construct" – as the bewildering, super-specific language of the novel reflects Case's bombardment with a "blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information" when he is logged into the digital dataspace.[96] Samuel R. Delany, therefore, notes that the cybernetic "paraspace[s]"[97] constructed in cyberpunk are characterized by an intricate engagement with the structures of language. The ontological confusion between cyberspace and the "outside" world is specifically mediated by a defamiliarization of dominant language patterns. Therefore, the differentiation between the digital and the analogue is not entirely negligible. As porous as the border between both spheres might appear at times, the realm of virtual reality nonetheless serves an important role in terms of novelistic representation. Insofar the realm of cyberspace constructed in *Neuromancer* "is implicated in the economy of the world, yet [also] arouses its double,"[98] it creates a distancing effect that makes sensible – as if for the first time – the electro-economic abstractions at work in the "ordinary" itself.[99]

Against this background, though, the cognitive dissonances experienced while reading Gibson's cyberpunk tales are principally induced by the buzz of technological change not due to deep societal transformations. The disruption of the status quo by robotization and computerization is not considered to effect qualitative social transformations.

94 Gibson, "Academy Leader," 27.
95 Maurizio Lazzarato. 2014. *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Joshua David Jordan (Transl.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 40.
96 Cf. Scott Bukatman, "Allegory, Rhetoric, and the Paraspace," 215.
97 Samuel R. Delany. "Is Cyberpunk a Good or a Bad Thing?" *Mississippi Review* 47:48. 31.
98 exmilitary. "Preface." *Flatline Constructs*. New York: Exmilitary Press. vii.
99 Cf. Takayuki Tatsumi. "An Interview with Samuel R. Delany." *Science Fiction Eye* 1:3. 8.

Rather, it seems to confirm and perpetuate the existing capitalist apparatus with its behavioural patterns. Fittingly, macro-history – as in the fictional historiographies lined out in the century-spanning literature of hard SF writers such as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Hugo Gernsback, or Arthur C. Clarke – only appears as a background. This is, in fact, echoed in the supplanting of outer space by the microelectronic projections of cyberspace. The former has traditionally functioned as a principal site of macrosocial extrapolation: a key SF technique based in the extension of potentialities inhering current social, technological and scientific development to a speculative near- or far-future.[100] The latter, by contrast, tend to shift the scope of fictional projection to a more microscopic aesthetic concerned with the hallucinatory experience of atomized subjects positioned at the interfaces of cybernetic constructs for whom the "possibility of experiencing history in some active way"[101] has waned. There is no sense of a grand civilizational project in the eerie occultation of "corporate power"[102] as the be all and end all of social activity. Instead, cyberspace appears as an "accidental megastructure"[103] built unwittingly in the short-term dynamics of capital accumulation. There, thus, pertains a strange recognition effect to cyberpunk. The social structure in which these digital technologies are placed presents itself first and foremost as a speed-up version of 1980s capitalism: the augmented reality of cyberspace promises no more than an acceleration of market forces. In this sense, the quasi-naturalist cybernetic language of the novel could be said to perform the evanescence of a certain sense of historicity, which fades out of sight in the fleeting impressions of the Sprawl.

In the pixelization of the old city cores of Manhattan and Atlanta described above, one can therefore discern the contours of a historical argument that decodes the relicts of industrial modernity persisting in the accidental structure of the cyberneticized mega-city as "[a]n archi-

100 Darko R. Suvin. *Positions and Presuppositions in Science-fiction*. London: Macmillan Press. 37.
101 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 21.
102 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 242.
103 Benjamin H. Bratton. *The Stack. On Software and Sovereignty*. London/Cambridge: MIT Press. 8ff.

tecture of broken dreams,"[104] to put it in the words of Gibson's 1981 *The Gernsback Continuum*. As a matter of fact, said short-story provides a template for the anti-utopian gesture marking cyberpunk's intervention into the genre of science-fiction. Featuring a photographer tasked to document the futuristic architecture of the interwar era, it charts the vision of an alternate future, as imagined from the 1920s, that never came to happen: "*The Tomorrow That Never Was*."[105] Confronted with the fantasies of industrial modernity, notably the future visions extrapolated in Gernsback's pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*, the documentarian is almost driven into madness as he fails to reconcile these unrealized vistas of the future with the reality of 1980s America. Eventually, the narrator contemplates the barbaric inversion of modernity's utopias by tracing the complicity of Gernsbackian notions of perfectibility in the fascist war effort: "the rockets on the covers of the Gernsback pulps had fallen on London in the dead of night, screaming."[106]

Against this backdrop, the short-story ends up writing an apologia of the present. In the closing sentences, the text conjures "the petroleum crisis and the nuclear energy hazard" of the 1970s-80s, only to talk down these scenarios in a projection of this post-modern society as the best of all possible worlds: "'But it could be worse, huh?' 'That's right,' I said, 'or even worse, it could be perfect.'"[107] The text evokes the "trope of 'modernity'" not to write a history of literature but to enact "a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms"[108] and their historical baggage. Like the narrator who hopes to liberate himself from the hallucinations of a bygone dreamworld by immersing himself in the flatness of an oversaturated media environment ("Really bad media can exorcise your semiotic ghosts"), it seeks to expel the "semiotic phantoms" of an older era of SF to embrace the futurelessness of the present.[109] In this sense, Gibson's short-story articulates a "direct opposition against the SF

104 William Gibson. "The Gernsback Continuum." *Burning Chrome*. New York: Arbor House. 5.
105 Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," 1.
106 Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," 5.
107 Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," 11.
108 Fredric Jameson. *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present*. London/New York: Verso. 35–36.
109 Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," 10, 7.

of the past, especially the Gernsbackian and Golden Age world-building extrapolations."[110] Abandoning the "expansionist SF" of "heroic planetary exploration" with its "utilitarian prose," his cyberpunk shifts the gaze toward body-machine networks in which the integrity of humanhood itself starts coming apart.[111] Applying punk's "No Future" sentiment to science-fiction, it seems intent on aestheticizing and "dramatiz[ing] our incapacity to imagine the future"[112] as radical alterity.

In *Neuromancer*, now, this dissipation of narrative perspective seems to be especially confirmed by the neo-noir theme, which the novel takes on in its attempt to cast out the "semiotic ghosts" of expansionist sci-fi. The cyberpunk classic in many ways reads like an updated hard-boiled fiction in which the viewpoint is limited to the hacker-protagonist, who marks a quintessential anti-hero encircled by an a-moral environment described as a "deranged experiment in social Darwinism designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button."[113] Surely, Case is profiled as a skilful user of technology. But he is in no way in control of it. If anything, the tech-addict is portrayed to be subject to invisible powers beyond his comprehension. In these circumnavigations of the digital frontier, cyberpunk to a certain degree carries forward the turn inward that marks some of the most notable SF experiments coming out of the 1960s–70s by expanding the quasi-existentialist investigation of "inner space" into "cyberspace." Cyberpunk, in this sense, marks "both a continuation and the discontinuation of New Wave."[114] The representation of cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination" can be read as an index of this legacy, albeit it marks at once a crucial mutation of the "synaesthetic trope."[115] According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, cyberpunk constructs a literary space that dis-

110 Janez Steble. *New Wave in Science Fiction or the Explosion of the Genre*. PhD Dissertation. University of Ljubljana. 112. https://www.academia.edu/7160946/New_Wave_in_Science_Fiction_or_the_Explosion_of_the_Genre [last accessed 08.09.2022].

111 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay. "Cyberpunk and Neuroromanticism." *Mississippi Review* 16:2/3. 270–272.

112 Fredric Jameson. "Progress Versus Utopia: Or, can we imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies* 9:2. 153.

113 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 14.

114 Steble, *New Wave in Science Fiction and the Explosion or the Explosion of the Genre*, 4.

115 Bukatman, "Allegory, Rhetoric, and the Paraspace," 204.

ables the clear demarcation of "perceptual and cognitive, indeed even ontological, categories," whereby it moves from treating "hallucination" as a subjective overstimulation of the senses to representing it "as an object in the world."[116] As "figural language becomes literalized by the text," the "hallucinatory excess of the New Wave"[117] mutates into very real abstractions that confront the protagonists as an extrinsic synesthetic overload. In replacing, that is, "the psychedelic realm of the mind" with "the digital landscape of the matrix,"[118] the hallucinatory confusion of the senses is externalized to the shock and awe of the digital vortex. Thereby, however, the emancipatory, anti-authoritarian intents that drove the counter-cultural trip into the unconscious compulsions which bind subjects to power are nullified. In projecting the psychedelic scene outward into a "*consensual* hallucination" perpetrated by billions, cyberpunk re-works the "synesthetic trope" into an anti-utopian figure that gives way to the sense of an essentially immutable world reigned by capitalist abstractions which confront the subject as something fundamentally external and inevitable.

It is under this aspect that Fisher and Jameson allusively suggest decrypting cyberpunk as a "sequel to naturalism"[119] updated for the Information Age.[120] Regrettably, the formal-aesthetic reasons given to substantiate this historical analogy are scarce. Notwithstanding, I suggest that the blueprints for this comparison can be discerned in a critical re-formulation of Georg Lukács forwarded by Jameson. Indeed, Lukács infamously rebutted naturalism for de-realizing capitalist reality by dissolving the social whole into "'isolated' complexes of facts."[121] As such, though, he understands it as a representational form adequate to a bourgeoisie that has developed past its revolutionary role in the overturning of the *Ancien Régime*. For the descriptive apparatus of naturalism renders literary characters as "nothing but observers" that testify to

116 Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuroromanticism," 272, 274.
117 Bukatman, "Allegory, Rhetoric, and the Paraspace," 213, 204.
118 Steble, *New Wave in Science Fiction and the Explosion or the Explosion of the Genre*, 4.
119 Fredric Jameson. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press. 150.
120 Mark Fisher, *Flatline Constructs*, 43.
121 Georg Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness*. Rodney Livingstone (Transl.). Cambridge: MIT Press. 6.

ready-made "social facts."[122] It portrays bourgeois individuals as objects rather than subjects of history. According to Lukács, that is, naturalism captures representation in "abstract particularit[ies],"[123] whereby it, eventually, ends up making society appear as a given that pre-exists social praxis. Jameson, now, reads this assessment against the grain by arguing that the emancipation of realism from protagonicity might just as well be construed as a strength of naturalist literature. Zola's de-dramatization of individual characters into "the most perfunctory pretexts for what is virtually an autonomous unfolding of sense-data"[124] allows precisely for a mode of representation that decodes the centred bourgeois subject as a transindividual, socio-historical construct. Lukács' description of naturalism as a literary style that turns the novelistic personnel into an "undifferentiated, additional element[] of the environment" – unable to act on the "setting"[125] that encloses it – is turned upside down. It is rebranded as a finetuning of literary realism to the alienating conditions of capitalist modernity.

The narratologist Peter Brooks notes something similar. If the Leninist philosopher considers the literary background of naturalist novels to have solely an incidental character without deeper connection to plot structure, Brooks suggest that the social machines featured in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle are never "merely setting."[126] Instead:

122 Georg Lukács. "Narrate or Describe? A Preliminary Discussion of Naturalism and Formalism." *Writer & Critic. And Other Essays*. Arthur D. Kahn (Ed. & Transl.). London: Merlin Press. 113, 115.

123 Georg Lukács. "The Ideology of Modernism." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*. Dorothy J. Hale (Ed.). Malden: Blackwell. 410.

124 Fredric Jameson. *The Antinomies of Realism*. New York/London: Verso. 59, 7. Jameson considers realism and naturalism not as opposite forms but aesthetic impulses that mark "an opposition at work within realism itself (and not externally, between realism and some other kind of discourse)." *Antinomies of Realism*, thus, projects a historical narrative that lays out a gradual process of literary depersonalization which passes from realism through naturalism and, eventually, to modernism.

125 Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?," 115.

126 Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?," 115.

> With Zola, nearly every novel centers on an engine itself or else a social institution that functions as an engine; the locomotive of *La Bête humaine;* the dynamic, expanding pressure chamber of the department store in *Au Bonheur des dames;* the coal mine of *Germinal,* with its steam elevator and underground railway; the alcohol still *of L'Assommoir*.[127]

The engines of industrialization and commodification taking over Zola's writing do not only "provide the thematic core of the novels in which they figure, they also represent the dynamics of the narrative, furnish the motor power by which the plot moves forward."[128] It is in this sense that I wish to read the historical analogization between cyberpunk and naturalism hinted at in Jameson's and Fisher's scattered remarks. The cyberpunk sub-genre that emerges in the 1980s is not only concerned with the hyperreal on a thematic level but translates the agency of the virtual into a formal problem. Following up on the cybernetic de-legitimization of traditional binaries between the natural and mechanical world,[129] cyberspace turns into the main actor of this new kind of science-fiction that narrativizes the third-order abstractions of finance in the image of an embodied internet. The role played by literary characters, on the other hand, appears incidental. Echoing Wiener's re-definition of the "human being as a terminal machine,"[130] literary characters in the *Neuromancer* trilogy are decentred into narrative conductors whose agency is abstracted into cybernetic feedback circuits. Akin to the waning of bourgeois protagonicity in naturalism, then, the disablement of the promethean-utopian impulses of expansive SF is acted out in an impressionistic aesthetic that depersonalizes human characters into "the most perfunctory pretexts" for the scenic elaboration of cyberspace.

Ideologically speaking, this is reflected in the tension between mind and body played out in the novel. Someone like Case regards his body as biohazard. Steadily desiring to escape "the prison of his own

127 Peter Brooks. *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 45.
128 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 45.
129 Mark Fisher, *Flatline Constructs*, 43.
130 Norbert Wiener. *The Human Use of Human Beings. Cybernetics and Society*. London: Free Association Books. 79.

flesh," he projects onto cyberspace a certain idealist bias that re-codes the body as inanimate meat while "the bodiless exultation of cyberspace" is vitalized into an entity larger than life.[131] At once, though, this cyber-idealism coincides with a recurring agency panic. The novel, hence, is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity. It breeds fantasies of bodily immersion into augmented digital realities, but it also oscillates toward fearful anticipations of the erasure of human agency. Through its quasi-naturalistic rhetoric, the novel negotiates at once "the thrill *and* threat of dematerialization,"[132] in the sense that the idiom of disembodiment encrypts an ideological relation to an emerging information economy that "has become a cultural phenomenon in its own right."[133] This becomes all the more acute when the language of data is interrupted by highly contrastive sequences in which the body makes a brutal return, such as in a scene toward the beginning that visits a crammed bar crowded by addicts physically suffering from cyber-spatial withdrawal and run by a barman wearing a defunct "prosthetic arm jerking monotonously" while baring artificial "teeth" in visible "decay."[134] In this, the cyberpunk tale narrativizes the question of embodiment in and without cyberspace as a conflict-ridden dynamic characterized by a fundamental class split. Insofar the body appears as the site of psycho-somatic trauma, it is supposed to materialize the anatomy of the poor. The promise of de-materialization is narrated as a process of social filtering that consigns the world of meat to the immiserated subjects of the Information Age.

In this vein, the movement between "thrill" and "threat" affects the entire narrative build-up. At first, the novel seems to combine science-fiction with a more conventional heist plot. The story is grouped around a singular cast of characters that prepare to steal a highly-developed computer hard disk. In doing so, the novel feigns a subliminal emancipatory drive that inheres to both, the Robin Hood principle of the heist genre and early internet utopias that project the hacker as hero

131 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 6; Cf. Jameson, "A Global *Neuromancer*," 236–237.
132 Joshua Clover. "Remarks on Method." *Film Quarterly* 63:4. 9.
133 Terence Whalen. "The Future of a Commodity. Notes Towards a Critique of Cyberpunk and the Information Age." *Science-fiction Studies* 19:1. 76
134 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 3.

and ascribe to fantasies of a non-alienated division of labour.[135] In the background of this primary level of action, however, another dramatic scene is set up that slowly but surely establishes the cybernetic landscapes of the capitalist Sprawl as the "primary hero."[136] Narratively speaking, this materializes through a sort of science-fictional *anagnorisis* that exposes the subversive actions of the rogue hackers as partaking non-consciously in an elaborate cyber-teleological scheme to fuse two high-tech computer systems into a new god-like artificial intelligence. *Neuromancer* is characterized by a two-fold structure – contrasting the protagonist-centred plot arc to a non-narrative, post-anthropomorphic scene of action – which is laced together in a final plot twist that brutally inverts the novel's initial utopian impulses. It is, thus that cyberspace is plotted as the "sum total of the works, the whole show."[137]

In this regard, it is interesting to note that this expression (the "sum total of the works") echoes almost literally a passage from Marx's chapter on the fetish character of the commodity, which addresses the reification of "the social relation of the producers to *the sum total of labor* as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers."[138] As accidental as this consonance may be, I think it is fitting. In establishing the technical abstractions of cyberspace as the "the whole show" of the cyberpunk narrative, the plot structure of *Neuromancer* uncannily resonates with the logic of misrecognition that Marx identifies in commodity abstraction, namely the externalization of "the social characteristics of men's own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things."[139] Pitting a small band of outlaws against a multinational corporation, the novel initially lures readers into expecting a certain utopian resolution to the plot. Yet, this promethean inclination is ultimately re-branded as an illusion: the ostensibly utopian heist sub-plot is revealed as nothing but an exigency

135 Cf. Jameson, "A Global Neuromancer," 225.
136 Samuel R. Delany. *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*. Middletown: Wesleyan University. 282. See also Jameson, "Global Neuromancer," 224.
137 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 259.
138 Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 165 (emphasis added).
139 Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 164–165.

internal to the grander scheme of the AI's elliptical posthuman master plot. At the end of the plotline, it, thus, seems that nothing will have taken place except cyberspace. Combined with the naturalist rhetoric delineated above, I argue that this narrative blueprint is crucial to the representation of high-tech-capitalism in *Neuromancer*. In fact, we here come upon a theme that is perpetuated throughout the trilogy: from Case's perception of the matrix as a "discontinuous flood of images"[140] to the representation of global information systems composed of data flows that "had never been intended for human input"[141] in *Count Zero*, the second volume of the series. Caught between information overload and scarcity, narrative knowledge centred around human protagonists gradually breaks down while multinational corporations – "independent of the individual lives that comprise it" – emerge as "the planet's dominant form of intelligence"[142] whose operations in the fields of data remain utterly opaque to readers. The narrative edifice of *Neuromancer* merely registers their effects on the storyline not their execution. Other than that, it sticks to conveying the "infinite complexity" of Big Data. As the cybernetic setting of the trilogy appears "structurally meaningless to any individual [human] consciousness" through which the plot is narrated, it becomes palpable that "the social truth of cyberpunk is most revealed when its narrative truth is most concealed."[143]

This implicit historical narrative is crucially negotiated via the business dynasty Tessier-Ashpool, which is, first, introduced as a sort of "atavism"[144] in an impersonal economic system that dates from a time prior to the reign of "zaibatsus," the global hegemony of Japanese-style capitalism, projected in Gibson's image of the 21st century. If "zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history" are claimed to have "transcended old barriers" and "attained a kind of immortality,"[145] then T-A is tainted with the stain of all-too human finitude that the company heirs seek to overcome through the cryogenic

140 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 57.
141 William Gibson. 1986. *Count Zero*. New York: Ace, 33.
142 William Gibson, *New Rose Hotel*, 107.
143 Whalen, "The Future of a Commodity," 85.
144 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 216.
145 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 216.

storage of their biological bodies. But it is precisely in entering this "symbiotic relationship" with machine-learning algorithms that *Neuromancer* shows them undergoing a radical alteration. As individual clan members seek immortality, the transgenerational, techno-oligarchic dynasty already morphs into a meta-organic entity: "a cybernetic spider slowly spinning webs while Ashpool slept."[146] Across the text, the boundaries between algorithmic operations and the managerial board of Tessier-Ashpool slowly but surely fade. Often company representatives appear like mere interfaces for computing machines acting like "ghosts in the corporate cores. Voices."[147] Yet, *Neuromancer* also refrains from linking AI back to a personifiable "mainframe."[148] Instead, artificial intelligences appear as confusing, decentred assemblages between organic and non-organic life, where singular interfaces are "only a part of another, a […] *potential entity*,"[149] which is, eventually, the nexus of economic relations forming the corporation. It is hence the capitalist corporation that appears as the artificial intelligence *par excellence*. Forming "hives with cybernetic memories, vast single organisms, their DNA coded in silicon," it is suggested that via the micro-electronic revolution capital has, indeed, turned into an "automatic subject"[150] emancipated from the supervisory power of its human substrates:

> You couldn't kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory.[151]

Not surprisingly, the imagery of the "hive" or "nest" comes to illustrate both Tessier-Ashpool and artificial intelligence in the novel. For instance, Wintermute, one of the AI's encountered in *Neuromancer*, "had chosen the nest to represent it,"[152] while the visualization of the cor-

146 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 285.
147 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 243.
148 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 128.
149 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 129.
150 Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 255,
151 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 216.
152 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 285.

porate structure of T-A in the three-dimensional datastreams of cyberspace stimulates "Afterimages, retinal flares" of a strange "spiral factory" composed of metamorphizing insect-like drones ("hatching cells blind jaws of the unborn moving ceaselessly, the staged process from egg to larva, near-wasp, wasp") that unsettles the divide between machine and nature: "In his mind's eye, a kind of time-lapse photography took place revealing the thing as the biological equivalent of a machine-gun, hideous in its perfection."[153] Through this enmeshment of machinic and entomological metaphors of replication, *Neuromancer* creates an image of the corporate body as a multi-scalar, swarming intelligence – a meta-organic hive mind without any single locus of decision – that takes shape and wields market power through the cumulative effect of its subcomponents.[154] More than any cyborg imagery, it is multinationals that are represented as the foremost image of an emerging posthuman condition. Under this aspect, the figural language laying out the metamorphosis – the cyberneticization – of the fictional company Tessier-Ashpool encrypts a profound historical mutation of the capitalist class that is marked by the intensified "governing power of capital over the capitalist himself."[155]

In this regard, the subsidiarity principle of the corporation as a multinational mega-structure imposes itself as the true thought-image of the posthuman. The "virtual computer-mediated relationships," through which the plots of cyberpunk unfold, find their counterpart in the "contemporary landscape" of "multinational businesses."[156] The Nobel Prize laureate in economics Herbert A. Simon has lent particular expression to such an image of a posthuman economy. In 1991 he offered a thought experiment that uncannily resonates with Gibson's short-story *New Rose Hotel* wherein a character asks us to "[i]magine an alien […] who's come here to identify the planet's dominant form of intelligence," only to pick the "zaibatsus, […] the multination-

153 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 134–135.
154 Cf. Fisher, *Flatline Constructs*, 127.
155 Karl Marx. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." *Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels Collected Works Vol. 3.* New York: International Publishers. 247.
156 Cf. Veronica Hollinger. "Stories about the Future. From Patterns of Expectation to Patterns of Recognition." *Science-fiction Studies* 33. 464.

als."[157] Similarly, upon observing the "[u]biquity of organizations" on a planetary scale, Simon devises the speculative scenario that Earth is approached by "a mythical visitor from Mars," that "might find the new institutional economics rather astonishing":

> Suppose that it […] approaches the Earth from space, equipped with a telescope that reveals social structures. The firms reveal themselves, say, as solid green areas with faint interior contours marking out divisions and departments. Market transactions show as red lines connecting firms, forming a network in the spaces between them. […]. [T]he greater part of the space below it would be within the green areas, for almost all of the inhabitants would be employees, hence inside the firm boundaries. Organizations would be the dominant feature of the landscape.[158]

Curiously, this parable echoes Gibson's vision of the posthuman. If in Simon's example the social patterns making up Earth's surface would appear to the alien visitor as "large green areas interconnected by red lines,"[159] to the readers of cyberpunk the stories of their protagonists appear as subplots interconnecting the larger, albeit mostly intangible, stage of action of the corporation that is narrated predominantly by indices of absence. In this sense, the cyberpunk image of corporate futurity negotiates on the level of narrative the "transnational corporate realities"[160] making up capitalism in the late 20th and early 21st century.

That said, it is especially interesting that the novel seeks to respond to the phantom-like objectivity of this situation of anonymous rule with a shift toward post-secular explanatory systems. In this, the text chronologically fits Lacan's diagnosis of a strange triumph of religion in the form of new-age spiritualism, which the French theorist establishes not coincidentally a couple of years after the termination of the Gold Stand-

157 Gibson, "New Rose Hotel," 107.
158 Herbert A. Simon. "Organizations and Markets." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5:2. 27.
159 Simon, "Organizations and Markets," 27.
160 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 38.

ard and the inauguration of an era of free-floating currencies.[161] In fact, as Tomšič notes in this regard, the persistence of theological explanation patterns expresses an "idealist counter-offensive" that strives "to attribute" the system of capitalist abstractions "to a positive being."[162] Accordingly, the perception of T-A as a "complexity that cuts the eye"[163] induces a sense of terror and eeriness – "Horror. The spiral factory. […]. Alien"[164] – which is processed in the novel by an infusion of gothic aesthetics into the super-specificity of computer slang. The titular notion of "neuromancy" already speaks to this, as it decrypts the idea of a neuronal link between the cerebral system and cybernetic technology in gothic terms: "Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer. Necromancer. I call up the dead."[165] In this way, the wired brain is imagined not only as the fusion of human and corporate machinery but an encounter between living and dead labour.[166] Throughout the text, necromantic imagery is invoked to positivize or spiritualize the abstract body of the corporation into existence by imagining it, at once, as an extractive, mortifying power that feasts on the living and a vitalist force posing as a source of life.[167]

161 Cf. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 48–49; See also Jacques Lacan. *The Triumph of Religion preceded by Discourse to Catholics*. Bruce Fink (Transl.). Cambridge: Polity Press. 63ff.

162 Cf. Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 49.

163 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 271.

164 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 134–135.

165 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 260.

166 Cf. Adam Turl. "Cyborgs! Shoot the Moon." *Locust Review* 6. https://www.locustreview.com/editorial/cyborgs-shoot-the-moon [last accessed 01.09.2022]. In light of these similarities, Turl suggests that "the cybernetic" might be considered to be "inherently gothic" as it marks "the fusion of ourselves with our ancestors." He, then, proceeds to re-frame this argument from the standpoint of labour: "For the worker, the cybernetic is also the fusion of our subjectivity with dead labor, with fixed capital. In Marxism, the means of production and civilization are 'dead labor' – the accumulation of wealth that comes from the past labors of the working class."

167 See also Benjamin Noys. "Between Two Vampires." *academia*. https://www.academia.edu/30913519/Between_Two_Vampires [last accessed 01.09.2022]. Noys notes that the ongoing popularity of vampiric imagery stems from the persistent anxiety at the metaphysical scandal posed by capital, since "the vampire as undead figures an excessive life that coincides with deadly repetition." That is, the vampire provides an image for a process of accumulation that appears "more alive than us," all while it "absorbs and condenses life into surplus-value."

From this perspective, it only seems fitting that the orbital space station housing the cryogenic storage systems of Tessier-Ashpool is re-imagined after the enchanted castles of romantic literature. As if to suggest that cyber-capital marked the return of the "mystifications of the 18/19th century"[168] in a new techno-chrome guise, the corporate headquarters of T-A – the so-called "Villa Straylight" – are invoked as "a Gothic folly […] vaulted like intestines where the eye is trapped in narrow curves […]."[169] The hacker-protagonist encounters the firewalls of corporations in a manner akin to the mysterious structures of haunted chateaus in gothic fiction, as "these new 'castles' carry their own ghosts and devices of bodily invasion, from artificial intelligences manouvering our brains to cybernetic implants transfiguring our body structure."[170] Matching the cross-disciplinary trajectories of cybernetics, Gibson's cyberpunk fiction breaches the boundaries between multiple genres – fusing naturalist rhetoric with a noir narrative or mixing up gothic and science-fiction – to project an image of capitalism as a regime of the undead.[171] In doing so, though, the novel does not always keep its figural language in check. Brain-computer interfaces are figured as "livewire voodoo" just as well as a pact with a "demon."[172] But the message seems clear. *Neuromancer* engages with corporate structures and cybernetic technology, especially "questions of interface,"[173] by invoking a demonic poetics, narratives of (zombie-like) possession or necromantic domains.[174] Albeit the text introduces a further twist by speculating that we are not in the realm of metaphor anymore. Rather,

168 Steble, *New Wave in Science Fiction and the Explosion or the Explosion of the Genre*, 119.

169 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 184.

170 Steble, *New Wave in Science Fiction and the Explosion or the Explosion of the Genre*, 119.

171 Cf. Mark Neocloeous. "The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires." *History of Political Thought* 24:4. 684.

172 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 5, 259.

173 Alistair Brown. *Demonic Fictions. Cybernetics and Postmodernism*. Durham University. 29. https://www.academia.edu/2020158/Demonic_fictions_cybernetics_and_postmodernism [last accessed 08.09.2022].

174 See also Fisher, *Flatline Constructs*, 139. Fisher argues that the most significant contribution of the two sequels to *Neuromancer* – "*Count Zero* in particular" – has been to render this poetics of zombification even more explicit via "the retrospective coding" of the first volume in the trilogy "as a voodoo narrative."

the capitalist development of productive forces has turned the supernatural or metaphysical excursions of pre-capitalist civilizations into a material reality: "Men dreamed that, once, but now it is real."[175] In a sense, the novel imagines the becoming-concrete of capitalist mystifications. It suggests that cybernetics has truly turned capital into a posthuman, automatic subject.

Regarding this "neuro-romanticist"[176] penchant of *Neuromancer*, Csicsery-Ronay proposes to consider the perspective offered by cyberpunk in terms of an "[i]mplosive science fiction."[177] If "[t]he point of the expansive mode was to show that human consciousness can contain the future,"[178] epitomizing 19th century bourgeois and social-democratic philosophies of progress, this promethean sense of futurity has collapsed. Far from functioning as a tool of liberation wielded by humanity in the conquest of nature, computer technology is envisioned as a possessive machinery that re-subjugates civilization to an all-pervasive capitalist second-nature. The confidence in technological or scientific fixes to the malaises of the social has waned. Instead, science-fiction passes over to acting out the "destruction of liberal ideology by autonomous technology,"[179] in which the subject, fallen victim to false illusions of free choice, is bequeathed the position of a sentient automaton in a posthuman economy that far exceeds the individual mind. But over and above the rupture with bourgeois progressivism, cyberpunk even more fundamentally breaks with the visions of a post-capitalist future outlined in the Socialist utopianisms of for example Charles Fourier, Edward Bellamy, or Alexander Bogdanov. If the utopian form is more or less specified until the early 20th century by the general absence of private property, a re-imagination of the labour system, and the vision of a

175 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 259.
176 Cf. Fisher, *Flatline Constructs*, 20, 58. Fisher, in fact, prefers to consider cyberpunk in terms of a "Gothic materialism" deemed "*equivalent to cybernetic realism*." That is, he understands *Neuromancer* not so much "as the dialectical fusion of Horror and Science Fiction, [than] the materialist critique of Science Fiction from hypernaturalist horror."
177 Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," 272.
178 Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," 271.
179 Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," 271.

rational, transparent social structure,[180] then by contrast the mega-cities of cyberpunk are reigned by scarcity, rampant marketization, and civil-warlike competition mediated by untransparent computer grids. In that vein, *Neuromancer* traces emerging modes of cybernetic embodiment, whilst exposing simultaneously the apparent inability to reconcile these transformations in the material basis of capitalism with the "constitutive form of the traditional Utopian blueprint."[181] Akin to the perspective offered by F. A. von Hayek, *Neuromancer* envisions a future in which any pretence of a rational utopia or a collective solution to social conflict has been side-lined. Instead, the counter-enlightenment idea of a spontaneous hierarchical order devoid of reason has gained track, promising increased adjustment to the unconscious forces embodied in the system of market price formation as the only way to go.[182]

That said, it is probably more adequate to point out that cyberpunk's anti-utopian gesture – its narrative production of alternativelessness – betrays a twisted neoliberal utopianism. It is in this sense that Noys puts forward the daring thesis that "cyberpunk *is* the utopia of capital"[183] precisely because it renounces the utopian undercurrents written into the historical semantics of science-fiction. As we have seen, this is nowhere clearer spelt out than in Gibson's invective against Gernsbackian notions of perfectibility, which suspiciously echoes Hayek's conception of his own vision of unfettered competition as the true, disavowed utopia. The "progressive society" that the Austrian economist wishes for "appears cruel,"[184] as he himself admits, but the ways of the "Market" are inscrutable to the human mind. Claiming that the world-market "far

180 Cf. Fredric Jameson. *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire called Utopia and other Science-fictions*. London/New York. Verso. 414; Rebekka Rohleder. "Im/Possible Prisons: News from the Future of Work." *Coils of the Serpent* 8. 34ff.

181 Cf. Jameson, *A Global Neuromancer*, 221.

182 Cf. Gerhard Stapelfeldt. "Dialektik der ökonomischen Rationalisierung. Von der Kritischen Theorie zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie." *Kritiknetz – Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*. 1ff. https://www.kritiknetz.de/images/stories/texte/Dialektik_der_oekonomischen_Rationalisierung.pdf [last accessed: 04.09.2022].

183 Benjamin Noys. "Cybernetic Phuturism. The Politics of Acceleration." *Anarchai Group Brasilia* [Talk]. https://www.scribd.com/document/331544003/Benjamin-Noys-Cyberpunk-Phuturism [last accessed: 2703.2026].

184 Friedrich A. von Hayek. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Ronald Hamowy (Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 98.

surpasses the reach of our understanding, wishes, and purposes, and our sense perceptions," Hayek purports that "the only appropriate word" to name "this extended order" is "transcendent."[185] In a strange gesture of sacralization, all trust to regulate earthly affairs is put into the market as a higher intelligence.[186] Wagering that it functions as an engine of evolution, the price system is conceived in cybernetic terms as a quasi-transcendent "system of telecommunication"[187] that provides signs for rising profit opportunities and, thereby, triggers selective processes in which "the survival of the successful"[188] reigns supreme. In this inverted sense, the self-promoted realism of the neoliberals is underwritten by a secret utopianism that antithetically calls for "the eradication of all utopias"[189] by bidding for good faith in the impersonal forces of the market. It is under this aspect that cyberpunk parallels the denouncement of Enlightenment and socialist utopianism in neoliberal theory.

As we have seen, the implosion of extrapolation performed in *Neuromancer* manifests in an externalization of narrative information to a cybernetic corporate apparatus that itself only speaks to readers through interfaces. Meanwhile, the "*potential entity*" in its totality is visualized only through third-order abstractions – "graphic representation[s] of data"[190] taking the shape of "nests" and "gothic follies" – that propose to fill in these gaps in knowledge. The trilogy projects an entropic future in which no transcendence of the present becomes palpable. Opaque technologies and the extreme concentrations of ownership characteristic of cyberpunk close off utopian possibility. In this vision, the material world of cyber-capital itself structurally blocks any emancipatory opening. Consequently, the cyberpunk genre abstains from imagining the removal of money from everyday life. In fact, it cannot but narrate social synthesis in terms of exchange abstraction.

185 Friedrich A. von Hayek. *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 72.
186 Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 72.
187 Friedrich A. von Hayek. "The Use of Knowledge in Society." *American Economic Review* 35: 4. 527.
188 Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 103–105, 112.
189 William Davies. "Introduction." *Economic Science Fiction*, William Davies (Ed.). London: Goldsmith Press. 5–6.
190 William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 129, 56.

The social is staged exclusively in and through the relationships among things too dense to allow for the extrapolation of a utopian futurity. Cyberpunk is unable to represent the systemic break necessary for the utopian imagination, let alone narrate the event-chain that would lead beyond the impasses of the present, without indulging in a massive world-reduction or post-apocalyptic scenario.[191] To a certain extent, the technocratic determinism of cyberpunk takes on an almost ontological character; it presents itself less as a "particular type of realism," but "more like realism in itself."[192] One could, therefore, say that cyberpunk engages in a hard-boiled "capitalist realism"[193] that stages within the genre of science-fiction the tension between early utopian imaginings of reason-based, post-scarcity societies and the seemingly overcomplex, irrational life-worlds of the information era. Albeit, as has been pointed out, it is more adequate to say that *Neuromancer* does not so much chart the end of utopia than the absorption of earlier utopias into the capitalist apparatus such as the inversion of the age-old dream of immortality into the outmost expression of corporate domination. Cyberpunk emerges as an engine of recuperation that inverts the dreamscapes of science-fiction.

191 Cf. Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 104; David Wallace-Wells. "The Art of Fiction No. 211." *Paris Review*. https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6089/william-gibson-the-art-of-fiction-no-211-william-gibson [last accessed 03.09.2022]. *Neuromancer*'s commitment to the absorbability of capitalism becomes especially apparent in the traces of atomic decay that appear in the margins of the novelistic background. Instead of presenting these diegetic indices of nuclear fallout as triggers for global cataclysm, the contaminated sites passed by in the novel (e.g., "the radioactive core of old Bonn") are pictured as just a layer on top of the complexity of the cybernetic setting: a negative feedback signal rooted into a self-perpetuating control loop. In the quasi-naturalistic overabundance of detail conveyed to readers, the inner-literary historical backdrop of these fictional locales of devastation is silently skipped over. Thus, it is not only that the cyberpunk aesthetics crafted in Gibson's *Neuromancer* bar the spatialization or extrapolation of a utopian space. The descriptive apparatus of the novel represses the mutability of the world *tout court*. In its near-ontological commitment to the adaptive capacities of capital, it disables the narrative opening towards the radical alterity of a post-capitalist future in any form whatsoever. Even the prospect of nuclear fallout, it seems, does not suffice to imagine the "end" of capitalism. In an interview, Gibson makes this point quite explicit: "[…] I didn't want to write one of those science-fiction novels where the United States and the Soviet Union nuke themselves to death. I wanted to write a novel where multinational capital took over, straightened that shit out, but the world was still very problematic."

192 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 3.

193 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 3.

By the same token, the erosion of the binary between virtual and analogue reality cancels out any retrograde or psychedelic fantasy of unspoiled experience: so-called "meatspace" is not intuited as a realm of authenticity but a site of deprivation, dispossession, and alienation. The reference to the counterculture of earlier decades first and foremost follows the exigencies of the neo-noir worldview expounded across the novel. Impulses of cultural rebellion are invoked so as to perform their co-optation into the system. Here, the novel prefigures the near-future of the internet, which was still in its early development phase in the mid-eighties. The trilogy envisions a sort of enclosure of the digital frontier that is, for instance, registered in the conception of the computer-hacker or data thief as a "cyberspace cowboy" roaming corporate backyards like the Wild West. More specifically, though, the novel describes a permanent dynamic of absorption that spawns short-lived underground movements over and over: "entire subcultures could rise overnight, thrive for a dozen weeks, and then vanish utterly."[194] One such example is the guerrilla network "Panther Moderns" that engages in "random acts of surreal violence"[195] supposed to disrupt the corporate media system. While the subversive grouping first is posed as a vanguardist consortium of terroristic culture jammers, "manipulat[ing] the media gestalt," it is as soon re-incorporated by noting that it had "become symptomatic of the media gestalt itself," merely replicating the destruction of meaning – "original sociopolitical intent" – inhering the market-system.[196] As the network's name is subsequently abbreviated into the more generic cognomen "Moderns," abstracting from any political specificities, it comes to stand exemplarily for "a kind of ghostly teenage DNA at work in the Sprawl" – the steady capitalist need for new outsides to expand into – "something that carried the coded precepts of various short-lived subcults and replicated them at odd intervals."[197]

Neuromancer is truly characterized by a multi-layered movement of recuperation (expressed most regularly in a vocabulary of demonic or spectral possession), that ultimately leaves us with nothing but "the

194 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 63.
195 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 63.
196 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 63–64.
197 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 64.

freemarket deliria of cyberpunk, which assumes that capitalism is itself a kind of utopia of difference and variety."[198] Here, we can discern Gibson's take on the odd moniker "cyberpunk." If a site such as "Night City" is described as a space that is not "there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself,"[199] then the underground is not so much positioned as an outside than an internal frontier driving innovation via the disruptive use of digital machinery.[200] In this sense, the neo-noir image of cyber-capital crafted in *Neuromancer* is marked by the subjunctive synthesis between "Gothic High-Tech" and "Favela Chic,"[201] as fellow SF author Sterling puts it: high-tech's thrill of dematerialization is undergirded by the hazard zones of international labour division. The narrative blueprint unfolded across *Neuromancer*, hence, is crucially underwritten by a cybernetic subtext in which, eventually, the final plot twist is realized through an "alliance […] between an AI-'demon' (Wintermute) and a band of humans […] and quasi-humans."[202] In this, the text formalizes the cybernetic notion of a process than cannot be disassembled into its technical components. As per Norbert Wiener:

> When human atoms are knit into an organization in which they are used, not in their full rights as responsible human beings, but as cogs and levers and rods, it matters little that their raw material is flesh and blood.[203]

Eventually, *Neuromancer* can be considered putting into effect a "cyberneticization of fiction"[204] wherein all narrative cogs are in some way or another part of the disruptive becoming of the artificial intelligence

198 Fredric Jameson. "In Soviet Arcadia." *New Left Review* 75. 125.
199 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 11.
200 Cf. Csiscery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," 270. Csiscery-Ronay describes punk as "a sarcastic mirror-reflection of the social-engineers' dream." Precisely for this reason, he claims, "Cyber/Punk" constitutes "the ideal postmodern couple: a machine philosophy that can create the world in its own image and […] that image snarling back."
201 Bruce Sterling. "Atemporality for the Creative Artist." *Transmediale 10, Berlin* [Presentation] https://www.wired.com/2010/02/atemporality-for-the-creative-artist/ [last accessed 06.04.2026].
202 Fisher, *Flatline Construct*, 133.
203 Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 185.
204 Fisher, *Flatline Construct*, 138.

that emerges in the final pages of the novel. Gibson's trilogy refrains from picturing AI at an individual scale. Rather, it is represented as a corporate "neuromantic" arrangement that operates at an aggregate level. As such, it is characterized by a cybernetic "*movement of reflexivity*" wherein "*that which has been used to generate a system is made through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates*."[205] It appears as "the whole show." The information economy given expression in Gibson's literature is mystified into a post-anthropomorphic power, a "Gothic folly," endowed with an autonomous existence.

4 Freedom and Control: Structural Adjustment as a Recognizable Cultural Form

> It will not do to read only from economics to art. We must be able to read from art to economics as well.
>
> — La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork*, 33.

In the previous passage, I have argued that the "paraspaces" engineered in cyberpunk respond to certain aesthetic impasses in the face of increasing capitalist abstraction by "giving us a picture and a sense of our relationships to realities that transcend our phenomenological mapping systems […]."[206] The subjectless aesthetics developed in Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy emerge as a crucial medium for the negotiation of some major shifts in the history of capitalism that most pertinently pertain to changes in the nature of capitalist power. Traversed in a concise manner by what might be considered a specific neoliberal "sense of an ending," the novel hence projects a haptic vision of a capitalist order caught in perpetual adjustment. Most oppressively, this is manifested in the figure of the corporation as a "difference engine" (Gibson/Sterling) which has made disruptions functional to its mode of operation. Depicted in the posthuman imagery of artificial intelligence, it is the

205 Kathrin N. Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press. 8.
206 Jameson, "A Global Neuromancer," 234.

centre piece in a crucial re-imagination of SF in terms of an anti-utopian realism that inverts the extrapolation of utopian futurities into a narrative of recuperation. As encapsulated in the compound noun "neuromancer," it seems that SF is shifted toward an aesthetic of "machinic enslavement"[207] (to take up a specious formulation by Deleuze/Guattari), in which human labour at once turns into a raw material for data extraction and is fantasized to merge with hived off cybernetic forces.

Against this background, though, it is difficult to ward off the impression that extrapolation here comes to function as a device of disambiguation. By rewriting the synaesthetic trope in terms of cyber-spatial abstraction, *Neuromancer* offers a specific interpretation of the countercultural rebellion that facilitates the neutralization of its critical impetuses. That also applies to the representation of technology, especially the discourse of cybernetics, which is emptied of any emancipatory promises by cutting it down to an aesthetics of control wherein it appears foremost as the medium of an ever-deeper penetration of the social body by the logic of capital. It is not surprising that the vision of immortality dreamed up in Gibson's trilogy cannot but view this invention as a mechanism of intensified social segregation stripped of any utopian quality.[208] Admittedly, the subgenre accounts for a more general impasse insofar computerization has somewhat resisted formalization within the established patterns of utopian writing.[209] Nonetheless, it contributes to a narrowing of the cybernetic horizon that taps into ambivalences that have haunted the field from the beginning by painting a picture of the future in which such ambiguities have been resolved and the utopian impulses of the early phase of computer development – such as expressed in Stafford Beer's 1974 *Designing Freedom*[210] – have been largely cancelled, displaced, or co-opted. It puts into effect a narrative closure that disambiguates the legacy and potentials of the

207 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Brian Massumi (Transl.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 428.
208 Cf. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron. "The Californian Ideology." *Science as Culture* 6:1. 62.
209 Cf. Jameson, A" Global Neuromancer," 221–222.
210 Beer's study is inspired by his cooperation in the Chilean Project Cybersyn under President Allende, which has been prematurely terminated by the forces of General Pinochet in what might be considered a first neoliberal coup.

period into an "end of history" narrative *avant la lettre* tinged in the jargon of an emergent Information Society proclaimed at the time by writers such as Daniel Bell who assert the demise of the antagonistic logic characteristic of industrial capitalism.[211] Against this background, the opposition articulated in and by cyberpunk to the expansive and New Wave SF preceding it appears as an extension of these ideological struggles. Indeed, one can read sci-fi as a battleground in the struggle over "the meaning and legacy" of "the dreamings that the counter-culture unleashed."[212] The neo-gothic and -noir re-working of SF emerges as an eminent negotiation site for what "Bifo" Berardi calls the "slow cancellation of the future"[213] at the heart of the anti-utopian program of neoliberalism.

It is for this reason that cyberpunk proves a particularly vivid case study to trace a shift in capitalist imaginaries. Situated at the threshold between decades, cyberpunk's renegotiation of the extrapolative principle marks a transitional form that registers the emergence of a novel "end of history" narrative. By decoupling SF from its utopian inclinations, Gibson however expounds an anti-utopian vision that departs quite significantly from the totalitarian imagery characteristic of post-war dystopias such as Orwell's *1984*.[214] The latter are infamous for their vistas of top-down brainwashing, standardization, and the enclosure of the individual in punitive institutions. The worlds of cyberpunk, on the other hand, are marked by complexity, differentiation, and deterritorialization. Orwell can be seen to extrapolate from the business sociology of the 1940s, foremost James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* (1942), by postulating the bureaucratization of the world directed by managerial despots which not only submit the manufacturing base to their rule but re-organize society as a whole after the stratifications of the modern factory while the international order is re-grouped in highly centralized

211 Daniel Bell. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York (1973): Basic Books.

212 Mark Fisher. "acid communism (unfinished introduction)." *k-punk. The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*. Darren Ambrose (Ed.). London: repeater books. 1127–1128.

213 Franco "Bifo" Berardi. *After the Future*. Stirling: AK Press. 18.

214 Cf. Isaac Deutscher. "1984 – The Mysticism of Cruelty." *Heretics and Renegades and Other Essays*. London: Hamish and Hamilton.

super-states emerging in Oceanian, Asian, and trans-Atlantic industrial centres.[215] By contrast, *Neuromancer* depicts a complex landscape of transnational enterprise that is invested with neoliberal fantasies of a corporate global order. It proposes to show an apparent shift in the bourgeoisie's form of existence – arguably more spectacular than material – by morphing it into a cybernetic process that has transcended "the historical bourgeoisie, constituted of families rooted locally."[216]

A similar but less subtle vision of corporate futurity can still be found in Liza Elliott's 2018 dystopia *Everything is Known*, which notes that "Big Brother did not come from a totalitarian state, but from a totalitarian non-state," taking on the impersonal appearance of "a relentless cybernetic grandmaster" that exercises power by "control[ling] the market, the heartbeat of the money economy."[217] Interestingly, though, the *Neuromancer* trilogy proposes to think through these epochal changes by way of a national allegory. Underwritten by a "techno-orientalist"[218] imagery, the vision of Japanese Capitalism construed by Gibson displays a more or less overt geopolitical consciousness that extrapolates Tokyo Bay as the future-present, while the United States are quietly disappeared from the stage of world history as it appears superseded into a corporate network. The "obsession with the great Other, who is perhaps our own future rather than our past […]"[219] is taken as a "con-

215 Cf. George Orwell. "Second Thoughts on James Burnham." *The Complete Works of George Orwell.* Vol. 18. London: Secker. 268–284.

216 Samir Amin. *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press 25–26, 112. Amin argues that "[a]t this highest phase of the centralization of capital, its ties with a living organic body – the bourgeoisie – have broken." The historical bourgeoisie "has given way to an anonymous oligarchy/plutocracy that controls the monopolies, in spite of the dispersion of the title deeds of their capital." Albeit this argument tends to discount the persistence of national path dependencies in the formation of capitalist elites.

217 Liza Elliott. *Everything is Known*. Birmingham: Red Camel Press. 9–10.

218 David Morley and Kevin Robins. "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic." *Spaces in Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries.* London/New York: Routledge. 169, 173.

219 Cf. Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, 155–156. One may speak here of a "readaptation of Hegel's end of history" that has been "passed on down to us by way of a fateful footnote in Kojève, which explicitly glosses this idea with Japan."

ceptual instrument" to "think the world-system as such."[220] The Yen and Japanese corporate culture have turned into the default setting in the timeline of *Neuromancer*. Expressive of a persistent fantasy of Western decline, the so-called "Japan panic"[221] of the late 20th century comes to function as an allegorical stand-in to reflect on the stagnation of the success models of post-war transatlantic capitalism, a feared loss of sovereignty, and a latent automation panic at the dissolution of industrial mass manufacturing into decentralized production circuits that downsize the cost and ratio of living labour. The posthuman phantasmagoria of the "zaibatsu," thus, marks a nationalistically distorted meditation on the gradual autonomation of capital from the frame of the national economy.[222]

Bizarrely, however, as we have seen, these ruptures are mediated in a microscopic aesthetic. It is in downsizing the scope of world-building that cyberpunk proposes to historicize its present as a transitional phase geared towards something new.[223] Breaking with the expansive world-building of hard SF, the cyber-naturalist aesthetic of cyberpunk purports to bear witness to structural transformations that disable

220 Cf. Fredric Jameson. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World-System*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 3–7. Jameson introduces the term "geopolitical unconscious" as an add-on to his concept of the "political unconscious." My observations do not object to his explications, yet the extrapolative figuration of Japan in *Neuromancer* seems too on the nose for me to speak of an "unconscious" textual knowledge.
221 Sato Kumiko. "How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41:3. 340. See also Cf. James P. Womack et al. *The Story of Lean Production – Toyota's Secret Weapon in the Global Car Wars that is Revolutionizing Global Industry*. New York: Harper Perennial. The image of corporate futurity projected in the trilogy is thoroughly marked by fears of a covert takeover of the American economy by the fastest growing national economy up until the early 1980s – Japan – coinciding with the export of particular managerial programs such as "Toyotism" or business methods such as "kaizin" in which just-in-time manufacturing, the flexibilization of labour, and the methodical exploitation of co-management to boost innovation are, first, systematically applied as key theorists of "lean production" point out.
222 As such, though, it should be regarded as a "return of the repressed" in the form of the Dollar empire itself in which national interests and the global extension of private capital have long been conflated.
223 McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 238–239. See also Jameson, "Progress vs Utopia," 150–52. Following Jameson, McHale suggests that by "reimagining the present as the *past of a determinate future,*" SF has taken the role of historical fiction which "once helped us in a similar way by reimagining the present as the *future of a determinate past*."

the very principle of extrapolation inherited from Gernsbackian science-fiction, whose "productionist simulacra"[224] seem intimately tied to the proper world-building activities of industrial modernity's vertically-integrated monopolies:

> The connection to the mechanist, conveyor-belt, roboticized production of the time is apparent; the notion of 'building' reality at the micro and macro level is thus a necessary component of the science fiction of the period. The world-building projection is at the heart of SF, and 'hard SF,' especially, in the 1950s, becomes its mechanized expression.[225]

As Jameson aptly puts it, cyberpunk stands as a "precious symptom" and a curious "registering apparatus for historical transformations."[226] Combined with the techno-orientalist aesthetics of corporate futurity marking the genre, the descriptive apparatus of *Neuromancer* lays out a contorted image of a new accumulation paradigm in the making that emerges out of an older balance of forces and exercises power precisely on the microscopic level.

That said, it is remarkable that *Neuromancer*'s intervention into the future visions of science-fiction has proven especially pernicious. It has intuited an anti-utopian blueprint that does not only literalize a general historical defeatism but writes the backstory to a "microgenre" – marked by the *mise en scène* of the "Edge of the Construct" – that has sprawled since into various pop-cultural pieces such as *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1998), *The Matrix* franchise (1999–2003), or the *Mr. Robot* serial (2015–19).[227] The capitalist realism of the cyberpunk moment continues to have an effect in late 20th and early 21st century SF spectacles. The motif of resistance is ubiquitous in these sagas but in one way or another dissent is, ultimately, marked out as having always-already been co-opted. Especially, the trope of the plot twist works to falsify

224 Jean Baudrillard. "Simulacra and Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 18:3. Arthur B. Evans (Transl.). 309.
225 Steble, *New Wave in Science Fiction or the Explosion of the Genre*, 32–33.
226 Jameson, "A Global Neuromancer," 234.
227 Clover, *The Matrix*, 8, 20.

the original motives of the rebellious act. Either it is plotted from the very beginning or set to be recaptured by the dominant power structure. Arguably, this becomes most apparent in the allegorical deceit at the bottom of the *Matrix* media franchise, which seems to offer – in the style of a conspiracy narrative – an image of the whole by way of a simulation hypothesis. Set in a post-apocalyptic timeline devastated by a war between mankind and robots, the trilogy paints a gruesome scenario in which the victorious machinic overlords breed humans to harvest them as bio-electrical raw material while keeping the minds of the synthetical foetuses pacified with a version of 1999 frozen in time. The false reality that Neo rebels against presents itself as "a tolerable symbolic expression"[228] of the reality of human farming – the movie's take on the Baudrillardian concept of the "*desert of the real*"[229] – which in return offers a crude allegory of the increasing exploitation of the social relation itself as the exertion of consumer choice generates a "behavioural surplus"[230] extracted by tech-capital in the form of Big Data. The rewriting of the human element as a natural resource unaware of its predicament codifies a passage toward a condition of total immersion into the market system in the guise of freedom.

Of course, the plot surrounding the hacker-turned-hero Neo at first comes with a utopian prospect in that regard. Offering a glimpse at the "truth," it promises the release of humanity from the illusions of the computer simulation. Spectators are lured into expecting a triumphal overthrow of the machinic conspirators. Eventually, however, the movie's protagonist must recognize that he is but the sixth iteration of the digital messiah in a series of failed simulations. The resistance movement itself appears caught up in the fatal delusion that it is free from the predictive power of the Master AI – the "Architect" – while viewers soon learn that it is but a calculated glitch essential to the rebooting of the Matrix. Ultimately, Neo even allies himself with the source code against a rogue program that poses an actual immanent threat. As he comes to regard such cooperation as the only means guaranteeing sur-

228 Clover, *The Matrix*, 82–83.
229 Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Sheila F. Glaser (Transl.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1.
230 Shoshana Zuboff. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: Public Affairs. 63–97.

vival and is re-conditioned into a centrism-of-necessity, he ends up vindicating the existing balance of forces.[231] Interestingly, historical consciousness – in this case the recoding of all hitherto revolutionary history into a series of defeats – here emerges as a disciplinary tool. It does not express opposition to a post-historical condition but rather serves as a reminder for the absence of alternatives to the status quo.[232] The awe and terror at technology is repurposed into "some privileged representational shorthand" for contemporary capital that, however, precisely through this "distorted figuration"[233] confabulates a whole without holes. By pretending to make the social totality materialize in front of the individual viewer, it construes a (cyber-)idealist image of power in which all inconsistencies in the machinations of control are bridged over. Perhaps the "ultimate product" of the millennial turn, the *Matrix* trilogy acts out the "dreamlife of the [dot-com] boom" by conceiving capitalism after the image of "millennial merger mania," in which "the corporations of the world become one seamless super-entity"[234] that is one with life.

231 Following a similar logic, the movie ending of Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013) surprises viewers with the plot twist that the insurrection shown across the film is not a singular event but has happened numerous times before. Set on a post-apocalyptic snow-capped planet, the movie takes place in a self-sustaining circumnavigational train that runs on a highly segregated system of labour division. Hence, when the ringleader finally reaches the front engine, he is confronted with the revelation that this closed locomotive ecosystem would collapse if this hierarchy were to collapse. In this light, the revolt is re-written in terms of a Malthusian logic. The uprising is framed as a calculated glitch that serves the purpose of renewing the fragile demographic balance of the dystopic train-society, eventually forcing upon the 'hero' the choice between survival or extinction. Likewise, the hit series *Mr. Robot* (2015–19) tells the story about a large-scale hack intended to cancel the entire debt of the U.S.-American population. However, when this scheme ends up being re-incorporated into a plot to replace the Dollar with a corporate crypto-currency, here, too, the hacktivists drop their critique of the system in favour of its protection against a conspiratorial corporate excess that, on top of it, plays into Sino-phobic fears of a covert takeover of the U.S.-economy.

232 Cf. Tish Turl. "There is nothing wrong with Time Travel." *Born Again Labor Museum* [Online Exibition]. https://www.bornagainlabor.com/ [last accessed: 09.09.2022]. The prominence of anti-time travel tropes in recent popular culture is expressive of an "end of history" narrative as it cements the inevitability of the historical process.

233 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 37–38.

234 Clover, *The Matrix*, 73–74.

In hindsight, the change brought to sci-fi by cyberpunk's adoption of a "neo-noir worldview"[235] does not simply come across as an idiosyncratic, contingent innovation. Rather, it seems to delineate a first "terrible […] battleground"[236] for the negotiation of a recalibration in capitalist power. Csicsery-Ronay, therefore, is right to argue that we better think of cyberpunk as "a more encompassing aesthetic" instead of narrowing it down to a niche "movement in the U.S. and Japanese SF trade."[237] The sense of being "hardwired in" – so prevalent in cyberpunk as "a metaphor and a literal mode of being in the brave new world"[238] – crucially resonates in the larger literary-theoretical moment of the time. As notes Brian McHale, one can observe the emergence of a "shared repertoire of motifs and strategies"[239] which taps into the novel media of the computer age as technologies of representation that provide schemata through which to refract and reflect upon changes in social existence. The case of Gilles Deleuze's *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (1992) is particularly intriguing in that regard, as it models itself as a peculiar synthesis of post-68 science-fiction and social theory:

> Control is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault characterizes as our immediate future.[240]

In fact, Deleuze cites new cybernetic technologies – "machines of a third type, computers" – as a crucial model of thought to map the operations of the emerging compact "because they express those social forms

235 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 11.
236 Cf. Scott Bukatman. "Amidst these Fields of Data: Allegory, Rhetoric, and the Paraspace." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 33:3. 216.
237 Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuroromanticism," 269.
238 Steble, *New Wave in Science Fiction or the Explosion of the Genre.*, 18.
239 McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 225, 235–237, 228ff. According to McHale, it is only in the 1980s that "SF and postmodernist mainstream fiction really become one another's contemporaries, aesthetically as well as chronologically, with each finally beginning to draw on the current phase of the other, rather than on some earlier and now dated phase." He contends that if cyberpunk slowly fades from literary discourse, it remains a ghostly presence in fictional accounts of Big Data. This is not to say that there is always a direct influence. Rather, it seems that fiction reaches similar aesthetic conclusions in relation to a shared and persistent representational dilemma.
240 Gilles Deleuze. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 26. 4.

capable of generating them and using them."[241] In this, again, he explicitly[242] borrows from the discourse of cybernetics that had emerged as a reflection on a new stage in capitalist technology – capable of "circumventing the role of the machinist as the source of intelligence in production"[243] – by building up on the assumption that intelligence is based in information circuits that allow an organism, whether "in the metal or in the flesh,"[244] to negotiate a dynamic environment.[245] It is, then, the vision of adaptative feedback-loops at the bottom of the cybernetic notion of control (as in κυβερνητική, *kybernētiké*, meaning 'governance' or κυβερνάω, *kybernáō*, meaning 'to steer, navigate or gov-

241 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 6.

242 Cf. Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 25.

243 David F. Noble. "Social Choice in Machine Design: The Case of Automatically Controlled Machine Tools." *The Social Shaping of Technology*. Judi Wajcman and Donald A. MacKenzie (Eds.). Berkshire: Open University Press. 111. See also Nick Dyer-Witheford. *Cyber-Proletariat. Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*. London: Pluto Press. 44ff.

244 Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 42. See also W. Ross Ashby. "Design for Brain." *Electronic Engineering* 20. 379; David Porush. 1985. *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction*. London: Methuen. 2. In a notable intervention into the field of neuropsychology, Ashby proposes to conceive the brain as an "acting machine." In this sense, Porush takes cybernetics to argue that there is a functional equivalence between the operating modes of humans, other biological organisms, and machine systems. It figures "a metaphor so deeply engrained in our culture, so silently driven down to the roots of our imaginations, that it achieves the status of an element in a new mythology."

245 Cf. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 73ff; Pioneered at the famous Macy Conferences (1946–53), there has been a host of disciplines as diverse as mathematics (e.g., Norbert Wiener, John von Neumann), anthropology (e.g., Margaret Mead), linguistics (e.g., Roman Jakobson), neurophysiology (e.g., Warren McCulloch), sociology (e.g., Ervin Goffmann), or psychology (e.g., Ross Ashby) that have explored the potential equivalences between machines and humans. From the start, then, cybernetics has functioned as an interdisciplinary rubric engaged with ideas of automated piloting, circular causality, and information control. As such, though, the meta-discipline has always been the site of contradictions that at times traverse the individual work of these researchers themselves. Take Wiener's cybernetic vision. Albeit largely inclined toward the closet humanist hope of maximizing human behaviour – the titular *Human Use of Human Beings* (1950) – his ideas did, nonetheless, first find application in the context of weapons research, that is, the construction of an anti-aircraft predictor operating on the basis of positive and negative feedback signals. It, thus, provided a model for Wiener's reflections on information circuits. Yet, as he himself was acutely aware and the science historian David F. Noble similarly points out, it stands to reason in how far these conditions of emergence "also helped determine the shape the technology would take." (Noble, "Social Choice in Machine Design," 113)

ern')[246] that serves as a conceptual image for a new analytics of power. Especially, so-called (post-)structuralism, crafting "concepts such as 'apparatuses,' 'social machines,' and 'abstract machines,'"[247] sought ought the cybernetic critique of anthropocentrism to finetune theory to the new machinations of power.[248] The Foucauldian concept of the *dispositif* is particularly noteworthy since its analytic abstraction of agency into impersonal processes provides the most radical articulation of feedback-looped power. [249] Modelled after the image of negative and positive feedback, it develops an analytics according to which "resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power"[250] but rather marks a functional element in the reproduction of power. As such, though, radical theory reconfirms the disambiguation of cybernetics registered in the control aesthetics of cyberpunk by making it appear as first and fore-

246 Cf. Norbert Wiener. *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 11. Noting that "all the existing terminology has too heavy a bias to one side or another" to capture the sense of the emerging "field of control and communication theory," Wiener states that he has opted for an "artificial neo-Greek expression to fill the gap […], which we form from the Greek *κυβερνήτης* or steersman."
247 Read, *Micro-Politics of Capital*, 6.
248 Céline Lafontaine. "The Cybernetic Matrix of 'French Theory.'" *Theory, Culture & Society*. 24:5. 27–46; Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Transl.), Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press. 9; Cf. Friedrich Kittler. "The World of the Symbolic – A World of the Machine." *Literature, Media, Information Systems*. John Johnston (Ed.). London/New York: Routledge. 145; Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan. 2011. "From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus." *Critical Inquiry*, 38. 99–100. Céline Lafontaine's comprehensive intellectual history of structuralism and poststructuralism establishes that the entire theoretical moment of post-war France was profoundly impressed by the influx of cybernetic information theories, which were widely disseminated and received over the scientific landscape in the context of the so-called Marshall Plan. As stated paradigmatically by Jacques Derrida in the introduction to his *Grammatology* (1967), this upcoming theoretical anti-humanism proposed to take the "cybernetic program" to its logical conclusion and purge the onto-epistemological rupture achieved by it from its humanist remnants. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler even goes so far as to say that Derrida's non-subjective notion of "écriture" but equally Lévi-Strauss' and Lacan's concepts of the symbolic could only be elaborated in the historical encounter with the information technologies of the cybernetic episteme.
249 Cf. Henri Lefebvre. *Positions contre les technocrates*. Paris: Denoël-Gonthier. 85. Henri Lefebvre particularly insisted on the unmarked presence of cybernetics in Foucault's relational concept of power.
250 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I: An Introduction*. Robert Hurley (Transl.). New York: Pantheon Books. 95; See also Slavoj Žižek. *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*. London/New York: Routledge. 71.

most a technology of alienation that inhibits mass upheaval through the pre-emptive management of social unrest.[251] In any case, however, the analytic shift to environmental technologies of power (e.g., Deleuze or Foucault) reflects real transformations in the history of capital and the nature of abstraction.[252]

Nowadays, of course, the signifier "cybernetics" itself is all but forgotten. Yet, as authors like Alexander Galloway or Jasper Bernes persuasively argue, the "cybernetic hypothesis"[253] has survived or rather diffused in distorted manners into a whole range of disciplines from complexity theory, through management and systems theory, to monetarism that are crucial to the neoliberal order and, in fact, the re-definition of "order" underlying it.[254] Giving this argumentation a more materialist spin, Joseph Vogl further delineates in how far the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural dispersion of cyberneticized information vocabulary – metaphorizing self-steering communication processes – is itself expressive of the strategic relationship between information technology and finance after the de-pegging of the Dollar from the Gold Standard that is epitomized by the establishment of the electronic stock-market NASDAQ (National Association of Securities Deal-

251 See also Norbert Wiener. "Letter to UAW President Walter Reuther." *Libcom*. http://libcom.org/history/father-cybernetics-norbert-wieners-letter-uaw-president-walter-reuther [last accessed 01.12.2022]. Wiener himself established contact with Detroit labour leader Walter Reuther to caution against the introduction of cybernetic forces into the factory-system. As he urges the union activist to pre-emptively campaign for workers control over emerging computer technologies, it becomes clear that the prospect of a "disastrous" disempowerment of organized labour facilitated by new levels of automation has troubled much of cybernetic thinking from the outset.

252 Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital*, 8.

253 Tiqqun. *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*. Robert Hurley (Transl.). South Pasadena: Semiotext(e). 25.

254 Cf. Alexander Galloway. "Preface." *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*. South Pasadena: Semiotext(e). 8; Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustriliaztion*. 100. Galloway writes that cybernetics has assumed a "*practical hegemony*" detached from the unhandiness of the neo-Greek neologism. The "near-disappearance, at the end of the 1970s, of the very term 'cybernetic' in favor of other terms (systemic, cognitive, *informatique*, digital, *numérique*) deemed equivalent or close and seeking to describe, though always partially, the shifts of the current period, is one of the intriguing and paradoxical symptoms of the successful penetration of the cybernetic vision of the world." Bernes, again, notes that systems theory and complexity theory can be considered heirs to cybernetics that shift the focus from "homeostasis" toward "chaotic turbulence" but retain the idea of a self-organizing order.

ers Automated Quotations) in 1971.[255] He notes a double movement in which the expansive importance of computerized financial markets and the persistent virulence of information discourses have continually reinforced each other.[256] This comes through, especially, in the writing of neoliberal economists whose theoretical language increasingly reflects the fusion of tech- and finance capital taking hold in the later 20th century. The work of Hayek is particularly symptomatic in that regard, as his writings in the post-war era are profoundly characterized by the incorporation of "cybernetics and the related subjects of information and system theory"[257] into his own conceptual apparatus.

By re-interpreting "information" in terms of price signals, the Austrian intellectual rebrands the market as the information-processing machine *par excellence*.[258] He and his disciples carry out an active sublation of cybernetic notions of circular causality into a world-economic imaginary organized around the key ideological precept that "order is adjustment."[259] Similarly, Franz Böhm, one of the leading proponents of ordoliberalism, frames his vision of "the market price system" in a thoroughly cybernetic terminology of "control" and "automation" that thinks of financial signalling as the fundamental "steering mechanism"[260] of micro- and macro-structural behaviour. The electrical imagery of power grids equips these writers with a particularly pertinent image of thought to give shape to their cybernetic notion of the market, in which the trade in physical goods is considered subsidiary to the allocation of information. Conceiving of negative and positive feedback as switches in the circuitry of a wired "world of signals,"[261] it gives expression to a market order that encases economic actors in a motion of perpetual adjustment to price indices.[262] As the French neoliberal Henri Lepage

255 Cf. Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 35–40. Vogl cites the NASDAQ as the technical precursor of today's internet.
256 Cf. Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 35–39.
257 Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty Vol. 1*, 14.
258 Cf. Matteo Pasquinelli. "Hayek's Neoliberalism and the Origins of Connectionism." *Qui Parle* 30:01. 162–166.
259 Tumlir, "National Sovereignty, Power and Interest," 24.
260 Franz Böhm. 1966. "Privatrechtsgesellschaft und Marktwirtschaft." *Ordo* 17. 74.
261 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 223.
262 Cf. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," 86.

puts it, the "social legitimacy of capitalism" issues from "principles of cybernetic regulation of the market economy."[263]

It must be conceded, though, that even if the imagery of microelectronics lends itself to the expression of the ideological premises of neoliberalism, it is the semantics of the market that is the dominant relatum in this metaphorical construction. The market price system takes on the character of an expansive meta-metaphor in the neoliberal vision of (global) governance. Next to Hayek, it is particularly the Chicago School that has extended the "price theory as a mode of representation,"[264] for instance by re-conceptualizing criminology as the management of incentives or annexing the strategic thinking of military theory.[265] The "*Landnahme* of the social,"[266] that is: the penetration of the logic of capital into all facets of life, is complemented on a representational level. The extra-economic is reconstructed after the image of price signals while social actors are recoded in terms of "human capital"[267] (Gary S. Becker) caught in constant processes of price hermeneutics. Nowhere is this clearer articulated than in the philosophy of Hayek, who mobilizes the entire "armamentarium of cognitive sciences to make neoliberal principles look natural and universal."[268] If one of the core tenets of cybernetics consists in the idea of an analogical equivalence between feedback-based intelligences in the metal or in the flesh, then in Hayek's book the "decentralization of knowledge across the market" mirrors coeval "theories of neuroplasticity [that] described

263 Henri Lepage. *Demain le Libéralisme*. Paris: Livre de Poche. 380. Quoted after: Grégoire Chamayou. *The Ungovernable Society: A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism*. Andrew Brown (Transl.). Cambridge: Polity Press. 60.

264 William Davies and Linsey McGoey. "Rationalities of Ignorance. On Financial Crisis and the Ambivalence of Neo-Liberal Epistemology." *Economy and Society* 41:1. 71.

265 Cf. Gary S. Becker. 1974. "Crime and punishment: an economic approach." *Essays in the Economics of Crime and Punishment*. New York: Columbia University Press; Alberts/Hayes, *Power to the Edge*, Online. Insisting on the merger of economics and warfare in the age of "complex adaptive systems," contemporary military theory means to accumulate "non-battle forces" such that military power is reconceived according to economic parameters.

266 Neilson/Mezzadra, *The Politics of Operations*, 88. Neilson and Mezzadra discuss the notion of "*Landnahme*" with regard to the re-visitation of the Schmittian concept in Klaus Dörre's recent work.

267 Gary S. Becker. *Human Capital. A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

268 Pasquinelli, "Hayeks's Neoliberalism," 160–161.

the decentralization of cognitive functions across the brain."[269] In this simile, the knowability of the social is reduced to a propensity for "pattern recognition"[270] while the price mechanism is supposed to fill in the gaps in the individual sensorium. Crafting a theory of "human capital" *avant la lettre*, Hayek makes a case for a homology between the neurological and the market which ultimately brands the latter as the natural instrument for the organization of human societies.

Again, French (poststructuralist) theory has been particularly sensible to the changes in subjectification implied in the assimilation of experience to market diagnostics by registering the financialization of life into a sort of "share-holder existence."[271] Taking to task the ideology of the *homo economicus* encoded in the terminology of "human capital," Foucault for instance notes a break with the model of possessive individualism characteristic of classical liberalism. The conception of the propertied subject as an "atom of freedom" that unites ownership and managerial responsibility – the "intangible partner of laissez-faire" and at the centre of the classical justification of capitalist authority – makes way for a neoliberal anthropology in which individual conduct is irreducibly feedback-looped with impersonal market mechanisms and quasi-automatized.[272] Deleuze, in this sense, goes even so far to propose abbreviating the very notion of the in-dividual – bracketing the idea of an indivisible self – to speak of the "dividuals" populating the societies of control. The self is modulated after the "corporate-form" which does not only constitute the key organizational unit but also model of subjectivity for a stage of capitalism wherein the impersonal char-

269 Pasquinelli, "Hayeks's Neoliberalism," 161.

270 Pasquinelli, "Hayek's Neoliberalism," 168. Re-tracing the movement from "Gestalt" to "pattern" in Hayek's reading of cognitive sciences, Pasquinelli notes that it, eventually, turns into a totalizing term that goes on to represent all possible fields of social activity after a market logic.

271 Frédéric Gros. *Le Principe Sécurité*. Paris: Gallimard. 236. Quoted after: Emily Apter. "Shareholder Existence. On the Turn to Numbers in recent French Theory." *Textual Practice* 28:7. 1330.

272 Michel Foucault. *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79*. Michel Senallart (Ed.), Graham Burchell (Transl.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 270–271.

acter of capitalist domination reaches new heights.[273] Power becomes smart as agency is synthesized across "masses, samples, data, markets, or '*banks*'"[274] that do not so much recruit the subject into a specific ideology than exert social control by quantifying, micro-targeting, and indebting it at every turn. In his vocabulary, this is registered in a shift from power models predicated on "codes" to the operationality of "axioms," whereas Foucault opts to speak of a "conduct of conducts."[275] Instead of shaping particular subject types adapted to specific institutional regiments, that is to say, control acts upon the rules of the game itself by subjecting the set of initial conditions underlying social praxis to a permanent re-modulation in accordance with money flows. Positioned at "the interface"[276] between power and freedom, the neoliberal *homo economicus* is, in this sense, considered the key subject-model of a governmental reason that rules through abstractions. The dividual self-regulates, consciously or not, through adaptation to steadily changing market variables all while the mute compulsions of the economy

273 See also Ellen Meiksins Wood. *The Origin of Capitalism. A Longer View*. London/New York: Verso. 96–97. Capitalism has fundamentally reshaped the terrain of social behaviour since its emergence. Early critics of capitalism such as Sismondi (1773–1842) already noted it "separate[s] every kind of property from every kind of labour." The historian Ellen Meiksins Wood, in that respect, speaks of a totalizing market logic since direct producers become "dependent on the market for the most basic conditions of their own reproduction." Capitalist freedom is, indeed, ambivalent: wage-dependents are free to carry their labour-power to market without being bound to a specific master (as would have been the case under feudal serfdom), but also insofar they are "free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own." In that sense, as Søren Mau insists, the mechanisms of capitalist domination extend beyond the "*violence/ideology couplet*" insofar they are "immediately embedded in the economic processes themselves rather than tacked onto them in an external manner." The historically specific form of power marking capitalism, that is, does not so much "*directly* address the subject" but "addresses the subject […] indirectly, by *acting* on its *environment*" (Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 4–5). Marx, therefore, notes that the labouring masses do not belong to a particular capitalist but to the capitalist system as a whole: "the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist. His economic bondage is at once mediated through, and concealed by the periodical renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of individual wage-masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labour" (Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 874, 723–724).

274 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5.

275 Cf. Fredric Jameson. "Marxism and Dualism in Deleuze." *A Deleuzian Century?* Ian Buchanan (Ed.), Durham/London: Duke University Press. 18; Michel Foucault. "The Subject and Power." *Essential Works of Foucault (1954–1984): Power*. James D. Faubion (Ed.). Robert Hurley (Transl.). 341.

276 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 253.

are effaced in an image of rational choice such that the marketplace – "coordinating the economic activities of millions" – appears to achieve, in the words of Milton Friedman, "[c]o-operation" without "coercion."[277]

Compared to the models of power developed simultaneously in post-68 critical theory but also economic self-descriptions, the *Neuromancer* trilogy, hence, can be said to articulate a similar redefinition of order as adjustment. If neoliberalism is described by proponents and opponents alike as a mode of governance that takes on an environmental character, then the corporate situation represented in *Neuromancer*, too, rather "frame[s]" than "determine[s] the subjects acting within."[278] In both, the "market does not require specific economic pursuits, political commitments, or ideological beliefs; it only requires our being in and of it."[279] The cyberneticization of fiction put into effect in Gibson's poetics inscribes the axiom of structural adjustment into literary structure by narrativizing cyberspace as an "open environment" wherein control "runs through each, dividing each within."[280] In *Neuromancer,* corporate rule appears liquified and anonymized into the open-world simulation of cyberspace, where – to put it in Kenneth Burke's narratological categories – the literary "scene" instead of the "agent" is posited as the primary source of "agency."[281] In encoding a profound mutation of capital, that is, the "dark world of cyberpunk fiction" comes to envision a social plain in which the "freedom of self-fashioning" is quasi "indistinguishable from the powers of an all-encompassing control."[282] Fittingly, the anti-utopian ruse of the novel does not stem from the suppression of

277 Milton Friedman. 1962/2002. Capitalism and Freedom. Chicago: Chicago University Press. 13.

278 Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith. "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature. An Introduction." Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture. Idem (Eds.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 9.

279 Huehls/Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature," 9.

280 Deleuze, Postscript, 7, 5.

281 Kenneth Burke. A Grammar of Motives. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press. 7ff.

282 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Empire. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 216; Fisher, Capitalist Realism, 25. Taking up Deleuze's periodization, Mark Fisher proposes to read Gibson's Neuromancer in light of this transition to a "[c]yberspatial capital" that dissolves the boundaries of work by directly tapping into social cooperation and consequently "operates by addicting its users." This finds its most visual representation in the creaturely

civil liberty as is the case in Orwell's dystopian fiction. Instead, it comes through in the final plot twist when the initial utopian impulses of the band of misfits carrying out the heist subplot is inverted into a sort of corporate eschatology that precisely capitalizes on the exercise of freedom itself. Envisaging the supersession of the disciplinary apparatuses of industrialized mass production into a fluid digital space, the aesthetic invention of cyberspace provides a recognizable optic for the new dispositive of capitalist control wherein the self is literally transcoded into the infamous "abilities-machine"[283] described during the same historical moment in Foucault's lectures on neoliberal governance.

As explains Fredric Jameson, the "axiometric abstractions which exist in cyberspace as buildings and cityscapes […] enhance the possibilities of the narrativization of this material."[284] As such, Gibson's poetic shares in the apprehension of an "always-already restored" order. At once, though, it makes a discrete, original contribution to the cultural repertoire of neoliberalism. In offering a specific aesthetic response to the representational and narrative challenge posed by dividual subjecthood, it generates a proper look and feel for a changing economy in which capitalism's "human embodiment seems to have vanished" but in this appears all the "more powerful."[285] By ascertaining the contemporaneity between *Neuromancer* and the neoliberal armamentarium, I suggest that cyberpunk always oscillates between a critical poetics and capitalist fetishization. Thereby, the genre's intervention into the field of sci-fi, in fact, echoes the ambivalences in what might still be called critical theory. Seeking to represent the agency of the virtual, it skilfully brings into view a form of power that is non-discursive but mutely compels behaviour by governing the social environment. Thereby, it points toward a change in ideology in which freedom, as in neoliberal choice theories, emerges as a means of domination underwritten by a tacit dynamic of recuperation. Yet, the allegory of control constructed

"feeling" of "insects-under-the-skin" experienced by Gibson's "cyberspace cowboys" as they unplug from the "abstract speed" of the matrix, which literally gets under the skin by turning into an internal repetition compulsion.

283 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 229.

284 Jameson, "A Global Neuromancer," 233.

285 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 1.

in *Neuromancer* simultaneously participates in a certain "end of history" narrative, insofar it envisions "*a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility*" that succeeds all the better when it manages to make "even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favour."[286]

Setting the example for other "Edge of the Construct" stories such as *The Matrix*, it might initially read like a trenchant criticism of the present. But, at once, it contributes to a vision of ubiquitous control which "actually reinforces a discourse that *prevents* imagining alternatives."[287] Figuring as a stand-in for our "degraded attempt"[288] to grasp the whole, the allegorization of AI projects an impossible symbolic unity of the capitalist class that fills in the gaps not only in our understanding but also the functioning of the system. Under this aspect, I argue, cyberpunk manifests as a privileged site to read out (narrative) patterns in neoliberal culture at large. Indeed, it exemplifies broader trends. Popular culture is filled with stories of uprising. However, an anti-utopian mood prevails. Resistance recurs but power structures always resurge. Or, when authoritarian rule, as embodied by figures such as President Snow from Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008–2010), is dismantled, the emergent resistance reveals itself as a mirror image of the old order: equally ruthless and power-hungry. The cycle of domination is not broken. It is merely reset under new management. What remains conspicuously absent is any substantive vision of systemic transformation. The articulation of a post-hierarchical society is cast as fraudulent. Revolution, in this frame, becomes not a break with the past but its grim continuation by other means. The image of revolt might manifest as a prominent feature of late 20th and early 21st century imaginaries. Yet, it is reduced to a plot point serving to underscore that opposition against the forces-that-be remains effectively impossible or

286 Slavoj Žižek. The Sublime Object of Ideology. New York/London: Verso. 50. Allegory, here, seems to function as another procedure of subsumption. The status quo is projected not only onto future and past but also alternative worlds: capital is established as the truth of this and all other realities.

287 Laura Horn. "Future Incorporated." *Economic Science-fiction*. William Davies (Ed.). London: Goldsmith Press. 41–42.

288 Jameson, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 38.

is futile to begin with. It is as if neoliberal culture re-enacted over and over the defeat of the forces that had to be overcome to make place for the subsumption of world society to capital: the defeat of the workers movement, anti-colonial struggle, really-existing socialism, etc.[289] This is not merely an ideological cover. It is a way of doing politics. It marks a defence mechanism that wards off the very re-emergence of social and political alternatives. Neoliberal cultural production, haunted by the discontent generated by decades of structural adjustment the world over, repeatedly turns to narratives of inevitability that rationalize the "historical failure of an 'alternative'" into an "always-already failed alternative."[290] Yet, the "potential and the historical roots and the detours of possibilities also belong to reality," as notes Alexander Kluge: "The realistic result, the actual result, is only an abstraction that has murdered all other possibilities for the moment."[291] With this in mind, I would now like to take a look back and return to the historical turning point at which neoliberalism prevailed over its systemic alternatives – not only over its anti-capitalist opponents, but also over its capitalist counter-models. This historical intermezzo is in order to contextualize the crisis of critique elaborated so far more thoroughly within the upheavals of the last half-century.

289 Cf. Maurizzio Lazzarato. *Money and War. The Imperialism of the Dollar*. New York/London: Verso. 116–119. Lazzarato goes so far to call neoliberal governance a "subsidiary technique that seeks to stabilize what has been violently destabilized." It follows upon a cycle of imperialist aggression as a "relative pacification (governmentality) in which the radical conflict is not annulled by the action of [neo]liberalism but continues, expressed through other means." The "transformation of subjectivity according to the principles of human capital has defeated subjectivity as a condition."

290 Zupančič, "Power in the Closet," 222.

291 Jan Dawson. 1974. "Interview: Alexander Kluge." *Film Comment*. https://www.filmcomment.com/article/a-blast-from-the-past-alexander-kluge-interview/ [last accessed 07.08.2025].

5 [Historical Intermezzo I] On the Crisis of Fordism and the Neoliberal Turn

Before investigating the neoliberal turn in greater detail, we have to determine the conditions that gave rise to it. That is why we must first turn our attention to the regime of capitalism that preceded it. In research literature, this settlement is often periodized as the *Trentes Glorieuses* – the glorious early decades of post-World War II reconstruction – due to the levels of sustained growth on a scale not seen since. The U.N. itself has gone so far as to call it the "Golden Age of Capitalism."[292] In the sociological self-descriptions of the epoch, this dynamic is reflected upon in terms of a "late" or "neo-capitalism" based in a "mixed economy" that combines market principles, industrial planning, and the management of aggregate demand following Keynesian doctrines. This corresponds to a sense of overwhelming stability in the critical theory of the day which differs quite significantly from the historical horizon up until the interwar period. If before opponents of capitalism viewed it as inherently unstable, war-prone, and marked by an irreconcilable antagonism between the exploited and propertied classes, leading to an ever-growing working-class rebellion in the industrial centres,[293] during the post-war boom there was a real sense in critical theory that capitalism had segued into a "one-dimensional society without opposition"[294] or a "classless class society"[295] as Adorno put it.

Indeed, the notion of totality developed by the Frankfurt School is based in the analysis of a "reified" or "administered" civilization marked by the wholesale organization of society via the rationalization of labour division, the national integration of unions, and a culture industry wherein "nothing has a chance to survive which is not in turn

292 United Nations. "Post-war Reconstruction and Development in the Golden Age of Capitalism." *World Economic and Social Survey.* 24ff. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESS_2017_ch2.pdf [last accessed 05.07.2025].
293 Cf Vivek Chibber. *The Class Matrix.* Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press. 2ff.
294 Paul Mattick Sr. *Critique of Marcuse*. New York/St. Louis/San Francisco: Herder and Herder. 38.
295 Theodor W. Adorno. "Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie." *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 8*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp. 337ff.

reified."[296] The anti-authoritarian critique advanced in Germany, again, took aim at the "concerted action" of a state aiming at neutralizing class conflict into an "ordered society" as then-Chancellor Ludwig Erhard put it.[297] The Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James captures the broader sentiment of this period:

> For some years after the war it seemed that the totalitarian state, by its control of every aspect of human life, had crushed forever all hopes for freedom, for liberty and socialism. Men struggled, but under the belief that the Welfare State was in reality only a half-way house to the ultimate totalitarian domination. A symbolical date was even fixed when this would be achieved all over the world, 1984.[298]

In the anti-bureaucratic struggles of the New Left, the state was perceived as an agency capable of mitigating and effectively blocking the instabilities issuing from capitalist competition and recurring economic crises. In this, the critique of exploitation was slowly side-stepped by the resistance against the total administration of society, which has been blueprinted infamously in George Orwell's *1984*. Conjuring the spectre of despotic bureaucratization, such dystopian scenarios of state totalitarianism re-defined the key problem of the moment not as a challenge of abolishing private property but maximizing liberty. As Cornelius Castoriadis from the collective *Socialisme ou Barbarie* put it, social struggle in the imperialist centres should turn from the property question towards the increasement of freedom within the sectors of (re-) production, be it the factory, education, or the family.[299]

Foucault's term for this arrangement, as Deleuze points out, is of course that of the disciplinary society. Albeit in their genealogy, the formation is rooted in long-term trends that reach back to the replace-

296 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno. "Introduction." *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. Glin Adey and David Frisby (Transl.). London: Heinemann. 7.
297 Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Jürgen Krahl. "Organisationsreferat." *Vom Ende der abstrakten Arbeit*. Walter Neumann (Ed.) Frankfurt a.M.: Materialismus-Verlag. 58–59.
298 C.L.R. James et al. *Facing Reality*. Detroit: Bewick Editions. 5.
299 Cf. Cornelius Castoriadis. "On the Content of Socialism, II." *The Castoriadis Reader*. David Ames Curtis (Ed. & Transl.). Malden: Blackwell Publishers. 61, 85, 98.

ment of feudal modes of sovereignty based in the power "to tax rather than to organize production, to rule on death rather than to administer life."[300] By contrast, the paradigm of discipline is understood precisely as the turn of power to the organization of the life of the social body. It marks the emergence of a so-called bio-power which initiated the large-scale "organization of vast spaces of enclosure" that set out exactly to realize the administration of social life in the passage of individuals "from one closed environment to another […], first, the family; then, the school […]; then, the barracks […]; then the factory; from time to time the hospital; possibly prison."[301] Each of these spaces function according to their own sets of laws, but they share a common rationality: "to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time*; to compose a productive force* within the dimension of space-time *whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces*."[302] From the exploitation of unpaid domestic labour in the enclosed site of the family to the workplace rationalizations of new factory-systems, discipline names the specific strategies of surplus extraction sustaining the accumulation strategy of mass production.

Nowadays, the mode of regulation and exploitation characterizing this period is commonly grasped in the nomenclature of "Fordism."[303] Derived from the model of mass manufacturing implemented in the factories of Ford, this "capitalism of concentration"[304] refers to an epochal re-structuring of the production process that builds on the

300 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 3.
301 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 3.
302 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 3 (emphasis added).
303 Cf. Antonio Gramsci. "Americanism and Fordism." *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (Ed. & Transl.). New York: International Publishers. 279–287, 306–318. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci used the term in his *Prison Notebooks* to denote an emerging future organizational form of capitalism that he saw, first, as a response to the Great Depression after 1929 and, second, as an American counterstrategy to fascism and revolutionary communism during the interwar period. Those technological and organizational developments were coupled with a new democratic regime that ascribed – primarily through full employment policies – a much larger role to the state as a guarantor of economic stability. Yet, Gramsci still leaves open the question whether Fordism could be generalized on a transatlantic level, noting some obstacles to its transfer from the U.S. to Continental Europe due to the different demographic compositions and historical baggage of both regions.
304 Cf. Deleuze, *Postscript*, 6.

execution – facilitated by the assembly-line – of new *Principles of Scientific Management*, paradigmatically articulated by Frederick W. Taylor (1911) and later on updated by Operations Research. Sub-dividing the entire labour process into small-scale, manual tasks carried out by low-paid workers whilst centralizing managerial knowledge in the hands of property owners, this innovation push accelerated the historical process of the "real subsumption" of the shop floor under capital via a rationalized work division. However, this periodisation hides a more antagonistic timeline. When Taylorist production norms were introduced, they initially triggered considerable resistance by the labour movement. It was only the combination of war and novel machinery such as the conveyer belt, numerical control, or early computers that helped defuse these disputes by disempowering craft workers via a new automated piecework-system.[305] Yet, early 20th century capitalism was still marked by a lack of mass consumption. Sales markets needed to expand to absorb the increases in productivity.[306] The turn to a state-led management of overproduction respectively underconsumption proved a response to this. At once, this definite move away from a night-watchman state-model marked a reaction to the challenge posed by socialism and organized labour. In the course of WWI and the interwar era, the Euro-American bourgeoisie was thus re-cast by integrating social elements that "had earlier been outside the system."[307] The potential for radical unrest was attenuated by incorporating trade unions and social-democratic parties.

John M. Keynes made the decisive theoretical-ideological contribution to this co-optation. Throughout the 1920s, he underscored the organizational power of the labour movement.[308] To this end, he turned against classical *laissez-faire* doctrines and advocated a program of state intervention capable of mediating class conflict:

305 Cf. Riccardo Bellofiore. "Lavori in Corso." *Common Sense. Journal of the Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists*. 22. Werner Bonefeld and Ed Emery (Transl.). 43–60.
306 Cf. Martha Olney. *Buy Now Pay Later*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 47.
307 Charles S. Maier. *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 10.
308 J.M. Keynes. 1972. "Am I a Liberal?" *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes. Vol. IX*. D. Moggridge (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 336–337.

> Working-class political revolution could only be avoided by recognising and accepting the new relation of class forces, while making the working-class function within an overall mechanism that would 'sublimate' its continuous struggle for power into a dynamic element within the system.[309]

Yet, it was only in the wake of the global economic crisis of 1929 that he transformed this perspective into a fully-articulated scientific framework. In his *General Theory* (1936), the state is called upon to "become a prime mover of economic activity"[310] and re-introduce a sense of the future in the face of stagnation and faltering investment. The goal was "to eliminate every trace and possibility of non-consumed, non-invested income, every overproduction of capital, i.e. every disfunction of circulation."[311] Central to this project was the concept of effective demand. Politically understood as "the wage-unit as determined by the bargains reached between employers and employed,"[312] Keynes proposed to manoeuvre working-class organizations into an institutionalized balance of forces. Since the proletariat could not simply be defined away, its forms of struggle had to be regulated and shaped. To this end, he argued, mass consumption should be turned into an object of governmental policy, be it by way of full-employment schemes or income equilibration. The task consisted in taming the business cycle via a kind of demand management that steers discontent into state-mediated bargaining procedures: "to dictate a continual revolution of incomes and of the propensity to consume, which will maintain global production and investment and will thus bring about the only form of political equilibrium that is possible."[313] Keynes, hence, remained a proponent of liberal equilibrium theory. But he insisted that equilibrium required an interventionist state capable of recuperating and managing the chal-

309 Antonio Negri. 1988. "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929." *Revolution Retrieved. Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects (1967–83)*. Ed Emery (Transl.). London: Red Notes. 7.

310 Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929," 14.

311 Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929," 14.

312 J. M. Keynes. 1970. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. London: Macmillan. 375–376.

313 Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929," 15.

lenges posed by the working-class: "The state was now prepared, as it were, to descend into civil society, to continuously recreate the source of its legitimacy in a process of permanent readjustment of the conditions of equilibrium."[314]

The roots of this state interventionism can be traced back to the modernization programs adopted in the late 19th century in countries such as Japan, Germany, France, or the U.S., to catch up with British capitalism. The war economies of WWI marked a further shift that was, later, consolidated after the Great Depression: "Unfolding in the shadow of 1917, the mass unemployment and mass worker militancy of the global depression convinced political elites around the world that it was time to discard outdated ideologies and renovate the state itself."[315] Yet, this settlement still proved unstable, going down amidst fascism and total war. By 1945, Europe lay in ruins. Albeit spared physical destruction, the U.S., too, saw a profound re-shaping of its economic basis. Everywhere the capital stock had been run hard and devalued. Rationing and wage restraint pushed living standards down. Labour power itself was cheapened. The war re-wrote the balance sheet of industrial capitalism: the cost of machinery and equipment fell, while the share of surplus extracted from workers rose. The result was a sharp increase in profitability.[316] It was this wartime reset that set the stage for the post-war expansion. From 1949 through the early 1960s, both the U.S. and the re-built economies of Western Europe experienced a deepening of capital investment and a rapid rise in labour productivity. This coincided with a wave of massive proletarianization of large segments of the population, as the old peasantry – still only formally subsumed into Western European capitalism during the interwar period – could no longer resist the pull of large-scale production. Once this sector had dissolved across extensive areas, a millionfold workforce was set free to enter the wage-relation and meet the rising demand for labour in

314 Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929," 7.
315 Jamie Merchant. 2025. "Suicide State." *Brooklyn Rail*. https://brooklynrail.org/2025/09/field-notes/the-suicide-state/ [last accessed 29.11.2025].
316 Cf. Geoffrey M. Hodgson. 1991. "The Theory of the Falling Rate of Profit." *After Marx and Sraffa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 46ff.

expanding industrial societies.[317] For them, the Fordist economy of scale turned into the pre-eminent "model of socialisation."[318] Sponsored by the U.S.-led "European Recovery Program," better known as the "Marshall Plan," it was, hence, only in the era of post-war reconstruction that the re-socialization of the working population into a new mass production/consumption norm succeeded. Indeed, this norm figured prominently in the strategic thinking of the Cold War, as it came to be regarded as a crucial principle of social regulation that containerizes the domestic front against collectivism by encasing populations in the private lifeworlds of individual consumer choice.[319] Debord's notion of the "spectacle" speaks to this as it notes that the post-war economies of scale require an "additional collaboration" from the wageworker to absorb the unseen levels of "commodity abundance" reached by mass production.[320] Overdetermined by Cold War geopolitics, this "Fordistic" arrangement turned into the hegemonic transatlantic mode of capitalism. It managed to integrate the national working-class in a hitherto unseen manner, all while setting off a new phase of growth.

This trade-off, though, was reliant on an intrafamilial division between the male coded wage-relation and a predominantly female sphere of unpaid domestic work that guaranteed the social reproduction of labour power.[321] In addition, it presupposed the "development of underdevelopment"[322] in the ex-colonies. The "new imagined communities" of post-war capitalism and the supposed "social peace between capital and labor" underlying them were "limited to a few nation states in the West" and "always contained spaces of exception" for marginalized populations.[323] Effecting the embourgeoisement of certain sec-

317 Cf. Lutz Burkart. *Der kurze Traum immerwährender Prosperität*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag. 186ff.

318 Jean Baudrillard. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Ian H. Grant (Transl.). London: SAGE. 17.

319 Alliez/Lazzarato, *Wars and Capital*, 196, 232–233, 255ff.

320 Guy Debord. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Ken Knabb (Transl.). Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets. 17.

321 Cf. Silvia Federici. *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol/London: Falling Wall Press. 2–3.

322 Walter Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Washington: Howard University Press. 241.

323 Mikel Bolt Rasmussen. "From Revolution to Destitution." *Ill Will*. https://illwill.com/from-revolution-to-destitution [last accessed 29.05.2024].

tions of the white working-class in the capitalist centres, the "elevator effect"[324] of the post-war boom, as Ulrich Beck terms it, was facilitated by extra-profits generated abroad and the immigration of a racialized workforce that satisfied the expansive need for a cheap supply of labour. Combined with the demographic changes and the scope for renewed economic growth resulting from the "destructions and devaluations of war,"[325] these variegated dynamics converged in a *Great Acceleration* after World War II in which GDP growth was based in mass production/consumption, the "Green Revolution" in agriculture, an unprecedented surge in fossil fuel combustion, and the expansion of petrochemicals. In this, "economic hegemony" was installed across Western capitalism as that "accumulation strategy" functioned as "the basis for an institutionalized compromise between opposing social forces"[326] at the expense of an internal and external Other.

The trend in quasi-Orwellian theories of "bureaucratic" (Rizzi) or "monopoly capitalism" (Sweezy/Baran) responds to the apparent pacification of capitalist production, curiously echoing the dictum of the "end of ideology" uttered by conservative philosophers such as Daniel Bell who applauded the appeasement of the proletariat by "consumption society."[327] As a fierce analysist of Keynesian economics, Paul Mattick was already early on challenging the eternalization of post-war stability implicit in these descriptions of the mixed economy. Even if he agreed with Herbert Marcuse's ideology critique of the reconciliation of labour with capitalist rule in new forms of "one-dimensional" mass consumption, he criticized the Frankfurt School for blanking out the transience of this particular sequence of capitalism on the level of political economy and state theory. The "old labor movement," as he noted at the height of the American New Deal, had indeed come to see "consciously and unconsciously in the capitalist expansion process its

324 Cf. Ulrich Beck. " Auf dem Weg in die individualisierte Arbeitnehmergesellschaft." *Merkur*, 38: 427. 485–497.

325 Henryk Grossmann. *The Law of Accumulation*. Jairus Banaji (Transl.). London: Pluto Press. 157.

326 Bob Jessop. T*he Future of the Capitalist State*. Oxford: Polity Press. 30.

327 Daniel Bell. 1960. *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. Glencoe: Free Press. 246.

own road to greater welfare and recognition."[328] Yet, the limits of that regulatory model would re-assert themselves when the conflict between the profit dimensions of capital accumulation and compensatory action were to sharpen again.[329]

This contestation of the "end of history" vibes particular to the Fordistic compact would prove anticipatory. The re-organization of the capitalist world economy during the post-war recovery had grouped the Allies of WWII and the former Axis powers together into a Dollar bloc under the Marshall Plan, IMF and World Bank, based on the managerial ideologies and new technologies of the 1920s-30s that had been bottled up in those years of high imperialist conflict. This "Pax Americana" inaugurated a novel wave of globalization after the retreat of "world capitalism […] into the igloos of its nation-state economies and their associated empires" during the 1930s–40s.[330] Under the gold-pegged Bretton Woods currency regime, established in 1944, the Dollar-centred re-making of the global market became a pillar of Fordist stability.[331] Over time, however, that constellation undermined its own foundations. The credit crunch of 1966 in the U.S. and the FRG's soft recession of 1966–67 were first indicators. In fact, the economic resurgence of Japan and Germany but also other Western European economies increasingly challenged the USA's position as undisputed industrial powerhouse in the wake of the 1960s. Encouraged by Cold War policy – intent to build anti-communist strongholds against the USSR – these nations were granted relatively "open access" to a U.S. home market pumped by Keynesian stimulus and Vietnam War packages: "This geopolitical strategy could be sustained as long as markets were expanding and profits growing for all producers."[332] But the scope for mutually beneficial growth slowly exhausted itself. Markets were less and less able to absorb the overabundance of capital, eroding the

328 Paul Mattick. "Karl Kautsky: from Marx to Hitler." *Anti-Bolshevik Communism.* London: Merlin Press. 4.
329 Cf. Mattick Sr, *Critique of Marcuse*, 38.
330 Eric Hobsbawm. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 132.
331 Giovanni Arrighi. "The Global Market." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 5. 233ff.
332 Jamie Merchant. *Endgame. Economic Nationalism and Global Decline*. London: Reaktion Books. 94–95.

sources of profit. Export growth and international competition proved "no longer complementary, but conflictual."[333] This crisis of overproduction came together with a decade of buoyant workers' struggles for higher wages and increased resistance to factory discipline.[334] Aggravated by the 1970s energy crisis – driven by oil shocks due to extraction peaks and war in the Middle East – the "mixed economy" began to crack. Established Keynesian measures of crisis response failed to re-boost profitability and instead gave way to a paradoxical situation of simultaneous stagnation and inflation. Mass layoffs and unemployment were put back on the agenda. Currency devaluation, price hikes, and soaring production costs coincided with plant closures, the gradual offshoring of industrial production, dwindling tax revenues, and downward pressure on wages. The scope for growth within the post-war paradigm had reached its limits, bringing on a "legitimation crisis."[335]

This set the material ground for a shift toward neoliberalism. However, one consensus is not simply replaced by another. Neoliberalism – first coined as such at the Colloque Walter Lippmann[336] in 1938 by key intellectuals such as Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow, Ludwig von Mises, or Hayek – already competed with Keynesian doctrines in the immediate post-war era. Moreover, these paradigms are not mutually exclusive.[337] Both are rooted in liberal ideologies of equilibrium; both assume the eternalization of capitalism. It is rather a question of where to "draw the line" between "state planning and market activity."[338] Keynes argued in favour of compensatory measures that maintain effective demand. Yet, he insisted that the reason to do so was precisely to maintain market discipline, reserving state interventionism for a cap-

333 Merchant, *Endgame*, 95.
334 Cf. Bellofiore, "Lavori in Corso," 43–60.
335 Cf. Jürgen Habermas. *Legitimation Crisis*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 46.
336 Alexander Rüstow. "Das Versagen des Wirtschaftsliberalismus." *Istanbuler Schriften* 12.
337 João R. Hermeto. *Phenomenology of the Capitalist Eternisation*. London/Poughkeepsie/Dublin: Iskra Books. 91.
338 Alexis Moraitis. "Market Rule and Liberal Planning in the Governance of Capitalism." *Critical Sociology*. 8.

italist elite unsuspected of socialist sympathies.[339] Conversely, neoliberalism does not simply abolish the state. As Röpke put it, the market is not considered a natural mode of exchange but "an artifice of civilisation" that requires "strenuous efforts" to be put into place.[340] Hayek phrases it still more pointedly, stressing that the state must "plan for competition."[341] It is still interventionist, then, albeit more so in favour of liberating capital from compensatory regulations. The mystified expression of this is that of an unfettered, self-regulating market. In practice, though, neoliberalism did not follow a single-minded plan. Unfolding as the detritus of crisis, the capitalist response to the profitability and legitimation issues of the 1960s oscillated between repression, co-optation, and shock-therapy, giving rise to the miscellaneous strategies that shaped the last few decades. The entrepreneurial offensive took aim at two interlinked enemies: the insurgent social movements of the Sixties – both inside and outside the factory – and the Keynesian welfare state that purportedly sheltered them. To the ruling class, the latter no longer stabilized the system. It empowered demands for regulation, redistribution, and democratic control. Friedman articulated the ideological core by deeming any social mandate beyond profit-maximization "fundamentally subversive."[342] In that respect, the labour market insecurity of the 70s provided an opportunity to dismantle the organizational power of workers. The anti-union industry had flourished beforehand. Nonetheless, it took the added force of monetary policy to crackdown unrest – take Reagan's campaign against striking airline unions, which was flanked by Fed Chair Paul Volcker's anti-inflationary push to raise interest rates, cutting credit supply and forcing a recession in which unemployment rose to over 10%. Crisis was, hence, weaponized to unsettle the workforce and exert downward pressure on the wage share in GDP. At once, calls to re-assert the global competitivity of a crisis-ridden national industry helped neoliberals lobby to shift tax

339 Cf. J.M. Keynes. *The Collected Writings of Keynes*. Vol. XXVII. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 386–388.
340 Wilhelm Röpke. 1996. *The Moral Foundations of Civil Society*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers. 28.
341 Friedrich A. von Hayek. *The Road to Serfdom*. London/New York: Routledge. 43.
342 Milton Friedman, quoted in: Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 45.

burden from big business to lower-income strata and put into effect a systematic trickle-up economics toward capital.[343] Profitability was supposed to be re-vitalized through a rise in the rate of exploitation and multitudinous forms of "accumulation by dispossession."[344]

This program of structural adjustment was framed by concomitant global developments. In the crisis-shaken environment of the late 1960s to early 1970s, the Bretton Woods system that had regulated exchange rates since 1944 was thrown out of joint when more and more nations, under economic duress, tried to convert their Dollar reserves for gold, depreciating the currency. Eventually, the gold standard was suspended in 1973, turning the Dollar into a fiat currency regulated by central bank policies and exchange rates. This move helped consolidate the Dollar as reserve currency of the world notwithstanding industrial decline. Foreign central banks, holding large reserves, were now compelled to buy U.S. government bonds to protect their export economies by preventing their currencies from appreciating vis-à-vis the Dollar. Due to a worldwide multiplication of Dollar-denominated debt, American monetary dominance persisted despite, or rather because, of a persistent current account deficit. This trade imbalance managed to integrate competitors relying on U.S. consumer demand to drive their growth. In turn, the greenback remains the predominant currency used to settle international transactions, compelling countries world-wide to accumulate Dollars by buying Treasury bonds, which, again, are re-invested in U.S. assets. In sum, more and more foreign capital is thereby brought into the country, while that seigniorage position grants the U.S. unique influence over global economic policy norms. The might of this new "Washington Consensus" was confirmed in 1979 by the so-called Volcker shock, when the U.S. sharply raised interest rates, triggering a debt crisis across the Global South. The austerity-driven "structural adjustment" programs enforced in the aftermath attested to a new form of imperialist power projection.

343 See also Goldner, "The Historical Moment that Produced Us," Online.
344 Cf. David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. 116.

All this contributed to an increasing hegemony of finance in the broader framework of an expanding global capitalism: "by the mid-1970s the volume of purely monetary transactions carried out in offshore money markets already exceeded the value of world trade many times over."[345] To a certain extent, this financial turn allowed a temporary resolution of the protracted recession that brought the post-war boom to a halt. The inflation volume of the 1970s could partially be deflated by re-routing capital funds into the realm of monetary expansion itself. Insofar the accumulation of "fictitious capital" pushes the devaluation of excessive capital capacities into the future, the assent of finance in the final stages of the Fordistic paradigm, hence, functioned as a crisis deferment in two ways: 1) it created new investment opportunities for over-accumulated capital; 2) the liquidity generated via debt and the speculation on the future value of financial assets could be re-channelled into the economy to stimulate purchase power and investments.[346] Of course, the credit economy has played an eminent role before in the history of capitalism.[347] It is, therefore, more adequate to speak of an extended financialization that increasingly stands "as instrument *and* agent in the global circulation of the money form."[348] In this, capitalist enterprise shifts from long-term entanglements with singular banks to a systemic dependence on stock-markets to assure liquidity. This ushered in a new representation of economic goals in a language of short-term tempo-

345 Arrighi, "The Global Market," 237.

346 See also Ernst Lohoff and Norbert Trenkle. *Die große Entwertung*. Münster: Unrast Verlag. 70.

347 Money is not a neutral medium of exchange. It is a social relation: the necessary form of appearance of value under conditions of generalized commodity production. As such, it expresses the socialization of production specific to capitalism, in which private labours are rendered commensurable only through exchange, and this monetary form is inseparable from state power, which guarantees the legal, fiscal, and coercive conditions of its validity. Within this framework, state debt occupies a constitutive role in the historical development of capitalism. The issuance of government bonds provided an early mechanism for concentrating and mobilizing monetary capital at a scale unavailable to individual capitals, thereby enabling the mustering of funds required for large-scale infrastructural and industrial investments. In this sense, public debt functioned as a lever for the growth of early industrial capital, compensating for the initial insufficiency of private accumulations and facilitating the expansion of the productive forces necessary for capitalist development.

348 Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma. *Financial Derivatives*. Durham: Duke University Press. 113 (emphasis added).

ralities (e.g., "rating," "budgeting") wherein yields in the next quarter trump long-term investment.[349] As a consequence, financialization enacts a veracious "discipling [of] the present."[350] Financial assets act as:

> structural representations of capitalist relations, objectified perceptions which obscure the class nature of capitalist societies while, at the same time, signalling and calling forth the proper mode of behaviour required for the effective reproduction of capitalist power relations.[351]

Finance shapes economic conjunctures under the terms of expected return rates and risk assessments, be it the credit rating of a stock company, a nation-state, employees or other market actors.[352] Financialization, in this sense, can be understood at once as a world-economic effort of adaptation to a deep crisis and a medium of world-economic re-adjustment. The expansion of financial markets increases the structural power of capital to dismantle barriers to private accumulation, ensure commodity-flows (especially of key resources such as oil) and to do away with the closure of particular places or regions from foreign capital. It helps enforce an integrated world-market characterized by international capital mobility, transnational value-chains, de-regulated prices, extensive public-private partnerships, the large-scale privatization of social infrastructure, and the perpetual competitive pressure to create investment-friendly conditions.[353] But, as said, above all the international financial system assures liquidity:

> Without it, markets cannot be made, prices cannot be formed, no one can sell what they need without huge losses, sending the entire system into a sort of heart attack – a liquidity crisis. To prevent this from happening,

349 Cf. Nachtwey, *Hidden Crisis*, 47.
350 Dimitris P. Sotiropolous, John Milios, Spyros Lapatsioras. *Demystifying Finance*. London: Routledge. 4, 161.
351 Sotiropolous/Milios/Lapatsioras. *Demystifying Finance*. 2.
352 Social and care work are also restructured via new quantification methods to measure the "efficiency" of labour. These instruments monitor workers all while mediating the norms of neoliberalism vis-à-vis "customers."
353 Cf. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin. *The Political Economy of American Empire*. London/New York: Verso. 11ff.

> states are compelled to manufacture liquidity by issuing bonds to be used as premium collateral for borrowing and lending […].[354]

This is done via legal instruments such as repurchase agreements, short "repos," in which state bonds act as securities but can also easily be converted into cash without depreciation. The financial system is marked by a deep entanglement between state debt and liquidity, with the United States at its centre. Since the 1970s onward, U.S. Treasury debt has become increasingly "critical to the world financial market because it is treated as the safest asset in the system – everyone assumes the U.S. government will continue to pay the interest on its debts."[355] Across time, this dynamic has only exacerbated, linking private markets and sovereign debt in a common mode of crisis-management. From the Volcker Shock, to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and the 2001 dot-com crash, up through the Financial Crisis of 2007/8 and the European Sovereign Debt Crisis of the 2010s, to the Covid-19 bailouts and the recession in the wake of the Russian invasion in Ukraine: the liquidation of speculative bubbles has become inconceivable given the massive collateralization of debt. "Zombified" balance-sheets pile up in a dynamic of short- and long-term bailout, be it in the form of stimulus packages or quantitative easing: "Under the pressurizing force of one pulverizing crisis after another, this public-private fusion has evolved to support rising asset prices above all else, because if the credit stops flowing, and the prices stop rising, the game is up."[356] The stock-market is marked by a constant repackaging of risk. "[M]oney creation" is tied to the "potentiated circulation of bankruptcy," that is, the collateralization of debt on increasing scales (corporate, public, subprime mortgages, etc.): "Risks are disseminated, diversified and to a certain extent covered by derivatives that match the perspectives of low-risk sellers with those of high-risk buyers."[357] In this

354 Merchant, *Endgame*, 130.
355 Merchant, Endgame, 130.
356 Merchant, Endgame, 161.
357 Joseph Vogl. *The Ascendancy of Finance*. Simon Garnett (Transl.), Cambridge: Polity Press, 137. See also Paul Mattick Sr. *The Limits of the Mixed Economy*. London: Merlin Press. 5. Mattick argues that speculation may defer a crash but eventually "enhance[s] crisis situations by permitting the fictitious overvaluation of capital, which [in the long run] cannot satisfy the profit claims bound up with it."

sense, the financialization of accumulation has become well and truly "structural"[358] to the world economy. Capitalism has proceeded to "buying time"[359] to extend its lease on life. It triggers a bubble-driven "ersatz form of growth"[360] premised on debt and asset price inflation.

Ultimately, this enormous debt is rooted in a production system that precisely depends on ever-new liquidity to keep going. Although these cash injections themselves often end up back in financial markets. Corporate borrowing feeds back less and less into industrial investment.[361] New technology cannot seem to change this state of affairs, notwithstanding the social changes brought about by the Industry 3.0 and 4.0: "You can see the computer age everywhere except in the productivity statistics,"[362] as Nobel laureate Robert Solow infamously put it. When compared to the industrial advances of the post-war era, new branches only score meagre upturns in aggregate profit (these trends are, of course, unevenly distributed geographically).[363] This vision of a "secular stagnation" is not exclusive to heterodox analysts. It is shared by mainstream economists such as Paul Krugman, "Larry" Summers, or Robert J. Gordon.[364] But if these commentators generally see the causes in slackening productivity, Marx would argue that it could perhaps be the other way around: "The profit rate does not fall because labour becomes less productive but rather because it becomes more

358 Vogl, *The Ascendancy of Finance*, 143.
359 Wolfgang Streeck. *Buying Time. The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. London/New Yor: Verso.
360 Gopal Balakrishnan. "On the Stationary State." *New Left Review* 59. 14.
361 J. W. Mason. "Disgorge the Cash." *The New Inquiry.* https://thenewinquiry.com/disgorge-the-cash/ [accessed 11/05/2023]. Less than 10 cents of each borrowed Dollar are re-circulated into industrial investment.
362 Robert Solow. "We'd better watch out." *New York Times Book Review*. 36.
363 See also Robert Brenner. *The Boom and the Bubble. The U.S. in the World Economy*. London/New York: Verso. 3ff.
364 Cf. Oliver Nachtwey. *Germany's Hidden Crisis*. London/New York: Verso. 33–34; Lawrence H. Summers. "Why Stagnation might prove to be the new normal." *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/87cb15ea-5d1a-11e3-a558-00144feabdc0 [last accessed 08.11.2025]; Paul Krugman. "Secular Stagnation." *New York Times Blog*. https://archive.nytimes.com/krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/16/secular-stagnation-coalmines-bubbles-and-larry-summers/ [last accessed 08.11.2022]; Robert J. Gordon. *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 22.

productive."[365] Across the global economy, the machinery of production scales upwards, churning out an unprecedented volume of use-values. Yet, this expanding material capacity is steeped in a crucial valorization problem. An increasing share of investment is funnelled not into direct value-producing labour, but into the infrastructural and technological preconditions of exploitation itself. Paul Mattick Jr. often cites GM's Lordstown, Ohio plant built in 1966 as the world's most automated car factory at a cost of $100 million. Its 2002 modernization cost five times that, yet following the 2007–08 crash GM still required a government bailout to avoid bankruptcy.[366] And while the costs of fixed assets, that is, constant capital keep increasing, eating more and more into profits, there is at once "a worsening overcapacity in world markets for manufactured goods."[367] To stay with the example of the automobile industry. In 2017, global annual sales peaked at over 86 million new cars. Since then, they have ranged between 70 and 80 million on average – with production capacity for 90–100 million cars per year, signalling a significant overcapacity. Phil A. Neel and Aaron Benanav get to the heart of this hypertrophy of capital. 21st century capitalism

> is marked by the "global redundancy of productive and technological capacities" which creates "more crowded international markets" which make further industrial expansion difficult. It is signaled by "depressed prices in global markets for manufactured goods," which act as the "mechanism transmitting this problem across the world" because they force competitors everywhere to meet the same global price […]. The result for investors is that these falling prices then lead "to falling income-per-unit capital ratios (falling capital productivity), then to falling rates of profit, then to lower rates of investment, and finally to lower output growth rates."[368]

365 Marx. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3, 347.
366 Cf. Paul Mattick Jr., Quoted after: Freundinnen und Freunde der Klassenlosen Gesellschaft. "Thesen zur Krise." *Klasse. Krise. Weltcommune*. Hamburg: Edition Nautilus. 75.
367 Aaron Benanav. *Automation and the Future of Work*. London/New York: Verso. 24.
368 Phil A. Neel. 2021. *Global China, Global Crisis*. PhD Dissertation. University of Washington. 117–118; Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work*, 26.

There is, then, an overabundance of capital as production capacity has expanded well beyond the bounds of what the global market can absorb profitably. High-cost infrastructure, for instance in advanced manufacturing, logistics, or energy, amplifies this dynamic. Profitability stalls. Not due to immediate inefficiencies, but because the composition of capital itself reflects deeper contradictions in the global economy's capacity to valorise investment. This global glut – that "undermines the capacity of any sector to act as a lever of economic growth" and "exhausts productivity's capacity to increase social wealth" – comes along with increasingly "precarious labour markets."[369] Across advanced industrial economies, the post-1973 era marks a decisive break.[370] Between 1950 and 1973, manufacturing employment expanded consistently, while real wages were rising. In the following, however, this trade-off between capital profits and labour income faltered. In turn, the "employment lost in the manufacturing sector has been spread out across services," yet these jobs, on average, are lower paid.[371] This has structural causes within service industries themselves. The difficulty in automating the service sector means its growth depends largely on expanding employment. But since prices in many services cannot be driven down through productivity gains, they become vulnerable to what Baumol called "cost disease": complexity rises, especially in labour-intensive fields like healthcare and education, and output cannot be sped up without a performance drop. In the absence of technological fixes, the primary lever to contain costs is downward pressure on wages.[372] As such, this

369 Alexis Moraitis. "From post-industrial prophecy to the de-industrial nightmare." *Competition & Change* 26:5. 515.

370 Neel, Global Crisis, 113.

371 Neel, *Global Crisis*, 115. These changes in the economic structure and the labour market are often referred to as de-industrialization. This is a specious moniker that masks the reality of international value-chains. In addition, manufacturing was never fully re-located to low-income countries. Yet, it contains a kernel of truth insofar the share of industrial employment in domestic labour markets has undeniably declined. At once, outsourcing to subcontractors beyond the reach of collective bargaining agreements has expanded dramatically, while wages have stagnated relative to productivity for decades. What is more, the tertiary sector itself is not a closed category.

372 William Baumol. *The Cost Disease*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 59. Cf. Phil Neel, *Global Crisis*, 122. That does not mean that there have been no attempts to subject the service sector to processes of real subsumption. "Service" is a flexible category that generally designates that kind of work which is deemed resistant to mechanization. Yet, this reifies the

dynamic has contributed significantly to the erosion in labour's share of national income, even as populations grew healthier and more educated in this time.[373] For one thing, then, the structural break effected during the neoliberal turn consisted in the suspension of a decade-long trend of rising wages. What is more: Facilitated by flexibilization, denser time schedules, new compulsions to do overtime to compensate for income losses, or delayed retirement, the working time is multifariously extended.[374] The crisis of capital, thus, manifests most palpably as a crisis of labour, which has to bear to bulk of the profit system's increasing maintenance costs.

In this context, the model of the neoliberal firm – doing away with fixed employment, dividing the workforce via subcontracting and outsourcing – has been increasingly that of the "fragmented factory."[375] Platform capital perhaps represents its most developed expression. Pioneered by the corporations competing over the commercial internet, it stands for a streamlined company-model that aims to circumvent the classical wage-relation by taking outsourcing to the edge. As such, it is at the frontier of the casualization of labour as it puts into effect an extreme version of temp- or on-call work, recruiting services from a fully market-dependent "pool of freelancing and competing individuals"[376] cast adrift by ongoing crises. Joblessness is turned into a business scheme as precarious, pseudo-independent contractors are tethered to the corporation via various forms of algorithmic management (rating

categories of both service and industrial labour because manufacturing, too, had to overcome its own constraints before it could subsume labour to capital. Early manufacturing faced subjective barriers such as high labour turnover and the resistance of workers culturally unaccustomed to the intensity of factory work. It was only through the imposition of new managerial regimes that capital succeeded in aligning labor with the demands of the machine. (Cf. Moraitis, "De-Industrial Nightmare," 526) Similarly, management techniques have been developed to rationalize service work: compressing labour time by completing tasks with fewer staff, imposing binding performance quotas, accelerating workflows to process more "customers" (including patients in hospitals) in ever shorter periods, and thereby driving up throughput and reducing costs.

373 Cf. Benanav, *Future of Work*, 9.

374 Bellofiore, "Lavori in Corso," 43–60.

375 Nachtwey, *Hidden Crisis*, 86.

376 Julieta Haider and Maarten Keune. "Introduction." *Work and Labour Relations in Global Platform Capitalism*. Cheltenham, North Hampton, Geneva: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited/ILO. 4.

systems, GPS tracking, gamified reward/punishment mechanisms) and a general dependence on it for market access. In this intermediate gatekeeping function, platforms, in a sense, act like marketplaces onto themselves. Philipp Staab, therefore, speaks of "proprietary markets"[377] that are downright owned by private capital. By interconnecting clients and customers, the platform captures a rent/fee on transactions while also extracting behavioural data from these user-interactions to rationalize the consumer sphere in a context of latent overproduction. In that sense, though, more "than improving productivity or developing new markets," the main effect of platforms consists in a tightened "competition for market share"[378] under conditions of slackening growth. Massively subsidized by risk capital, seeking fast and high yields, platforms are underwritten by scaling strategies that aim to seize entire market segments. In this, they drive the disruption of labour markets, intensifying the downward pressure on wages. Thereby, however, the strategic relationship between finance and platform capital is subject to all the vicissitudes of speculation as digitalization is subsumed to the larger bubble-and-bust dynamics of the moment.[379]

The mounting research on "precarity" bears a specific historical signature in that regard.[380] As Deleuze notes, the serial socialization of the labouring body through the disciplinary apparatuses of Fordism is sublated into a regime that requires "permanent training" to keep up with the "infinite and discontinuous" flows of capital locking the subject in precarious "states of perpetual metastability."[381] Economic

377 Philipp Staab. *Digitaler Kapitalismus. Markt und Herrschaft in der Ökonomie der Unknappheit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp. 47.

378 Nick Srnicek. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press. 116, 118, 103, 113. Srnicek observes that firms like Uber, which limit fixed-capital investment, accept reduced efficiency and productivity by "[o]utsourcing to individual amateurs." He argues that capitalist competition produces a near-negative dialectical reversal of social infrastructure: as productive forces are constrained by dominant relations of production, expansion becomes "driven […] by the need to occupy key positions within the ecosystem" of global communication networks. This, in turn, leads firms "to use enclosure as a key means of competing against their rivals," displacing the "idea of general computing" with business models that "driv[e] the internet to fragment."

379 Staab, Digitaler Kapitalismus, 118ff.

380 Cf. Klaus Dörre, Klaus Kraemer, and Frederic Speidel. "Prekäre Arbeit." *Das Argument*. 381.

381 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5, 4.

power issues from the continuous compulsion to adapt to financial risk, winner-takes-all competition, and other volatilities. Against the background of the weakening of the structural leverage held by organized labour, the "dividual" thus gets to the fantasy logic of neoliberal austerity politics. It expresses the true meaning of human capital: "In the crisis, the population must fluctuate like stockmarket prices; it must rise and fall following the variations of the spread.[382] The fundamental idea, as expressed by Paul Volcker, is that losses must be felt again instead of being absorbed by the welfare state and Keynesian employment schemes.[383] Breaking with the notion, articulated exemplarily in John K. Galbraith's *Affluent Society* (1958), that "a high level of security is essential for maximum production,"[384] neoliberalism operationalizes the very insecurity generated by crisis – encoded in mottos such as Toyota's "management by stress," the return to Schumpeter's "creative destruction," managerial philosophies of "disruption," or Peter Hartz's "war of talents." Interestingly, though, this uncertainty is invested with a popular appeal. It comes with a pledge of upward mobility, which frames the market as the primary means for self-development. Hartz, for instance, elevates de-securitization into an emancipatory principle. The dismantling of safety structures ("Denkmäler sozialer Errungenschaften werden beiseite geräumt") is celebrated as ultimate liberation:

> Arbeit wird neu definiert: Sie umfasst wieder ein ganzheitliches Stück Leben: lernen, produzieren, kommunizieren. Etwas bewegen! [...] Die zukünftige Arbeit bekommt den Motivator: ›Beweg etwas – du kannst es!‹ Der Unternehmer vor Ort nimmt das Schicksal seiner Beschäftigung mit in die Hand.[385]

Not incidentally, though, this promise of individual freedom – which hides a threat ("Das Gefühl der Sicherheit kennt nur noch derjenige, der schneller läuft als der Boden entgleitet"[386]) – falls in line with the back-

382 Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 209.
383 Cf. Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 23–24.
384 John Kenneth Galbraith. *The Affluent Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 75.
385 Cf. Peter Hartz. *Job-Revolution*. Frankfurt a. M.: Frankfurter Allgemeine Buch. 21.
386 Hartz, *Job-Revolution,* 21.

lash against associational power. It complements the counter-activist effort to break organized resistance. The assault on collective bargaining, sold as a release from bureaucratic constraints, forces labour to face the organized powers of capital in utter fragmentation. Against this backdrop, sovereignty comes to be re-coded more and more in terms of financial risk: "Sovereign is he who can transform his own risks into others' dangers, positioning himself as a creditor of last resort."[387] This spells out the specific meaning of the popular saying "too big to fail" that came to define the bailouts in the cycle of crashes since the 1970s.

Expectations of upward mobility are foreclosed, while social actors are interpellated into "small, private alternative experts in risks,"[388] compelled to invest in private securities to offset the dismantling of social services. Ironically, this "democratization" of finance again enlarged the multi-trillion capital volume at the disposal of stock-companies and administered by asset management firms such as BlackRock, Vanguard, or State Street. For the "essentially dispersive"[389] ownership structures promoted by shareholder capitalism, ultimately constitute "an enormous social mechanism for the centralisation of capitals."[390] The subjugation to finance is intensified that way. The strategic cancellation of the social contract with labour has coincided with the production of "man in debt,"[391] notably by way of a gradual financialization of social reproduction that replaces public welfare with private insurance, annuity, subprime mortgages, or other economic instruments that re-route household savings into financial circuits. In fact, the subprime market, purported to be at the root of the 2007/8 crisis, already constituted itself a crisis mechanism that mitigated "the limits of incorporation of social needs through the neoliberal model."[392] Tools such as subprime borrowing fulfilled a specific function in the context of stagnating wages, managing aggregate demand by subsidizing private consumption via

387 Vogl, *The Ascendancy of Finance*, 165.
388 Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society – Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage. 61.
389 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5.
390 Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 778; See also Lazzarato, *War and Money*, 57; Marx, Capital Vol. III, 570. Credit facilitates the "command over the capital and property of others, within certain limits, and, through this, command over other people's labour."
391 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 6.
392 Sotiropolous/Milios/Lapatsioras, *Demystifying Finance*, 121

mass indebtment, all while adding new market dependencies via interest payments. Structural adjustment has a macro- and micro-economic dimension.

> […] socially, the consequences are enormous. All debt is ultimately a claim on future profits that are yet to be produced. As governments are forced to mortgage an ever rising portion of the social product to the needs of the credit system, as the total debt rises while profits falls, there will be ever less social wealth available to provide the basic resources that society needs to materially reproduce itself.[393]

The "end of history" regime is maintained via a permanentized condition of crisis-management that displaces over and again crises of (private) corporate finances into sovereign debt crises while shifting the load of the problem onto the peripheries. Contra "small state" or "laissez faire" myths, the neoliberal program consists in a statecraft that privatizes gains and socializes losses. In the face of economic slowdown, capital sees no bargaining range for a new wage-profit compromise. Wealth redistribution is re-cast as a liability; welfare obligations are framed as obstacles to competitiveness. As the material basis for consent erodes, economic hegemony is increasingly tied to cheap, debt-based consumption. Less and less tolerant of concessions, state and capital – giving out slogans of inevitability – opt to exploit crisis as a lever of discipline.

In this context, crises seem to have become "stationary,"[394] attesting to an "end of history" narrative in which disorder, in contrast to the chimera of Fordistic order, is naturalized, cultivated, and exploited. Even as crisis registers the persistence of "fundamental contradictions," denied by Fukuyama, it does not seem to function as the site from which those are politicized. Crisis appears to have become "*postcritical*."[395] The nexus crisis/critique once captured the fears and hopes of an era whose break with the old regime was shaped by *fin de siècle* sentiments and the prospect of new beginnings. Yet, it has mutated into the vision of a perpet-

393 Merchant, *Endgame*, 161–162.
394 Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 9.
395 Alliez/Lazzarato, *Wars and Capital*, 368.

ual capitalist now: permacrisis in lieu of radical change. Against earlier leftist conceptions, crisis now appears integral to capital's strategic compendium, which foregoes "promise[s] of long-term, stable and socially manageable growth" for "eruptive growth spurts."[396] "Disruption"[397] is a key watchword of that moment. Societies of control are societies of insecurity. Meanwhile, critical theory, in negative parallel to cyberpunk, finds itself at a loss to extrapolate a pathway to a post-capitalist future. Instead, the counter-images to neoliberalism remain largely bound to the perspectives offered by capitalism itself, playing off different systemic tendencies or periods of the system against each other – foremost nostalgia for Fordist stability or Keynesian interventionism.[398] On this reading, cyberpunk helps to work through this crisis in critique. In the following, therefore, I treat the genre as a paradigmatic case of a critical aesthetic that gets caught up, co-opted, in the dialectical stabilization of the very situation that it puts under scrutiny. It becomes "a mirror of the power it describes."[399] Through this prism, I hope to elucidate a larger de-dialectization of crisis and critique characteristic of the confrontation between critical theory and neoliberalism in which

396 Staab, *Digitaler Kapitalismus*, 140. Big Tech, especially, is underwritten by scaling strategies that drive the disruption of labour markets, social regulation, and political systems, in a quest to secure virtual monopolies, enclose ecosystems, become free from state interference, and "innovate" without democratic accountability.

397 Cf. Clayton M. Christensen. *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

398 See Philipp Bötcher. "Der Mythos von der 'Nivellierten Mittelstandsgesellschaft' und die Soziologie der Gegenwartsliteratur." *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft*. Alexander Honold et al (Eds.) Konstanz: Wallsteinverlag. 277. Retrospectives on the "economic miracle" of post-war reconstruction are often romanticized. This is encapsulated in the moniker of the *Trentes Glorieuses* after 1945 or the myth of a "nivellierte Mittelklasse" coined in the 1950s by the influential German sociologist Helmut Schelsky. Wolfgang Streeck's coinage of "democratic capitalism" to designate the heydays of the welfare state also gives away a certain nostalgia. As Böttcher notes, contemporary accounts of downward mobility and neoliberal austerity policy tend to reproduce the very myths that the architects of post-war reconstruction told about the period for the narrative purpose of constructing a historical contrast foil. What is more, as Beverly Silver notes, "there is some irony in the fact that early-twentieth-century observers of the transformations associated with Fordism were certain that these changes spelled the death of labor movements. […] It was only post facto – with the success of mass production unionization – that Fordism came to be seen as inherently labor strengthening rather than inherently labor weakening." (Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 6)

399 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 30.

the former certainly registers the crisis of a prior regime of accumulation but fails to envisage a new cycle of struggle out of this turning point in capitalist history.

6 Crisis & Critique: Disruption and Fantasies of the Free Market

> In the meantime […] they must continue the struggle for existence in painful, costly, and obsolete forms.
>
> — Marcuse, *Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Society*, 256.

A few years after Nixon was quoted saying that "We are all Keynesians now" – subscribing to his own version of late society – a new accumulation regime, hence, emerges that dramatically shifts the horizon of the Fordist period. As Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre corroborate, in the early post-war period the language of international institutions such as the World Bank was marked by "a strong sense of causality link[ing] expertise, loans, investment, and material realizations" that clearly demarcated "past accomplishments, current actions, necessary policies, and future projects."[400] By contrast, as insists Deleuze, the new regime of accumulation is geared towards "rapid rates of turnover"[401] in the form of shareholder value. It subjects industrial profit maximation to an inverted temporal logic and is marked by an ideal of disruption. Faced with the breakdown of post-war stability, social theory suddenly needed to explain not only the return of instability but even more so the divorcement of crisis from any revolutionary opening, that is, the perpetuation of this seemingly late capitalism in and through crisis.

In his lectures on the neoliberal turn, Foucault gives an acute articulation of this impasse. Registering the signs of disintegration in the post-war settlement, he lucidly postulates that:

400 Moretti/Pestre, "The Language of World Bank Reports," 76–77.
401 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 6.

> those who denounce a […] standardizing, mass society of consumption and spectacle, etcetera, are mistaken when they think they are criticizing the current objective of governmental policy. They are criticizing something else. They are criticizing something that was certainly on the explicit or implicit horizon, willed or not, of the arts of government [from the twenties to the sixties].* But we have gone beyond that stage. […]. The [neoliberal] art of government […] which has now become the program of most governments in capitalist countries, absolutely does not seek the constitution of that type of society. It involves, on the contrary, obtaining a society that is not oriented towards […] the uniformity of the commodity, but towards the multiplicity and differentiation of enterprises. [402]

In this, the French theorist anticipates an observation made years later by Terry Eagleton who warns, albeit in a critique of post-structuralism, against "assum[ing] that ambiguity, indeterminacy, undecidability are always subversive strikes against an arrogantly monological certitude."[403] Confronted with "the internally differentiated, contradictory social discourses which now dominate us," he points out that today no social force is more transgressive than capital: "the commodity appears as an anarchic, iconoclastic force which mocks the obsessive rankings of traditional culture even as it in some sense depends upon them to secure the stable conditions for its own operations."[404] Critical languages that remain captured in "a vision of the hegemonic ideologies of the West as centrally reliant upon apodictic truth"[405] thus miss the point. Taking a passing social formation for the essence of the system, they externalize the pervasiveness of capitalist abstractions onto Orwellian images of totalized meaning and total administration.

Yet, as said, in the late Foucault, too, there is a notable awareness of such a tacit consensus of critique with the liberationist – utopian – promises of neoliberalism:

402 Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 149 (brackets in original).
403 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 379.
404 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 374–375.
405 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 379.

> there is an optimization of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated.[406]

The shift away, as he notes, from the "internal subjugation of individuals" toward an "environmental type of intervention" that acts on the conditions of free/rational choice and allows for diversity as a competitive factor distortedly echoes the pluralizing concerns of a New Left seeking to destabilize a normative Fordist order. The return to the "dissolutive logic of capital"[407] in the philosophy of Deleuze/Guattari – most notably encapsulated in the de-/re-territorialization couplet – also testifies to this. Manifesting, in a sense, as the sedimented content of the failure of 1968, the conceptual pair stresses that capitalist societies are defined by "processes of decoding" that steadily profane and sweep away the old to make way for new routes of accumulation. But it also notes that "*what they deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other*."[408]

Nonetheless, one could say that it takes until the small snippet on control to realize the full implication of this two-fold dynamic wherein powerlessness and freedom coincide. Struck by the sheer radicality of capital, it proposes a re-wording of Marshall McLuhan's claim, equally formulated by discussing Burroughs, that "we live science fiction"[409] inasmuch the society of control "is *already* in the process of substitution for the disciplinary sites of enclosure"[410] characteristic of Fordism. Against this backdrop, the *Postscript* appears haunted by the intuition that the "weapons"[411] of critique elaborated in the struggle against the hierarchies of the post-war compact have been neutered. Or, worse still, emerging out of the "generalized crisis"[412] of the post-war settlement, the society of control outlined by Deleuze resonates with his previous anti-oedipal critique of the enclosure of desire in the rigid regiments

406 Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 259–260.
407 Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, x.
408 Deleuze/Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* 257–258. "These neoterritorialities are often artificial, residual, archaic; but they are archaisms having a perfectly current function, […]."
409 Marshall McLuhan. 1964. "Notes on Burroughs." *The Nation* 199:21. 519.
410 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 7 (emphasis added).
411 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 4.
412 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 3–4.

of discipline. The new desiring machineries appear themselves "essentially Anti-oedipal"[413] in their injunction to unleash desire from the one-dimensionality of a more traditionalist consumer culture. Daringly, Noys therefore speaks of a "traumatic intrusion of a new or mutated regime of capitalism and power"[414] that shines through in the *Postscript* and even in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In fact, Deleuze/Guattari insert multiple nuances to "distinguish [their] conceptual terminology from its seeming similarity to forms of capitalism," displaying an awareness that "there is a truth to this proximity."[415] Closely tracking capital's dissolutive tendencies, there is the steady caution that such exploration is to be done with "a very fine file" not a "sledgehammer" since in "the art of dosages" there is always the danger of "overdose."[416]

The discomfort at this silent accord now captures, I would argue, a wider crisis of critique regarding the mutation of the market into an "expansive popular system"[417] as Stuart Hall puts it in his reflections on these pivotal decades. Indeed, the phase of "neoliberal counter-revolution"[418] is intimately associated with a dynamic of recuperation.[419] It is figured as a "stealth" revaluation of the Fordist value system that latches onto a popular desire for freedom.[420] According to Postone, this plays out on the level of critical theory itself which proves form-determined by the logic of capital if it fails to consider its own historical pre-suppositions. He points out that the Fordist era was characterized by a host of structuralist theories focussed on the consistency rather than the dynamism of power, while there is a curious theoretical shift at the turn to the 1970s towards notions of micropolitics that parallels the concurrent rise to prominence of rational/free choice models. In both cases,

413 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 153.
414 Benjamin Noys. "Zones of Trauma: On Deleuze and Control." *Coils of the Serpent* 6. 61.
415 Noys, "Zones of Trauma," 63. See also Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, 238.
416 Deleuze/Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 160.
417 Stuart Hall. *The Hard Road to Renewal. Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London/New York: Verso. 215.
418 Mark Fisher, *acid communism*, 1127–1128.
419 Cf. Boltanski/Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 326ff.
420 Wendy Brown. *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT Press; Christoph Menke. *Theorie der Befreiung*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp. 241ff.

he argues, the critical gaze remains fixed on the order of appearances, such that "a historically specific configuration of capitalism [is taken] to be the essence of the social formation."[421] Similarly, but from a different angle, Jacques Lacan countered the voluntarism expressed in May 68, inverting a famous graffito from the time, by stating that "if the events demonstrate anything, then precisely the descent of structures in the street."[422] In hoping to unlock the blocked dynamism of the post-war compact, the anti-authoritarian act, he claims, "misrecognizes itself."[423] By re-inscribing contingency back into the social order, emancipationist discourses tended to replicate the visions of market freedom elaborated in the neoliberal fix to the "crisis of government"[424] of the 1970s.

Critique, that is to say, "risks the absolutisation of capitalism as 'untranscendable horizon' in the very act of trying to transcend it."[425] Under this aspect, critical theories and aesthetics premised on shock, transgression, disruption, and de-totalization suddenly take on a somewhat ambiguous character: the vanguardist act of subversion appears to "simply knock[] over what was already falling down."[426] For it is capital itself that most radically de-centres the bourgeois individual, it is the world-market which effectuates the most brutal critique of the metaphysics of presence, and it is the commodity that in the long run carries out the most sustained cultural revolution. There is, thus, a sense that the counter-formulations to the Fordistic state of affairs became congruent with capital's own fantasy logic by inadvertently wagering on a specific feature of the system to found their critique, "thereby disarticulating its harmful character."[427] Massumi, therefore, argues that:

421 Moishe Postone. "Critique and Historical Transformation." *Historical Materialism* 12:3. 55ff.

422 Jacques Lacan, Quoted after Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 20.

423 Jacques Lacan, Quoted after Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 20.

424 Michel Foucault. "Interview with Michel Foucault." *Power. Essential Works of Foucault (1954–1984) Vol. 3*. James D. Faubion (Ed.). Robert Hurley et al (Transl.). New York: The New Press. 295.

425 Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, 7, 65–66.

426 Anselm Jappe. "Where the Situationists the Last Avant-Garde?" *As Radical as Reality Itself. Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century*. Matthew Beaumont et al. (Eds.), Oxford: Peter Lang. 213–214.

427 Adamczak, *communism for kids*, 78.

> It's no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it's capitalism's power to produce variety – because markets get saturate. […]. [I]t seems to me that there's been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.[428]

In this regard, though, Chamayou insists that this movement of recuperation should not simply be considered an inevitable outcome. Focusing the rise of contestations to the post-war order, he applies an autonomist method to the genealogy of neoliberalism that takes seriously the thesis of ungovernability at the heart of 1960–70s ruling class debates. The confluence of critical theory and neoliberal liberationism must also be seen to emerge as the practical effect of counter-tactics to forms of social opposition that in the eyes of elites, indeed, presented a legitimate threat to power. As Chamayou remarks by re-formulating Spinoza, the challenge that posed itself to neoliberal restauration consisted in ensuring "that the masses fight for their servitude as if it was their salvation."[429] Yet, recuperation always involves distortion, that is, a reformulation of the terms of critique. The neoliberal re-adjustment of society inverts the demand for workers autonomy into the flexibilization of labour, environmentalism is defused into ethical consumption, etc.[430] The neoliberal response to the crisis of Fordism, thus, has:

> a false family resemblance with that of the authors of *Anti-Oedipus*: deployed for a micro-engineering of rational choice. How to get people to do what we want them to do? Not so much by the repression of their great desires as by the reorientation of their smallest choices.[431]

In a nutshell: the departure from the logic of totalizing normality is realized in an ever-deeper micro-structural exposure to the "mute com-

428 Brian Massumi. "Navigating Movements." *Hope*. Mary Zournazi (Ed.). New York: Routledge. 224.
429 Chamayou, *Ungovernable Society*, 233.
430 Bini Adamczak. *Beziehungsweise Revolution. 1917, 1968 und kommende*. Berlin: Suhrkamp. 213, 219.
431 Chamayou, *Ungovernable Society*, 233.

pulsions" of the economy, such that social contradictions are more and more deflected into a personal responsibility of the isolated (in)dividual. Under this aspect, the perspective of recuperation itself risks idealizing capital into a positive structure voided of contradictions. Namely, when it fully dissolves historical accident into necessity and decodes the struggles of the 20th century as nothing but modernizing movements internal to world-market expansion. That would mean to confuse ends and means by projecting a historical outcome back onto an open historical process. The neoliberal turn is recast in a narrative of inevitability. In such a retrospective teleology, the antagonistic logic of capital is written out of history. Akin to the scene from DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* prefacing this chapter, the system's gravediggers are transfigured into a positive feature of a market economy that pre-corporates its own critique. Capitalism appears as an always-already restored order. Antagonistic "[f]orces and agents," meanwhile, "appear to be 'miraculated' *(miraculés)* by it."[432]

Against this backdrop, the genre of cyberpunk can be read at once as a medium of recuperation and a literary reflection on the dynamics of co-optation. It functions as a social and symbolic act in that it encodes and contributes to the crisis of critique manifesting in the "traumatic" recognition of capital's adaptive powers. Considering the pop-cultural variations of cyberpunk fiction makes this painfully clear as these do not only testify to the recuperation of certain features of critique but the "commodification of dissent"[433] per se. Following Frida Beckman's account of political allegory in 21st century popular culture, one may say that the new regime of capitalism is marked by a strange "strategy of 'transparency,'"[434] in which the motif of resistance is evoked only to provide an all the more vehement allegory of control. Noting the curious prominence of anti-capitalist or system-critical products in mainstream

432 Deleuze/Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 10.

433 Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland. *Commodify your Dissent*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

434 Cf. Frida Beckman. *Culture Control Critique. Allegories of Reading the Present*. London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International. 118. The Obama administration perfected this realism of power. It cultivated "transparency" about the limits of presidential action into an effective 'there is no alternative'-rhetoric.

media, Beckman, therefore, claims as per Baudrillard that today we, in fact, deal with a political spectacle that "thrives by persecuting itself."[435] From this viewpoint, Angus Fletcher's notion that "allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology"[436] gains new plausibility, although under other auspices. Instead of getting distracted by the imposingly allegorical character of these anti-utopias of co-optation, one should interrogate less "what we are allowed to see" and more "how we are allowed to see it."[437] Faced with a mode of governance that "hides its logic in full view," exposing the oppressiveness of power instead of seeking to conceal it, the task of ideology criticism is to figure out how "such texts function as an active part of this same society on the level of form."[438]

In that regard, though, the argument is less one of familiarization, that is, the normalization of domination through overexposure to mass-telecommunicated violence and surveillance.[439] Rather, it is the mode of consumption offered by these cultural commodities that is suspect. The obviousness of the political allegorism in question seems to spell it out all for you. Divorcing aesthetic expression from interpretation or action, this political spectacle compels a "mode of reading that seem[s] to add nothing,"[440] putting into effect a logic of impassivity in which the futility of resistance is performed to us by power itself.[441] In this sense, these cultural mass products do portray less the political reality of present-day capitalism than they co-constitute it: "[…] this material is not a representation of the political; it is the political."[442] Proposing to map the nature of power in the neoliberal compact, they end up demarcating the terrain of political action itself. It, therefore, suggests itself to consider these symbolic forms not only in representational

435 Jean Baudrillard. *The Conspiracy of* Art. Sylvère Lotringer (Ed.). Ames Hodges (Transl.), New York: Semiotext(e). 69.
436 Angus Fletcher. 1964. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. 368.
437 Beckman, *Culture Control* Critique, xxv.
438 Beckman, *Culture Control Critique*, xxv, 132.
439 cf. Fredric Jameson. "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: Dog Day Afternoon as a Political Film." *College English* 38:8. 847.
440 Beckman, *Culture Control Critique*, 131, 121.
441 Cf. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16. See also Robert Pfaller. 2017. *Interpassivity. The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
442 Beckman, *Culture Control Critique*, 134.

terms but also as an applied or operational aesthetics concerning the role that they themselves play in the establishment of agency for the axioms of neoliberalism.

Here, one can follow the authors of *The Californian Ideology* (1995) Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron who trace the intricate exchange between cyberpunk fiction and Silicon Valley – a central node in the emergence of today's inseparability of finance and tech-capital – by investigating the magazine *Wired* ("the monthly bible of the 'virtual class'") as a crucial cultural medium in the 1980s-90s. In this, they delineate the curious synthesis between the "laissez fair ideology" articulated by neo-conservative politicians such as Newt Gingrich and the journalistic contributions of one William Gibson tasked to track, in line with the techno-orientalist antics of *Neuromancer*, the image(s) of the future represented by the so-called "Asian Tigers."[443] From this standpoint, our discussion of cyberpunk appears in a new light. Popularizing terms used thereafter in commercial parlance (e.g., "cyberspace") to come to terms with the reality of electronic markets, the genre might be considered a strange sub-cultural double of neoliberal ideology production.[444] In this connection, the prophetic quality oftentimes ascribed to the classics of cyberpunk must be re-conceptualized in terms of a feedback loop between SF and corporate R&D activities. In seeking to craft a distinctive identity, the emergent intelligentsia of Silicon Valley derived many of its cues from the conceptual mishmashes marking cyberpunk.[445] Not surprisingly, the self-fashioning of these "cybernetic entrepreneurs" as "hi-tech artisans" recalls the ideological bricolage encrypted in the coupling of cybernetics with the DIY-attitudes of punk,

443 Barbrook/Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," 52, 60, 64; William Gibson. 1993. "Disneyland with the Death Penalty." *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/1993/04/gibson-2/ [last accessed 06.08.2022].

444 Cf. John Semley. "Cyberpunk is Dead. At the inglorious end of a once promising genre." *The Baffler* 48. https://thebaffler.com/salvos/cyberpunk-is-dead-semley [last accessed 10.05.2022]. Semley notes that the "realization of many technologies envisioned by cyberpunk […] has occurred," as the genre has been absorbed into the imaginaries animating the public-private partnership between Silicon Valley and the military complex. Gibson himself remarks on the unintended effects of his work. He devised his corporate SF as a cathartic critique of technological fallacies, but worries that some scientists have built machines inspired directly by his fiction.

445 Barbrook/Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," 68.

as it designs a "machine aesthetic for the information age"[446] that essentially builds up on the idea that the emancipatory potentials of technology cannot be realized but in and through unfettered market forces: a market freed from all welfarist ballast.

Recombining libertarian individualism with free market ideology in the "vision of a cybernetic frontier" navigated by the lonesome cyber-cowboy, the neoliberal "retro-futurism" of an "electronic marketplace," hence, deeply echoes the neo-noir speculations of the sci-fi novelists of the era.[447] In this vein, the economic historians Goodwin and Rogers go so far to designate cyberpunk fiction as the literary "underworld"[448] of the neoliberal compact. Traces of this can still be found in the naming patterns of Silicon Valley, where CEOs like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg continue mining the canon of cyberpunk – in this case Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) – to dream up new investment possibilities such as the "Metaverse" to counter declining growth rates.[449] But already the leading document of so-called Reaganomics, that is, the neo-conservative shape that neoliberal reforms took at their initial implementation under the Reagan Administration, is impressed by this cultural imaginary. The proclamation of a new entrepreneurial age, which updates the foundational American myth of the "frontier" for the tech-industry, is articulated through the prism of a particular cyber-futurist imagery that crafts the artisans of microelectronics as practitioners of science-fiction in the backyards of the 1980s: "[t]he everyday middle-class life of 21st-century America is here, right now,

446 Barbrook/Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," 63, 68.
447 Barbrook/Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," 50, 68.
448 Craufurd D. Goodwin and Alex Rogers. "Cyberpunk and Chicago." *The State of the History of Economics*. James P. Henderson (Ed.). New York/London: Routledge. 39, 50. They argue that the Clinton Administration's proposal to build a National Information Infrastructure, especially, the metaphor of an "information superhighway" animating the High Performances Computing Act (1991), is tinged in the visual vocabulary of cyberpunk.
449 The idea of an embodied internet comes with the prospect of a new route for expansion in which capitalists act themselves as builders of alternative worlds wherein human behaviour is, now, wired in an immediate sense with the digital infrastructures owned by the capitalist world-builders. As such, though, it is foremost conductive to a process of speculative growth that entices risk-capital with the narrative means of cyberpunk's capitalist utopias.

in embryonic form, in thousands of garages, basements, and storefront small businesses."[450]

Giving the starting signal for the dot-com boom of the following decade, this Reaganite extrapolation expresses the speculative logic at the heart of the strategic fusion between venture capital and the start-up companies of the emerging internet economy. It builds on the dissolutive ideal outlined above by legislating that the advent of the "Free World" as an integrated world-market would be initialized by "experimenters in decentralized corporate laboratories."[451] In this, the policy document operationalizes the concept of "creative destruction" coined by Schumpeter. Echoing the latter's description of the entrepreneur as "the special trailblazer [*Bahnbrecher*] of the modern human itself; especially free of tradition and affiliation, […] the true severer of all connections,"[452] it decrees that the invention of the future requires the disruptive initiative of cybernetic venture capitalists – "the explorers of the modern era" – to unlock new "economic growth" in and through the breakup of the New Deal Order.[453] Today this ideology of disruption lives on in credos of "techno-optimism" (Marc Andreessen) or "effective accelerationism" (Guillaume Verdon) preached by Silicon Valley elites. As the techno-oligarchic manifesto *The Sovereign Individual*, republished in 2020 by Peter Thiel, sets out, the idea is to bring the welfare state to a breaking point via proprietary digital platforms that privatize critical infrastructure and bypass public control. However, as Naomi Klein explains regarding U.S.-doctrine in Iraq, the strategy of disruption respectively shock-therapy extends as well to military affairs, as the "shock and awe" induced by war paralyzes populations, facilitat-

450 Ronald Reagan. "Why this is an Entrepreneurial Age." *Journal of Business Venturing*. 1:1. 2.

451 Reagan, "Entrepreneurial Age," 4, 3.

452 Joseph A. Schumpeter. *The Theory of Economic Development. An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Interests, and The Business Cycle.* Redvers Opie (Transl.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 134.

453 Ronald Reagan. "Session with the Students and Faculty at Moscow University." *The American Presidency Project*. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley (Eds.). https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-and-question-and-answer-session-with-the-students-and-faculty-moscow-state [last accessed 25.01.2023].

ing policies of mass privatization and de-regulation.[454] In any case, the liberationist, anti-statist appeal of disruption functions as a legitimational discourse that brings to the fore the authoritarian underpinnings of a neoliberalism bent on divorcing, or at the very least, encasing capitalism from democracy.

That said, few cultural artefacts embody the synthesis between cyberpunk and Silicon Valley disruptionism in a more condensed manner than Ridley Scott's Super Bowl commercial from 1984 that introduced Apple's Macintosh Computer to the American public.[455] Only half-jokingly called "the most influential film from the last thirty-five years"[456] by Mark Fisher, here again we encounter the ambiguity of cyberpunk aesthetics, as Ridley Scott recycles the imagery of his former *Blade Runner* cinematics to advertise the start-up engineers of Apple as rebel entrepreneurs. The ad tells a story about desire, or, rather, the unleashing of desire. Ending on the note that 1984 will be nothing like the lifeless, totalitarian world of Orwell's classic, the commercial conflates Cold War imagery of the bureaucratic submission of individuality to the party-state with a picture of standardized mass production associated with the industry leader at the time IBM into a narrative of repressed creativity. To this the movie contrasts the irresistible run of a young woman toward the propaganda tools of suppression, which ends in a hammer throw that wrecks these instruments of top-down mind control. In the fashion of Reaganomic entrepreneurialism, Apple's 'advertisement with a hammer' thereby gives a particularly pertinent aesthetic expression to the ideology of disruption that animates the accumulation paradigm of start-up capital. By presenting itself as the techno-capitalist supersession of the revolutionary vanguard, the tech-giant in the making does not only "position itself as an upstart […] intervening in this grey world of bureaucratic monoliths […]."[457] It also

454 Cf. Klein, *Shock-Doctrine*, 7–8, 13.
455 Cf. Robert Cole. "Apple 1984 Super Bowl Commercial Introducing Macintosh Computer (HD)." *Youtube*, 25 June 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zfqw8nhUwA [last accessed 22.09.2022].
456 Mark Fisher. *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*. Matt Colquhoun (Ed.). London: Repeater Books. 36.
457 Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire,* 37.

provides visual expression to a new economic strategy that reneges on promises of long-term and socially cushioned growth in favour of a non-linear temporal logic in which capitalist expansion takes place in destructive boosts of creative destruction.[458]

In this sense, though, the tech-giant does not only cultivate the aesthetics of cyberpunk for advertising purposes. By providing its own user's guide to the critique of Fordist society, it also engages in an effective practice of endogenization by annexing the idioms of the (Californian) New Left. As the story goes, the conflict of systems is decided by the capacity for individual wish-fulfilment: counter-cultural dissidents may still advocate for a different society but "at the level of desire, they are committed to living within the current capitalist world."[459] As such, the spontaneous ideology fermented at the historic juncture between finance and digital technology draws the final stroke under a process of primitive accumulation that set off in 1969 with the bloody evacuation of the so-called People's Park, an activist camp near the University of California, that had been ordered by the then-Governor Ronald Reagan. At the time, it still "seemed that the historical choice between these two opposing visions of America's future could only be settled through violent conflict."[460] But in the subsequent shift by many counter-cultural radicals toward new information media as a technological fix to the liberationist ideals held by the New Left, "the cultural divide between the hippie and the 'organisation man'" slowly but surely eroded.[461] Under this aspect, the weaponization of cyberpunk as a cultural engine of recuperation symbolically seals the deal for the defeat of the American counter-culture against the country's establishment by offering a reconciliation between the struggle for individual freedom and the technocratic solutionism promised by the tech-industry.[462] It performs

458 Cf. Staab, *Digitaler Kapitalismus*, 140ff.
459 Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire*, 39.
460 Barbrook/Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," 47, 49.
461 Cf. Timothy Leary. *The Politics of Self-Determination*. Berkeley: Ronin Publishing. 95. One of the most prominent encounters between the American counter-culture and information theories can be found in the work of Timothy Leary who mused about about the messianic advent of a "homo sapiens cyberneticus" in an upcoming electronic age that would, finally, make possible the psychedelic revolution.
462 Barbrook/Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," 58.

the futility of anti-Fordist critique to its viewers by positing itself as the true severer of connections: only the unleashing of market forces can fulfil the dreams of anti-bureaucratic self-expression and bring about the disruption of social mores without slipping into the totalitarian dystopia depicted in Orwell's *1984*. Philosophizing with a "sledgehammer" not a "fine file," the cybernetic entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley substitute the dystopian "end of history" in total administration for a different sense of an ending characterized by an ideal of disruption. As such, the ad at once sees through and is symptomatic of a momentous story of assimilation. It is, here, where Noys' audacious claim that "cyberpunk *is* the utopia of capital"[463] really comes into its own. The genre might well disarticulate the totalitarian dystopia of *1984* but as such it plays into the proper anti-Orwellian self-fashioning of neoliberal ideology. If *Neuromancer* still oscillates between a critical diagnostics and indulgence in capitalist realism, Ridley Scott's commercial disambiguates the ambivalences in the aesthetic sensorium of the genre into an organic style of tech-capitalist brand management. In seeking to expel the "semiotic phantoms" of the Fordistic compact, Appel's rebellious self-advertising lifts the charge against the temporal horizon of expansive SF to the level of intra-capitalist competition.

Under this aspect, *Neuromancer*'s meditations on the Panther Moderns can be read as a premonition of the novel's own absorption into the "ghostly teenage DNA" of the capitalist sprawl – an early literary reflection on what Boltanski/Chiapello later came to consider as the recuperation of the "artistic critique" of Fordistic work culture. In Gibson's first novel of the new millennium, his 2003 *Pattern Recognition*, the mainstreaming of cyberpunk becomes a plot point, as the jet-setting protagonist travels a "Blade Runnered" urbanity wherein global space seems to shrink to the downtowns areas of London, Paris, New York, or the "Found Future City" of Tokyo.[464] More fundamentally, though, the text does not only negotiate the fate of a specific genre of science-fiction but positions literature at large in the embroilments of a rising creative industry by narrating the self-employed artist as the emblem of

463 Benjamin Noys, "Cybernetic Phuturism," Online.
464 William Gibson. 2003. *Pattern Recognition*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 151

mental labour. By turning the incorporation of aesthetic critique into a central narrative conceit, aesthetic praxis, in this context, comes to assume a paradoxical position. While the artist formerly appeared as "the subject most resistant to capitalist value extraction," since it was ascribed an excess of creativity that could not possibly be contained by commodity abstraction, it, now, has turned into "the most capitalist subject."[465] Marketability manifests as the mark not the antonym of artistic genius. Continuing the reflection on the principle of extrapolation, the novel moves to narrativize aesthetic speculation in toto as an engine of commodification. In *Pattern Recognition*, the "contemporary forms of artistic practice mesh with the forms of […] value-extraction" prevalent in just-in-time economics: "precarity, flexibility, mobility and fluidity."[466] In the following, I, therefore, wish to consider how Gibson's continuing intervention into the field of sci-fi leads him to track the confluence between artistic labour per se and the subjective modalities corresponding to a gigified labour market marked by short-term project management, part-time employment, and sub-contracting.

7 The New Economy and its Discontents

Pattern Recognition might be considered the point in Gibson's writing career in which he re-purposes the principle of extrapolation for an "investigation of our alien present"[467] instead of trading in futures. Travelling a seemingly unipolar capitalist planet, the novel follows a so-called "cool hunter" – "a dowser in the world of global marketing"[468] – across global cities such as London, Paris, Tokyo, and a post-soviet Moscow undergoing neoliberal shock-therapy. As such, it tells a story of recuperation on a macro- and micro-scale that parallels structural adjustment to the endo-colonization of society by commodity culture. The market analyst Cayce Pollard is at the centre of this plot. Inciden-

465 Benjamin Noys. "The Art of Capital." *Playgrounds and Battlefields*. Tallinn: Tallinn University Press. 384.
466 Noys, "The Art of Capital," 384.
467 Mark Ward. "Interview with Gibson." *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-11502715 [last accessed 03.02.2023].
468 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 2.

tally, her name is pronounced "Case" in remembrance of *Neuromancer*'s lead character. The parallels, though, do not end there. Employed by the mysterious Hubertus Bigend, CEO of the multinational corporation Blue Ant, she is tasked to track the origins of an obscure internet phenomenon reminiscent of the mission statement in Gibson's cult novel. Similar to the abstinence deliria re-counted by Case, readers encounter Cayce in state of stress disorder. However, her condition is not related to the future-shock of technology but her peculiar, almost allergic sensitivity to "the semiotics of the marketplace."[469]

Thusly earmarked as the supersession of the quasi-romantic hero of the anti-social hacker into to the cynical figure of the corporate consultant, Pollard herself fittingly describes her job as the recuperation of emerging underground styles: "I point a commodifier at it … It gets productized. Turned into units. Marketed."[470] There is no motif of faux (artistic) radicalism here. Instead, extrapolation is affirmed as the principle of operation of a market system seeking to capitalize on the in- and pre-corporation of counter-cultural dissensus. The only expression that, at first, seems to escape these recuperative dynamics is the ominous "footage" – a series of clips of unknown origin which have found a large following in the web forum "FETISH: FOOTAGE: FORUM" or "F: F: F"[471] – that the protagonist is supposed to track down. It evokes fantasies of a pure aesthetic object withdrawn from the market that is inscribed with early conceptions of the internet as a sort of virtual heterotopy. For Pollard herself, the "site had come to feel like a second home."[472] Yet, slowly but surely it gnaws at her that it at once "was a sort of text-based broadcast, available in its entirety to anyone who cared to access it."[473] Over the course of the novel, the internet phenomenon is transcoded into an "effective piece of guerrilla marketing" that precisely taps into the "illusion of randomness"[474] associated with the footage. The dem-

469 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 86.
470 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 86.
471 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 4.5.
472 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 67.
473 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 67.
474 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 66–67.

ocratic appearance of "free communication"[475] without the mediation of an institution generated by the footage reveals a system of capture for which potentially "[a]ny creation that attracts the attention of the world, on an ongoing basis, becomes valuable."[476] Against this background, the web forum stands as an early figuration of new social media as technologies of micro-demographic targeting that disrupt the commercial models of more linear media such as television. Employed as a freelancer, Pollard epitomizes the gig economy cultivated by platform capital – not incidentally, Blue Ant is described as "relatively tiny in terms of permanent staff, globally distributed, more post-geographic than multinational"[477] – as she, eventually, comes to recognize (reminiscent of *Neuromancer*'s cyberneticized plot) herself as "the merest of cogs"[478] by which capital expands.

In this regard, the protagonist acts as "a very specialized piece of human litmus paper"[479] for a condition of universal trademarking. Indeed, all "behaviour" in the novel is "codified"[480] through global or national commodity networks. There is no simple object in the story. Everything is branded in some way or another. Take this description of her outfit:

> A fresh Fruit T-shirt, her black Buzz Rickson's MA-1, anonymous black skirt from a Tulsa thrift, the black leggings she'd worn for Pilates, black Harajuku schoolgirl shoes. Her purse-analog is an envelope of black East German laminate, purchased on eBay – if not actual Stasi-issue then well in the ballpark.[481]

What we have here is a very different kind of super-specificity than the neologistic cut/up style displayed in *Neuromancer*. The engulfment of literary representation in market diagnostics transposes the cyber-nat-

475 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 120.
476 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 317.
477 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 6.
478 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 352.
479 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 13.
480 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 248.
481 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 8.

uralism of the Sprawl trilogy into a sort of brand realism that takes the "logo-maze"[482] built up in the novel as the only remaining representational tool to navigate the complex of early 21st century global capitalism.[483] Interestingly, though, when it comes to the representation of the corporation – Blue Ant is described as "a high-speed, low-drag lifeform in an advertising ecology of lumbering herbivores"[484] – *Pattern Recognition* remains faithful to cyberpunk terminology. Here, indeed, "sf and mainstream realism have become indistinguishable strategies for mimetically representing the ceaseless transformations of the future present."[485]

Gibson's novel, thus, largely resonates with international literary trends such as the German phenomenon of *Popliteratur* that is most infamously represented by the "quintet"[486] of Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre, Joachim Bessing, Alexander von Schönburg, Eckhardt Nickel, and Christian Kracht. A taxi scene from Kracht's 1995 *Faserland* might serve as a good standard of comparison. In this episode, the interaction with the cab driver is substituted for a speculative reading of his clothing style. The "Kiton-Jackett"[487] of the narrator, an article from an Italian luxury brand specialized in custom tailoring, is juxtaposed to the rainbow and peace stickers attached to the dashboard of the taxi, eventually replacing political dissensus for the imagined clash of commodity signs. Avowedly assuming a posture of ignorance – "ich verstehe gar nichts mehr, obwohl ich mir natürlich diese Namen merke […]"[488] – the first-person narrator readily affirms the attribu-

482 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 18.

483 Steven Poole. "Tomorrow's Man: Interview with William Gibson." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/03/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.williamgibson [last accessed 08.09.2022]. William Gibson himself explicitly states that "[a]ny attempt at literary naturalism in 2003 will bring the author into direct contact with material that 20 years ago would have been barely publishable as science fiction...."

484 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 6.

485 Hollinger, "Stories about the Future," 455.

486 Cf. Joachim Bessing (Ed.). *Tristesse Royale. Das popkulturelle Quintett mit Joachim Bessing, Christian Kracht, Eckhart Nickel, Alexander v. Schönburg und Benjamin v. Stuckrad-Barre*. Berlin: List Verlag. This goes back to a business stunt that transcribes a private conversation between the five authors recorded in the luxury Hotel Adlon in Berlin.

487 Christian Kracht. *Faserland*. München: Kiepenheuer & Witsch. 26.

488 Kracht, *Faserland*, 35.

tions inscribed into the found signifiers of corporate iconography.[489] It is therefore not surprising that the depicted commodity flow does not purport to re-arrange a divided social reality into a sensible whole. Rather, the pop-cultural plot is held together by a parade of trademarks such as Kiton, Barbour, or Jever – as in the novel's opening scene on the beaches of Sylt – which quilt together an otherwise arbitrary episodic structure. Feigning a turn inward, the text, in fact, marks a displaced account of the monological spectacle of corporate language in which the brand serves as a readymade mental map that regulates intersubjective contacts and assigns a position in the social order.

On that note, the current of *Popliteratur* finds itself in good company as it carries forward an artistic gesture pioneered in Germany by the likes of Gerhardt Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Konrad Lueg in a series of exhibitions in the early 1960s. Incidentally, it is these art shows that first coined the notion of "capitalist realism" to undermine the binary models that structured the prevailing aesthetic ideologies of the "fabled West German *Wirtschaftswunder*."[490] Under headers such as *Leben mit Pop – Eine Demonstration für den Kapitalistischen Realismus* (1963), these installations performed an ironic inversion of Socialist Realism that juxtaposed the uniformity of Fordistic consumer culture to the normative aesthetics institutionalized in the countries of the Eastern bloc.[491] As such, this equation meant to negate at once the utopian potentials of the modernist avantgarde and its Soviet counter-formation.[492] By making use of the trope of the readymade, the curatorial style of "capitalist realism" proposed to problematize the incorporation of the aesthetic vanguard into mass consumer culture, noting that techniques of artistic abstraction had transmuted into "a value-producing operation and a means to brand commodities for the mass market."[493] In a twisted sense, the aesthetization of everyday life pursued by the modernist avantgarde

489 Cf. Andrzej Kopacki. "Christian Kracht, *Tristesse Royale* und die Möbiusschleife." *Convivium. Germanistisches Jahrbuch Polen*. 267–268.
490 Andrew Stefan Weiner. "*Stoffbilder*: On Capitalist Realisms." *ArtMargins* 4:3. 93.
491 Cf. Stephan Strsembski. *Kapitalistischer Realismus. Objekt und Kritik in der Kunst der 60er Jahre*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač. 24ff.
492 Schuller, *Realismus des Kapitals*, 93.
493 Weiner, "*Stoffbilder*: On Capitalist Realisms," 94.

appears realized in the expansive commodity culture documented in the conceptual art of the capitalist realists.[494]

The exploitation of the erosion of traditional hierarchies between high- and low-culture as a poetic reservoir in 1990s *Popliteratur*, now, seems to share the "satirical program" of the original capitalist realists.[495] Yet, if the provocative impulse encountered in Richter & Co still issues from an ironic critique of the complicity of art in the structures it puts under scrutiny, the pop-literary plot more or less indulges in capitalist alienation.[496] There is no aspiration towards a zone of aesthetic autonomy in which the totalization of exchange-value is blocked. Rather, as Clover, Bernes, and Spahr put it: "Whereas once authenticity was secured by autonomy from the market, now authenticity is vouchsafed by heteronomy."[497] Likewise, as said before, Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* affirms the passage of extrapolation into the standard repertoire of commodity production's incessant drive to tap new sales markets. Instead of engaging in a large-scale extrapolation of the virtual futurity immanent to the present, corporate language remains as the last "basis for exercises in world building."[498] In this vein, the writing program of Gibson's post-cyberpunk literature reduces the scope of speculative fiction to keeping up with the latest market innovations, or, at the most, recognize patterns of market behaviour emerging in the very-near-future. Gibson's future-is-now approach, therefore, not only nominally echoes von Hayek's notion of "pattern recognition"[499] (a sort

494 Cf. Schuller, *Realismus des Kapitals*, 93.

495 Weiner: "*Stoffbilder*: On Capitalist Realisms," 99.

496 Bessing, *Tristesse Royale*, 137; Eckhard Schumacher. "'Tristesse Royale.' Sinnsuche als Kitsch." *Kitsch. Faszination und Herausforderung des Banalen und Trivialen*. Wolfgang Braungart. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag. 208–210. The critical element of the pop-literary quintet seems to consist in the book-long reproduction of outworn clichés of transgression: Lamenting the "Wohlstandsverwahrlosung" of new (literary) generations, the conversation recorded in *Tristesse Royale* does not only debate the kitschification of provocative art but continually stylizes itself, deliberately or not, as such a "Kitschphänomen."

497 Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, Juliana Spahr. "Period Style and the Art of the Present." *Commune Editions*. http://communeeditions.com/period-style-and-the-art-of-the-present/ [last accessed 10.05.2021].

498 Konstantinou, "The Brand as Cognitive Map," 74.

499 Friedrich A. von Hayek. "The Theory of Complex Phenomena." *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*. Friedrich A. von Hayek (Ed.). London: Routledge. 23; Cf. Marshall McLuhan. *The Medium Is the Massage*, Quentin Fiore (Ed.). New York: Random House. 63.

of pre-subjective response to processes of price formation).[500] It more fundamentally adopts the credo of unknowability – the essential opacity of the market – encoded in the concept and the Hayekian recombination of cybernetics, systems theory, and neo-classical economics overall. Just as von Hayek contends that the economy works beyond reason and therefore must be insulated from political intervention, Gibson retreats from extrapolation as the realistic kernel of science-fiction. The permanent cognitive estrangements induced by cascading market trends impede the discursive practice of extrapolation. Collapsing in a sort of science-fiction voided of "The Future, capital-F," Gibson's market-trend fiction puts into effect a linguistically inflected commodity culture "[a]head of [which], there is merely… more stuff."[501]

In a sense, one can apprehend a far echo of Douglas Huebler, a key exponent of 1960s conceptual art, who iconically stated that "[t]he world is full of objects" and that he "do[es] not wish to add any more."[502] Instead, he "prefer[s], simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and/or place" and "[m]ore specifically" to recognize the patterns – the "inter-relationship" – between these things "beyond direct perceptual experience."[503] Similarly, Gibson's very-near-future fiction "surfs" the surfaces of trademarks and advertisement, albeit it is less the *objets trouvés* of Fordistic mass consumption than the *signifiants trouvés* of the neoliberal logo-maze that (dis)organize narration. As such, the novel is closer to the conceptual poetry of the likes of Kenneth Goldsmith or Christian Bök who propose to actualize the premises of 1960s concep-

Another frame of reference might be Marshall McLuhan who wrote in comparable fashion that "[o]ur electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition," as "instant communication ensures that all factors of the environment and of experience coexist in a state of active interplay."

500 Economists in the tradition of Hayek have also drawn this connection. See: https://mises.org/library/friedrich-hayek-and-american-science-fiction.

501 William Gibson, quoted in Kathrin Hayles. "Computing the Human." *Theory, Culture and Society* 22:1. 149n2; William Gibson. 2012. *Distrust That Particular Flavor*. New York: Penguin Putnam. 41.

502 Douglas Huebler, quoted in Joshua Clover. "The Technical Composition of Conceptualism." *Mute Magazine*. https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/technical-composition-conceptualism [last accessed 10.05.2021]. The citation is from the catalogue to an important exhibition of conceptual art curated by Seth Siegelaub.

503 Douglas Huebler, quoted in Joshua Clover, "The Technical Composition of Conceptualism." Online.

tual art for a presumed New Economy in which presumably, as a character in *Pattern Recognition* puts it, "[f]ar more creativity, today, goes into the marketing of products than into the products themselves."[504] The idea is that in an age in which "[c]onsumers don't buy products, so much as narratives,"[505] it is the overabundance of signs that exhausts literary form. Hence, Goldsmith and Bök formulate the idea of a poetry that does nothing but plagiarize finished textual products as for example in the exhibition with the self-explanatory title *Printing out the Internet* (2013).[506] If conceptual poetry re-models the lyrical act after the kind of office work performed in new key economic branches such as marketing, consulting, public relations, or media business,[507] then in *Pattern Recognition* the novelistic text is aligned with the business of brand-management at the centre of much of 1990s economic thinking.

In this sense, the book fully tunes into the mantra of the "New Economy" – defined contra the image of an "old" economy based in industrial manufacturing – that actualizes earlier visions of tertiarization or an upcoming service society dating back to the 1970s. Cayce Pollard is part of the so-called "creative class,"[508] as Richard Florida puts in his 2002 classic of management literature, whose labour – the fabrication of immaterial values – is hypothesized as the novel motor of the economy. The novel re-imagines the virtuoso of brand-management as the original artists of "postmodern" pastiche whose exercises in semiotic speculation assign value in an ever-more derivative play of floating signifiers:

504 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 67.
505 William Gibson. 2010. *Zero History*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 21.
506 Cf. Kenneth Goldmsith. "Against Expression." *Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation* http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22407 [last accessed 14.06.2021]; Christian Bök. "The Piecemeal Bard Is Deconstructed: Notes toward a Potential Robopoetics." *Object* 10. 10–18. Blök even goes so far that under the present circumstances one should withdraw from classical readerships and address "inhuman readers" in a poetry written and read by machines.
507 Cf. Joshua Clover, "The Technical Composition of Conceptualism," (Online).
508 Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Boston: Basic Books.

> This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, flavoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo knit and regimental stripes. But Tommy Hilfiger surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul.[509]

Pollard describes a "creative" industry that engages in an overproduction of simulacra that do not only mask an external reality but supposedly entertain no relation whatsoever to a so-to-say real economy. The "chain of production" appears as "a linguistic chain, a semantic connection,"[510] in which the absence itself of a source disappears into an uncontrollable circulation of language. In this sense, the "New Economy" advances, as Clover provocatively puts it, "the purest formulation of poststructuralism's materiality of the signifier as something more than abstraction, as a new truth of production."[511] The manufacture of the logo maze is not merely cast as an additional labour input invested into the making and sale of the commodity but substituted for the real locus of value as it hides the system of labour division.

Consequentially, the excessive namedropping of made-up[512] or existing labels such as eBay or Tommy Hilfiger does not invite an allegorical reading. These corporate brands:

509 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 226, 17–18.
510 Christian Marazzi. *Capital and Language.* Gregory Corsi (Transl.). New York: Semiotext(e). 50.
511 Joshua Clover. "Value | Theory | Crisis." *PMLA* 121:1. 111.
512 Cf. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 386. Jameson notes that "the references 'work,' whether or not you know the product is real or has been made up by Gibson. […] [T]he names being dropped are brand names, whose very dynamic conveys both instant obsolescence and the […] neo-exotism of the world market today."

> do not *stand in for* or *refer to* the world system or consumerism or even late capitalism, but rather are its *real products*, pieces of intellectual property, reproducing themselves again in textual form on Gibson's pages.[513]

In fact, the novel positions itself as a relay-station for the extra-literary circuit of corporate logos. It engages in an exercise of self-marketization that assertively bridges the gap between literary extrapolation and brand design. As Gibson appears himself as a mannequin in an advertisement for a black Buzz Rickson's MA-1 flying jacket, a made-up article worn by his fictional protagonist, *Pattern Recognition* opens science-fictional writing to the circuits of global trade. The novel itself conducts a commercial transaction. It partakes in the very "coolhunting" it depicts. That is, literature does not only present itself as a reflection on the upcoming caste of "symbol analysts" designated by Jeremy Rifkin as the "new aristocracy"[514] of the projected New Economy. It recrafts science-fiction as a tool of market diagnostics and a form of "immaterial labour" on par with advertisement and other creative activities that "produce[] the informational and cultural content of the commodity."[515] It self-assuredly engages in an overarching "pan-fictionalism"[516] that purports to de-differentiate artistic and economic speculation.

As such, *Pattern Recognition* anticipates later trends in the artworld that precisely attempt to re-make the artistic gesture on the model of advertisement and finance. As recently observed by Jenny Nachtigall on the occasion of the 2016 Berlin Biennale, there is an emerging art movement which affirms its position as a branch of the new-economic creative industry "[a]cross Airbnb-styled installations, trade faire information booths, workout zones and juice bars."[517] The key text analysed by

513 Lee Konstantinou. "The Brand as Cognitive Map in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*." *boundary* 36:2. 86.
514 Jeremy Rifkin. *The End of Work*. New York: Putnam. 175.
515 Cf. Maurizio Lazzarato. "Immaterial Labor." *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics*. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Eds.). Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press. 132.
516 Cf. Matías Martínez and Christian Klein. *Wirklichkeitserzählungen. Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens* Stuttgart: Metzler. 1.
517 Jenny Nachtigall. "Realism after Fetishism." *Wirklichkeit des Realismus*. Joseph Vogl et al. (Eds.). München: Fink. 260.

Nachtigall, in that regard, is the near-future science-fictional manifesto *Styles and Customs in the 2020s* (2015) by the New York collective DIS. In this agenda-setting document, artists are re-imagined as "operators within culture" that blur the distinction between the implementation of commercial growth models within the arts and the application of aesthetic techniques to spur growth in other industries.[518] Suhail Malik and Gerald Nestler put this most extremely in a programmatic text that does not simply affirm art as a paid-for experience but strives to collapse the distinction between artistic and financial medium altogether. One can, thus, observe an aesthetic ideology that pursues art as a "medium of contingency" supposed "to converge with the contingency of finance."[519] In this aesthetic philosophy, then, art is seen as an integral loop in the circuits of finance that participates in a burgeoning bubblenomics.

Interestingly, though, in *Pattern Recognition* this subsumption under capital is not described as a peaceful process. The figure of Cayce Pollard herself experiences "global consumer culture" as "traumatic."[520] Throughout, the character is seized by crushing episodes of panic attacks at the waning of referentiality in the derivative productions of the creative industry:

> Down here, next to a display of Tommy Hilfiger, it's all started to go sideways on her, the trademark thing. Less warning aura than usual. Some people ingest a single peanut and their head swells like a basketball. When it happens to Cayce, it's her psyche.[521]

What is more, the coolhunter is constantly befallen by a quasi-chronic jetlag, which she repeatedly refers to as a sort of "soul delay," symbolizing her failure to keep up with the pace of trans-continental movement marking her chase after the footage's source. Indeed, *Pattern Recogni-*

518 DIS. "Styles and Costums in the 2020s." *e-flux journal*. https://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/styles-and-customs-in-the-2020s/ [last accessed 10.12.2021].
519 Nachtigall, "Realism after Fetishism," 259; Suhail Malik and Gerald Nestler. "Introduction: Art & Finance," in: *Finance and Society* 2:2. 94.
520 Aris Mousoutzanis. "Soul Delay." Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzanis (Eds.). *Apocalytptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture.* London/New York: Routledge. 118.
521 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 17–18.

tion makes extensive use of a specific literary device that we may call "entrelacement" (Beecroft) by crafting a narrative that purports to write the plot of globalization in a "multi-strand narration"[522] wherein episodes across the planet are tied to each other via the fictional gimmick of the footage. As such, the narrative form of Gibson's market-fiction lends itself to a specific "post-geographic" conception of globalization – as if to re-double the novelistic representation of the Blue Ant corporation – in which the cosmopolitan spaces of narration are "super-signifi[ed]" as "microcosms of the world at large."[523] The sense of interconnectedness conveyed by the book's fictional structure, that is, tends to reify the networks between these urban hubs in the specious image of a frictionless "global village" in which the excesses in scale marking global capitalism disappear.[524] Against this background, the kind of "soul delay" experienced by Pollard can be read as a symptom of the hidden antagonistic spatialization of these "highly concentrated command points of the world economy," as Saskia Sassen puts it in her study of the so-called "global city."[525] As the novel purports to bear witness to processes in which "[g]lobal values are being established" in a "not yet entirely rationalized" market-system – from technological standardization to currency convertibility – the figure of the market analyst acts as an amplifier of a perceived capitalist unipolarization toward "a world where there are no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of."[526] Fitting her description as a "human litmus paper," Cayce's pathologies act as an affective intensification of the, as she terms it, "mirror-world" – take the "mirror-world

522 Alexander Beecroft. "On the Tropes of Literary Ecology: The Plot of Globalization." *Globalizing Literary Genres. Literature, History, Modernity*. Jernej Habjan and Fabienne Imlinger (Eds.). New York/London: Routledge. 200–201, 210. Beecroft's examples include Amitav Gosh's *Ibis* Trilogy and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* but also Hollywood blockbusters such as Alejandro Iñárritu's *Babel*, As striking as these acts of representation might be, though, this expansion of the scale of narration often takes on a "paranoically literal and direct" appearance.

523 Suman Gupta. *Globalization and Literature*. London/Malden: Polity Press. 39.

524 Beecroft, "The Plot of Globalization," 210.

525 Saskia Sassen. 1991. *The Global City. New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 3–4.

526 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 241, 352, 6, 108. In the beginning, she still considers Europe a "mirror world" of the USA, partly reflecting on cultural differences but more importantly the differences in material standards ("All their bits and pieces were different, from the ground up"), that is, the lacking interoperability between national industries.

trailer" visited in the "desolate-looking"[527] British hinterland – that is erased in the synecdochization of the global city as a stand-in for the global economy. In this sense, the making of the world-market is registered throughout as a thoroughly antagonistic process haunted by an "invasive weirdness"[528] that can never be entirely contained.

This narrative discord comes to a head when the footage proves the hybrid product of brain-machine interfaces and forced labour – the most virtual and manual features of global capitalism – as Pollard traces the "mystery Internet movie" back to a private prison owned by "some Russian oil magnate" that re-cycles surpluses drawn from petroleum export into the creative industry.[529] If the mysterious video clips function as a McGuffin that facilitates a narrative of interconnectedness by setting in motion the transcontinental journey of Pollard, it also pokes a hole in the image of the global "Blade Runnered"[530] city projected throughout the novel. By re-framing the footage as "a downright spooky accomplishment"[531] whose genesis is isomorphic with the violent incorporation of post-soviet Russia into the global economy, this plot twist, if you will, stages the hidden brutality of the simulacrum. Raving about a condition in which "all experience [appears] reduced, by the spectral hand of marketing, to price point variations on the same thing,"[532] it is the figure of prison labour that fixes up Cayce's panic disorders at the forlornness in the semantic chains of the corporate logo-maze. Against this background, the footage is key to the discourse of historicity unfolded in *Pattern Recognition*. Crystallizing the violence that goes into so-called de-materialization, it emerges as Gibson's satirical take on the "Free World" and the "peace dividends" expected to flourish in the aftermath of the Cold War.

In this sense, however, the figure of subaltern labour always remains a distant absent cause – in vein of the trope of "sweatshop sublimity"[533]

527 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 6, 243–245.
528 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 226.
529 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 364.
530 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 151.
531 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 341.
532 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 352.
533 Bruce Robbins. *Perpetual War*. Durham/London: Duke University Press. 96

coined by Bruce Robbins – that evades representation. Even the return to the hidden abode of the footage's production cannot escape the motif of traumatic speechlessness: international labour division is registered as "the wound [that] speak[s] itself wordlessly in the dark."[534] There is, hence, a strange conflation of global commodity-chains and speechlessness in the novel that stands opposed to the overproduction of language in the semiotic chains of the logo-maze and the global city's simulacra of interconnectedness. Functioning as a counter-metaphor to the image of the web/network, the "wound" records the split between first-world capitalism and the repressed Other ("countless Asian workers"; "the workers who'd made that part"[535]) but only to establish the failure of any common denominator.[536] If, then, the plot twist in Gibson's *Neuromancer* is based in a logic of misrecognition ("they don't

534 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 316.

535 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 12, 305.

536 Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press. 72–73. It is against homogenizing views of globalization that Spivak intervenes into recent debates about world literature. Proposing to differentiate between the figures of "the globe" and what she calls "the planetary," she notes that the former is but an abstract image of whole- and interconnectedness, constituted by a "gridwork of electronic capital" yet uninhabited, while the re-imagination of humans as "planetary subjects" opens us up to something that is "beyond our reach" but, at once, "contains us." Against the figment of a smooth, rounded globality, as it appears for example on the data screens of the aircraft industry, she therefore positions the look out of the airplane window, where the time-space-compressions of financial culture are contrasted to alterities that seem irreducible to any totalizing system of exchange. Stockhammer, though, is right to point out that this outward gaze constructs the planet itself as a fallacious figure of wholeness as if it were a self-evidential experiential object. Yet, the glance out of the airplane window is subject to myriad contingencies and, generally speaking, only grants sight at a small cut-out of the planet. (Robert Stockhammer. "Welt- oder Erdliteratur? Hinweis auf einen Unterschied." *Poetica* 47:3/5. 145) Bruce Robbins' coinage of the notion of a "sweatshop sublime" could be read as an immediate response to Spivak in this regard, as it starts off with a discussion of a similar airplane scene from David Lodge's campus novel *Nice Work* (1988). Here the protagonist, a professor in English literature, equally looks out of the window to "see" the system of global labour division flown over by oblivious air passengers, while trying to link private consumption to the outer reaches of commodity-chains. Albeit, in this example, the "heady access" to the absent presence of global assembly-lines in "everyday smallness" is contrasted to the sublime shock at the absence of any "commensurate power of action upon the [same] global scale." Robbins' example, therefore, is particularly interesting, because it proposes to view the metier of literary studies itself – as a branch of what he refers to as cosmopolitanism – from the viewpoint of violence, stressing that it is not, in fact, about raising awareness, since it is precisely the magnitude of the processes at work that paralyzes social action. (Robbins, *Perpetual War*. 95, 100–101)

know it, but they're doing it"), *Pattern Recognition* expresses a shift toward an "enlightened false consciousness," as Žižek would put it, in that she knows very well what she is doing but still does not renounce it.[537] Surely, at the end, Cayce is not lacking awareness of "her complicity in processes of neoliberal globalization," as notes Konstantinou, but this does not move her to "quit her job as a coolhunter."[538] Rather, it is precisely at the prison facility that she "feel[s] much of the recent weirdness of her life shift beneath her, rearranging itself according to a new paradigm of history."[539] Instead of aggravating her "soul delay," the knowledge of the footage's origins paradoxically allows her to re-adjust to the reality of post-soviet globalization: "hers [her soul] has returned,"[540] it, thus, reads in the closing paragraph of the novel.

It is in a similar vein, now, that we can return to DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and the meta-narrative (in which contradictions are made to speak for the system) marking the fusion of tech- and risk-capital, the Silicon Valley-Wall Street nexus, that our initial reading of the finance novella has introduced us to. Parallel to Gibson's engagement with capitalist globalization "in relation to the contemporary literature of branding theory"[541] – Konstantinou cites titles such as *The Power of Cult Branding* (2002) or more critical takes such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2002) – DeLillo joins the debate by re-mixing 1990s financial discourse and key stock-market events such as the 1997–98 Asian crisis or the dot-com crash when a large share of overvalued Internet companies bankrupted in the early 2000s. Against this backdrop, the novella invites us to problematize de-materialization as a key feature of financial power, which it deciphers even more so than *Pattern Recognition* does with respect to the world of brand-management in terms of the opacification of the "invasive weirdness" of international labour division. The brevity of the text, especially in contrast to his previous novel *Underworld*, is highly symptomatic in this regard. Proposing to track levels of capitalist abstraction that go far beyond the commodity-fetishism of

537 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 25.
538 Konstantinou, "The Brand as Map," 89.
539 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 352.
540 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 367.
541 Konstantinou, "The Brand as Map," 90.

corporate logos, the registering apparatus of the modern novel seems left with the interfaces – the screens, the monitors, the tickers – of financial exchange. According to Shonkwiler, DeLillo's narrative strategy, thus, suggests that literary representation has become "limited to historicizing the forms of alienation"[542] generated by capitalist development. If the maximalism of *Underworld* – which tracks the nuclear waste left behind by the Cold War along the object biography of an infamous baseball – issues from the narrative desire to contain the global supply-chains of the military-industrial complex within novelistic form, then *Cosmopolis* goes into the opposite direction. It does not only insinuate that "the sublime imagination of capital does not reach into the thickness of historical relations"[543] but that the fetish of capital is constituted via the de-realization of the social character of surplus production, which finds itself reproduced in a plotline framed on all sides by surfaces that (sometimes more, sometimes less effectively) hinder the outside world from entering narrativization. In this sense, the next subchapter will turn to the financial epic's depiction of market-instruments as technologies of invisibilization. It will, however, also negotiate in how far the novella brings into view the failure of economic theory's linguistic chains to produce meaning and stabilize value as it encounters capital itself as its own worst enemy.

542 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 255.
543 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 254.

8 *Cosmopolis:* A Spectacle of Abstraction

> […] we have no idea, now, of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which "now" was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient "now" to stand on.
>
> — Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 58–59.

After this extended detour – in which I cross-read the history of cyberpunk with the neoliberal transformation of capitalism – we can now return to DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. In fact, I suggest that the novella translates the cyberspatial aesthetics of the genre into an aesthetics of finance capital. Following McHale's elaborations on the diffusion of cyberpunk into narrative fiction at large, it is fair to argue that *Cosmopolis* can be considered a piece of literature that has "*been 'science-fictionized' to some greater or lesser degree*" – composing a case of "interface fiction"[544] – as it re-purposes the "Edge of the Construct" optics of cyberpunk for the representation of contemporary stock-markets. The aesthetic invention of cyberspace forwarded in *Neuromancer* lingers on in DeLillo's circumnavigations of cyber-capital, which narrate electronic exchange (e. g. the NASDAQ) as the real-life implementation of the embodied internet visualized by Gibson. In this, if you will, DeLillo's novella mirrors neoliberalism's proper co-optation of the conceptual domain of microelectronics into its construction of the market-price system as a sort of "natural computer."[545] But the novella has more to tell us

544 McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 233, 236.

545 Cf. Mark Duffield. "Capitalism and Liberal Zombification." *World Peace Foundation*. https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2017/03/22/capitalism-and-liberal-zombification/#_ednref11 [last accessed 09.10.2022]. Describing it as a "totalizing metascience," Duffield conceives cybernetics as "a sui generis mode of knowledge that uses methods of analogical transfer to discover equivalent modes of functioning and regimes of operation in otherwise different orders of reality." In this, he reflects most importantly on the "relation between neoliberalism and cybernetics" by delineating that in the former's theory of "the price mechanism, the market functions like a computer that is able to achieve optimal

than serving as a preliminary to a (discursive) history of neoliberalism. Underwritten by the hyperreal realism of cyberpunk poetics, it seeks to embody in textual form the "spontaneous order" (Hayek) of the market hypostatized in the enacted theory of financial economics. Bearing the historical detour through the mutations of sci-fi in mind, I therefore wish to expand on my reading of the financial epic by arguing that the vision of a post-antagonistic capitalism – in which structural adjustment and recuperation complement each other – is extended by an image of finance-technological heteronomy respectively control that "runs through each [character], dividing each within."[546]

In the science-fictionized reality of finance framing DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, the narrative act seems fully caught up in the volatile movements of financial markets whose boom-and-bust patterns roll over human civilization like "pre-determined events,"[547] derailing any ideologies of progress held by the characters. In this, the text echoes the late Gibson. If at all, as we have seen, the historical novum put into narrative form by *Pattern Recognition* is the representation of the freelancer as a model of subjectivity in today's precarious labour market. As if to ventriloquize the literature of "reflexive modernity" marking the 1990s, the secretive Hubertus Bigend programmatically exclaims that "[w]e have only risk management."[548] Similarly, the limited form of agency that is still conceivable in DeLillo's financial epic emerges as a reaction to price signals generated by the market: "The spinning of a given moment's scenarios."[549]

This entire sense of instability is amplified by the temporal contraction marking the text. It begins and ends on a single, random day in the spring of the year 2000, making the narrative present appear unhinged from any "temporal chain that leads from the past to the future."[550] The "one-day narrative structure," of course, refers back to a range of "mod-

resource allocation through powers of spontaneous self-organisation." Displacing competing interpretations, neoliberalism assimilates the cybernetic vocabulary of feedback loops to construe the market as a sort of "natural computer."

546 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 7, 5.
547 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 107, 147.
548 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 57.
549 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 57.
550 Voelz, "In the Future," 19.

ernist predecessors like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*,"[551] albeit the formal set-up of the narrative more closely resembles the literary genre of the "novella" in that it condenses the issue of financial trade into the compact temporality of an escalating event-chain. Joseph Vogl, again, attests an epic inclination to the text, speaking of a ruptured narrative structure that leads "into a world in which events are loosely or merely episodically interlinked."[552] Here, Vogl echoes Thomas Travers who notes that "*Cosmopolis* is a novel of quarters and its four chapters convert Eric's existential day into a business cycle on the verge of going bust."[553] Eric Packer's erratic journey through New York traverses a series of seemingly unrelated occurrences – from his penthouse through a rectal examination to a haircut in his childhood neighbourhood – that he more or less spontaneously stumbles into as his plan for the day is increasingly disrupted by an unruly Yen. Thus, narrative "security increasingly breaks down as events unfold"[554] and currency fluctuations rapidly evade speculative activity. The pluralism of genres evoked in response to this volatile narrative structure is not an expression of hermeneutic arbitrariness though. Rather, the financial novella/epic lends itself to these manifold readings because it is constructed as a multi-tasking text that bastardizes the various representations of time offered by these literary forms to reflect on "the impact of the new value abstractions on everyday life and lived experience," which it finds to be "best articulated in terms of temporality."[555]

Staged through a setting of heightened contingency, textual form remakes itself after the volatile, short-term temporality of stock-trade. Novelistic space-time takes on the character of a plastic environment tuned to the aleatory events of the stock-market. Time, hence, becomes punctiform as "each derivative is a new present of time," volatilizing the

551 Thomas W. L. Travers. *Delirious America. The Representation of Capital in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*. PhD Dissertation. 232. https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/40479/1/Delirious%20USA_Thomas%20Travers_PhD%20Thesis.pdf [last accessed 27.03.2026].
552 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 6.
553 Travers, *Delirious America*, 232.
554 Vogl, *The Spectre of Capital*, 6.
555 Fredric Jameson. "The End of Temporality." *The Ideologies of Theory*. London/New York: Verso. 643.

status quo into a billionfold "series of singularity-events"[556] that disrupt everything for everything to remain the same. In that vein, literary episodes bank up in ever quicker succession. Taking on an accidental character, new sequences often start off without being integrated into the larger action of the novella and end just as quickly as if it never happened. Take the following scene, in which the multi-billionaire finds himself more or less randomly at the centre of a collective nude performance. Totally absorbed by this "all-body" event, funnelled by a sudden desire to become "one," he wishes to exit the spatiotemporal disjunctions of financial derivatives "to see them" – the amassed naked bodies – "here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas."[557] But it "tore his mind apart" [558] when he is forcibly pulled out of this illusion of immediacy due to the collapse of the movie's financing in a matter of mere seconds caused by the crash of the Yen. The disinvestment from the film's production company is narrated as an experiential disjunction that refers to a traumatic affect often found in literary fantasies of capitalist globalization as Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping tries to sum up, arguing that when individual experience is felt to be authentic it cannot be true to its conditions of production.[559] Having failed "to explain the yen," Packer finds himself utterly out of joint with the speed-up temporality of capital. His debilitation as an acting subject is proportional to the demystification of the "techniques of charting" animating his self-fashioning as financial sovereign that "was effectively making history" by "forecasting stocks."[560]

In that regard, though, it is the figure Benno Levin which verbalizes this experience of disjunction even more acutely. Introduced as a former employee of Packer Capital, Levin is presented as a dropout. His value is constantly assessed by comparison to "lesser currencies"[561] in the global hierarchy of the Dollar regime (especially the Thai baht whose collapse triggered the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis). As such, his

556 Fredric Jameson. "The Aesthetics of Singularity." *New Left Review* 92:3. 122.
557 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 176.
558 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 175–176.
559 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 411.
560 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 75.
561 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 169.

confessions focalize an overwhelming panic of agency loss that is manifested in a hatred of the "faceless world"[562] of finance. This, however, is reconverted into an illusion of representability. Packer is made the object of a resentment-laden discourse in which the desire to eradicate monetary abstraction by killing his designated nemesis becomes a stand-in for a delusional mastering of the whole ("I put my world in order"[563]). In this sense, Levin's internally focalized point-of-view chapters might be taken to challenge Packer's position as the lead character. At the end, he even succeeds in assassinating his former CEO. Yet, the attempt "to generate a counternarrative"[564] by rendering the world of finance transparent via personification (necessarily) miscarries, as the confessions that he notes down while Packer's cadaver lies next to him reveal. Having pulled the trigger, he cannot seem "to remember why."[565] Instead of restoring a sense of wholeness, he falls back into speechlessness:

> all the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what I felt in the awful moment when I fired the gun and saw him fall. So what is left that's worth the telling?[566]

As if to re-enact Hegel's opposition between the Homeric and the modern bourgeois epic, then, Levin's lethal method of complexity-reduction fails to make things fall into place: the world remains disordered, while the subject stays confined to the "unendingly particular."[567] The return to an epic portrayal of events in the classical sense is fundamentally blocked in the face of a de-territorialized financial order dealing in "currencies from every sort of territorial entity."[568] All the while, however, this decapitation of representation is posited as "a function of

562 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 20.
563 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 151.
564 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 84.
565 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 61.
566 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 61.
567 G.W.H. Hegel. *Aesthetics*: *Lectures on Fine Art.* T.M. Knox (Transl.). Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1092, 1044.
568 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 75.

the ever-more totalising and abstract character of capital itself"[569] that unites precisely by separating. In the end, it does not matter "which narrative frames which" since the "formal split between rival narrators"[570] is fully contained within the virtual plot of the Yen. Contrasting different modes of representation aimed at the whole, the novella acts out their disablement in the face of processes out of their control.

The financial epic, then, does not seek to account for the aesthetic challenge posed by financial markets in a self-contained form that puts the world in order from the perspective of the "unendingly particular" subject. The gesture of totalization remains impossible within the scope of internal or external focalization just like there is no fantasy of omniscient narration. Rather, literary action is short-circuited with floating exchange rates that permeate narration as an imperceptible medium and as such can only be intuited via indices of absence. Menacingly concatenating and disrupting events in the background, the stock-exchange, thus, has a scene-making function but eludes the level of agential perspective. Narrative form, thereby, crystallizes a crisis of time and space as it seeks to account for a transformation in the "nature of concretion itself"[571] brought about by the abstract-but-real abstractions ruling the market economy. In that regard, *Cosmopolis* presents its own take on the spectral turn of the 1990s exemplified by Derrida's re-reading of the ghostly imagery pervading Marx's critique of political economy.[572] The recurring quip on the "spectre of capitalism," of course, encapsulates this most obviously. But more specifically, the novella tests out the limits of novelistic fiction with respect to what Larry Summers, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, also terms the "spectre […] of the global capital market"[573] haunting the crisis mechanisms of sover-

569 David Cunningham. "The Historical Novel of Contemporary Capitalism." *Raison Publique*. https://raison-publique.fr/1271/ [last accessed 27.03.2026].
570 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 84.
571 Sven Lütticken. "Inside Abstraction." *e-flux* 38. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/38/61196/inside-abstraction/ [last accessed 11.05.2020].
572 Cf. Mark Fisher. "Nostalgia for an Age Yet to Come (Interview)." *3:AM Magazine*. https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/nostalgia-for-an-age-yet-to-come/ [last access: 09.10.2022]. Fisher is right to note, though, that "hauntology" circumscribes a particular cultural moment steeped in a crisis of materiality, space and historical time.
573 Summers, "Go With the Flow," Online.

eign states. The cracks in literary form, indicating a "*non-contemporaneity with itself* of the living present,"[574] that I propose to render readable bear a peculiar historical index. They account for a system in which "the future becomes urgent"[575] and subjects the here-and-now to the discipline of short-term financialization.

Taking seriously Vogl's characterization of *Cosmopolis*, one can say that the capitalist spectre is figured as the "most properly 'epic' subject."[576] In line with the "epic conventions" of Homeric Greece, the narrativization of finance as a "medium of contingency"[577] (in the words of volatility trader Elie Ayache) marks "an entry-point into a zone of elemental danger" in which events appear instigated – fated – by an ineffable force akin to the capricious Gods of Mount Olympus.[578] In this sense, the novella "re-accentuates"[579] the epic form for a socio-historical order in which the financial market has seemingly become autonomous – "in electronic form" – as it subjects reality to the abstract temporal regime of risk-capital. The novella, thus, reflects upon a condition of corporate futurity ("time is a corporate asset now"[580]) wherein capital is accredited a quasi-ontological power that confines the subject to a position of speculation in the old etymological sense of the word: a "seer"[581] steadily on the lookout for emerging contingencies.[582] If the Homeric hero is depicted as a centreless "being whose parts are more in evidence than the whole, and one very conscious of sudden unexpected external forces,"[583] then the personage of DeLillo's financial fiction is decentred in the ups and downs of currency markets. Echoing Beck's dictum

574 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, xviii.
575 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79.
576 Cunningham, "Capitalist Epics," 18.
577 Elie Ayache. *A Medium of Contingency: An Inverse View of the Market*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 25.
578 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 15.
579 Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist (Ed.). Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Transl.). Austin: University of Texas Press. 421.
580 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79.
581 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 24.
582 Cf. Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 16.
583 Arthur W. H. Adkins. *From the Many to the One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 27.

that a "fate of endangerment"[584] has befallen capitalist society, the epic tradition is re-purposed against the background of an "end of history" narrative in which the boom-and-bust of markets becomes the subject of a re-enchantment that reigns over society like "a principle of fate."[585] It seems that the "gothic follies" of cyberpunk return in *Cosmopolis* in the guise of the spectral abstractions of finance capital. Packer celebrates his "release from the influence of his neocortex" – "gaining distance from the need to take inspired action, make original judgements, maintain independent principles and convictions" – as he fully surrenders himself to the "yen spree."[586] Adhering to a sort of cyber-idealism, Packer despises "meat space" (a direct reference to Gibson) while he dreams about merging with the cybernetic interface "to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data":

> It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment.[587]

Reminiscent of *Neuromancer*'s imagery of "livewire voodoo," the asset manager's disparaging comments about the outdatedness of the presidential office, thus, could just as well be applied to him or the other characters in the novel: "He was the undead. He lived in a state of occult repose, waiting to be reanimated."[588] The literary characters that take the stage in the novella appear depersonalized into interchangeable disseminators in the linguistic chains of the "end of history" narrative unfolded across the pages of the novella. It is, therefore, fitting that the novelistic personnel seems incapable of holding talks that are not entirely traversed by theoretical jargon. This does not only go to the point that "anyone can complete anyone else's sentences because they

584 Ulrich Beck. *Ecological Enlightenment. Essays on the Politics of the Risk Society*. Mark A. Ritter (Transl.). Oakland: Humanities Press. 65.
585 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 107, 147.
586 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 115.
587 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 64, 206–207.
588 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 77.

consist of interchangeable elements."[589] The inner monologues of various figures virtually merge ("He knew what she [chief of theory] was thinking"[590]) such that it almost seems as if an alien 3rd voice spoke through them: "I am speaking to someone and hear the sound of my voice, third person, filling the air around my head."[591] The stylized language of the novella signals an abstraction of subjectivity in which some paragraphs come across as afterimages of the information flows flickering on the screens of the NASDAQ ticker holding Packer in awe: "as if discourses themselves ran like data along discrete tiers, jumping from one level to the other without a flicker of distinction."[592]

It fits in the picture that the experience of the market is wholly depersonalized in the novella. The act of speculation does not involve interaction with competing investors. Nina Peter's contrasting of DeLillo's financial fiction to Émile Zola's *L'Argent* (1890/91) is telling in that regard. Compared to "Zola's protagonist Saccard [who] know[s] both his allies and his adversaries and is himself a prominent figure of the stock market,"[593] Packer experiences the market only via screens that disallow the identification of individual agents. There are intrigues in Zola's stock exchange novel. Nothing of that kind characterizes *Cosmopolis*, where economic activity slips into anonymity behind financial data tickers: The "screens showed money moving. There were numbers gliding horizontally and bar charts pumping up and down."[594] Against this background, to return to a key notion from Hayek's philosophy, Packer downsizes economic activity to an exercise in "pattern recognition."[595] Charting his own metamorphosis, Packer himself notes that the times for a straightforward CEO-narrative, wherein "[t]he things [he] imagines become facts,"[596] have passed. The fantasy of the bourgeois as

589 Voelz, "In the Future," 22.
590 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 80.
591 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 57–58.
592 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 94.
593 Nina Peter. "Precarious Ontology: Contemporary Financial Markets in Literature." *Writing (for) the Market. Narratives of the Global Economy*. Anna-Katharina Krüger et al (Eds.). Berlin: Peter Lang. 34.
594 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 63.
595 Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena.," 23.
596 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 192.

a history-making subject survives only in the strangely depersonalized figure of the absent investor concerned purely with "the number itself" abstracted from "power, personality, and command."[597] If Saccard fashions himself as a "poète de l'argent"[598] that creates money by enthralling traders with his rhetorical finesse, then Packer delegates agency to the market as a higher-order intelligence. He is not a creator but an interpreter: "The yen is making a statement. Read it."[599]

Mediated by computer interfaces that abstract from the competitive circus of finance, the stock exchange appears "as a singular unit"[600] – a posthuman affair – that faces actors as the "sum total of the works." It is here where the "Edge of the Construct" story recounted in the interface fiction of *Cosmopolis* most explicitly echoes the digital aesthetics of *Neuromancer*.

> Financial news, stock prices, currency markets. The action was unflagging. The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized Dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed. […] Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable.[601]

In a sense, the "infinite complexity" of Gibson's cyberspatial imagery returns in the fetishization of "speed" as cyber-capital's mode of existence. As such, the picture of accelerating monetary flows provokes a sublime effect. The impression of "unflagging action" induced by stock-market price feeds does not only function as a distorted allegory of the future but facilitates the figment of a spectral agency independ-

597 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 78.
598 Émile Zola. *L'Argent*. Paris : Éditions Flammarion. 306.
599 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 21.
600 Caitlin Zaloom. "Time, Space, and, Technology in Financial Networks." *The Network Society*. Manuel Castells (Ed.). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. 208, 205
601 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 80.

ent of human action in the first place. The power of finance is ascribed a non-discursive character in that it is fantasized as a self-mapping system whose data flux remains "ritually unreadable" to market actors: "What is happening doesn't chart."[602] *Cosmopolis* proposes to view 21st century society as one in which social relations are mediated by the "asignifying semiotics" of finance that "act on" the environment but "bypass[] the representations of a subject."[603] In the apparent dematerialization of money, that is, the system of exchange seems fully abstract as if "money [were] talking to itself."[604]

Against this background, the text can be seen again and again to work through the inadequacies of language. Cultural signs systems cannot account for the super-specificity of an economy moving in nanoseconds. The entire terminology of work is termed "out-dated" – it has "zero saturation" considering the casualization of labour.[605] DeLillo's billionaire protagonist questions state "presidents" as objects of terrorism in times of high-speed trading, all while pondering repeatedly on the "anachronistic quality" of terms such as "airport," "office," or "skyscraper" – "No recent structure ought to bear this word."[606] Even the automated teller (ATM) – "burdened by its own historical memory" – is found to be "anti-futuristic" and "antiquated."[607] Indulging in the cyber-capitalist "assault on the borders of perception," he, hence, models his worldview after the planned-obsolescence of commodity-culture:

> The hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared. He knew he'd have to *junk* it.[608]

Not surprisingly, the hunch that "money has lost its narrative quality" is eventually inscribed with an almost Social-Darwinist fantasy of superfluisation. Packer's linguistic reflections end up decrying an economy

602 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 21.
603 Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 40.
604 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79.
605 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 65, 15.
606 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 22, 15, 20, 9.
607 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 54.
608 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 21, 9 (emphasis added).

"unable to escape the interference of fuddled human personnel and jerking moving parts."[609] As he comes to envision the "street [a]s an offense to the truth of the future," he ultimately fashions himself as a prophet of cyber-capital who means to dispel the semiotic ghosts of "a form of money so obsolete Eric didn't know how to think about it."[610]

Against this backdrop, though, it is right to consider the complicity of the novella itself in reproducing the hierarchy of speed expressed in Packer's cyber-idealism on the level of form. The breakdown of the syntagmatic marking the financial epic as it tracks the spatiotemporal compressions of stock exchange betrays a fetish of acceleration. That is, the brevity of the novella's portrait of the networked metropolis, proposing to reproduce the temporal densifications effected by the financial contingency-machine, tends to blank out the hierarchies of mobility marking contemporary urbanity. *Cosmopolis* turns currency exchange into a metonymy of the economy itself that "comes at the expense of the informal and micro-sectors of production and consumption that are also constitutive elements" of the global city, thereby "pick[ing] up the trend set in the 1980s by Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and Oliver Stone's film *Rival Street* (1987)."[611] That said, I want to argue that there is another way of reading the reified image of cosmopolitan urbanity put forward in the novella. In keeping with the movement of foreclosure attested to the financial epic above, the flattened appearance of the global city could just as well be considered expressive of the "hypothesis of a subject without negativity"[612] that *Cosmopolis* scrutinizes. In tracing the modes of appearance through which cyber-capital imposes itself as a "wholeness" from the future, the text precisely delineates the exclusionary logic at work in the capitalist "annihilation of space by time."[613] Indeed, the logistical space of asset management that provides the setting for the novella is described as a staggering apparatus of separation as it reproduces the opaqueness of money: "A surface sepa-

609 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 54.
610 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 64–65.
611 Gupta, *Globalization and Literature*, 46–47.
612 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 5.
613 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 539.

rates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other."[614] The architecture of banking, thus, is composed of "abstract," "monotonic," "empty" looking facades – he "had to concentrate to see them" – while "indistinguishable […] long white limousines […] the most unnoticed vehicles in the city" serve as de-territorialized offices that in their very "anonymity" mirror the aesthetics of monetary abstraction.[615]

As such, these contact surfaces appear as if:

> They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren't here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it.[616]

Depicted as embodiments of finance's inverted temporality, these "covert structures"[617] are taken to spatialize the disruptive urge of capital in its conquest for new markets. Feeling "contiguous" with this built-environment, Packer paraphrases the spatial strategies of capital as a "kind of banality that reveals itself over time as being truly brutal."[618] The abstraction of space under the financial turn is posited against a phantasmagorical "plot of concrete," revealing a not so covert disgust of the real economy which is evoked in a strange – racially over-coded – superimposition of logistics, informal labour, and rare-metal-trading:

> FedEx trucks and UPS. Black men wore signboards and spoke in African murmurs. Cash for gold and diamonds. Ring, coins, pearls, wholesale jewelry, antique jewelry. This was the souk, the shtetl. Here were the hagglers and talebearers, the scrapmongers, the dealers in stray talk.[619]

The "plot of concrete" stands, here, ambivalently in opposition to the ever-greater abstraction of monetary exchange. By contrast, the opaque

614 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 9.
615 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 36, 10–11.
616 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 36.
617 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 36,
618 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 8–9.
619 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 65.

architecture of the banking district is inscribed with a fantasy of immateriality supposed to symbolize the future as such. It is in this sense that the novella figures the manufactured landscape of the global city as an aesthetic extension of the contact surfaces of algorithmic trading delineated above. It is narrated as an apparatus for the maintenance of an appearance of frictionless accumulation wherein "the present is sucked out of the world"[620] and capital appears finally liberated from the embarrassing residues of materiality that it has to rely on for its existence.

As such, though, these "interface effects" – inscribed, as they are, with the "control allegories"[621] of finance capital – also have a (dis)ordering impact on narrative form. In facilitating the flow of money, that is, they help the epic plot take shape. At the beginning of the story, the opacification of economic abstractions behind the edges of the financial construct provides a certain consistency to the narrative unfolding and the character's worldviews. The "less visible" the instruments of exchange are, that is, "the more efficient they" organize "the circulation of capital,"[622] the less narrative motion is dishevelled. Indeed, the spatial framework provided by these "covert" fixtures has a structuring effect on the scenes and dialogues related in the story. Thus, the "nearly touchless" context of Packer's mobile operation room merges with his initial self-representation as an ersatz god that has substituted itself for the invisible hand of the market ("He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank"[623]). The strange opposition in Kinski's excursus on the totality of the market between the power of "capitalist thought"[624] and the impotence of anti-capitalist action is also telling in that regard.[625] Endowed with an exorbitant version of the new-economic speech-act theory elaborated above, the venture capitalist is not only fantasized to assign value by the pure power of his linguistic labour – a financial version of the biblical

620 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 79.
621 Alexander R. Galloway. *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge: Polity.
622 Georg Lukács. "Realism in the Balance." *Aesthetics and Politics*. Fredric Jameson (Ed.) Roney Livingstone (Transl.). London/New York: Verso. 32.
623 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 13.
624 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 93.
625 Gupta, *Globalization and Literature*, 15–16.

en archē ēn ho logos – but to will his own foes into being: "They are acting on your terms."[626] In this, the perception of Packer's chief of theory, viewing the anti-globalization rioters as unwitting freelancers recruited into the business of disruption, fits "the neatness of the juxtaposition of Eric's limo with the theorist inside against the raging protests without."[627] The claim to power of the New Economy's symbol analysts converges with the control fantasies facilitated by the user interfaces of capital markets. As Gupta observes, this extremely staged "fictionalizing arrangement" comes with the "licence" to "play[] up" the market while "downplay[ing]" the demonstrators "for maximum effect."[628] Carrying forward a CEO-narrative cultivated in works like Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* or Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* movie, released six days before respectively after the infamous 1987 Black Monday, *Cosmopolis* decodes the "radical subjectivity of the financier"[629] as a sort of cyber-idealist interface effect.

If the financial epic brings into view Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction" as a discourse through which the economy is perceived, it is always embedded in a general equilibrium model that ascribes at once a "purging and lubricating" function to the "enforced destruction" wrought by the market.[630] Appealing more or less explicitly to the Schumpeterian re-conception of the market as the avant-gardist force *par excellence* that "incessantly revolutionizes […] *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one,"[631] the text gives a sense of the inner linkage between disruption and recuperation. In this, the "techniques of charting" that the realist representation of *Cosmopolis* is constricted to are figured as narrative lubricants that absorb market failures in a pretension of homeostasis. Acting as embodiments of so-called DSGE models (Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium), which run on the assumption of a perfect economy supposedly realized in its purest form on financial markets, the interfaces

626 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 92.
627 Gupta, *Globalization and Literature*, 16.
628 Gupta, *Globalization and Literature*, 16.
629 La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 76–77.
630 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 99.
631 Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 87.

of financial brokering represented in the novella appear as bubble technologies that facilitate the production of spectral values.

On the other hand, the bursting of the bubble, as the currency rate of the Yen drops abruptly, produces a narrative rupture. At the end of the novel, when the predictive models of the stock-exchange fail, "the financial suddenly appears directly"[632] as a social force. The crash of the Yen marks a "reality-enhancing anomaly"[633] that forces the totalizing effects of the system into appearance and de-mystifies the control fantasies of finance:

> There were currencies tumbling everywhere. Bank failures were spreading…. Strategists could not explain the speed and depth of the fall. He knew it was the yen. His actions regarding the yen were causing storms of disorder. He was so leveraged, his firm's portfolio large and sprawling, linked crucially to the affairs of so many key institutions, all reciprocally vulnerable, that the whole system was in danger.[634]

The "sprawl" as a metaphor of complexity cultivated in cyberpunk is reversed, here, into a metaphor of collateralized debt. It becomes the sign of an overleveraged economy in which the abstract contracts into the concrete. As such, something Lukácsian pertains to the moment of crisis in the novella. Lukács crafted his notion of crisis in response to Ernst Bloch's insistence on the mimetic character of expressionist fragmentation regarding the fissured reality of everyday perception under capitalism.[635] By contrast, Lukács insists that our modes of apperception should not be taken for the essential reality of the capitalist mode of production. He asserts the realism of crisis against the discontinuities of modern social experience, seeing crisis as a failure of invisibility. In times preceding economic recession, capitalism – "[a]s a result of the

632 Zachary Formwalt. 2010. *Reading the Economist*. Utrecht/Porto: Serralves & Casco. 16.
633 Albrecht Koschorke. "Das Mysterium des Realen in der Moderne." *Auf die Wirklichkeit zeigen*. Helmuth Lethen et al. (Eds.) Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus Verlag. 36 (my translation).
634 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 115–116.
635 Ernst Bloch. "Discussing Expressionism." *Aesthetics and Politics*. Fredric Jameson (Ed.), Rodney Livingstone (Transl.). London/New York: Verso. 22.

objective structure of this economic system" – appears to differentiate into incommensurable subsystems: the social disintegrates "into a series of elements all driven towards independence."[636] The disappearance of totality in the complexification of the social into "discrete objects" is considered an aesthetic effect induced by the the market in which appearance functions as disappearance.[637] But when a crisis hits, this "distribution of the sensible"[638] founders as one might say with regard to Rancière. The "independence assumed by processes which belong together and complement each other is violently destroyed,"[639] manifesting the underlying causal nexus of the system.

In this, though, DeLillo's financial epic adds a crucial facet to Lukácsian crisis theory. The novella, in fact, acts out the de-stabilizing effects of financial crisis-management itself. As Vogl points out, *Cosmopolis* starts off with an almost hyperbolic invocation of danger prevention and risk assessment.[640] Packer's networks are "secure" and "safe from penetration."[641] The text, then, proceeds to take on the figure of "efficient capital markets"[642] as if to probe the conceptual apparatus of financial securitization. In the following, however, the literary course of events resembles more and more a process of brutal disruption.[643] In this, though, Packer's cyber-teleology does not only fail to make the activities of the Yen cohere into a "pattern latent in nature itself."[644] Rather, the very precautions that he takes by hedging his transactions against potential losses contribute to the increasement of systemic risk: "He was so leveraged […] that the whole system was in danger."[645] The management of financial risk amplifies the likelihood of large-scale threats. Inverting the business of risk-management into an "involuntary

636 Lukács, *Realism in the Balance*, 32.
637 Lukács, *Realism in the Balance*, 32.
638 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.
639 Lukács, *Realism in the Balance*, 32.
640 Cf. Vogl, *Specter of Capital*, 15.
641 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 12, 22.
642 Eugene F. Fama. "Efficient Capital Markets." *The Journal of Finance* 25:2. 383–417.
643 Vogl, *Specter of Capital*, 15.
644 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 63.
645 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 116.

satire,"[646] the text emerges as a reflection on the inherent instability of financial security, that is, the prospect of securitizing the market with the means of finance itself.

9 A Capitalist Aesthetic?

It is for this reason that I consider *Cosmopolis* less in terms of a theorization of literature than a literary account of the enacted theory of the marketplace and its limits. Tracing the representational tools of economics, the novella charts the failure of theoretical language to stabilize the erratic dynamics of high-frequency trading into a coherent narrative. Herein, a crucial difference between the functionalist fantasy underwriting Gibson's cybernetic fiction and the syntagmatic breakdown characterizing DeLillo's financial epic shows itself. As literary events turn into the mere detritus of the boom-and-bust of currency exchange, Packer's wish "to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass"[647] in the zero-oneness of cyber-capital – to become, narratively speaking, a servomechanism in the virtual plot of the Yen – is disappointed. Fittingly, the space of narration collapses across entire chapters into the non-lieu of a limousine, trapped in a traffic jam, condemning the asset manager to contemplate the depreciation of his assets. In the end, it is not only Benno Levin for whom money has lost its narrative quality. Instead of being recruited into the Yen's becoming, Packer and his chief of theory are outmanoeuvred by it. Theory as a device of speculation and risk-management always appears too late in the novella. It cannot carry the text. Theory fails to chart the performance of value and, thus, cannot produce a narrative of futurity that drives action. The "figure of performative economics, attuned to speech-act theory"[648] and embodied to the extreme by Packer, no longer holds: "the world has become unreadable, its interconnections blurred."[649] Fittingly, the chief of theory ends up conceding in an involuntary satirical fashion the

646 Ulrich Beck. "Living in the World Risk Society." *Economy and Society* 35:3. 329.
647 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 206.
648 Clover, "Value | Theory | Crisis," 112.
649 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 190.

inadequacy of her theoretical models by downsizing the very scope of the term: "'That was theory. I deal in theory,' she said sharply."[650]

In a sense, *Cosmopolis* proposes to achieve an effect of the real not only by encountering capital as an invisible narrative limit but by turning theory itself into a site of crisis: theoretical "language becomes another symptom of money's new historical unrepresentability."[651] Throughout, the novella thematizes the nexus between different capitalist stages and the narrative promises these settlements hold. Most notably, the "olden soul of awe" belonging to the early skyscrapers built in New York City is associated with a progressivist "narrative long before [Packer] was born."[652] By contrast, the rule of cyber-capital is again and again related to a fundamental disconnect as an ever-accelerating speculative process, moving in zepto-seconds, no longer provides a shared historical horizon for both capital and its subjects.[653] Homologous to fiat-currency's lack of a stable referent, it is characterized by the absence of a unifying ideological narrative. The aesthetic mediation of financial abstraction takes us through a ruination of language that echoes the indices of urban collapse appearing in the margins of narrative form, casting the production of obsolescence as a hidden tendency that proceeds effectively unnoticed in the infrastructures and monetary abstractions of contemporary capitalism. Against the background of the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s – encoded in "the inseparability" of finance and tech-capital celebrated by Packer – *Cosmopolis* crafts a critical poetics of the efficient-market-hypothesis by staging the "expenses of representa-

650 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 95.
651 Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary*, 94.
652 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 9.
653 It is interesting that it is again Japanese capital that comes to embody the "thrust of the future" here. As the epicentre of instability, the Tokyo stock-exchange weirdly figures at the absent centre of the novella, almost as if to encode ongoing fears of a shift in world financial supremacy. Of course, the choice of currency could be arbitrary. But in the wake of the so-called "Lost Decade" of the 1990s in which Japan entered a period of sustained stagnation, it seems significant and curious at once that the novella opted for the Yen. Centred around Packer, a self-proclaimed "world citizen with a New York set of balls," *Cosmopolis* could, thus, be read in terms of an Americanized piece of world literature that relates to globalization through a perspective of imperial decline. (Cf. Martina Sciolino. "The Contemporary American Novel as World Literature." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 57:2. 211).

tion"[654] entailed in the appearance of an accumulation paradigm that bypasses the human element.

In fact, from the very first paragraph the novella unfolds the motif of the blank: "It was a matter of silences, not words."[655] Packer's ruminations on the "white space around the lines" of a metrical text, considering it "vital to the soul of the poem," continue this theme, just like the recurring invocation of the rat as a sort of counter-currency that undermines the monetary system.[656] The driver – a "Sikh" – chauffeuring Packer through Manhattan, again, is described to be "missing a finger," an absence, that is taken to symbolize the violence suffered by migrant labour: "a body ruin that carried history and pain."[657] Benno Levin, too, is figured as a sort of "demoted […] generic labor" which has been de-synchronized from the "microtimed" and "infinitesimal" pace of algorithmic trading.[658] Again and again, there are passing mentions in the novel concerning "the material crush, […] the obsolescences, going mostly unseen"[659] in the hierarchy of speed marking just-in-time economics. The "autopoietic closure"[660] of the stock-market is every now and then contrasted to the missing link that is subtracted in the fantasy of doing *Business @ The Speed of Thought* as Bill Gates speculates. *Cosmopolis* stages the dialectical tension marking the financial spectacle of abstraction, which invites a surface reading that is mesmerized by the speed of information but misses the socio-historical contents seeping through in these textual cracks that fleetingly betray the "made" character of these surfaces. Operationalizing the hole/whole couplet as a dialectic image, the financial epic figures "the logic of subjectlessness itself as an accumulation strategy"[661] whose extravaganzas of wholeness reproduce the economic demotion of labour on the level of the representational.

654 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 741.
655 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 5.
656 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 66.
657 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 17.
658 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 60, 191.
659 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 83.
660 Vogl, *Spectre of Capital*, 80–81.
661 Hitchcock, "Accumulating Fictions," 152.

It must be conceded, however, that the novella does never entirely escape capitalist fetishization. The absences remain silences; the surfaces only insinuate a hidden depth. Thus, the recourse to the epic is always ambivalent. On the one hand, it does generate a de-familiarizing effect through which the historical genesis of a new temporal regime is narrated while the underlying financial epistemology is re-cast as the restoration of a certain providential sensibility. On the other hand, the epic plot risks being entrapped in an axiom of unknowability that does not challenge the market but rather entrenches its hold over society. In seeking to re-create, as Vogl states,[662] the effect of a "Black Swan"[663] event – a theory of contingency developed by the risk analyst Nassim Taleb and applied to the credit crunch in 2007 – the novella, ultimately, reifies crisis in an image of unpredictability encased away from causal explanation. If Joseph Vogl, then, reads Packer as "not only an allegory of contemporary finance capitalism but also the fallen angel of an illusion,"[664] I would interject that the novella re-introduces another figure of the neo-classical canon through the backdoor that does not come with a promise of calculability but precisely "harness[es] ignorance"[665] as an epistemological alibi and means of power. In this sense, the novella's ambivalences refract the ambivalences marking neoliberalism itself as an applied ideology. *Cosmopolis* takes to task the "epistemological arrogance" (Taleb) entailed in the scientification of economics via a critique of its "pretence of knowledge"[666] much in vein of Hayek who precisely hypostasised the epistemological limits of risk-management to argue for the unleashing of market forces. The imbrication of DeLillo's critical poetics in ambiguities internal to neoliberal discourse, thus,

662 Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, 8ff.
663 Nassim N. Taleb. *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York: Random House. xvii-xviii.
664 Joseph Vogl. 2015. "The End of an Illusion." *Finance and Society.* 38.
665 Davies/McGoey, "Rationalities of Ignorance," 80.
666 See also Wolfgang Schäuble. "Germany and the Global Financial Crisis: Lessons We Need to Learn." *London School of Economics* [Talk]. https://www.wolfgang-schaeuble.de/rede-von-bundesminister-dr-wolfgang-schaeuble-an-der-london-school-of-economics-am-18-februar-2009-in-london/ [last accessed: 14.12.2022]. This view has been repeated for instance by Schäuble in explicit reference to the work of Hayek – to immunize the existing economic set-up against systemic critique after the crash of 2007–9.

prompts us to reckon with the neoliberal complicities of our categories of criticism. Indeed, the analysis of the critical fallacies manifesting in *Cosmopolis* prepares the grounds for an investigation into the proper aesthetic exploits of neoliberal theory as an axiomatic that variably seeks to fill in the gaps of the economy or to unmake the economy as an object of knowledge and, hence, intervention.

A later short-story by DeLillo from 2010 – *Hammer and Sickle* – might be revelatory in that regard. Trying to account for the global financial crisis of 2007–8, the text comes up with the fictional conceit that some of the main culprits of the economic crash are brought to justice and receive long prison sentences. Yet, contrary to expectations, the unfolded narrative does not expound on the fraudulent money schemes that the detainees are found guilty of. Rather, it puts forward a story of "constitutional ignorance" (Hayek) centred around a narrator that may at times purport to display specialized knowledge about "offshore finance" or "virtual money" but lacks any systematic understanding of the economy beyond his personal profit-drive:

> I don't remember knowing why I did what I did to put myself in this place. […]. I think about money. What did I know about it, how much did I need it, what would I do when I got it.[667]

Intriguingly, this sense of debilitation is directly tied to his disconnection from the techniques of charting that helped him navigate capital markets: "We'd lost our appendages, our extensions, the data systems that kept us fed and cleansed."[668] Thus, he re-defines his role in the lead-up to the crisis as an exchangeable input-output mechanism in the data flows of the market: "Information, this was everything, coming in, coming out."[669] Detached from the cybernetic interfaces of stock-market exchange, he feels himself disintegrate into "a floating fever dream"[670] that has lost any grounding in the economy or his general surrounding.

667 Don DeLillo. "Hammer and Sickle." *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*. New York: Scribner. 147, 149, 155.
668 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 162.
669 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 162.
670 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 149.

Resonating with Packer's last thoughts at the prospect of having to start again from scratch, preferring to die instead, he has turned into "burnt-out capital"[671] for which the system has no use anymore.

The "epistemological blockage"[672] of the narrator, again, finds itself paralleled in a financial news report on the Great Recession, especially the global sovereign debt crisis, that strangely features his two daughters who despair at the, as they exclaim, "[n]ot real, unreal, surreal" terminology of crisis-management: "What is a credit default swap? What is a sovereign default? What is a special-purpose entity? We don't know. Do you know? Do you care?"[673] Over the course of the short story, the children's programme becomes a regular fixture in the daily routine of the imprisoned capitalists who consume the "market report" like a "performance piece."[674] The juvenile news anchors are not orchestrated as seditious figures that speak truth to power. Rather, their act turns into a spectacle for the inmates who, while failing themselves to keep up with the news flash, indulge in the "[f]ear of numbers," the awe and terror at the might of market abstractions, conjured in the crisis reporting:

> Do we know what that means? It means the Dow Jones Industrial Average is down, down, down. Deutsche Bank. Down. London – the FTSE One Hundred Index. Down. Amsterdam – ING Group. Down. The Hang Seng in Hong Kong. Crude Oil. Islamic Bonds. Down, down, down.[675]

Albeit this fictional exaggeration of stock-market reporting, now, sounds far-fetched, the prose piece goes to greater lengths to establish that "[i]t wasn't any crazier, probably, than most TV […]."[676] Rather, it is perceived to distort to recognizability an "ancient truism" that the narrator's father leaves his company heir with: "*We depend on the news to disappear*."[677] Here, the text echoes Alain Badiou's notion that the crisis

671 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 175.
672 Stipe Grgas. "Capitalist Realism, Finance and Don DeLillo." *Umjetnost riječi* LXIII. 206.
673 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 174, 163.
674 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 164.
675 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 154.
676 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 151.
677 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 157, 177.

of 2007–8 has been turned into a form of entertainment, akin to a disaster movie,[678] that responds to the gaps in ideology exposed in the crash "by re-doubling abstractions."[679] Economic instability is not considered to "undermine the fetishist relation to the market" but to endow it with "a surplus of positive existence."[680] The apocalyptic transfiguration of the crisis into an "end-of-the-world-bad"[681] news cycle does not come with an emancipatory impetus in the short story but re-delegates all agency to the spectres of capital. Despite the fantasy of judicial prosecution framing *Hammer and Sickle*, the text stages a crisis of representation in which the failed emancipation of our critical and representational paradigms from capital marks the flipside of a persistent "end of history" vibe. The "subversive semantics"[682] invoked in the title of the piece are fittingly emptied out in a chant that re-mixes the names of communist icons and the imagery of rioting protesters into mere decorum for the spectacle of crisis. Meanwhile, the system itself – even if deprived of some of its executive leadership – remains firmly in place.

As DeLillo's post-recession prose showcases, the critical representation of crisis can itself reproduce the internal mythologies of the market by "treating a capitalist aesthetic as an aesthetic of capital."[683] Along similar lines, *Cosmopolis* provides an astute literary formalization of contingency as a proper neoliberal mode of power but in the same breath dramatizes the unknowability of the economy. It is, thus, consistent that the proletarian lifeworld emerging as the underside of the cosmopolis is ever as ephemeral in the text's descriptive apparatus as is the kind of sweatshop sublimity encountered in *Pattern Recognition*. It is present in the finance epic as a wordless symptom: "What was there to say? It was a matter of silences, not words."[684] In the last instance, the link between the irrepresentability of the economy and the incapaci-

678 Cf. Alain Badiou. "De quel Réel cette Crise est-elle le spectacle." *Hypothèse Communiste*. Nouvelles Éditions Lignes. 75.
679 Noys, "Apocalypse, Tendency, Crisis," Online. Noys, here, comments Badiou's article on the Financial Crisis.
680 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 98.
681 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 176.
682 Grgas, "Capitalist Realism, Finance and Don DeLillo," 207.
683 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 182.
684 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 5.

tation of the subject played out in the novella "radicalizes the lack of an alternative to capitalism and endows it with a debilitating finality"[685] that is later fully expressed in *Hammer and Sickle*:

> 'Blame the worker. Bury the worker.' 'Freeze their pay. Increase their tax.' 'Steal from the worker. Screw the worker'.[686]

It is on this account that DeLillo's representational project forces us to "ask what abstraction itself might represent,"[687] if the logic of subjectlessness encoded in the trope of the ineffable, the abstract, manifests as an integral part of financial discourse itself. It suggests that perhaps above all else the genuine novelty of neoliberal capitalism consists in the operationalization of crisis not as a motor of social struggle but a medium for its de-mobilization and an occasion for the upward re-distribution of societal wealth.

The chapter on Kathrin Röggla's prose that will follow now is going to deepen this interest in the foreclosure of antagonism and recent literature's representation of "structural adjustment" at the heart of this study. If *Cosmopolis* dissolves the impression of a higher-order intelligence, still at work in the cybernetic imaginary of Gibson's SF, into an image of market irrationality driven by the capitalization of risk, then Röggla's *die alarmbereiten* is truly concerned with crisis-management as a means of power. As I will argue, it ties together the systematic plugging of liquidity gaps and the filling of plots holes in the "()hole complex" of capitalism. Röggla's crisis prose, placed in the context of a broader disaster imaginary, furthers our investigation of the kind of representation of representation so prevalent in recent attempts at a critical aesthetic. The main focus of the next section will, hence, consist in Röggla's negotiation of the "techniques of charting" at work in neoliberal risk discourses. In this, I hope to dissect a prose of de-personalization which translates the representational problem posed by the "dividual" into an experimental play with pronouns that makes the subject

685 Grgas, "Capitalist Realism, Finance and Don DeLillo," 208.
686 DeLillo, "Hammer and Sickle," 164.
687 La Berge, "Rules of Abstraction," 118. 107.

itself appear as a medium of structural adjustment. Tracking Röggla's engagement with popular and specialized discourses of crisis, the next chapter is going to show how her prose reflects in literary form on the de-realization but also aggressive polarization of the socius implied in the essential neoliberal slogan that "There is no Society." My aim will, then, be to re-trace how *die alarmbereiten* moves from the "horrors of the 'split self'" to the "horrors of *split society*"[688] so as to examine the structural stabilization of the capitalist system by way of the very negative affects that it unleashes.

688 David McNally. *Monsters of the Market. Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. Leiden/Boston: Brill. 11–12.

III A Global "löcherstopfsystem": Representing Neoliberal Crisis-Management

> Speech and work are […] expressions in which the individual no longer keeps and possesses himself within himself, but lets the inner get completely outside of him, leaving it to the mercy of something other than himself.
>
> — Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 187 (§312)

In the preceding chapter, we have come across a certain narrative of adjustment that taps into the novel media of the computer age as a way to think through elemental changes in the organization of capitalism. Across *Neuromancer*, *Pattern Recognition*, and *Cosmopolis* a curious shift in the imagination of the ruling class has been negotiated in which capitalist power is exercised via a new, almost environmental type of power wherein freedom and control seem to coincide. These representational short-cuts, now, have been taken to refract real historical transformations in which the robber barons persist but power also works more diffusely, microscopically. At once, they have been read as neoliberal control allegories that project a capitalism without antagonism by confabulating a system in which resistance is always-already co-opted. This is reflected upon in DeLillo's novella which is chiefly concerned with the technologies of representation that facilitate the appearance of cyber/financial capital as a whole without holes. Thus, I have identified a literary aesthetic of capitalism crucially premised on a *representation of representation* that registers the emergence of a novel "end of history" narrative in which power is considered uniquely disruptive and adaptive, capable of incorporating even its worst critics.

If I noted that the neoliberal dispositive of "structural adjustment" emerges as a recognizable aesthetic, my analysis also pointed out that this finds a complementary expression on the level of literary form in a certain abstraction of subjectivity. *Neuromancer* has, hence, been interpreted as a cyberneticized fiction that recuperates the narrative agency of the main characters into the grander posthuman plot of a corpo-

rate AI, all while rendering the dividual subjecthood evoked thereby in a zombified or demonic metaphorology. In *Cosmopolis*, again, it is almost as if something alien spoke through the characters as for example notes the seeming protagonist Eric Packer: "the sound of my voice, third person, filling the air around my head."[1] In this sense, the difference between dialogue and monologue fades in a mode of direct speech that at times makes it nearly "impossible – but also pointless – to figure out who's saying what."[2] Insofar DeLillo's novelistic prose approximates verbal communication to the information flows flickering on the screens of the NASDAQ ticker, it achieves a certain effect of depersonalization that corresponds to the spectacle of abstraction narrativized throughout the book.

In the following, now, I want to argue that Kathrin Röggla's volume *die alarmbereiten* takes up this gesture of depersonalization. In so doing, it can be read as a critique of recent trends in autofiction and other solipsistic narrative modes that purport to erase literary fiction's distance from a supposed reality by engaging in a "fulsome personalism"[3] which ostensibly accounts for an unprocessed, uncensored reality. This advocacy for the – seemingly – unfiltered immediacy of first-person narration is most starkly expressed by bestseller author Karl Ove Knausgård for whom "in reality there is no such thing as the social dimension, only single human beings."[4] His Thatcherite literary turn, however, only exemplifies a more widespread "preoccupation with the 'auto'"[5] in pub-

1 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 57–58.

2 Voelz, In the Future," 20–21. See also DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 10. In a complementary way, the minor characters appearing in the margins of DeLillo's novella seem as generic as the architecture they populate. Represented as no more than "the investment banker, the land developer, the venture capitalist, […] the software entrepreneur, the global overlord of satellite and cable, the discount broker, the beaked media chief," they are depicted as flat personae – devoid of cultural or personal insignia – that mirror the depthless spaces through which they circulate.

3 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 73.

4 Karl Ove Knausgård. *My Struggle* (Book 6). Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken (Transl.). Brookly: Archipelago. 1077.

5 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 72, 78–80. Citing quantitative data on the last 300 years of the English novel, Kornbluh notes a "dramatic change". Apart from the early years of the genre, the 3rd person has been the norm in the history of the novel. The last decades have, by contrast, seen the rise of *"a new hegemony of first-person narration*" that symptomizes an enclosure/privatization of social experience and executes a vehement anti-fictional turn.

lishing, journalism, and theory that signals a withdrawal from the narration of collective experience. In Röggla, by contrast, literary form seems rather underwritten by a deep skepticism as regards the "ideological conceit"[6] of disintermediation, especially concerning the lived experience of disasters. If the "ideology of immediacy holds a kernel truth" insofar the subject seems tethered to the extremity of events, unable to take contemplative or agential distance, then Röggla's prose works on emancipating itself from this "atomistic absorption"[7] to probe the hidden mediations obscured by the catastrophic real.

First, however, a brief summary of the seven short-stories at stake may be in order to provide a first impression of the volume's range. In "die zuseher" readers follow, in a kind of found-manuscript-narrative, a series of meetings recorded in written transcripts that engage in an unspecified emergency drill. Paraphrased as a form of disaster tourism, it consists primarily in the surveillance of an empty car park and ensuing speculations as to the absence of panic buyers in response to a vague catastrophic event. The storyline of "die ansprechbare" is restricted to a telephone conversation between a soliloquizing caller and her friend to whom an escalating stance of climate alarmism is attributed without, however, assuming a discrete speaker position. The piece ends in the apparent demise by respiratory distress of the former as she is caught up with the desolate living conditions ("desolate[] verhältnisse"[8]) that she sought to relativize. "der übersetzer" is contextualized by and large in the aftermath of the stock market crash of 2007–9 which is negotiated in an economic coaching course that takes place in an industrial ruin. Therein it confronts a self-declared financial expert intent on explaining away ("wegerklären"[9]) the causes of crisis to a working-class pauper who is expropriated of any share in the dialogue situation. The setting of "die erwachsenen," again, is a local parent's meeting that stages the chastisement of a mother blamed for infusing her child with an excessive scientific panic that slowly spreads to the entire school. All the while, the accusers increasingly project their own paranoid fantasies

6 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 77.
7 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 14–15.
8 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 53
9 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 62.

onto the pupils who appear more and more alien to their seniors as they end up being targeted as enemies of the state: "innere[] feinde."[10] "das recherchegespenst" takes us to the global sites of humanitarian aid following an aspiring reporter who navigates the cognitive disjunctions of neo-colonial class relations and the economic compulsions of investigative journalism. The piece concludes in the disappearance of the narrating "ich" on the airport of Tashkent, leaving behind a convoluted research material unapt to be re-arranged into a publishable news story. "wilde jagd" reflects on the predicament of a rescued kidnap victim – marking parallels to the case of Natascha Kampusch – chased at every turn by a voyeuristic crowd which desires to participate in the media attention only to end up accusing the escapee of the very sensation mongering it displays. Ultimately, "deutschlandfunk" relays a radio discussion on an undefined crisis event, engaging in a popular exercise of normalization of the incident that by and by turns antagonistic against the so-called "hinterbliebenen"[11] who are targeted as an obstacle to the return to workaday life as they impede a clear break with the past. In the final stages of the text, this logic is exacerbated. The focus shifts to a hospital patient listening to a talk show wherein a Social-Darwinist consensus takes hold which argues that the sick should make way for the healthy so that economic life could continue.

It can be gathered from this short overview that *die alarmbereiten* constitutes at the most basic level a negotiation of the discourses of emergency that unfold in response to the manifold crises of the early 21st century. Indeed, the key focus of "wilde jagd" is the representation of the wholly economized language whereby the various figures in the text lay claim to the traumatic experience of the narrator:

> sie mache mir mit ihrem hiersein ein angebot. sie sei für mich da, sie stehe sozusagen auf meiner imaginären mitarbeiterliste, ich könne das als dienstleistung verstehen, was sie mache, das sei ja ein service für mich.[12]

10 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 90.
11 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 186.
12 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 137.

This passage is telling. It succinctly showcases the "micro-economic mode"[13] through which the discursive fields traversed in the volume are articulated. Superimposing the notion of a business proposition with a strange incursion of the third-person singular into the direct speech of the "ich," the quote pinpoints the unequal transactions between 3rd and 1st person narrators that characterize the various stories. Direct speech in *die alarmbereiten* is not employed to exercise agency. Instead, it acts as a conduit for the encroaching monologue of a "sie" that expropriates the voice of the "ich." In the case of "wilde jagd," this hostile dynamic redoubles in literary form the subtle threat expressed in the "angebot" that the "ich" cannot refuse – indexing the "punitive futurity"[14] under which most discourse is placed in the volume. In tracing the historical content sedimented in the vernacular of risk, that is, the set pieces at once act out the power relations encoded in the language that helps inscribe the order of crisis-management. Compared to our previous readings, they move from an aesthetic of irresistible capitalist recuperation to a mode of representation in which the subject itself – inflected by a highly conflict-ridden verbal exchange – becomes the playground of structural adjustment. It is precisely for this purpose that *die alarmbereiten* turns to language as an object of analysis and material of representation.[15]

As such, *die alarmbereiten* can be contextualized at the edge of a broader trend in German literature which has taken it upon itself "[d]ie Poesie dort [zu] suchen, wo sie niemand sonst finden will"[16] as Ernst Wilhelm Händler programmatically professes in his corporate novel *Wenn wir sterben* (2002). Her writing fits into a range of texts emerging at the turn of the century that propose to tap into the "irrational exuberance" of the dot-com boom and the New Economy as a novel liter-

13 Jane Elliott. *The Microeconomic Mode.* New York: Columbia University Press. 1.
14 Jane Elliott. "Punitive Futurity and Speculative Time." *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*. 8.
15 See also Andreas Stuhlmann. "'kleine textmonster': Zu Kathrin Rögglas poetischem Verfahren." *Kathrin Röggla*. Iuditha Balint, Tanja Nusser, Rolf Parr (Eds.), München: edition text+kritik. 87; Michael Navratil. "Einspruch ohne Abbildung. Zur doppelten Diskursivität von Kathrin Rögglas Dokumentarismus." *Kathrin Röggla*. Iuditha Balint, Tanja Nusser, Rolf Parr (Eds.), München: edition text+kritik. 155.
16 Ernst Wilhelm Händler. *Wenn wir sterben*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Verlag. 5 [unpaginated].

ary resource. Examples include Urs Widmer's *Top Dogs* (1996), Georg M. Oswald's *Alles, was zählt* (2000), Rainer Merkel's *Das Jahr der Wunder* (2001), John von Düffel's *EGO* (2001), or Rolf Hochhut's *McKinsey kommt* (2004). But also Terézia Mora's *Der Einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent* (2009) and Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns* (2009), written in the vicinities of the Lehman Brothers crash in 2008, are still tied to this literary moment.[17] The same can be said about her 2004 *wir schlafen nicht* which provides a milieu study of business consultancy that unfolds via the distorted re-presentation of the managerial jargon spoken by her interlocutors. Based on interviews, Röggla's docu-novel, then, links up with the documentary literature of the 1960s-70s such as Erika Runge's *Bottropper Protokolle*. But if the latter proposed to lend expression to the silenced vernacular of the industrial working-class, Röggla's new documentary prose rather tries to account for the excess in language characteristic of the so-called New Economy.[18] In that vein, she at once turns to the neo-avant-gardist tradition of "Spracharbeit" exemplified by the Vienna Group. Concerned with an expanding discourse of economics, that is, Röggla's writing is marked by an attempt at "sounding out the basic structure of language"[19] in a historical context marked by an endemic inability to escape the logic of capital.[20]

17 See also Christoph Deupmann. "Narrating (New) Economy. Literatur und Wirtschaft um 2000." *Literatur der Jahrtausendwende. Themen, Schreibverfahren und Buchmarkt um 2000*. Evi Zemanek and Susanne Krones (Eds.). Bielefeld: transcript verlag. 151–161; Sandra Pott. "Wirtschaft in Literatur. Ökonomische Subjekte im Wirtschaftsroman der Gegenwart." *KulturPoetik* 4:2. 202–217.

18 See also Daniel Neumann. "Dokumentarliteratur Revisited – Arbeitsliteratur als Reiseberichte einer unterschlagenen Wirklichkeit und dialektischer Öffentlichkeitstheorie und -praxis." *Literatur und Arbeit*, Vid Stevanovič et al (Ed.). Berlin: Frank & Timme. 123. Neumann argues that the technique of documentation deployed, here, does not hope to organize a disparate social experience but rather turns the disorganization of proletarian worlds itself into a poetic principle. Alienation is not supposed to be dissolved but elevated into a stylistic precept.

19 Walter Höllerer. "Der Autor, die Sprache des Alltags und die Sprache des Kalküls." *Akzente* 14:3. 213; Translation cited from: Robert Stockhammer. "'We shall therefore never write about what took place or did not take place in may.' Politics of Literature, '67 vs '68." *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. 5.

20 See also Kathrin Röggla. "Deckerzählung." *Make it Real. Für einen Strukturalen Realismus*. Stephan Kammer and Karin Krauthausen (Eds.). Zürich: Diaphanes. 230.

In *die alarmbereiten*, now, this merger of language critique and documentary method is updated to reflect on the dominant crisis discourses of the twenty-first century. True, there is no direct paratextual indication that the volume is based on interviews or some kind of field research. However, the anthology is surrounded by a vast metatextual apparatus that investigates in a journalistic or quasi-ethnographic manner the apparatus of crisis-management: e. g., the ZDF reportage *Die bewegliche Zukunft - Eine Reise ins Risikomanagement*, the essay *Beitrag zu einem kleinen Wachstumsmarathon* (2013) wherein Röggla escorts a risk manager, or the play *draußen tobt die dunkelziffer* (2013) which is based on interlocutions with debt counsellors and defaulters. The motives and issues broached in *die alarmbereiten* recur in numerous other texts that precede or postdate the individual pieces making up the volume. Reworking her own literary material in different genres and media, Röggla tracks what she calls a "löcherstopfsystem" in which the plugging of potentially calamitous liquidity gaps ("eine art permanenter interner kreditunfall"[21]) coincides with the plugging of plot holes in the "()hole complex" of the world economy. Corresponding to the last resort credits that shore up current capitalism, Röggla proposes to identify in contemporary emergency discourses something like last resort narratives that promise to keep the catastrophic contingencies of the 21st century within narratable bounds.

Against this backdrop, the short-stories collected in the anthology take us *in medias res* to some of the key discursive arenas of present-day crisis-management: from a crisis cabinet or an economic seminar to humanitarian reporting and a nationwide talk show broadcast. Narrated across a series of strangely monological set pieces that feature no real closure but also share no obvious narrative interconnection, *die alarmbereiten* filters out the common nexus of these emergency settings by dissecting the shared language of risk that connects them. The short-stories do not focus on immediate catastrophic incidents as is the case in conventional disaster plots with their focus on the actions and concrete survival strategies of a set of main characters. Instead, the texts redirect literary attention to the discourses that manage and

21 Röggla, "draußen tobt die dunkelziffer," 272.

mediate the overlapping emergencies of the present. As Nathalie Moser puts it, *die alarmbereiten* eludes the traditional genre of disaster narratives all while pointing toward that form's problematic promise to story catastrophic events within familiar narrative patterns.[22] The pieces, hence, unfold as "language about language."[23] Albeit, in this, the referential capacities of literature are not emptied out. Rather, it is precisely the turn to the forms of (rhetorical) mediation at work in crisis-management that holds the disparate contexts visited across the volume together instead of missing the bigger picture by getting lost in immediacies.

Under this aspect, Röggla gives another twist to the neo-avant-gardist notion of "Spracharbeit" by turning to the actual linguistic performance of (self-declared) risk experts, which it, then, redacts – similar to the linguistic labour practiced in New-economic industries – "as a kind of material medium […], to which one applies a series of techniques or processes: rearranging, sorting, cataloguing, parsing, transcribing, excerpting."[24] Her writing program works upon the language(s) of crisis-management as the subject-matter of representation, which it compels to bring forward new or hidden meanings by re-arranging it and creating new semantic connections. In this chapter, then, I will continue my interest in the literary representation of capital's "techniques of charting." My concern will be a realism of failed (narrative) containments articulated in a highly stylized prose whose rhetorical and grammatical finesse at creating an effect of depersonalization I want to bring forward. In a first instance, therefore, I propose to establish the linkage between language and labour in Röggla's writing. Here, the Hegel quote prefacing this chapter will serve as a heuristic in that speech in *die alarmbereiten* functions as an expression "in which the

22 Cf. Nathalie Moser. "Echtzeit-Fiktion." *Kathrin Röggla*. Iudita Balint, Tanja Nusser and Rolf Parr (Eds.). München (2017): edition text+kritik. 164.

23 J. Hillis Miller. *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 102. Miller is interesting for departing from the general criticism of "realism" cultivated in the Yale School as he argues that realism does not engage in the obfuscation of its own rhetoricity – as if it were "a mimesis in language of something nonverbal" – but exactly reflects that "[t]he social world is already a written record or memorial."

24 Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, 21.

individual no longer keeps and possesses himself within himself."[25] In the communication situations staged across the volume, it is as if a sort of surplus labour were exacted from the enunciating subjects that "lets the inner get completely outside of [them], leaving it to the mercy of something other than [themselves]."[26] As I will elaborate, Röggla, thus, crafts a prose that is well and truly dividualized.

1 "teilzeitpaniken" & "vollzeitpaniken": Unfree Direct Discourse in *die alarmbereiten*

> und wer müsse dann die konkretion absitzen?
>
> — Röggla, "recherchegespenst," 117.

Content-wise the conflation of language and labour in *die alarmbereiten* is notably embodied in the oscillation between "panics" of every kind such as in the following sequence: "die grundschulpanik, die kleinkindpanik, die sozial- und leistungspanik."[27] Switching between anxieties of the school system and child education, the pressures of a high-performance work culture and the ensuing phobias of the social, this juxtaposition features the multifaceted areas of contemporary life across which Röggla proposes to trace the expansive logic of risk-management. This sense of delimitation becomes even more manifest, when by way of a wordplay – talking about "teilzeitpaniken" and even "vollzeitpaniken"[28] – panic is ultimately brought into a strange relationship with the contemporary shape of the labour market, designating it not only as a particular set of attitudes to compounding crises but as expressive of the prevalent working culture with its flexible timetables and forms of value extraction based in the erosion of workplace boundaries. Exercised as a part-time or even full-time job, then, the (linguistic) labour of "pan-

25 G. W. F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A. V. Miller (Transl.) Oxford: Oxford University Press. 187.
26 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 187.
27 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 73.
28 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 73.

ic"[29] exacts a form of surplus from Röggla's anxious characters whose anguished speech acts give rise to the "metastable states"[30] formed by and in these set pieces.

In a first instance, the depersonalized prose thusly crafted shows itself in a poetics of hearsay – manifesting in the shape of informational overflow – where a depersonalized "man," the generic pronoun *par excellence* in German grammar, takes over the narrative in an authorless discourse of risk whose efficiency stands in stark contrast to its lack of support.[31] Unfolding around volatile exclamations such as "man könne nur hoffen," "man höre so vieles," or "man habe informationen ja nur aus zweiter hand,"[32] Röggla's collection traverses a multiplicity of catastrophes that are refracted through an ever-expanding series of signifiers which morph from one panic into another and, eventually, conflate in the image of an overarching "meta-crisis"[33] that traverses and interweaves them all. More fundamentally, though, the depersonalized prose of *die alarmbereiten* manifests in a strange incursion of 3rd person agentive perspective into 1st person narration. One example from "die ansprechbare" might serve to illustrate this alienating play of pronouns that undermines the fantasy of immediate self-expression adhering the first-person narration of most autofiction. Alas, in the very first sentence we already encounter an "ich" that is fundamentally divided: "ich solle erstmal luft holen."[34] In the German original it is entirely unclear whether the "ich" in question is a mere object of address or uttering

29 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. *Precarious Rhapsody. Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. Arianna Bove et al. (Transl.). London: Minor Compositions. 44. Playing on the etymology of the word, Berardi notes the transition of "panic" into a widespread syndrome located at the edge of the body and the social, which he leads back to the intensification of labour in an ever-accelerating info-sphere. Overloaded by the overproduction of what he has termed "semio-capital" – the full integration of linguistic labour into capital valorization by means of informational technologies – available attention spans are exhausted by these psychic stimulations. Social actors are induced by a neuro-pathological anxiety that sticks to everything, just like in Greek mythology "Pan used to be the god of nature, the god of totality" who symbolized "the relationship between man and nature."
30 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5.
31 European Graduate School Video Lectures. *"Mladen Dolar – "Gossip, Rumors, and Philosophy" – 2019–06–10" Youtube*. 13 November 2019.
32 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 37, 49, 85.
33 Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe*, 8.
34 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 29.

these words itself. Today, the first-person singular is understood as the grammatical form through which a subject articulates itself by speaking in its own name. Yet, it is exactly this presupposition which is subverted in this passage. The narrating I rather reports a monologue that is held about itself, bracketing exactly those sentence parts respectively syntactic constituents that would indicate that someone else suggested to the "ich" to draw a breath (e. g., "[sie sagt,] ich solle erstmal luft holen").[35] From this ensues an unsettling effect: the combination of indirect speech with the first-person singular generates a grammatical subject that is "not master in its own house"[36] but merely protocols an imposed, alien monologue. Even if the conversation is relayed to readers via the detour of a narrating I, then, the narrator appears as a kind of empty place that exists only insofar it is spoken to or for. The title of the second short-story in the volume puts this precarious ontological status of the "ich" most succinctly: "die ansprechbare." In this text fragment, readers attend to an extended but one-sided telephone conversation in which the third-person perspective embarks on a string of monologues about a variety of ecological transformations. Meanwhile, the narrating I is slowly transfigured into a spectral appearance ("telefongespenst") that has withered away into a mere acoustic feedback signal ("eine art sprachrückkopplung, ein akustischer rest").[37] Ultimately, it appears to live on only in the panics that it triggers ("das nur in den reaktionen der anderen lebte, in den paniken, die ich auslöste").[38] As the subject is verbally annulled, then, it takes shape but as the hearsay of external ascriptions that seem to leave no room for reciprocity.

In a similar vein, the title of the piece "die zuseher" marks out the peculiar status of its characters as passive and generally motionless recipients, whereas the title "der übersetzer" circles around an activity

35 Cf. Robert Stockhammer, Fabienne Imlinger, Kathrin Röggla. "ob das jetzt das interview sei? 'ist das jetzt das interview,' um das gebeten worden sei?" *LMUcast* [Discussion]. 00:26:39.007 – 00:28:48.072 https://cast.itunes.uni-muenchen.de/clips/pqetVmqrf5/vod/online.html [last accessed 06.10.2023].

36 Sigmund Freud. "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis." *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVII. "An Infantile Neurosis" and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press. 140.

37 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 50.

38 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 50.

that appears merely supplementary to a linguistic utterance prior to it. Anticipating the depersonalization of speech put into effect in Röggla's plays, these nominalized verbs or adjectives – "zusehen," "ansprechbar," "übersetzen" – bring to the fore an absence of dialogue or character interaction and instead emphasize the mediatedness of the ensuing dramaturgic arc. Röggla's texts do not delineate a model of action for human figures. Instead, it is sentences that take the stage of literary representation to pick up an iconic quote from the Wiener Gruppe ("verschiedene sätze treten auf"[39] taken from Konrad Bayer's *der stein der weisen*). It is consequently rather language itself – appearing as an impersonal agency – that induces a textual dynamic in the first place. Emptied of any inner motivation or conflict that might serve as a dramatic motor, the "protagonists" depicted in the short-story compilation by contrast have little to no impact on the outcome of the depicted scenario. In this sense, it is more adequate to say that the set pieces do not merely start *in medias res*, in the middle of events or things, but are irreducibly positioned *in media,* in the middle of concatenating linguistic chains.

This sense of the fundamental mediatedness of the narrated content is further underscored by the dominant manner of speaking in the volume, namely the *Konjunktivform* as it is called in German.[40] In sharp contrast to disaster blockbusters with their fictions of catastrophic immediacy,[41] the subjunctive rather marks the functional, grammatical counterpart to the speculative language of risk capital. In its relation to the unreal or possible, expressed in the terms of indirect discourse, the conjunctive mood establishes rumour or speculation as the key mode of action in Röggla's texts. The literary personnel engage in constantly failing exercises of "pattern recognition" (as in Hayek's coinage and Gibson's treatment of the term) to make sense of the crisis signals traversing these texts. It is true that Röggla's writing at times feigns a certain documentary impulse by invoking, such as in "die zuse-

39 Konrad Bayer. *der stein der weisen*. Berlin: Wolfgang Fietkau Verlag. 166.
40 Cf. Christian Kremer. *Milieu und Performativität. Deutsche Gegenwartsprosa von John von Düffel, Georg M. Oswald und Kathrin Röggla*. Marburg: Tectum. 116.
41 Cf. Moser, "Echtzeit-Fiktion," 164.

her," the protocol as a paradigmatic medium of documentation.[42] But even here speculation takes the place of mere documentation in that the supposed risk-managers are clueless about preceding or future events, which, eventually, ushers in a peculiarly conflictual representation of time.[43] The mode of the scenario, hence, again and again collides with the documentary pretences of the protocol.[44] Whereas the form of the protocol implies a certain fiction of real-time narration or immediacy, issuing from the implied "co-presence"[45] of the minute keeper to the testified events – further emphasized by the clustered recurrence of temporal adverbs such as "jetzt," "gleich," or "wirklich"[46] – the scenario technique writes out the functional overdetermination of the present by ephemeral, speculative futures. As Eva Horn has observed, the textual form of the "scenario" maps the present as a probability space submitted to speculative futures and contingency plans that reflexively act back upon the setting of risk assessment.[47] The short-story volume, thus, works on themes and problems of literary form negotiated in Röggla's earlier and later work such as *really ground zero* (2001), *wir schlafen nicht* (2004), *die unvermeidlichen* (2013), or *draußen tobt die dunkelziffer* (2013) that alternately engage the representation of informational oversaturation, the inverted temporalities of risk capital and credit debt but also the prognostic tools of counter-terrorism. Yet, while these are all characterized to a greater or lesser extent by Röggla's trademark usage of the subjunctive, *die alarmbereiten* marks the most thorough investigation of the subjunctive as the secret grammatical mood underlying

42 Cf. Moser, "Echtzeit-Fiktion," 166.

43 Cf. Moser, "Echtzeit-Fiktion," 162, 169.

44 See also Michael Navratil. *Kontrafaktik der Gegenwart. Politisches Schreiben als Realitätsvariation bei Christian Kracht, Kathrin Röggla, Juli Zeh und Leif Brandt*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter. 388, 418. Navratil interepretes *wir schlafen nicht* as "formale Kontrafaktik" insofar the reality editing takes place on the level of form rather than by way of content manipulation. The aesthetic wager of this quasi-documentary novel consists in leaving readers in the dark concerning its degree of artificiality. There is a constant re-negotiation of the fictional contract between reader and author.

45 Michael Niehaus and Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa. "Textsorte Protokoll. Ein Aufriss." *Das Protokoll. Kulturelle Funktionen einer Textsorte*. Michael Niehaus and Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa (Eds.). Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang. 8.

46 Cf. Moser, "Echtzeit-Fiktion," 176.

47 Horn, The Future as Catastrophe, 17–19.

the reality models of contemporary capitalism. If in her other work the subjunctive competes with alternative modes of speech, in the stories summarized above the *Konjkutivform* has been "set free." That is, the struggle between direct and indirect speech has been more or less resolved in her 2010 short-story volume. Only isolated, highly precarious instances of direct speech remain, while a kind of free indirect speech, articulated in the grammatical modality of the subjunctive, has turned into the dominant mode of expression.

Karin Krauthausen has put this in a particularly salient manner. The "*verba dicendi et sentiendi*" that indicate a tense shift and demark reported from direct speech are absent in the use of the subjunctive in *die alarmbereiten*.[48] That way, the *Konjunktivform* is released from the grammatical framework of the indicative mood, which in common parlance would mark out the beginning and end of subjunctive speech as a special or exceptional type of communication. The eerie sensation of Röggla's depersonalized prose is generated precisely by cutting this kind of grammatical framing from narration (e. g., "[sie sagt,] ich solle"), whereby a fundamental lack is introduced: "there is nothing present when there should be something."[49] But at once there is something – a surplus – in the voice of the "ich" where there should be nothing. In a "failure of absence,"[50] 3rd person narration ruminates in the speech of the narrating I. As such an absent clause, it poses a fundamental enigma of agency. Narration is haunted by the indices of a grammatical agency which compels syntax from within without being named as such.[51]

48 Karin Krauthausen. "Wette auf die Wirklichkeit. Erzählkalkül in *die ansprechbare* und *Der Wiedereintritt in die Geschichte I* von Kathrin Röggla." *Literatur im Ausnahmezustand. Beiträge zum Werk Kathrin Rögglas*. Friedhelm Marx and Julia Schöll (Eds.), Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann. 166–167.

49 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 61.

50 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 63.

51 Roland Barthes. "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press. 14. Quoted in Kathrin Röggla. "Zukunft als Literarische Ressource." *Texte. Bühne. Äther. Kathrin Röggla*. https://www.kathrin-roeggla.de/meta/zuerich-2016-1. [last accessed 10.01.2022]. The uncertainty whether one deals with a case of reported or direct speech introduces a temporal disjunction. The subjunctive style in *die alarmbereiten* has a peculiar performative character. By its oral nature, it entertains an idiosyncratic relation to the "presence of the speech-act [*énonciation*]," as claims Röggla as per Barthes. This, though, stands in stark contrast to the way the discourse of the "ich" presents itself as reported speech, that is, the playback of past (direct) speech.

On the face of it, then, these short-stories relate in indirect speech the second-hand opinions of proxy characters such as a parent representative talking in monologues, a self-proclaimed personal secretary, a brother declaring himself the PR manager of his sister's journalistic research, a seat neighbour in a remedial course for financial matters, paparazzi, or voyeuristic strangers. In contrast, those that are being spoken for are relatives of disaster victims, hospital patients, residents of working-class areas, precariously employed journalists, suicided Indian peasants, a kidnapped girl escaped from her captor, children declared enemies of the state, and other vulnerable populations. By traversing in a quasi-episodical manner the operational areas of contemporary languages of crisis-management, *die alarmbereiten* cuts across various social strata whose respective positions in the existing power structure seem to correspond with the internal divisions of these texts. The lacking agency of Röggla's voided narrators appears to repeat the exclusionary and stratifying processes set in motion by the neoliberal regime of structural adjustment. Insofar the non-protagonists of *die alarmbereiten* can, then, be characterized as "language-samples,"[52] the socio-historical content refracted by the speech situation must be accounted for. In Röggla's work, that is, the linguistic sign always remains a social interaction that encodes an ensemble of social relations, which, though, is (deliberately) obscured by the grammatical set-up of the prose pieces. Under this aspect, the antagonistic dialectic formalized in the communication structure of *die alarmbereiten* takes on a more double-edged character.

As speech is duplicated in a combination of indirect discourse and first-person singular, agency can neither be ascribed to the narrating I *nor* its interlocutors, even if the latter at first seem to engage in an encroaching monologue. Indirect speech itself is re-doubled in an uneven exchange wherein 1st and 3rd person perspective form a relation of co-dependency from which neither can break free. Be it in grammatical or dramaturgical terms, both are inextricably linked.[53] For example,

52 Karin Krauthausen. "Gespräche mit Untoten: das konjunktivische Interview in Kathrin Rögglas Roman 'wir schlafen nicht.'" *Schreibweisen, Poetologien. Vol. 2: Zeitgenössische österreichische Literatur von Frauen*. Hilde Kernmayer (Ed.). Wien: Milena-Verlag.," 200. It reads "Sprach-Samples" in the German original.
53 Krauthausen, "Wette auf die Wirklichkeit," 165.

in the short story "die ansprechbare," the I's mode of speech is entirely derivative respectively parasitic on the discourse of her interlocutor. Nevertheless, the latter, too, does not manage to report her rant in direct speech despite appearing as the active part in the depicted scene. Instead, she is just as well dependent on the auxiliary language service of the first-person narrator to assume an ephemeral identity in the text. Strictly speaking, there is no stable or autonomous speaker position. Yet, the linguistic agency of the "ich" – that gives way to the appearance of 3rd person perspective in the first place – constantly recedes into oblivion in the asymmetries of indirect speech, thereby creating the semblance of 3rd person narration as an independent point of view that makes the conversation move forward.

In this sense – playing on the technique of free indirect discourse – the literary personnel recruited into the narrative act could be said to perform a kind of "free indirect labor"[54] that enacts on the level of form the divisions of labour sustaining crisis-management. Just like Röggla's texts recombine the semiotic material from crisis discourses all over, they temporarily recruit the personnel forming the professional support system of these risk trades into literary representation as precarious and

54 Jasper Bernes. "John Ashbery's Free Indirect Labor." *Modern Language Quarterly* 74:4. 526–527, 530–533. Building on a reading of Ashbery's *The Instruction Manual* (1956), Bernes introduces the formula of "free indirect labor" to identify a certain play with "pronominal shifts" that relates in a quite novelistic manner the lyrical potentials of free indirect discourse to the intersubjective relations of the "postwar workplace." Bernes, thereby, also proposes to historicize Deleuze/Guattari's transcendental notion of free indirect discourse, which they consider at the basis of all language, preceding the individuation of language into direct discourse. By contrast, Bernes argues that their linguistics has a historical index. It is modelled after "the indeterminate class position of the white-collar worker who is both commander and commanded, the speaking mouth and its object. Exploring this position, [Ashbery's] poems in the collection take on a peculiar mixture of obedience, insubordination, and authority." They reflect "the administrative language coursing through capitalist firms, a social ventriloquism through which white-collar workers simultaneously speak and are spoken for. […]. Free indirect discourse, in this way, is a product of struggle between represented and representing voices. The swarm of indirect discourse that forms the preindividual 'plane of consistency' is not originary […] but the product of the abstractive, 'deterritorializing' machine of history and its production of new subjects and new class relations in capitalism. […] As corporations grow in size and scope, requiring more elaborate systems of administration, control, and accounting, management becomes more difficult to locate in a particular person, and the source of particular commands becomes more difficult to trace."

exchangeable narrative mechanisms. In that regard, the stage directions prefacing Röggla's *draußen tobt die dunkelziffer* provide a good reference point, as they make the analogy between labour and the depersonalization of human figures into modulable linguistic mechanisms most explicit. Insisting on the notion of a theatrical "personal,"[55] they suggest treating the ensemble of characters joined together in the scenes (that can be performed in random order) in terms of gig workers that can be plugged in and out of narration at will. Equally conceivable as ("vorstellbar als") market leaders ("weltmarktführer"), bankruptcy trustees ("insolvenzverwalter"), unemployed people ("arbeitslose"), debt collectors ("inkassopersonal"), welfare recipients ("sozialhilfe-menschen") and so forth,[56] these figures are inserted into shapeshifting literary tableaux wherein they are fractalized into "interchangeable producer[s] of micro-fragments" in the "recombinant semiosis"[57] of crisis-management. Similarly, *die alarmbereiten* abstracts from biographical particulars or personal idiosyncrasies. Instead, the literary personnel – from EU policymakers through investment bankers to self-declared experts – mirrors the exchangeable ensemble cast of the 21st century's spectacle of crisis. One could therefore propose a transcoding of literary and economic terminology to render more precisely the specificity of the labour relations that find themselves refracted here in literary form. For the incursion of 3rd person narration into the discourse of 1st person narration performed in the peculiar free indirect discourse of *die alarmbereiten* does, indeed, re-enact the precarious employment conditions of today's economy. Perhaps more precisely, then, the formalistic stress test that Röggla subjects free indirect discourse to can be said to culminate in a mode of unfree direct speech. In the hopelessly unequal transaction between 1st and 3rd person, it is as if the latter's agentive perspective were outsourced to the narrating I which appears sub-contracted into the narrative act to speak in the place and hence the alien voice of the "sie" or "er."

55 Röggla: "dunkelziffer," 233.
56 Röggla: "dunkelziffer," 233.
57 Cf. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. *Heroes. Mass Murder and Suicide*. London/New York. Verso. 139.

2 Prose of the Dividual: "A Universal Third Person" in Recent Literature?

> I had all the characterizations of a human being, but my depersonalization was so intense…
>
> — Ellis, *American Psycho*, 282.

> "uns umgibt mehr magie als im mittelalter!", hätte ich gerufen.
>
> — Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 44.

In the internally broken indirect speech of Röggla's set pieces, now, I propose to identify a certain re-consideration of "expressive" literature in that the first-person singular stops functioning as a figure of immediacy. When the narrators say "ich," they are not pointing at an isolated – in-dividual – entity endowed with a profound psychological depth. By uttering that pronoun, rather, they always-already index a possessed respectively dispossessed subject. As I have argued, the highly stylized prose encountered in die *alarmbereiten* hopes to mimic the divided subjectivities of today's precarious economy. To that effect, it creates a form of unfree direct speech in which precarious figurines act as mediums for a discourse of crisis-management which seizes upon their power of expression such that they almost appear invisible as speaking subjects. That said, though, the specific representation of neoliberal crisis-management probed in *die alarmbeiten* can at once be transcoded into a sort of practical literary criticism which surveys similar formal strategies tested out in response to the mutations of capitalist society in the late 20th and early 21st century. In the following, consequently, I want to place Röggla's play with 1st and 3rd person perspective in literary history so as to filter out the historical unconscious pertaining to the particular use made of free indirect style in her prose.

Indeed, according to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comments on Free Indirect Discourse* (1964), it is always-already the sign of an ideology since it tends to fetishize the discordant "linguistic levels"[58] of a language into

58 Pier Paolo Pasolini. "Comments on Free Indirect Discourse." *Heretical Empiricism*. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Transl.), Washington D. C.: New Academia Publishing. 100.

a homogenous system. In his analysis, that takes as its point of departure the development of the (Italian) novel, this is notably tied to the construction of a supposed "middle" class. Indirect free style is said to function as the vehicle of an objectification that erases social differences. Competing "jargons of a language"[59] are assimilated to the ideological expressions of a ruling class that dares not speak its name. In Moretti's study of the "laborious prose" invested in the making of the bourgeoisie, these rudimentary comments are supplemented by a long-term perspective that connects (as argued in the introduction) the procedures of bourgeois ex-nomination to the emergence of a free indirect style which creates the effect of an almost neutral narrative voice.[60] It is worth noting, however, that academic opinion has remained divided concerning the implications of this narrative strategy. Hans Robert Jauss for instance considers free indirect style to undermine cultural homogenization. The collapse of authorial narration into a polyglot novelistic prose generates "an alienating uncertainty of judgement"[61] that cannot be disambiguated into an unequivocal narrative standpoint. On the other hand, D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) recognizes in free indirect discourse a formalization of the particular mode of power of bourgeois society that operates not via monological certitude but precisely "by qualifying, canceling, endorsing, subsuming all the other voices it lets speak."[62] Moretti, similarly, speaks of a "stylistic Panopticon" as he insists that the effect of an (almost) unbiased narrative voice generated by free indirect discourse, eventually, embodies the "thoroughly socialized voice of the achieved social contract"[63] that instantiates pre-

59 Pasolini: "Free Indirect Discourse," 99. Pasolini, here, builds up on the materialist linguistics of Voloshinov.
60 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 18, 96.
61 Hans Robert Jauss. "Literary History as Challenge to Literary Theory." *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Timothy Bathi (Transl.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 43–44, 39. For Jauss this unsettling potential culminated in the *Madame Bovary* trial which exemplified the moral turmoil caused by the novel's impersonal form of narration. As the novel's uninvolved narrator withheld "moral judgement of the represented characters," it forced readers themselves to judge the status of a character's utterance. As such, the novel did not only break with readerly expectations but also had "an effect on […] social behavior."
62 D. A. Miller. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 25.
63 Moretti, *The Bourgeois,* 99, 96.

cisely the abstract universality and pluralism of the market as the novel ground of social cohesion.

When we return to Pasolini, we see that this understanding of free indirect style as a "technique of *socialization*"[64] is inscribed into a further diachronic perspective. In fact, it is envisaged as the site of a historical shift from Fordist to neoliberal capitalism that goes along with novel forms of work, a generalized commodification of social life, and new degrees of alienation, whose aesthetic ramifications make themselves felt in novelistic prose. In earlier configurations of capitalist power, the rhythm or refrain of the assembly line could still be considered "only one of many specialized jargons of a language" while "the other parts of the language [could] tranquilly enjoy their partial freedom"[65] from the capitalist logic. At the time of his writing, however, Pasolini observes the creeping ubiquity of a "technological vocabulary"[66] that epitomizes a universalization of quantitative thinking, which he associates with the externalization of Fordistic scientific management into the social fabric itself. In the process, a "zero moment"[67] seems to have been reached insofar the capacity for free indirect speech to suspend the monolingualism of profit appears cancelled. The "margin of freedom assured by the various linguistic levels," differentiating for example the patois of working-class life from the vernacular of industrial managers, is "suppressed" as the cadence of the factory is re-created in all aspects of social life.[68] Leaving aside the aesthetic solutions proposed by Pasolini to overcome this impasse, these reflections on the historical trajectory of free indirect discourse prove immensely helpful to reflect upon the mode of social organization refracted by and in Röggla's writing program. That is, the totalizing logic of risk encountered in the various short pieces as it affects all linguistic levels can be equally read as an updated reflection on the "zero moment" that has been reached in the history of free indirect style according to Pasolini.

64 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 97.
65 Pasolini: "Comments on Free Indirect Discourse," 99.
66 Pasolini: "Comments on Free Indirect Discourse," 99.
67 Pasolini: "Comments on Free Indirect Discourse," 97.
68 Pasolini: "Comments on Free Indirect Discourse," 100.

The extreme accentuation of indirect discourse in Röggla's subjunctivized style instantiates a laborious neoliberal prose that acts out the power dynamics of crisis-management. The incursion of third-person agentive perspective into the direct speech of the grammatical "ich" stages the assimilation of the world to the neoliberal rationale of the characters that assert themselves in the 3rd person singular such that there appears to be no expressiveness in *die alarmbereiten* besides the creeping vernacular risk-containment. Literary form, thus, seeks to re-enact the modes of subject(ificat)ion of contemporary emergency regimes. Negotiating on the level of explicit content the scale effects of climate change or economic crisis and the threat these pose to individual agency, Röggla's short-stories proceed to reflect on how the very language of emergency surrounding these issues re-doubles the waning of agency from societal causality in a fundamentally depersonalized grammar. In a broader sense even, the particular kind of (un)free (in) direct style characterizing these prose texts replicates what Deleuze had come to call "dividuality" in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control*: the dissembling of the subject across "masses, samples, data, markets, or '*banks*'"[69] in which it can only momentarily assume an ephemeral identity as the derivative effect of floating risk and exchange rates. In that same spirit, the subjects of Röggla's pieces only enter narration insofar they act as temporary vectors for the self-perpetuating discourse of crisis-management. As such, the unfree direct discourse of *die alarmbereiten* proves a device of depersonalization that proposes to capture the transformation of social actors into "human capital" characteristic of neoliberal control society.

That said, Röggla's work provides a prism through which some developments of recent literature can be refracted. For it must be acknowledged that the trope of language as an alien medium has been picked up frequently in the German-speaking literature of the last couple of decades. John von Düffel's stage play *Balkonszenen* (2000) for instance deploys the formal device and motive of an alien voice ("Hast du das / Hast du das gehört / Diese / So eine Stimme") that possesses the workaholic characters ("Arbeit, jedenfalls, ist die ideale Geliebte") populat-

69 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5.

ing his piece on the new libidinal investments demanded by neoliberal work culture.[70] Likewise, the job hunters depicted in Gesine Danckwart's *Täglich Brot* (2001) are said to be seized by an external power that takes hold of their vocal cords: "Das ist etwas, was meine Stimmbänder angreift."[71] For Röggla, though, a key point of reference, in that regard, is actually Don DeLillo whom she recurrently comments upon. In effect, she recognizes in the American author's 1984 *White Noise* an early engagement with the panic condition induced by a society that generates speculation bubbles and environmental risks as a matter of course.[72] As such, the novel precipitates the future-is-now approach that culminates in *Cosmopolis*. As a point of fact, *White Noise* is lined with financial technologies which assume key literary functions that are crucially juxtaposed to the provincial undertones of the campus novel which are simultaneously evoked. Across the text, the seeming anonymity of family life is transcoded into a "whole data profile"[73] as the devices of personal banking (ATMs, barcodes, credit cards) start to act at once as narrative devices.[74] In this sense, the novel anticipates the data screens and money-like surfaces that serve as background in *Cosmopolis*, where they do not only mediate the access of the multibillion narrator to financial abstraction and organize his circulation through the capitalist metropolis but precisely, thereby, drive the text forward.

One might also think of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) in which similarly the agency of first-person narration recedes against the backdrop of increasingly abstract environments. Here, it is especially the cash machine – dubbed "my automated teller"[75] by the homicidal protagonist Patrick Bateman – that mediates the foray of finance into everyday life. It is intimately connected to Bateman's urge to "fit in" articulated throughout the novel. As a matter of fact, despite working as an investment banker, the ATM ("automated teller machine") represents

70 John von Düffel. *Balkonszenen*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Theater Verlag. 14, 16.
71 Gesine Danckwart. *Täglich Brot*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag. 8.
72 Kathrin Röggla. *das stottern des realismus. fiktion und fingiertes, ironie und kritik*. Paderborn: Universitätsreden. 15ff.
73 Don DeLillo. *White Noise*. New York: Viking Press. 140.
74 La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 34.
75 Bret Easton Ellis. *American Psycho*. London: Continuum. 81.

Bateman's foremost encounter with financial abstraction in the novel. Visits to ATMs are frequently recounted. In that sense, the cash machine serves as a mental map for the narrator. But as such a navigational tool it also is as if the ATM "tells" him to commit these murders.[76] At times, narration seems almost outsourced to these electronic banking outlets, which hence do not only act as financial service providers but narrative servomechanisms that tell in Bateman's stead when he is – according to himself – "simply not there."[77]

Comparably, *White Noise* is interspersed with textual breaks wherein the voice of the narrator Jack Gladney is temporarily seized by the "soundscape"[78] of capitalist markets that is detached from the broader plot and remains uncommented on (e.g., "MasterCard, Visa, American Express"[79]). Narration seems to freeze at the utterance of brand names like "Toyota Celica:" "near-nonsense words" which nevertheless strike first-person perspective with a sense "of splendid transcendence" such that it cannot but turn into a conduit for "some TV voice."[80] In these moments, it is as if he were "possessed, a mere medium who speaks"[81] the language of commodities.[82] If *Cosmopolis* plays with a sort

76 Ellis, *American Psycho*, 399. Towards the end, this split in Bateman's personality is replicated in the takeover of narration by an external point-of-view. Pursued by the police, Bateman hallucinates watching himself from the non-human perspective of a camera lens. In these pages, he refers to himself in the third person as if he were the star of an action movie. Yet, this escape into a fictional world where individual action matters, eventually proves a mirage: "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT." That sense, thus, marks the final collapse of the figment of personal choice which Bateman brutally holds on to in a ruthless attempt to reconcile the neoliberal promise of uniqueness with the reality of generalized exchangeability in a fully-marketized society.

77 Ellis, *American Psycho*, 367; See also La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 133.

78 Justin St. Clair. *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature*. London/New York: Routledge. 3–8.

79 DeLillo: *White Noise*, 100.

80 DeLillo, *White Noise*, 155.

81 Frank Lentricchia. "Tales of the Electronic Tribe." *New Essays on White Noise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 102.

82 See also Joshua Clover. "'A Form Adequate to History': Toward a New Marxist Poetics." *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 37. 340–341, 325; Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 101, 96. Can we not, during the same period, see a similar brand poetics emerge in the ideology-critique of Slavoj Žižek. Joshua Clover, at any rate, feels that the entire notion of the "point de capiton," so central to the *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), "is cola-stained." In Žižek's psychoanalytically inflected theory, the *point de capiton* is the point in which the meaning of a signifying chain is fixed (as an arbitrary sign assumes the

of third-person technique that "resembles an unusually objectified form of first-person"[83] narration, then *White Noise* is a first-person novel that aspires towards a "universal third person."[84] Gladney styles himself from the first page on as "witness[ing]" a "spectacle"[85] of commodity masses. In fact, the novel sets off with a narrative feint that precisely unsettles the distinction between subject- and object-position. *White Noise* commences with the description of a crowd of students arriving at their new campus who are metonymically presented via the consumer goods that they carry with them: from "personal computers" to "birth control pills."[86] Yet, throughout this first paragraph, there is no intervention by a first-person agentive perspective. Instead, the text feigns a third-person narration. But just like that, in the second section, narrative voice switches to a first-person who testifies to this impres-

role of a master-signifier) and thus the point through which the subject is anchored in the ideological order. In his own discourse, the turn to Cola assumes a similar function. To illustrate his critique of ideology, Žižek seems to require the found signifier of the "American commodity of commodities," that is, precisely "the particular thing" – a soft drink – "that has most successfully universalized itself." For his part, Clover therefore reads the Slovenian philosopher in line with the "poetic velocity" encountered in the poems of Frank O'Hara or Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, who, coincidentally, are often considered pioneers of *Popliteratur*. One might note here that Žižek's own style is characterized by an extraordinary speed. His recombinant theoretical prose acts as a reading-machine that 'works through' a seemingly discontinuous array of cultural and theoretical production. Taken alone his reflections on individual artefacts seem random or disconnected, giving a bewildering sense of radical difference. Yet, in the way these 'intertexts' – taken from philosophical history just like Hollywood cinema – are put in a new relationship, Žižek's idiosyncratic style purports to discern the 'social link' that unconsciously haunts them. It must hence be remarked that the American-Coca-Cola, despite its prominent explanatory role, only figures among a series of "mass-media symbols" in Žižek. That is, it marks but a temporary *capitonnage* in a wider concatenation of commodity signs. This emphasis is important since his key insight is not that "Coca-Cola 'connotes' a certain ideological experience of America," it is not "exemplary of 'America' as a sociological and ideological unity," but rather the exchange relations between these commodities "*are* it." Žižek: "They constitute, in their internal relations, that unity which is all the more real for being an appearance – for within the inverted realm of ideology, seeming is the pure form of being." The turn to the language of commodities, then, offers less a map of social relations as it accounts for the social cartographies provided by the world of brands itself, that is, the way the relation between commodity signs seemingly replaces the relation between social actors.

83 Shonkwiler: *The Financial Imaginary*, 83.

84 Lentricchia, "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," 88.

85 DeLillo, *White Noise*, 3

86 DeLillo, *White Noise*, 3.

sionistic commodity flow without, however, changing something about the affectless tone deployed in the first paragraph. Hence, in the end, the novel makes usage of an objectified subject technique through which the "white noise" of the market emerges as a hidden (novelistic) agency. It is the "operatic chaos" of capitalist alienation that appears active, while humans are "trudging" or "walking across wasted landscapes" like "a tragic army of the dispossessed."[87]

The sceneries of the personal depicted in DeLillo's or Ellis's writing are steadily permeated by indices of abstraction. They do not conceal social structures in sentimentalization. In vein of the trope of a science-fictionalized reality popularized in cyberpunk discourse, "the personal has rather been *depersonalized*"[88] in these writing programs. Similar to the zombified protagonists of *Neuromancer*, then, Bateman and Gladney appear hardwired into the "threats and thrills" of a techno-economic environment wholly beyond their control. In this sense, both *American Psycho* and *White Noise* articulate the "dream of entering a *third person* singular"[89] that oscillates between the intimate and the impersonal as narrative perspective is eerily placed at the edges of the financial construct. The novelistic prose of both authors follows the intrusion of the financial industry into the domain of so-called Personal Banking. If key Wall Street firms at the turn of the 1980s announced – in line with neoliberal micro-economics – that they intended to "open a branch in your home or office,"[90] then the likes of Ellis and DeLillo trace the becoming-intimate of stock-exchange all while narration is infected by the creeping sense that these financial abstractions have become "too complicated or complex to explain either to lay people or, increasingly, to the financial community in which the transactions originated."[91]

Röggla, for her part, reads the dividual subjects who emerge in this kind of fiction as hypochondriac characters that bring forward, in an especially pointed way, a social phenomenology ("gesellschaftsphänom-

87 DeLillo, *White Noise*, 119, 127.
88 La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 39.
89 Douglas Keesey. 1993. *Don DeLillo*. New York: Twayne Publishers. 16.
90 *The Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 1982, quoted in: La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 10.
91 La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 10.

enologie") that recent literature has struggled to account for.[92] The sense of heteronomy formalized in *White Noise* or *American Psycho* has turned into a new normal in contemporary literature ("literarische[r] Normalfall") that, however, evades the personalism and antirepresentational urges defining much of the present era's creative writing.[93] In that regard, the narrators of Ellis' and DeLillo's novels might be considered prototypes of the panic-stricken subjects – "die alarmbereiten" – populating Röggla's prose. The motive of the alien voice anticipates a "gesamtgesellschaftliche Kehlkopfmutation"[94] that seizes the enunciating subject who is beset on all sides by the speculative language of the market.[95] Yet, precisely as such a total social fact it is, according to Röggla, taken for granted and remains largely unchallenged in literary form. But the representational technique of the spectral voice also has its pitfalls. Sure, it is not accidental that this motif has been so prominent in the articulation of the market as an inhuman agency. Such "ventriloquisms of capital" draw their unsettling effect precisely from the "voice's singularly ambivalent position"[96] between body and language, the material and the immaterial, as Toscano/Kinkle note in an analysis of prominent voiceover scenes in the American cinema of the early neoliberal era (e. g. Alan Pakula's 1981 *Rollover* or Sidney Lumet's 1976 *Network*). Due to its suggestive force as a surplus generated within the body that appears as an external authority speaking through the subject, the alien or third voice lends itself to the representation of impersonal structures.[97] Yet, as such, this aesthetic device may very well end up in a kind of "capitalist shamanism"[98] that positives this ventriloquial power and, thereby, reproduces the fetishization of the proverbial spirit of capitalism.

It is this state of affairs that Röggla's prose intervenes into. Her own texts, in fact, propose to bring forward a certain "monsterology"[99] in the coping strategies of her literary personnel. In *wir schlafen nicht*, for

92 Röggla, *das stottern des realismus*,14.
93 Röggla, *das stottern des realismus*, 14.
94 Röggla, *das stottern des realismus*, 15.
95 Röggla, *das stottern des realismus*, 15.
96 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 43.
97 Cf. Mladen Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 113.
98 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 46.
99 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 2.

example, Röggla's interviewees at times feel like they are surrounded by zombie-like co-workers ("so von toten umgeben"[100]). That is, the sense of heteronomy evoked across her work ("in wirklichkeit is man ja dann eher dividiert") is processed again and again with a recourse to an imagery of undeadness and spectrality:

> *der senior associate*: ja, man sehe sich nicht als gespenst, diese definition würde immer erstmal von außen kommen, so von sich aus wurde man sich dieser gruppe auch nicht zurechnen wollen. man würde sich ja auch nicht für einen zombie *(lacht)* halten oder für ein monster (*lacht*). […] nein, er könne kein gespenst in sich entdecken *(lacht*) zumindest freiwillig würde er es nicht tun.[101]

The invokation of the "ich" as a telephonic ghost in "die ansprechbare" still speaks to this. Some commentators have, therefore, even noted a "fantastische Zurüstung der Figuren"[102] in Röggla's oeuvre. But if that is the case, this effect of alterity is first and foremost generated by her strangely depersonalized prose. The motive of the spectral voice just described is translated into a formal procedure, namely the entanglement of agentive perspectives, which proposes to reconstruct the implicit "grammar" underlying the dividual modes of agency that characterize neoliberal capitalism. It is, then, less about the plastic or figurative representation of these monstrous tropes, which always risks the vitalization of capital as an alien force that confronts social actors as something external. Röggla's dividualized prose, rather, brings forward an antagonistic social process, even if it plays with the effect of an alien voice. In the unequal exchange between 1st and 3rd person narration marking *die alarmbereiten*, that is, the direct speech of the enunciating subject almost appears effaced but, in the end, the entire communication situation is contingent upon the linguistic performance of the "ich."

100 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 199.
101 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 200–201.
102 Moser, "Echtzeit-Fiktion," 174.

3 Cruel (Narrative) Optimism: Spectacles of Crisis-Management

> "The tabloid future, with its mechanism of a hopeful twist to apocalyptic events, was perhaps not so very remote from our own immediate experience," Jack says. "Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope."
>
> — DeLillo, *White Noise,* 147.

As we have seen so far, the figure of the "alarmbereiten" brings to its logical conclusion the individuation in and through risk at the heart of neoliberal strategies of labour market de-securitization. But at once it finds itself reflected in a set of formal techniques that depersonalize the enunciating subjects into a "deformable and transformable"[103] literary personnel which shape-shifts along the free indirect discourse of crisis-management. Yet, insofar the social relationship encoded in the transposition of 3rd person perspective into the first-person singular is marked by a striking asymmetry, I proposed to transcode the peculiar kind of free indirect style in these set pieces in terms of free indirect labour or unfree direct speech. This insistence on the disavowed labour share of the "ich" (as an enunciating subject that gives way to the effect of a third voice in the first place) allowed me to map out the historical specificity of this subjunctivized free indirect style. It is therefore that I suggested rendering the depersonalized prose of Röggla's writing more precisely as a prose of the dividual in Deleuze's sense.

In that regard, then, it is interesting that Röggla's depersonalized prose is quite distinct from the dominant aesthetic responses to the crises of the present developed in popular culture, as for example "[m]ost of Hollywood's conventional disaster films are […] little more than either romances to bring a couple together or tales of family reunion."[104] Vis-à-vis the catastrophe scenarios of today's culture industry, now, it is especially the piece "recherchegespenst" which has taken on the form

103 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 6.
104 Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe*, 100.

of a "market metafiction"[105] that interrogates the embedment of writing in the marketplace and investigates the impact on form exerted by the demand for consumable stories. Set in the context of NGO-ified "global poverty" initiatives, the text, in fact, confronts the material circumstances of investigative journalism and conveyed through it the publishing industry more generally. This happens for example by considering the interests of potential investors ("potentielle brötchengeber"[106]) as central factors in the selection of topics and therefore the parameters of representation. But it is also the brevity of expression which is at stake as it reads in the media chase documented in "wilde jagd," wherein paparazzi draw a clear relation between invested amounts of attention ("aufmerksamkeitsenergie") and the attention dividends ("aufmerksamkeitszinsen"[107]) yielded by it. The representation of crisis is shown to be pervaded by a logic of exchange in which the "nachrichtenwert"[108] of the subject-matter is decisive. In that vein, there is incessant talk of heroic "hauptfiguren," "dramatische[] Wendepunkt[e]," and "anfänge" that spectacularize the recounted events, all while individualizing them in a melodramatic style that generates memorability by narrating structures via "menschliche rote f[ä]den."[109] There is no place for the narrator's insistence on social types that do without detailed forms of introspection or protagonicity. Consequently, at the end, the first-person narrator is reproached of staging "ein[en] einzige[n] recherchepotlatch"[110] that precisely fails to accrue any newsworthiness as it refuses the individualization of social relations.

That way, "recherchegespenst" generates a *mise-en-abyme* of the narrative blueprints underlying prevailing representations of crisis (be it social, economic, or ecological in character). The popular disaster plot is marked by a striking domestication that subsumes the bigger picture to the dramatic survival arc of the neoliberal monad. By contrast,

105 Paul Crosthwaite. *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 3.
106 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 96.
107 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 113.
108 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 68.
109 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 112–114.
110 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 113.

many of Röggla's short-stories behold something of the "eerie" opening to an unknown that appears in the early stages of prominent disaster movies before this fleeting sense of a catastrophic Real is neutralized in oedipalized plot patterns.[111] The set pieces are permeated by an indeterminate horror triggered by a sense of looming catastrophe that upsets a certain normal order of things and, thus, gives way to a concerted effort to narrativize this enigmatic condition. In Röggla's "deutschlandfunk," crisis is, indeed, an "absence [that] erupts into empirical reality"[112] and is only registered by the linguistic perturbations – the rhetorical practices of acquiescence to the ineluctability of crisis – it gives way to. In this sense, one could say that Röggla writes a literature set in the "noch," that is, within the time windows ("zeitfenster") that supposedly still ("noch") remain to avoid crossing certain critical thresholds.[113] Again and again, though, the "noch" also appears as a marker of lacking temporal distance which expresses a situational uncertainty as to the probable outcomes of unfolding events: "noch sind wir mitten drin."[114] According to Blanchot, the sheer possibility to grasp the totality of a catastrophe issues from a temporal distance that separates the subject from the event. It is in this sense, for example, that he claimed that the perspective of total loss opened by the nuclear bomb enabled for the first time the sense of a planetary totality: the idea of the whole stems from the anticipation of its utter negation.[115] By contrast, in the context of "deutschlandfunk" a shift in the nature of crisis comes to the fore compared to the Cold War's apocalyptic deterrence theory. The narration of crisis appears absolutely immanent to the process. As it reads, we are still in the middle of events: "*noch* sind die dinge ja am laufen."[116]

111 See also Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 9–10. One might recall Fisher's disappointment at Freud's localization of the strange pertaining to the "unheimlich" within the familiar, making "the outside […] legible in terms of a modernist family drama," as he ultimately settles the enigma of the uncanny by reducing it to "castration anxiety."

112 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 112.

113 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 42.

114 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 177.

115 Cf. Maurice Blanchot. "The Apocalypse is Disappointing." *Friendship*. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Transl.). Stanford: Stanford University Press. 105–106.

116 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 177 (emphasis added).

From this ensues an epistemological and aesthetic dilemma. The generalized state of emergency, as for example described in the last short-story of the volume "deutschlandfunk," is considered to escape causal perception: "so retrospektiv betrachtet, wäre man gerne näher rangegangen – aber richtig zu sehen war ja eigentlich nichts."[117] This is carried to the extreme in the narrative dispositive of "die ansprechbare" that contrasts the short-term temporalities of the capitalist workaday to the excesses of scale posed by the deep-time of climate change, which – in representational terms – cannot be brought to a common denominator with the "präsens der menschen."[118] It appears unfeasible to shift the computation of ecological collapse to the outside—"nach draußen" into the everyday of waged life: "in den realen alltag, in dem menschen ihr geld verdienen müssen."[119] There does not seem to be any link anymore between the banality of seemingly random accidents ("der banalität zufällig wirkender unfälle") and the general desolation of living conditions ("der desolaten verhältnisse").[120] The relation between daily experience and the catastrophic whole seems fundamentally dislocated. In this sense, the notion of "kassandrapräsens" evoked in the piece expresses an inescapable representational predicament. Referring to the tragic Greek mythological figure Cassandra, endowed with the gift of foresight but whose apocalyptic prophecies are not believed, it functions as a metaphor of temporality that indicates the disablement of the apocalyptic as a genre of revelation. As such, it encrypts the inability to extrapolate from the "unendingly particular" (Hegel) to such a massive planetary event as anthropogenic climate change. Timothy Clark puts this quite crassly in his discussion of the unrepresentability of climate change. Literature seems inherently bound to fall short of the enormous scales of this planetary process: It fails to frame the cumulative impact of everyday behaviours – "insignificant in themselves" – as they converge to form effects on scales utterly inaccessible

117 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 177.
118 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten,* 42.
119 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 42.
120 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 53.

to individual human perception.[121] Instead, it engages in a "miniaturization"[122] that disappears the scale-effects of crisis in the very narrative frames – the "menschliche rote f[ä]den" – that pretend to make these structural realities legible.

Röggla's *die alarmbereiten*, thus, takes into view crisis-management as a veritable endeavour of narrative containment. Structural adjustment is instigated as the government cautions citizens to return to work, go shopping, and spend time with their families:

> kehren sie zurück an ihren arbeitsplatz! gehen sie einkaufen, verbringen sie zeit mit ihrer familie, wenden sie sich wieder ihrem leben zu![123]

Crisis is gradually naturalized as part of the capitalist workaday while individual action and the social are radically disarticulated: family life is privatized just as the domains of wage labour and consumption are severed from macro-structural processes. Instead, life itself is thoroughly reduced to and identified with the petty-bourgeois family as the nucleus of crisis-management. The closing paragraphs of the text conclude this procedure of adjustment. Ending with a traffic report, the piece suggests a transition to the most prosaic: the everydayness of traffic jams and road accidents behind which any kind of human agency seems to disappear.[124]

121 Timothy Clark. *Ecocriticism on the Egde. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury. 72. Clark more specifically talks about the so-called Anthropocene, which is supposed to name the impact of "humanity en masse," as a novel geological force, on Earth's ecosystems whereby "the basic ecological cycles of the planet" are altered.

122 Clark, *Ecocriticism*, 75–80.

123 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 180.

124 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 189; Cf. Jean-Pierre Dupuy. *Economy and the Future. Crisis of Faith*. M. B. DeBevoise (Transl.). Chicago: Michigan State University. 72–77. Citing a parable from law studies, Dupuy examines in how far the fatalities of thousands of road users each year exemplify the permanent cost-benefit calculations sustaining the regular functioning of modern capitalism: "An evil genie paid a visit to the president of a certain country and made him the following proposal: 'I know that your economy is sluggish. I desire to help you strengthen it. I can place at your disposal a fabulous technological invention that will double your gross domestic product and increase the number of jobs by the same amount. But there is a price you will have to pay. Each year I will demand the lives of 20,000 of your people, a high proportion of them young men and women.' The president recoiled in horror and dismissed his visitor at once. He had just rejected the invention of – the automobile."

In that sense, Röggla can be said to dissect out the Thatcherite unconscious that prevails in popular representations of catastrophe and neoliberal crisis governance alike. For the vernacular of risk traversed in the volume is fraught with narratological presuppositions that propose to downsize the immense phenomena at hand to a stress test for the neoliberal self. In blockbusters such as *The Day after Tomorrow*, *San Andreas*, or *2012,* the backdrop of a collapsing world turns into a template for the cleansing of the traditional family against outsiders: "A few individuals are saved in the foreground while the masses die in the background."[125] Precisely in this sense, Röggla identifies in the dominant cultural and political genres of crisis-management a kind of apotheosis of Margaret Thatcher's dissolvement of society into "individuals and families."[126] As all social bonds are a priori presumed to deteriorate in the moment of catastrophe, the disaster plot gives an apparent ontological credence to the inexistence of society. Neoliberal culture turns crisis into a stage where the "antisocial program" articulated by Thatcher – the "abolition of every social bond that is not anchored in the economic relation of competition" – can be evidenced.[127]

The kind of crisis-management traversed in *die alarmbereiten*, hence, is underwritten by a particularly neoliberal sentiment that Lauren Berlant has dubbed "cruel optimism."[128] That is, the narrative containment of crisis incentivizes a positive libidinal investment in precisely those everyday forms of capitalist praxis that lock the subject into the current conjuncture. Zupančič offers a succinct elaboration of the work of normalization that is on display here:

> [T]he automatism of normalization is not the way to, or the means of, structural change, but is already a sign, an indicator, a symptom of a serious structural change – that is, of the fact that the button has already

125 Cf. Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe*, 74.
126 Cf. Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Kathrin Röggla. *disaster awareness fair. zum katastrophischen in stadt, land und film*, Graz/Wien: Droschl. 8.
127 Samo Tomšič. "No Such Thing as Society?" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 33:2–3. 56.
128 Cf. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

> been pressed. Were it not for this change having *already* occurred, the normalization would not work as smoothly as it does.[129]

Yet, these "daily adjustments" – sedimented into the cruel narrative optimism exhibited most poignantly in "die ansprechbare" and "deutschlandfunk" – miss the extent to which this exercise in normalization is itself fundamentally implicated in the unspecified "something" that is created along the way.[130] Fittingly, the piece "deutschlandfunk" ends on the note that "vollständige entwarnung" cannot be given: "das ist nun mal die situation, mit der man leben muss."[131] In the absence of any transcendent view on the whole, the crisis situation is eternalized. Citizens are asked to resign themselves to a new normal. The trope of the worst-case scenario passes through future expectancies, but its core representational effect consists in fixing "adaptation"[132] as a new leitmotif while the grander picture created along the way slips out of sight.[133] Here, one can draw a parallel to Suman Gupta's examination of the financial print culture after the crash of 2007–9, which emphasizes that press campaigns display an astonishing "literary optimism" that presumes the possibility of a "story" before it is actually noted down – even if the promise of a story is never followed up upon. Instead, the mere claim that it is feasible to "break[] the story" operates itself as a framing device that pacifies readers and generates consumable effects while removing events from systemic critique.[134] As such, the literary optimism observed by Gupta translates precisely into the cruel narrative optimism dissected in Röggla's depiction of crisis-management as a "löcherstopfsystem" that seeks to plug the (plot) holes in the economy.

In this manner, the condensed set pieces staged in *die alarmbereiten* re-enact the communication structure underlying the production

129 Alenka Zupančič. "The Apocalypse is (still) disappointing." *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 1. 25.
130 Zupančič, "The Apocalypse is (still) disappointing," 26.
131 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 187.
132 Staab, *Anpassung*, 13.
133 Cf. Zupančič, "The Apocalypse is (still) disappointing," 25.
134 Suman Gupta. "Philology of the Contemporary World: On Storying the Financial Crisis." *Philology: An International Journal on the Evolution of Languages, Cultures and Texts* 2. 282–283.

of passivity in the neoliberal "spectacle" of crisis as Röggla terms it with respect to Guy Debord.[135] By thinking the quasi-ontological statement that there are only "individual men and women and there are families" right to the end, the prose pieces decrypt the "prohibition" encoded in it, namely that "no such thing as society should become a project of politics and thus emerge in the order of being."[136] The disciplinary impetus that comes to the fore, then, becomes perhaps most legible in "der übersetzer" which picks up on the managerial function of stock-market jargon as it depicts a coaching program designed to explain away ("wegerklären"[137]) the compromised epistemological authority of financial models. At the centre of this piece is the monologue of a former banker – of course mediated via the unfree direct speech of an unnamed 1st person narrator – who stylizes himself as an economic expert. As such, he is intent on distinguishing himself from his fellow classmates whom he describes as "deppen"[138] incapable of abstract thought and in need of his translation work. In this capacity, he chastises the customary iconography of anti-capitalist criticism which he finds guilty of an insufficient level of complexity:

> die deppen, die sich gegenseitig nichts als fotos in den kopf jagten: finanzkrisenfotos, suppenküchenfotos, immobilienfotos, fotos von zeltstädten in nevada, fotos von ausverkäufen, von gestürmten banken in großbritannien, von verrammelten gegenden in new york. die meisten hier im raum könnten ja ohnehin nur in fotografien denken, die seien nicht zur abstraktion fähig.[139]

The narratology of the false act outlined in the previous chapter returns in the guise of a financial discourse that polarizes the economy into in- and outsiders. By reducing critique to a question of knowledge that is unavailable to the critics of capital, the self-declared translator proposes

135 Kathrin Röggla. *Gespensterarbeit, Krisenmanagement und Weltmarktfiktion*. Wien: Picus Verlag. 57.
136 Tomšič, "No Such Thing as Society?," 54.
137 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 62.
138 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 61.
139 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 61.

to neutralize the effective antagonisms inscribed into the signifiers of contestation that float through the text. The critique of fossil capital adhering to the concept of "peak-oil" but equally the perspective of finance as "akkumulationsregime" are deemed inadequate, for the cheap reason that those outside the decision-making processes of the economy lack the necessary sense of complexity to understand the negative repercussions of their unwillingness to submit to market discipline.[140]

In his analysis, Gupta similarly notes that the "storying" of the Great Recession circles around the construction of the "ordinary person" as a sort of "general reader," which as such is ascribed an irredeemably irrational worldview and is addressed in a patronizing tone despite the compromised authority of the explanatory models provided by neoliberalism that failed to anticipate the crisis.[141] Befitting the educational setting of the coaching course, then, the trope of abstraction is staged as a pedagogical tool, which is provided a particularly poignant expression towards the end of the piece in a telling analogization between market competition and memory disorder. Confronted again and again with charges of un-manageable behaviour, the first-person narrator is finally menaced with the cautionary example of her predecessor in the coaching course whose inflexible attitude had been trained down to such a degree that no time remained to re-fill the blackouts left behind in her mind: "die sei hier rausgekommen mit buchstäblich nichts mehr im kopf."[142] Her sole legacy ("erbe") consists in serving as a reminder for her classmates to dispel any doubts "an ihrer marktwirtschaftlichen totalüberzeugung."[143] The self-declared translator becomes a conveyor for a veritable market discipline which at times becomes quite literal. The strange injunction to stop moving uttered as the narrator leaves her

140 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 62.

141 Gupta, "On Storying the Financial Crisis," 277ff. Gupta insists on the germane concept of "storying" (in contrast to narrativization) to ground the telling of crisis in the "common parlance and everyday vagueness" displayed by the financial print culture. Thereby, he not only proposes to account for the fact that most crisis texts were not addressed to so-called insiders but the influence of popular languages on "expert" discourses. Gupta, that is to say, considers academic discourses to be informed by and positioned within the story techniques of mainstream media.

142 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 62–63.

143 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.

assigned seating position can be rendered readable as a prolongation of the disciplinary vernacular of risk into the basic deixis of language:

> strenggenommen dürften wir uns überhaupt nicht bewegen, die unüberschaubaren dominoeffekte, die das nach sich zöge, wenn einer von uns sich rührte, möchte er sich lieber gar nicht vorstellen. ja, was der markt jetzt gar nicht brauchen könne, sei, dass die leute in hektische bewegungen verfielen.[144]

The material immobilization of the narrator in the seating order of the classroom parallels the larger pedagogical intent of neoliberal crisis-management. In the text, then, macro-social concerns sprawl out into the micro-practices of language. The re-educational fervour of the translator functions, in a sense, as a preventative counter-revolution that trespasses into linguistic indexicality by defending – on the level of basic deictic shifts – against a feared insurgency that has not yet taken place and might not even stand on the agenda.[145]

The idiom of crisis-management put on display in "der übersetzer" purports to fill in the gaps in (economic) knowledge precisely by re-doubling the enormity of financial crisis in a discourse that abstracts agency into wholly depersonalized processes. Spreading panic against the unmanageable ripple-effects of even the simplest (market) movements, it creates the sense of a system that is too big to fail. Instead of unveiling the inexistence of a rational market order, the short-story acts out a Hayekian transcendentalization of the market that weaponizes the logic of subjectlessness as a means of systemic immunization: "the more

144 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 66.

145 Cf. Alberto Toscano. "The Long Shadow of Racial Fascism." *Boston Review*. http://bostonreview.net/race-politics/alberto-toscano-long-shadow-racial-fascism [last accessed 10.05.2021]. By way of Angela Davis's and Herbert Marcuse's reflections on racial fascism in the U.S. during the 60s and 70s, Toscano examines in how far fascism today takes on an "incipient form" that makes a pre-emptive strike against a feared popular excess, which, however, as a strategy is not experienced equally by all segments of society. Superstructure here overwhelms the base: "No imminent threat to the reproduction of capitalism is on the horizon (at least no *external* one), so that contemporary fascist trends," transmuting crisis and stagnation into a metaphysics of civilizational decline, "manifest the strange spectacle of what, in a variation on Davis and Marcuse, we could call a *preventive counterreform*."

the crisis unveils the instability of the markets, the more the Market receives a surplus of positive existence."[146] It thereby also become clear, though, that the real "risks" feared by power (as depicted in *die alarmbereiten*) turn out to be threats to the economic order. The first piece of the volume "die zuseher" is revelatory in that regard. As we know, the 'tourist attraction' visited by the disaster sightseers is the deserted parking lot of a supermarket which becomes newsworthy for the strange reason that customers or looters fail to appear. Consequently, it is exactly the absence of turmoil that turns into an alarm signal. Since the area of observation is situated opposite to "pico boulevard" in "west l. a.,"[147] the commotions of consumer masses would be a sign (from a capitalist perspective) of a functioning economy of supply and demand.[148] Epitomizing the image of suspended value-chains – the real capitalist dystopia – the absence of panic buyers can, thus, be placed in contrast to the address mode of the crisis scenarios recirculated throughout the volume which appeal precisely to maintain mass consumption under conditions of collapse. In that sense, the non-appearance of such consumer unrest marks the actual crisis plot of capital as it indicates underconsumption and, hence, declining profits.

What Röggla calls the contemporary "löcherstopfesystem," then, emerges as a scheme for the perpetual generation of demand and economic activity. That is to say, the cruel narrative optimism embodied in the miniaturized crisis resolutions of neoliberalism deploys the language of risk as a technique of subjectification that socializes subjects as isolated consumers and producers while de-realizing any collective dimension. Across the pages of *die alarmbereiten*, Röggla traverses the worst-case scenario as a two-fold allegory of control in that the neoliberal disarticulation of the social coincides with the ideological precept that capitalism is too big to fail. Obscurity – as in the trope of complexity or abstraction – is harnessed as a technology of power in that regard. Eventually, then, the simultaneous miniaturization and opacification of crisis merges with a rhetoric of austerity that urges citizens, addressed

146 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 98.
147 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, p. 7.
148 Moser, "Echtzeit-Fiktion," p. 163.

as survival monads, to stick together for the economy (consider the ideologeme of the "weltuntergangsboot"[149]) by going on with their daily routine of atomized consumption and wage labour.

4 "schrottprämienerklärungen": Crisis Language as Junk Language

In face of approaching socio-economic and ecological tipping points, then, it is striking that Röggla's prose pieces do not note a disruption of discourse. Rather, her extensive phraseological snippets document a multiplication of language as the world-market starts speaking in the jargon of a neoliberal catastrophism. In the following, now, I want to delineate in how far this is negotiated by reflecting on this language excess in terms of its inherent obsolescence. A certain sense of ruination is ascribed to the vernacular of crisis-management such that it may be considered in analogy to one of Röggla's earlier plays – *junk space* (2004) – a sort of junk language.[150] In "der übersetzer," the narrator is handed with a proliferating array of "discount- und abverkaufsvokabeln" which are – homologous to the "immobilienschrott" wherein the short-story takes place – thoroughly inscribed with their prospective redundancy.[151] At the same time, these "schrottprämienerklärung[en]"[152] are meant to mitigate the collapse of monetary value by organizing the relentless re-packaging of liabilities that cannot be serviced anymore: "die unendliche verpackbarkeit von Schulden."[153] Marking a wordplay on the scrappage programs triggered across Europe to increase market demand during the Great Recession (known in Germany as the "Abwrackprämie"), the notion of "schrottprämie" recirculated here points towards a system that lives on credit.

Röggla's writing is concerned with the excesses in language that the bailout realities of contemporary capitalism give way to. In this, how-

149 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 60.
150 Kathrin Röggla. *junk space*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag.
151 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55, 57–58.
152 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 59.
153 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 59.

ever, the complicated language games of crisis-management – concepts such as "minuserwartungen" appear as "kompliziertes Sprachspiel" – are steadily haunted by the risk of imminent insolvency due to the looming "nicht-mehr-verpackbarkeit" of debt.[154] Less than functioning as an indicator of value, the persistent increasement of the "fachwörterpegelstand,"[155] hence, indicates above all the inadequacy of language to stabilize value. As such, language itself appears as a register of the irresolvable obsolescence(s) generated in the process of permanent structural re-adjustment: the ruinations of crisis are re-doubled in the language supposed to manage them. In "der übersetzer," then, the overaccumulation of junk language functions at once as a symptom of the perceptual challenges posed by crisis and the bubble-and-bust dynamic of late 20th and early 21st century capitalism. However, it does in no way coincide with the supersession of capitalism.

Mathieu Lanaurdie's *Les Effondrés*, also from 2010, might serve as a telling contrast foil in that regard, as it pursues – in a manner which might seem similar at first glance – the crash of neoliberal doctrines that apparently followed the Lehman Brothers crash:

> […] ce que ce qui était ainsi ébranlé, sapé dans ses fondements, n'était pas seulement un épiphénomène nommé la marché des transactions financières, ni un ensemble de fonctions et de professions dont ils participaient, […] mais la représentation d'une cosmogonie, une figuration de l'univers (ils disaient: c'est un monde qui vient de s'écrouler): ainsi, tandis qu'ils avaient cru – comme si ce qui modèle les sociétés n'était pas œuvre humaine.[156]

In the face of the credit crunch, the narrative presumes that the "semaphores sémantiques" of power fail: "c'est-à-dire l'efficacité du système, résidaient dans la conviction inattaquable que cet ordre était une émanation de la nature même."[157] Focusing on the demise of key financial players, the text suggests that the de-legitimization of neoliberal-

154 Röggla. *die alarmbereiten*, 57, 59.
155 Röggla. *die alarmbereiten*, 55.
156 Mathieu Lanaurdie. *Les Effondrés*. Paris. Actes Sud. 18–19.
157 Lanaurdie, *Les Effondrés*, 15, 19.

ism's ideological justifications equates to its breakdown as a mode of social domination. By contrast, *die alarmbereiten* stages the effectivity of capitalist relations in and through something like a "vertrauenskrise."[158] The junk language described in "der übersetzer" is not marked out as a proper means of power. As such, the throwaway vernacular of risk corresponds to a situation of permanent bailout. It intervenes *in medias res* ("man hat sich eben ganz auf die gegenwart zu konzentrieren"[159]) to offer a short-term suspension, that is, displacement of crisis and is discarded as soon as the job is done.

In "der übersetzer," the world-economy is in that sense considered to have been taken over by a form of operational dementia: a global "betriebsalzheimer."[160] Again and again, the translator is compelled to admit that he has developed veritable "gedächtnislücken":

> dass beispielsweise sämtliche banken im grunde pleite seien, vergesse er täglich von neuem, dass wir nur noch von konjunkturhilfemilliarden umgeben seien, die unseren alltag stützten, dass unser alltag zusammenkrache, wenn diese einmal aufgebraucht seien […].[161]

In the text, the stimulus packages sustaining the capitalist everyday are said to result in systemic memory gaps. The unprecedented bank bailout that happened over the course of the slump of 2007–9 appears as a remembrance of the distant past. In that sense, the language of crisis is phrased as inducing a global amnesia that has become essential for contemporary capitalism to remain operational. Interestingly, however, Röggla's earlier work is already characterized by a certain apprehension of the blackouts and displacements involved in the making of the economy. The trope of an economic Alzheimer's disease is, indeed, a recurring topic in her work. Already in the 2004 literary reportage *wir schlafen nicht* – which takes us into the world of consultancy firms – the office staff admits to the memory disorders induced by their insecure employment conditions. As one figure, referred to as "die key account

158 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55.
159 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 186.
160 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 59.
161 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 59–60.

managerin," puts it, everyone working in the so-called new-economic industries is in principle amnesic ("im prinzip ziemlich gedächtnislos").[162] This is, of course, associated with the speed of exchange. But, also more generally, Röggla's interviewees story the New Economy as one single performance of displacement ("verdrängungsleistung") that strives to disremember the dotcom bubble and the entire Enron fiasco ("enronzeit") at the centre of it.[163]

In Röggla's latest work, the piece with the telling title "Off the record" from the short story volume *Nachtsendung* – featuring an office worker who step by step loses all recollection of her doings during certain days – continues this metaphorical construction. At the beginning, this amnesia only concerns her memories of Thursdays. But slowly this "Donnerstaglücke"[164] extends to other workdays. As one can learn from the statements of her colleagues ("Du bist ein echter Killer"), she lives through these days as if she were an entirely different person, possessed by a pure competitive drive that incites her to maximum "Performance" (the most frequent qualifier attached to her behaviour).[165] If she is initially alarmed by these blackouts, the narrator eventually comes to embrace this predicament. Her condition is quickly re-normalized, as it precisely guarantees her market operability.[166] The possession of the "ich" by an alien voice, which in *die alarmbereiten* is primarily performed by formal means, is rendered in very concrete terms here. Narrated in the third-person singular, it is stated that "sie" is made absent ("abwesend") more and more frequently as if she were taken over by an invisible co-worker ("einem für sie unsichtbaren Kollegen") who is always ready to jump into her memory gaps ("die Lücken, die sie ihm anscheinend bot").[167] However, she wards off the pathologization of this amnesic behaviour. Instead, the neurological adaptation to the laws of

162 Kathrin Röggla. *wir schlafen nicht*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Verlag. 40.
163 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 195.
164 Kathrin Röggla. *Nachtsendung*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer. 47.
165 Röggla, *Nachtsendung*, 51.
166 Julia Schöll. 2019. "Dead or alive. Räume des Unheimlichen bei Kathrin Röggla." *Literatur im Ausnahmezustand. Beiträge zum Werk Kathrin Rögglas*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann. 110.
167 Röggla, *Nachtsendung*, 51, 50.

pure competition is reframed as a "Zustand *ganzer Gesundheit*"[168] (not incidentally re-calling our hole/whole couplet). In fact, at the end it turns out that the entire business community has been possessed by this operational dementia. In that vein, it is rebranded as the Frankfurt's disease ("Frankfurter Krankheit"[169]) in allusion to the city's status as the financial hub of Germany, feeding back into the image encountered throughout Röggla's work of the world-economy as a gigantic "löcherstopfesystem."

The use of Alzheimer's disease as a metaphor of the social, then, insinuates at once a mode of subject(ificat)ion and a historically-specific production of historylessness.[170] Mark Fisher has argued something similar with respect to the remarkable success of amnesia narratives in the 2000s. According to him, the deployment of memory disorder as a narrative device in movies such as the *Bourne* Trilogy (2002–2007), *Memento* (2000), or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) expresses a "cultural anxiety"[171] with neoliberalism's culture of contingency. Likewise, in Röggla's oeuvre the image of an amnesic crisis economy "provides a compelling analogy for the glitches in capitalist

168 Röggla, *Nachtsendung*, 52. This idea of wholeness, associated with full economic operability, is ultimately related to the notion of "German reunification," when the clerk in question terms the time at which she has entirely given herself over to the drive of competition her "Wendetag."

169 Röggla, *Nachtsendung*, 51.

170 See also Catherine Malabou. *The New Wounded. From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. Steven Miller (Transl.). New York: Fordham University Press. 160, 155–156. Interestingly, Alzheimer's disease is also the clinical picture through which Malabou reflects upon the kinds of trauma inflicted by the abstract violence of contemporary society, which (according to her) utterly shatters the reality of the subject without any hope of being re-integrated into a meaningful frame of reference. In this "absence of sense" – analogous to the irretrievable damage caused by brain lesions, cutting subjects from their reserves of memory – social conflict seems de-dialecticized from political struggle, becoming "as anonymous as a natural catastrophe." For "it is striking to note," she writes, "that today's victims of sociopolitical traumas present the same profile as victims of natural catastrophes (tsunamis, earthquakes, floods) or grave accidents (serious domestic accidents, explosions, fires)," stating that "[w]e have entered a new age of political violence in which politics is defined by the renunciation of any hope of endowing violence with a political sense." Thereby, according to Malabou, new forms of illness emerge, "where politics is annulled as such so that it assumes the face of nature and where nature disappears beneath the mask of politics."

171 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 58.

realism" that perforate the "confabulated consistency"[172] of a capitalist business-as-usual maintained by last resort credits. One can also think of Rainer Merkel's abovementioned *Das Jahr der Wunder*, where the bubble culture of the 2000s real estate boom is interestingly combined with the topic of outer space – not as a new frontier for exploration but for financial investment. In the novel, in fact, literary characters speak in such a manner that one gets the sense that they compulsively try to maintain the euphoria of the boom. It is as if negativity were exorcized from language. In this affirmative corporate culture, everything is interesting ("interessant") or a brilliant idea ("gute idee") such that the figures are literally described as speech bubbles ("Sprechblasen") of an expanding bubble economy.[173] This cult of positivity, now, returns with a dystopian twist in *die alarmbereiten*. Instead of buying into the secret utopianism of unfettered growth, the texts in the anthology explore the entropic destiny of the New Economy's "linguistic chains" (Marazzi). In a sense, then, Röggla's writing is situated at a threshold. It proposes to historicize the "irrational exuberance" (Alan Greenspan) of the New Economy – purporting to have done with boom-and-bust cycles – as a form of quasi-amnesic bubble thinking that has ushered into the protracted crisis sentiment after the Great Recession. Consequentially, in the updated language criticism making up *die alarmbereiten*, the exuberant language excess of the New Economy is sublated in an expansive jargon of austerity. Rifkin's infamous "symbol analysts" who feature so prominently in Röggla's earlier writing return as professional or hobby risk-managers that cling to a "cruel optimism" so as to go on with their daily lives and maintain a semblance of capitalist normality amidst crisis.

172 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 60.

173 Rainer Merkel. *Das Jahr der Wunder*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer. 149. Putting into relief the myth of the start-up company, Merkel's account of the dotcom boom is spiced with religious allusions. Already in the first scene, the start-up office appears bathed in light like a cathedral while its disciples – fashioning themselves as prophetic mouthpieces of a digital revolution – literally promise "miracles" as evoked in the title of the novel. In this sense, the text records the blending of the linguistic registers of economic and religious messianism. Merkel's start-up novel, thereby, traces the neoliberal utopianism at the bottom of the dotcom boom. It outlines the sublation of the modernist image of the vanguard into Schumpeter's entrepreneurial "trailblazers" of the market caught in the quasi-religious frenzy ("Rausch") of a sacralized bubble economy dependent on a collective cult of positivity.

Albeit her work can not only be placed in a dialogue with German literature's special concern with the New Economy. In fact, there are at once significant parallels to academic discourses emerging at the same time in German Literature departments, where new research programs – invested in the "Poetologien des Wissens" – are formulated to study the "Verfertigungsformen" [174] of knowledge production. Building on the basic principle that the "how" of representation plays a crucial role in the construction of epistemic objects, that approach soon developed a particular interest in the homologies or even intersections between economic and literary forms.[175] Vogl's *The Specter of Capital* might be considered a pivotal point of reference in this regard as it identifies the

174 Joseph Vogl. *Kalkül und Leidenschaft. Poetik des ökonomischen Menschen*. Zürich: diaphanes. 13.

175 Cf. Roland Borgards and Harald Neumeyer. "Der Ort der Literatur in der Geschichte des Wissens. Plädoyer für eine entgrenzte Philologie." *Grenzen der Germanistik. Rephilologisierung oder Erweiterung?* Walter Erhart (Ed.). Stuttgart/ Weimar: Metzler. 211. See also Jacques Derrida. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Peggy Kamuf (Transl.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 129n9; Jean-Joseph Goux. *Symbolic Economies. After Marx and Freud*. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Transl.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 301; Clover: "Value | Theory | Crisis," 111. The theory of the New Economy is largely captivated by the figment of dematerialized currencies that seem to imply the irrevocable decoupling between the "real economy" and finance. It is fair to say, though, that there is a longer history to this fascination with monetary signifiers which is tied particularly to the delinking of the Dollar from the Gold Standard and its fiction of intrinsic value. The emerging social fact of fiat money exerted a strong pull upon cultural imagination, which coincided with the popularization of social analyses engulfed in visions of a tertiarized, post-industrial society. In literary studies, it is especially the poststructuralist response to these changes in the money-form that has had a lasting influence. Take Derrida's writings on immaterial currencies in his essay *La Fausse Monnaie*. Re-working Jean-Joseph Goux's theory of money, Derrida like many theorists of his era discussed the similarities between economic and linguistic systems of exchange. Ultimately, this led him to conclude that the automatization of monetary transactions in the circuits of finance culminated in an "uncontrollable play of floating capital" wherein the relational order of interconnected currency rates and commodity prices acts as the only reference value that fiat money could still point to. The indexical relationship that still seems present in the way that pegged currency systems establish a social link through reference to the "barbaric relict" of Gold had been replaced – in a dissemination without centre – by mere signifiers cut loose from the image of material production. Curiously mirroring simultaneous efforts to identify and exploit language as an economic resource and productive factor, linguistic theories of the "autonomy of the signifier" thus seemed to have found into their own in the circuits of finance. Under these circumstances, the apparent autopoietic closure of finance slowly became a truism, merging into a synecdoche of the economy in general, which as such fundamentally overdetermines the periodization and hence representation of the present

credit economy as the site of "real fictions" respectively an actual poetics ("Dichtung"[176]). In that sense, Vogl's analysis turns to the spectral values ("Wertgespenster"[177]) that haunt a global capitalist system as it tries to escape secular stagnation in ersatz forms of growth. In staging language as a site of crisis and overvaluation, now, Röggla's prose exactly illustrates the confluence of the operational logic of risk-capital and the creeping language of emergency. The image of ideological waste-material evoked in the notion of "schrottprämienerklärungen" is not just ornamental then but echoes the instruments of financial waste-management (e. g. junk bonds, bad banks) that have been normalized since the Great Recession.[178] In the long run, that is, capital's specious turn to communication as a source of value – as has been suggested in the 1990s and early 2000s – proves part and parcel of the "potentiated circulation of bankruptcy"[179] at the heart of present-day bubblenomics.[180] *die alarmbereiten*, thus, ultimately uncovers the repressed dystopian content of the New Economy.

epoch. I would, however, exempt Vogl's historical study from this critical appraisal as it is well aware of the capital-inherent contradictions that drive the expansion of financial markets and does not subscribe to the idea of free-floating financial profits.

176 Joseph Vogl. 2010. *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*. Zürich: Diaphanes. 81. Referring to a quote in DeLillo's Cosmopolis and by extension Marx's extensive usage of ghostly tropes in his analysis of capital, uncovered eminently in Derrida's return to the latter's work in *Specters of Marx* (1993), the title of Vogl's research already in itself emphasizes the eerie metaphysics of capital.

177 Vogl, *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*, 94, 157, 152.

178 See also Chris Reitz. "The Labouring Undead: Zombification as a Metaphor of Contemporary Crisis-Management." *Law Text Culture* 26. Röggla resonates with the widespread metaphorization of neoliberalism in terms of zombification. The post-2007 era has seen an upsurge of analyses that commentated on neoliberal theory as an economic rationale that has outlived itself but is unnaturally kept afloat by a permanentized crisis-management, wherein central banks act like "necromancers" that raise insolvent businesses from the dead with foul credits.

179 Vogl, *Ascendancy of Finance*, 165.

180 See also Martínez/Klein, *Wirklichkeitserzählungen*, 1; Röggla, "Zukunft als literarische Ressource," Online. It is currents such as "Wissenspoetik" that the Wuppertal school of narratology has in mind when it observes an overarching "pan-fictionalism" that levels all differences between the reality claims of different sub-system of communication. This might be related to Röggla's argument that a certain concept of "fiction" has become part of the contemporary architecture of power, not least concerning the dissolution of politics into the ubiquitous signifier "narrative" but also regarding the emergence of new pre-emptive technologies of counterinsurgency that defend potential future corporate profits against potential future suspects.

Something quite similar comes to the fore in "recherchegepenst" where crisis humanitarianism – "katastrophenhilfe, humanitäre einsätze, krisenintervention"[181] – stops being understood as a transient state of emergency but proves a disavowed "long-term systemic solution."[182] Thereby, Röggla tackles a topic that has been at the centre of New-economic discourses since the 1990s. This becomes most prominent in the writings of Jeremy Rifkin which project the emergence of a novel NGO-sector – located between the state and private capital – that would rise into the new core area of a 21st century service economy and absorb a growing global workforce. NGO-business is attached with a two-fold promise: First, it suggests a non-political pacification of the humanitarian crises driven by global inequalities without breaking with the capitalist logic of accumulation. Second, this "third sector" is supposed to offer "the only viable means for constructively channeling the surplus labor cast off by the global market."[183] As such, the NGO service industry has been at the heart of the economic crisis theories of the last few decades. In contrast to Rifkin's scenario, now, in "das recherchegepenst" this "NGO-pulk"[184] is rewritten into a new professional-managerial class that draws its revenue precisely from a crisis-situation that has become permanent. Following the dictates of "modeströmungen,"[185] humanitarian aid is depicted as an expanding business that co-manages the global labour market and cultivates its own lifestyle in the parallel societies that it fosters in the Global South. In Röggla's piece, NGO-employees act as agents of structural adjustment that organize the integration of untapped reservoirs of cheap labour into global supply-chains and open public welfare for a private sector that is not non-profit anymore. Assuring the ongoing operability of capital circulation under conditions of crisis, humanitarianism turns into a medium of neocolonial soft power irrespective of the self-descriptions of the actors involved. These professional fields ("berufszweige") traditionally associated with various

181 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 100.
182 cf. Alenka Zupančič. "Back to the Future of Europa." *The Final Countdown. Europa, Refugees and the Left*. Jela Krečič (Ed.). Ljubljana: IRWIN. 22.
183 Rifkin, *The End of Work*, 292.
184 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 98.
185 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 103.

kinds of philanthropy – "mit idealismus, mit gutmenschentum" – are shown to fulfil economic functions behind the backs of the executing personnel. In that way, "recherchegespenst" negotiates "the efficiency of structural relations being immune to consciousness."[186] As these "sozialsöldner"[187] rush from "job [to] job," they carry out important roles in the organizational relations of capital, securing the adjustment of emerging markets: "ob kongo, tadschikistan oder weißrussland."[188] This becomes especially clear in the narrated case of an agricultural engineer. Employed in Ecuador as a cacao beans expert, this figure has spent years of "coaching"[189] to mentor local peasants into independent farming, only to see this good faith turn into its exact opposite. As a development worker, he suddenly ("plötzlich") finds himself part of a lucrative segment of cacao supply-chains ("wertschöpfungsketten") that compels these very populations into economic dependency.[190] Indeed, things constantly turn into their opposite: autonomy morphs into subjection, the hopeful expectations of departure invert into the disillusionments of repatriates ("das enttäuschungsamalgam der zurückgekehrten"[191]). Akin to what Röggla has dubbed a global "betriebsalzheimer," then, things are not what they seem. Eventually, the entire sector "suddenly"[192] shows itself to be reigned by career systems and multinational money flows ("plötzlich zeigten sich karriereläufe, geldtöpfe, interessens- und arroganzverhältnisse"[193]). Stripping the NGO-sector of its utopian pretensions, "recherchegespenst" brings forward the hidden dystopianism of an industry that acts as a "löcherstopfsystem" in its own right.

That said, the crisis language documented in Röggla's prose – deciphered as junk language – is precisely marked by its disposable char-

186 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 58.
187 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, p. 110.
188 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 110.
189 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 108.
190 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 108.
191 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 110.
192 An important, albeit at first seemingly insignificant, word in these cases is "plötzlich," which is evoked repeatedly to signal the inversion of appearances into unsuspected consequences. It is clear, that the emphasis on the sudden nature of these realizations does not designate an incidental change in character. Rather, the notion seems to behold something of the displacements making up today's interfaced capitalist world-system.
193 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 101.

acter. The holes in the whole are only temporarily plugged. What is more, the overproduction of risk signifiers meant to contain the effects of crisis only intensifies the sense of emergency that goes along with them. Hito Steyerl calls this "the uncertainty principle of modern documentarism"[194] as the data excess and informational lack generated by crisis-management goad each other. In that sense, the various scenarios of the end piled up in *die alarmbereiten* do not only portray the repressive mechanisms of a system in permanent adjustment but also test the social effects unfolded by the multiplication of such worst-case scenarios themselves as these become active agents of risk in place of passive calculation models. In a certain respect, the language of crisis-management gives way to a second-order disaster that rather than containing the real of crisis re-doubles it.

Take the figure of the "übersetzer" which is drawn at first glance as a personification of the power structures underlying crisis-management as he claims to explain away the crisis-prone nature of capital. But his translation work is gradually confronted with its own deficiencies as the "translator" proves unable to re-insert the crisis event into (neo)liberal models of equilibrium that would neutralize it in the ups and downs of a business cycle. Just like the financial teaching course serving as a setting for the short piece seems without end, the crisis also is narrated to be continuing since the Great Recession: "*fortlaufend* seit September 2008."[195] Indicating the temporality of a present in perpetual breakdown, the gerund employed here takes up the posthumanization of economic language detected by Moretti/Pestre in their analysis of World Bank rhetoric in the neoliberal era. Instead of naming a moment of truth, judgement, or decision, then, the notion of crisis that emerges is shifted away from the transitional temporality of an event towards a thorough sense that there can be no break from the present. Against this backdrop, the managerial function of stock market jargon by and by breaks down and the position of knowledge claimed by 3rd person perspective, eventually, ends up in an even more fundamental de-securitization.

194 Hito Steyerl. "Documentary Uncertainty." *Re-visiones* 1. http://re-visiones.net/anteriores/spip.php%3Farticle37.html [last accessed 14.06.2021].
195 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55 (emphasis added).

In general, Röggla does not seem to place much hope in the practical realism of crisis but rather literarizes its disabling effects. As it reads in "die ansprechbare," the shift of the gaze "nach draußen" has shipwrecked.[196] There is no stable horizon that would guarantee a position of knowledge. In fact, the formula "da draußen" recurs throughout her work, most saliently perhaps in *draußen tobt die dunkelziffer* (2013). In this play, today's culture of surveys ("befragungskultur"), opinion polls ("demoskopie"), and specialized market research ("marktforschungssegmente) amounts to little more than inconclusive data masses (aussageschwache zahlen").[197] Pretensions at totality are replaced by porous statistics ("löchrige statistiken") that purport to manufacture transparency ("übersichtlichkeit") but precisely as such give way to "eine art sekundärwald an unklarheit" that clouds the modelling of

196 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 11; Gerhard Neumann. "Die Welt im Fenster. Erkennungsszenen in der Literatur." *Hofmannsthal-Jahrbuch. Zur Europäischen Moderne*. Freiburg: Rombach Verlag. 249. In this context, the window assumes a surprisingly important role in the various texts comprised in the volume. For one thing, it turns into the medium of death. In addition, it is connected to the disintegration of a certain idea of knowledge associated with a sense of distanced objectivity. That is to say, the window mediates a relation to the outside only insofar this exteriorization coincides with the absenting of the subject. In "die ansprechbare," it is ultimately the failure to open the window that sets the seal on the death by asphyxia suffered by the 3rd person narrator. By comparison, in "die zuseher," the spectators stylize themselves from behind a window façade ("fensterfront") as external observers of an untraceable incident, only to become themselves slowly part of that vague crisis process. From session to session more and more seminar participants disappear without a trace, dissolving eventually any clear-cut differentiation between in- and an outside. The window as a trope that purports to establish order amidst chaotic impressions, thus, collapses. But it is not only the 19th century idea of central perspective with its promise of centred subjectivity, reminiscent of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Des Vetters Eckfenster* (1822) or Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parma* (1846), that is annulled here. It is more contemporary window-scenes such as the tinted glass and spyware of the limousine in *Cosmopolis* that form the background of Röggla's intervention. In DeLillo's novella, the tinted screens are part of an apparatus that separates insiders from outsiders. Against the background of protesting crowds, it segregates the site of stock market speculation as a gated space from which the world is made legible by transcoding it into financial data at the exclusive disposal of the investor. In the drone-like view of the billionaire figure, urban space is vertically stratified according to a hierarchy of seeing. It is exactly this one-way gaze, that attempts to dominate space, which fails in "die zuseher." The promise of a safe space of seeing attached to the scenario techniques of "disaster tourism" with its pretensions of establishing a visual normality erodes.

197 Röggla, "dunkelziffer," 254.

reality.[198] Similarly, in *die alarmbereiten* the junk language of neoliberal crisis-management generates ever new uncertainties. Purporting to compensate for the representational failures brought about by the disruption of capitalist normality, it rather engenders further obscurity effects. The reflexivization of risk characterizing crisis-management only adds to the destabilization of social semantics.

The allegories of control encoded in these "techniques of charting" fail to plug the gaps in the system. Throughout, the cruel narrative optimism that crisis may be storied remains a promise that fails to cohere into a contained narrative. Hence, the various texts complied in the compendium unfold as a consequence of these failed narrative containments. To put it in Berardi's terms, the "end is everywhere" while it is at once "replaced by the endless replication of the 'and.'"[199] Caught in a vicious circuit of information excess and lack, the narrative goes on in continuous, directionless loops. There is no logical point of conclusion, judgement, or decision that the internal dynamic of these texts would lead up to. For that reason, these texts are unable to come to a narrative end out of their own self-perpetuating logic. Eventually, textual closure can only be achieved by way of an external intrusion. But as the stories end in communication breakdowns, technical malfunctions, a cable fire accident, or simply the disappearance or exhaustion of the ensemble cast, the sense of precarity and catastrophic contingency that is raised in these scenarios is only heightened.[200] Thus, the act of narration is volatilized in a series of discontinuous literary acts, reduced to a subject-less form of first-person literature (not to be mistaken with stream-of-consciousness techniques) in which a depersonalized narrator is captured by a escalating language of damage mitigation that is inscribed with

198 Röggla, "dunkelziffer," 255, 242.

199 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. "And: Phenomenology of the End." *e-flux*. https://www.e-flux.com/live/67021/and-phenomenology-of-the-end-lecture-by-franco-bifo-berardi/ [last accessed 18.07.2023].

200 Cf. Krauthausen, *Wette auf die Wirklichkeit*, 164n22. Concerning the "temporal anomaly" that follows from meshing indirect discourse (suggesting a certain posteriority of narration) and direct speech (insinuating the simultaneity of narration and narrated content), the eruptions that bring these texts to a hold can be read as a culmination of the temporal disjunction that is already at work in the dividual prose giving way to these set pieces in the first place.

its own planned obsolescence all while counteracting narrative finalization by continually putting new "discount- und abverkaufsvokabeln" up for sale to re-package the crisis in new guises. Contemporary power, then, is shown to manage the destabilizations of crisis by mitigating the representational failures of neoliberalism with the very ideological presuppositions provided by that mode of capitalist governance. The fog of crisis is exploited as it provokes a perpetual demand for new strategies to contain the risks and volatilities that neoliberal epistemology proved unable to predict and moderate in the first place.[201] Hence, *die alarmbereiten* traverses the aesthetic dilemma posed by the representation of crisis by turning to the crisis of representation encrypted in the throwaway idioms of crisis-management. That way, Röggla's prose stages a second-order catastrophe that materializes in language itself. Less than presenting a moment of revelation, then, these scenes of failed communication further emphasize the disabling effects of crisis on representation. Language itself is turned into a scene of crisis.

5 The Representation of Structures: Pinpointing Crisis in Language

In *die alarmbereiten* crisis-management has veritably risen to a site of representational dominance. Insofar the making of an integrated global economy is itself a fundamentally aesthetic problem, one might say that Röggla truly has taken to heart Jameson's claim that "any comprehensive new theory of finance capitalism will need to reach out into the expanded realm of cultural production to map its effects."[202] Detaching itself from an unattainable ideal of social complexity that hovers at the edge of literary form as an excess of the empirical over the aesthetic, her prose turns (in line with the other authors discussed in this study) to the representation of representation. As remarked before, in this, Röggla follows the linguistically inflected documentary programs of someone like Fichte for whom the reflection upon the inner dynamics

201 Cf. Davies/McGoey, "Rationalities of Ignorance," 79.
202 Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 143.

of language ("Eigengesetzlichkeit der Sprache") is the means whereby literature entertains a relation to empirical reality in the first place.[203] Her writing is, hence, caught up in a swelling linguistic bubble that refracts the bubbles of overcapitalization.[204]

On the level of form, this is realized, as demonstrated, in a series of precarious text fragments which take us into the middle of somersaulting linguistic chains that, eventually, fail to stabilize narration only to re-start it in another setting. From piece to piece, the sense of compounding risks is re-packaged, chasing readers across the manifold arenas of the unfolding crises of the present. The results are condensed fictional configurations that propose to capture the complexity of contemporary crisis discourses by turning to the unspoken language-logical substructures operative in these communication situations. Karin Krauthausen has proposed a similar formulation regarding the literary reportage *wir schlafen nicht*. Yet, she phrases Röggla's language work in terms of the "exemplary."[205] By contrast, I would argue, the steadily changing phrase-mongering encountered in *die alarmbereiten* rather follows an axiomatic logic (in a Deleuze/Guattarian sense).[206] From

203 Cf. Stephan Kammer and Karin Krauthausen. "Für einen strukturalen Realismus. Einleitung." *Make it Real. Für einen Strukturalen Realismus*. Stephan Kammer and Karin Krauthausen (Eds.). Zürich: Diaphanes. 43.

204 Whereas someone like Höllerer – e.g. in his journal *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* (1967) – proposed to engage the language of technical rationality and its tension with other sign systems, Röggla rather engages the obscurity effects generated by the dislocations and breakdown syndromes of the neoliberal compact. Grammatic is not approximated to the formal logic of mathematical calculation or the ideologemes of instrumental reason. Rather, it encrypts the collapse of scientific knowledge into scalable information and speculation, thereby sounding out the linguistic overproduction of a risk discourse that constantly fails to contain the encoded contingencies of crisis.

205 Krauthausen, "Gespräche mit Untoten," 214.

206 See again Jameson, "Marxism and Dualism in Deleuze," 18. "At any rate, it is precisely as an axiomatic that Deleuze and Guattari begin their discussion of capital […]: Codes have a momentary self-sufficiency about them, whether they subsist in the form of decorations (bodily tattoos, for example) or in the form of custom and myth, and even though they are prone to transformation into other codes in the immense slippage of history. Axioms, on the other hand, are operational; they do not offer anything for commentary or exegesis, but rather are merely a set of rules to be put into effect. And this is the sense in which capitalism repairs itself and surmounts its contradictions by adding new axioms: you are supposed to believe in a pure market system, that is to say, a rather simple axiomatic positing undisturbed exchanges. But when there is a crisis in free trade or the gold standard, you add the more complex axioms of Keynesianism: those do not modify the axiomatic of

failing emergency drills in "die zuseher" to the catastrophe business that foreign aid is inherently built upon in "das recherchegespenst," literary form shrinks to the instantiation of ever-new presents of time. As such, these texts lack narrative continuity but constantly re-work, in language, the self-reproducing logic of capitalist crisis-management. That way, the contradictions of one crisis scenery return and are re-processed in the guise of the preceding or subsequent texts in the volume.

This "spinning of the given moment's scenarios," as one might say with a nod to Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, already comes to the fore in the very first paragraph of *die alarmbereiten*, which engages in a proliferating act of speculation – non-attributable to any defined agent – that summarizes partly the threat-landscape traversed in the various pieces:

> *mal sehen, ob die wälder wieder brennen, mal sehen, ob starke hitze uns entgegenschlägt. mal sehen, ob der rauch die tiere aus den büschen treibt […], mal sehen, ob das eine stille nach sich zieht. […] mal sehen, ob sich wassermassen gegen brücken stemmen oder dämme längst gebrochen sind. mal sehen, ob gebäudeteile auf uns niederfallen, ja, mal sehen, ob das ganze runterkommt und eine staubwolke uns entgegenschlägt, […]. mal sehen, ob sich autos überschlagen und sich metall ineinanderschiebt. mal sehen, ob eine stromleitung auf der fahrbahn liegt. […] mal sehen, ob sich wieder was tut.*[207]

It is, then, seemingly harmless formulas such as the conditional clause "mal sehen, ob" that come to execute the axiomatic logic of contemporary crisis-management, which is irreducible to particular ideological codes but realizes itself instead in a steadily changing phrase-mongering. Across her short-stories, Röggla accumulates a glossary of crisis

capitalism but merely complicate the operations that make it up. There can be no return here to any simpler axiomatic or purer form of capitalism; only the addition of ever more rules and qualifications (rules against rules, for example, a dismantling of Keynesianism that has to use the latter's structures and institutions in order to fulfill itself)."

207 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 7. The meaning of these serial catastrophe projections hinges upon the speculation suturing the list: "mal sehen, ob sich wieder was tut." It shifts the focus from a series of more or less concretized threat scenarios to the probability space of a global threat-environment. Setting the tone for the subsequent texts, this passage from the particular to the general designates a transition from concrete to abstract risk.

that is always unequal to itself: from signifiers of climate change denial such as "klimahysterie," through watchwords of the financial press like "kreditklemme," to keywords of humanitarian interventionism such as "demokratieexport" or bio-security terminology as for instance "super-spreader."[208] In *die alarmbereiten,* the "fachwörterpegelstand"[209] – the water level of crisis-management terms – keeps on increasing, as it reads most literally in "der übersetzer," subsuming any upcoming discursive field to the same logic of risk. In the German original, this comes the fore even more poignantly since the word combination just quoted, associating technocratic vocabulary with water gauges, already enmeshes in itself the excess in language with the image of rising sea levels.[210] Similar metaphorical constructions can be found in "die erwachsenen," where everything – from children through climatic conditions to zoonotic diseases – morphs into ticking time bombs ("tickende bombe[n]"[211]). Unable to keep its sprawling imagery in check, the short-story ushers in an utter metaphorical disorder wherein conceptual domains simply mesh into one other. Worries about auto-immune disorders, performance pressure at school, the fear of social downward mobility, job-market competition, or concerns over infection risks all come to form part of a conflated language of risk. By establishing this sprawling "chain of equivalences,"[212] the volume brings a plethora of seemingly incommensurate fields into relationship with each other. *die alarmbereiten* juxtaposes the multifarious and intertwined crises of the first two decades of the 21st century in an escalating verbosity that blurs risk discourses and discerns between the lines the mutation of crisis into a concept of permanence.

208 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 38, 55, 106 and 84.

209 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55.

210 See also Alo Allkemper. "Kathrin Röggla: 'stottern.'" *Poetologisch-Poetische Interventionen: Gegenwartsliteratur schreiben*. Alo Allkemper et al. (Eds.). München: Wilhelm Fink. 418. Allkemper frames this kind of linguistic overdetermination in terms of "surreal catachreseses." By binding together what does not belong together, for example collapsing the literal sense of technical terminology into the metaphorical associations evoked by it, Röggla brings forward a certain linguistic overdetermination in the language of emergency that gives an idea of its expansive tendency.

211 Röggla, die alarmbereiten 72.

212 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. New York/London: Verso. 129.

The mimetic quality of *die alarmbereiten* resides precisely in this recombinant prose. None of the texts stands by itself. Rather, the usage of the serial technique forms an overarching "extradiegetic structure"[213] in which the texts are synchronized – concatenated – by a shared language of abstract risk. Across the "linguistic chains" of crisis-management, then, crisis is made to appear in multiple shapes, where each text re-iterates the structure of escalation of the previous piece. That way, the volume pinpoints contiguities that would remain unseen in treating these settings as "'isolated' complexes of facts."[214] In that fashion, her short texts mean to catch up on a totalizing discursive formation that does not remain restricted to separate economic sectors or social sub-systems. The logic of abstract risk claims general representational validity, annexing the language of social interaction itself and forming concatenations in all possible domains of knowledge. Seemingly heterogenous discourses are connected to each other so as to discern the social link that unconsciously haunts them all.

Similar to DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, then, Röggla's axiomatic approach departs from maximalist kinds of fiction that seek to reproduce the social totality in themselves.[215] Instead, it proposes to write out struc-

213 Krauthausen, "Wette auf die Wirklichkeit," 182. Krauthausen makes her observation with regard to another short-story volume by Röggla, Nachtsendung from 2016, but more on the level of plot: "Strukturell gesehen ist jede einzelne Binnen-Erzählung ein 'Wiedergänger' aller anderen, und alle zusammen verweisen auf etwas, das nicht selbst erscheinen kann, aber als Prinzip die Wiederholung antreibt."

214 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 6.

215 Cf. Sharae Deckard. "Capitalism's Long Spiral: Periodicity, Temporality and the Global Contemporary in World Literature." *Literature and the Global Contemporary. New Comparisons in World Literature*. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri (Eds.). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 86–87; Leerom Medovoi. "Terminal Crisis? From the Worlding of American Literature to World-System Literature." *American Literary History* 23:3. 657. Deckard draws a lucid comparison to the cartographers in Borges' *Del Rigor en la Ciencia* (1946), who forego abstraction for extreme exactitude or detail and thereby end up producing a map as vast as the charted empire itself, which is ultimately useless as it is too concrete to serve as a means of orientation. In this, she also articulates a normative outlook, stating with reference to Leerom Medovoi that "world-systemic literary criticism looks not for literature that maps 'the scales and coordinates of the globe […] as might a chart of gross domestic products, oil consumption, or ballistic missiles' but rather for writing that 'maps the dynamics of the system as an interplay of subject and object – power and desire, force and affect – as they are propelled by the spatial dialectics of territory and capital.'"

tures.[216] As such, her literary method recalls Bertolt Brecht's critique of photo-realism wherein the playwright remarks that the differential reality of modern capitalism, mediated by an international division of labour, could not be reduced to its reified image in the form of a factory or firm headquarters. For such a pictorial representation revealed merely a particular sequence in the process of capital accumulation while concealing the set of relations giving way to its emergence. As "reality has slipped into the functional,"[217] the surface appearance of a single manufacturing site or company's seat only functions as a means of disappearance that hides the underlying economic processes. Therefore, according to him, "something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed" to re-trace the modes of appearance and disappearance characterizing capitalism as a mode of (re)production.[218] The kind of language work deployed by Röggla might be said to constitute precisely such an artifice.[219]

That said, it does not suffice to focus on the intertextual references at work in her prose. Sure, there is a considerable temptation to situate the critical impetus of *die alarmbereiten* in the way the various pieces

216 Stephan Kammer and Karin Krauthausen, "Für einen strukturalen Realismus," 14, 43, 50. This expression is derived from Kammer's and Krauthausen's case for an exploration of how narrative form encodes structures: "wie narrative Darstellungen Strukturen anschreiben." In their critical intervention, they try to retrace a subterranean connection between literary realism and structuralism (from Jakobson through Barthes and Lévi-Strauss to Derrida) that finds itself condensed in Hubert Fichte's coinage of a "structural realism." Especially interested in a kind of literature that harnesses the hidden potentials of grammar, they follow up on a lineage – from the likes of Gottfried Keller through Fichte to Thomas Meinecke, Milo Rau, or exactly Röggla – that cultivates this untapped narrative resource as the condition sine qua non of realistic representation.

217 Bertolt Brecht. "The Threepenny Trial: A Sociological Experiment." *Bertold Brecht on Film and Radio*. Marc Silberman (Ed. & Transl). Bloomsbury. 164–165. "[…] less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp Works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. […]. The reification of human relations – the factory, say – means that they are no longer explicit."

218 Brecht, "Threepenny Trial," 165.

219 Cf. Kammer/Krauthausen, "Für einen strukturalen Realismus," 16. Kammer and Krauthausen, too, position Röggla's "strategic realism" in the tradition of Brecht's re-formulation of the task of realism.

summon up specific discourses of risk. But that would mean to undo the formal structure of her texts. My wager, by contrast, is that the documentary technique used in the set pieces taps into the grammar of crisis language as a hidden source of poetry[220] and means of estrangement so as to distort the dispositive of contemporary crisis-management into recognizability.[221] In her texts, then, the found signifiers of risk discourses are re-signified, de-familiarized, literalized, or short-circuited with each other to uncover their semantic overdetermination, bring forward unseen ideological meanings, and the ambivalences in the worst-case scenario as a mode of governance. The most inconspicuous expressions such as "mal sehen, ob" come to function as "mots d'ordre"[222] that codify a specific mode of speculation, while strange syntagmatic partners such as "schrottprämienerklärung" enmesh the plugging of liquidity gaps and plot holes in the market economy. In "die erwachsenen," again, the terminology of bio-security is repurposed to metaphorize the immunization of public discourse against the "ansteckungswahrscheinlichkeiten"[223] of a climate protection discourse that *risks* becoming a nuisance to the status quo. Against this background, as said before, the notion of "Spracharbeit" must be taken seriously. For Röggla's writing program treats crisis language – in a manner akin to clerical work – as a mouldable linguistic material that can be catalogued and re-arranged.

220 Cf. Roman Jakobson. "Linguistics and Poetics." *Language in Literature*. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Eds.). London/Cambrdige: The Belknap Press. 90

221 See also Fredric Jameson. 1998. *Brecht and Method*. London/New York: Verso. 39–40. One might, here, also think of the four dimensions of "Verfremdung" that Jameson identifies in Brecht's work. 1) the "distancing effect" or *ostranenie* as the Russian formalists put it, that is, techniques that make the familiar look strange; 2) the decryption of everyday activity as itself inescapably mimetic: Brechtian theatre purports to show that we are all actors; 3) the cancellation of "Einfühlung," that is, "Verfremdung" as "Entfühlung"; 4) estrangement as an act of ideology critique that counteracts the naturalization of the contingent by showing an object to be, indeed, historical.

222 Deleuze/Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 79. The concept of "mots d'ordre" designates "not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to explicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in a statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a 'social obligation.'"

223 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 75.

In *die alarmbereiten* literary form, then, is underwritten and driven forward by a "détournement" of the seemingly never-ending chattering of crisis experts. As such, though, this peculiar usage of the cut/up method does not so much exert a subversive function – forcing words to rebel against linguistic norms and refuse service to the ruling ideology as the Situationists put it[224] – but a mimetic character that brings forward the "stottern"[225] of the discourses of power as an integral feature of neoliberal governance. Similarly, in that respect, Röggla's systematic use of small letters inherited from the Neo-Dadaist Vienna Group[226] – which in German language marks a gesture of orthographic irritation – does not pertain a transgressive impetus. If the turn against capital letters once marked a serious critique of the hierarchies inscribed into words themselves, in *die alarmbereiten* the flattening of literary syntax rather has a representational quality. Instead of figuring a negation of bourgeois culture, literature's disenchantment of the sign, now, seems to decode the de-totalizing gestures and assaults on signification proper to the "schrottprämienerklärungen" of neoliberalism.[227] In fact, the consistent application of small letters and, thus, the removal of visual markers of orientation captures textual display in a static image of de-differentiation,[228] which befits Röggla's effort to interrelate the heterogenous settings visited in the volume by interweaving them through a common language of risk.

The critical impulse of *die alarmbereiten*, hence, does not consist in a subversion of power's totalizing effects. To the contrary, it is at work in the redirection of literary representation toward crisis language as an impersonal medium which precisely resists the narrative miniaturiza-

224 Cf. Situationist International, "All the King's Men." 153.
225 Röggla, "dunkelziffer," 282; Röggla, *Nachtsendung*, 213–14.
226 Cf. Kremer, *Milieu und Performativität,* 119; Felix Maschewski and Nina Peter. "Finanz- und postindustrielle Arbeitswelt in der Gegenwartsliteratur." *Handbuch Literatur & Ökonomie*. Joseph Vogl and Burkhardt Wolf (Eds.), Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter. 649.
227 The use of lowercase spelling in Röggla's pieces, hence, appears as a strange double of the aesthetic avantgarde that performs the antiquating of the subversive art of the past in the face of capital's proper iconoclastic fervour.
228 Cf. Natalie Moser. "Angebot ohne Nachfrage." *Der große Crash. Wirtschaftskrisen in Literatur und Film*. Nicole Mattern and Timo Rouget (Eds.). Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann. 313.

tion and parcellation undertaken by dividing today's overlapping emergencies into separate contingencies dealt with *in medias res.* Against neoliberal mantras of unknowability, Röggla's work tracks the linguistic traces of a "löcherstopfsystem" that instantiates this unknowability in the first place and, thereby, perpetuates the crisis-ridden "something" that emerges along the way in these "daily adjustments." In tracing the in-built wreckage of the linguistic concatenations of crisis-management, that is, *die alarmbereiten* brings to the fore a strangely de-temporalized state of crisis that otherwise would remain obscured. The volume, then, refrains from confronting the representation of the "enormity effects"[229] presented by the nexus of capitalist globalization and economic crisis or the "ecological rifts"[230] driven by it in a direct way. Instead, the collected texts examine from different angles the "tics and tremors"[231] in the charting techniques of crisis-management as it purports to manufacture a certain narratability of an increasingly unresponsive social reality while simultaneously contributing to the reproduction of that very situation. The erratic literary complex that is *die alarmbereiten* proposes to confront the limit to narrativization posed by global crises in and through a mode of representation that produces an effect of the real by traversing the representational failures of the dominant means of containment.

Here, one might think back to the way "recherchegespenst" stages the irreconcilability between the narrative requisites of the popular press and the raw material of reporting. The narrator precisely fails/refuses to break the story. Instead, the research notes become more and more unrepresentable: "ich saugte informationen in mich hinein und ließe sie dann im unendlichen raum, der sich hinter geschichten auftue, verpuffen."[232] In the end, nothing but a failed work of writing remains. The informational overload does not cohere into a legible and saleable narrative. Nonetheless, the set piece unfolds precisely as a collateral damage of the failed acts of signification accumulated across the

229 Carole Levine. "The Enormity Effect." *Genre* 50:1. 59–75.
230 John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York. *The Ecological Rift. Capitalism's War on the Earth*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 81, 84, 243.
231 Cunningham, "Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis," 5.
232 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 113.

exchange between 1st and 3rd person narration. Form and failure, then, come together as the intended article about the NGO sector does not materialize. By reconstructing the circumstances of failed representation, that is, the piece in turn realizes an indirect delineation of the stresses and strains placed on narrative form by the complexes at hand. In an almost meta-literary manoeuvre, the struggle between the raw material of writing and the constraints posed to writing turns itself into a forming principle. In fact, the text explicitly refers to the characters of the article project as "personal"[233] – with the narrator as a kind of staff manager who leaves behind a disoriented ensemble cast that fails to effect performance in a story given form by "menschliche rote fäden." The free indirect labour of the literary personnel, to return to this notion, fails to be exploited for profitable means. Yet, it is precisely by staging this conflict between mode of research and mode of representation – compelling the structural constraints on form into the open – that the short piece allows for something like a narratability of these social structures.[234]

233 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 115.

234 Nicholas Brown. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press. 8–9, 92. At stake is thus a problem identified by Nicholas Brown in his study of the abolition of aesthetic autonomy in the real subsumption of artmaking to the heteronomy of capital: "But if a work of art is only a commodity, interpretive tools suddenly make no sense at all. Since the only intention embodied in its form is the intention of exchange, the form the object takes is determined elsewhere from where it is made: that is, by (more or less informed guesses about) the market." Literary criticism, in that case, "would be a pointless endeavor" since what is encountered in the text work would be nothing but "desires represented by the market." This also heavily resembles Röggla's assessment of the position of the author in the contemporary production relations: "Der reinste Irrsinn? Der reinste Irrsinn, bzw. eine Variante von entweder: 'im Geschäft bleiben' oder 'im Diskurs bleiben,' 'im Gespräch bleiben,' sich unterhalten – Geld verdienen. (natürlich!) Die Rolle des Schriftstellers bzw. der Schriftstellerin hat sich enorm gewandelt in den letzten 20 Jahren, sie hat sich angeglichen den zahlreichen Formen des eifrigen Dabeiseins [...]" (Kathrin Röggla. "Literatur und Politik – Betrieb und System." *Essenpoetik. Drei Vorlesungen als Poet in Residence an der Universität Duisburg-Essen*. 3. https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/germanistik/lum/roeggla-essenpoetik.pdf [last accessed 10.05.2021]). Counter to first impressions, however, Brown does not give up on the idea of aesthetic autonomy, but hangs on to Kant's notion of a self-legislating work of art. In fact, he proposes to rephrase the conditions of autonomy in the present. Claiming (via Bourdieu's concept of "restricted production") that in the post-war era the literary market still constituted a niche separate from the general commodity market, subject to its own immanent rules, he proceeds to historize Adorno's aesthetic theory. While in the context of first-gen-

The piece "die zuseher" is another telling case in point. The meeting protocol that mediates the action in the piece sets off amid a not further specified catastrophic event, as the titular spectators place a deserted supermarket parking lot under observation. Against the expectations of the self-stylized crisis experts the expected crowds of panic buyers fail to appear. Eventually, the "out there" folds back into the observation room of the supposed disaster tourism agency. The panoptical illusion of the "zuseher" is undone, as they, too, become part of the obscure "da draußen." There is, hence, an interior connection between the textual form of the protocol as a precarious refuge of the enunciating subject and the contingent materiality of the narrative spaces traversed in *die alarmbereiten.* These fragile scenes of spatial isolation serve as "panic rooms" for the (in)direct speech of Röggla's voided literary characters, which disappear almost as soon as the differentiation between "drinnen" and "draußen" loses its consistency. In "die ansprechbare" this is underwritten by a particular sense of horror. While the self-proclaimed "kassandrasekretärin" hopes to normalize environmental collapse, it is already taking place. In her gestures of de-realization, she misses what is going on outside. At the end of narration, her containment efforts are disrupted by a mysteriously induced "atemnot" as events catch up to her, even if the 3rd person perspective tries to deny this until the very end:

> ich werde doch jetzt nichts von konkreten auswirkungen faseln und am ende mit einer atemnot kommen […] das werde ich doch nicht sagen, und dass das mein letzter satz gewesen sei."[235]

eration Critical Theory autonomy could still be "assumed," it now must be "asserted." For the restricted market of the literary public sphere that aesthetic autonomy was once contingent upon has dissolved today. Brown thereby advances a post-Kantian and post-Adornian rescue bid for the autonomy of art in times of its total subsumption to capital which identifies the assertion of the immanent purposiveness of aesthetic form as a means to create in the individual work of art an interstitial distance to its incipient commodification. Against this background, Röggla's literary research program, too, can be found to test out various writing strategies that might undermine the structural constraints of the market. The collapse of representation into a failed form, under this aspect, is explored as a potential temporary suspension of the commodity-character of the work of art, precisely as it confronts its own material circumstances and the more general history of literary forms.

235 Röggla, die alarmbereiten, 53.

In a sense, then, the turn to junk language encodes – to repurpose Brecht – a reality that has slipped into the dysfunctional. Distorting reality until it is almost recognizable, Röggla's writing carves out – little by little – a dysfunctional communication situation in which capitalist power is re-doubled in and through crisis. In the states of emergency traversed in the short pieces, the status quo might at first appear suspended. But, at once, the neoliberal order is brought to its logical conclusion in these extreme constellations. Under this aspect, it is fair to say that *die alarmbereiten* does, indeed, propose to pinpoint a certain "meta-crisis" by narrating it through the junk language left behind by neoliberal crisis-management.[236] Röggla's prose ties together the representation of crisis and the crisis of representation as the abstract is concretized "into a series of failed forms."[237] In this, however, an intriguing conflictual dynamic comes to the fore as is already indicated in the strategies of denial documented in "die ansprechbare" that, eventually, turn against first-person narration itself. The closing parts of my reading of *die alarmbereiten* will, therefore, return to the dividualized prose expounded at the beginning of this chapter in order to illustrate that the representation of structures in Röggla's work is, ultimately, concerned with the social antagonisms mediated by the junk language of crisis-management.

6 Anguish Language: Encoding Social Antagonism in Literary Form

The serial sceneries staged in *die alarmbereiten* might generate an effect of the real. But as they stand in alienated parallel to each other they do not give much cause for hope. The kinds of collectives that appear in

236 In distorting the underlying "grammar" of crisis-management to recognizability, the short-pieces also outline the distance between economic abstractions and literary fiction. While economic 'fictions,' that is, speculations precisely seek to authenticate or realize themselves, Röggla's texts disclose their fictional make-up through their highly artificial mise-en-scène. Concerning the distinction between economic speculation and literary fiction see also Christine Künzel. "Fiktion, Fiktionalisierung." Handbuch Literatur & Ökonomie. Joseph Vogl and Burkhard Wolf. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter. 135.

237 Liam Gillick. "Abstract." Written for the project Abstract Possible at the Museo Tamayo. https://www.on-curating.org/issue-20-reader/abstract.html [last accessed 31.03.2026].

the set pieces do so under the sign of impending collapse or division. Consider the dysfunctional meeting between the disaster entrepreneurs in the first story, the polarizing talk show in the closing piece, or the retreat of the NGO-sector into the gated communities of airport and hotel lobbies in "recherchegespenst." Meanwhile, the specious direct speech of 1st person agentive perspective is nothing but a mask for the subject's incapacity to act and speak in its own name: it hides, in fact, a very much unfree discourse. Perhaps this is most pointedly expressed in the repeated usage of the modal verb "können," which is generally conjugated in the subjunctive mood ("könnten"), befitting the capture of the literary personnel in impassive states of speculation as they ponder in the conjunctive about suitable courses of action never to be put into practice. In this, the sense that "there is no alternative" is depicted not only by recourse to specific neoliberal discourses but has sedimented into the minuscule lexical items of language.

What is more, the enunciating subjects appear essentially entrapped in time and space.[238] There is no room for manoeuvre in the short pieces. To put it in theatrical terms: there are no side rooms into which actants could escape and the off-stage retreats as an impossible totality. For these confined subjects there is no conceivable line of escape except in a form of lethal subtraction such as the demise of the failing journalist in "recherchegespenst" who in the end goes missing in the posthuman soundtrack of airport machines: "im leisen geräusch der sich bewegenden maschinen."[239] In "der übersetzer" this attains a more overtly political content. Mapping out a perspective on the present as that which offers no way out, the only exit offered by the piece's spatiotemporal representation is a form of self-liquidation. It ends on the note that either way this school could only be quit via the window and now it would be the turn of the narrator, who almost seems to stand for the

238 Cf. Julian Doepp. "Kathrin Röggla. Über/wider das postdemokratische Schreiben." *Bayerischer Rundfunk*. https://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/hoerspiel-und-medienkunst/hoerspiel-gespraech-roeggla-postdemokratisches-schreiben-100.html [last accessed 31.03.2026]. This fits Röggla's occupation with the possibilities of writing in the context of an increasingly post-democratic economic order, wherein the political processes of decision-making elude popular interference and seem to have objectivized themselves.
239 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 119.

first-person singular in total: "diese schule könne man so oder so nur durch das fenster verlassen und jetzt sei *ich* an der reihe."[240]

Röggla's traversal of the axiomatics of contemporary crisis-management, thus, shows figures that are structurally overpowered by the complexes at hand and the excessive production of language launched to tame them. Throughout the set pieces, this is given material shape in a peculiar blending of textual form with the trope of breathlessness. In "der übersetzer," the staccato of economic vocabulary takes a material toll on the body of the "ich." Again and again, we are alerted to the breathlessness of the narrator: "als ob ich irgendein gesundheitsproblem hätte, als ob irgendetwas nicht in ordnung wäre."[241] Captured in the perennial training of late neoliberal work culture – "es gebe keine endergebnisse, diese nachhilfestunde gehe immer weiter"[242] – the exhausted narrator is pushed to do overtime and constantly rehearse the absolute lack of alternatives enclosing its predicament: "'im grunde bin ich ja schon für die marktwirtschaft' oder 'ich als bekennender marktwirtschaftler'"[243] This problematization of breathing becomes even more acute in "die ansprechbare," which establishes a connection between the speed of discourse and air pollution. Not only is breathable air declared a scarce resource at the start of "die ansprechbare" but from page to page the calling party herself has more and more trouble breathing. In the end, just as she is out words she is also quite literally out of breath.[244] Ultimately, the entire personnel of *die alarmbereiten* is outpaced by the proliferating discourse of risk. First-person narration is not only taken over by an alien language but literally made breathless.

240 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten,* 69 (emphasis added)
241 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 65.
242 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 67.
243 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.
244 See also Kathrin Röggla. "die alarmbereiten." *Bayerischer Rundfunk*. 50'30"– 53'12". http://www.br-online.de/podcast/mp3-download/bayern2/mp3-download-podcasthoerspiel-pool.shtml [last accessed 15.10.2017]. In the radio play of the same name this textual effect takes on an acoustic dimension by simulating sonic effects such as line noise. While pauses between sentences become shorter, the monologue picks up more and more speed such that the readers are literally gasping for breath. In the final stages, audio tracks are used to play in noises of heathy breathing to accentuate the scene of suffocation that is taking place.

Further evidence of this literary motif can already be found in *wir schlafen nicht*, where readers encounter insomniac business consultants whom capital follows into their sleep.[245] The frenzied business consultants experience stasis as a threat.[246] This permanent unrest or workaholism ("arbeitssucht"[247]) takes control of the entire bodily apparatus as the pace of competition modulates even physiological needs after its image. To keep up with market velocities, these salaried masses therefore resort to a vast array of stimulants ("amphetamine"; "alkohol"; "red bull", "kaffee"[248]). Under these circumstances, sleep turns into a rare resource. It is not merely reframed as a competitive disadvantage that one cannot afford. No matter whether one would like to or not, capital-induced sleep depravity has inscribed itself into the body: the libidinal investment into work is not a personal choice but structural. There is no outside the sphere of labour: "[es] sei immer arbeit da."[249] Caught in "short-sleeping" and "quick-eating,"[250] these workaholics are steadily haunted by the near-collapse of bodily functions in the form of circulatory failure or nervous breakdown ("kreislaufzusammenbruch," "nervenzusammenbruch"[251]). The titles of the subsequent chapters mirror this invasion of the body. If early sections are captioned with workspace designations or corporate discourses ("die messe", "betrieb", "harte bwl"), these captions slowly merge into qualifiers that address the physical and psychic stress disturbances ("schock," "koma," "gedächtnis") brought about by these accelerated labour processes. Thus, readers follow the descent of capital into the neurological depths of subjective life. Despite the abstract appearance of Röggla's literary personnel, there is always a jump into the psychosomatic in her writing. Encased in iso-

245 Cf. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 34. One could read the topic of corporate insomnia elaborated in *wir schlafen nicht* as an anticipation of Fisher's formula in *Capitalist Realism* that "Capital follows you [even] when you dream."

246 Cf. Eva Kormann. " Zu Kathrin Rögglas wir schlafen nicht." *Zwischen Inszenierung und Botschaft. Zur Literatur deutschsprachiger Autorinnen ab Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Ilse Nagelschmidt et al. (Eds.). Berlin: Frank & Timme. 237.

247 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 127.

248 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 176–177.

249 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 127.

250 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 37.

251 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 127.

lated, narrow situation rooms, the body returns as it is overworked by a fundamentally depersonalized mode of speech.

In a similar way, it is precisely the linguistic excess of crisis-management that marks the gateway for the return of the body in *die alarmbereiten*. Navigating the ruins of neoliberal living and thought by way of language and its failures, her short stories come across a series of overworked and exhausted bodies that are literally brought into respiratory distress by the permanent state of emergency into which they are thrown: "The 'crisis language' apparatus exacts its toll in flesh."[252] In this sense, the tantalized speech acts recorded in the set pieces can be approximated to what John Cunningham and Anthony Iles call "anguish language" in an international project launched to study the "forms of enunciation that socio-economic crisis evokes."[253] Documenting articulations that take place in response to extreme conditions, the pieces bring to stage worn-out subjects that are continually overstrained by the constant signal noise of risk assessment which demands a surplus of alertness from them. The involuntary unfree direct speech into which the "ich" is enlisted, hence, extracts a form of "extra work"[254] as they make these text fragments appear in the first place through their "teilzeitpaniken" and "vollzeitpaniken." From this also ensues the instability of the depicted communication situations since the "ich" appears continually undone in and through the junk language of crisis-management. In this, *die alarmbereiten*'s prose of the dividual is complemented by tropes of breathlessness and memory loss that encode the injunction "to live in conditions of total instability, or 'precarity,' as the ugly neologism has it."[255] Insofar the narrative act is entrapped in a "purely fungible present in which space and psyches alike can be processed and remade at will,"[256] the pieces showcase the material effects of crisis on

252 Cunningham, "Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis," 7.
253 Cunningham, "Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis," 5; See also Anthony Iles. "Anguish Language: Crisis Literature, Speculation and Critique." *Anguish Language: Writing and Crisis*. John Cunningham et al. (Eds.). Berlin: Archive Books. 13ff.
254 Cunningham, "Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis," 7.
255 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 34.
256 Fredric Jameson. "The Antinomies of the Postmodern." *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998*. London/New York: Verso. 57.

language and the toll taken on bodies by the infiltration of everyday speech with the micro-fragments of neoliberal catastrophism.

At times, Röggla's serial technique thereby creates the impression that the volume consists of "*only one character*" which is "distributed across a multiplicity of nodes."[257] In the way literary form splits up speaking and telling into two figures ("ich" and "sie/er"), the performative character of these set pieces becomes hard to notice such that the infringement of 3rd person agentive perspective into the speech of the "ich" creates the initial semblance of a subject in control. Take the figure of the translator in "der übersetzer" which appropriates the voice of the "ich" to formulate the fantasy of an insider capable of overseeing the courses of the world market. Röggla here picks up a fiction quite prevalent in recent culture. Most often this is localized in the mystified figure of the CEO or financier as for example in Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) where insider-personae are projected as "subjects supposed to know" that see behind alienation and close the knowledge gaps in global capitalism. In fact, DeLillo's billionaire-protagonist in *Cosmopolis* puts this reasoning in a nutshell when he declares in a megalomaniac variety of post-Fordist theories of linguistic labour that "[t]he things [he] imagines become facts."[258] By contrast, now, in *die alarmbereiten* this spectacle of delegated agency is internally sabotaged. There might be no verbal sign of resistance from the part of first-person perspective in the "ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself"[259] that is staged here. But, as has already been elaborated, this is an effect of the strangely dividualized prose cultivated in *die alarmbereiten* in which the unfree direct speech of 1st person narration obfuscates the share of the "ich" in the speech situations at hand. The entanglement of direct and indirect speech entices readers to miss the "language work" of the

257 Sianne Ngai. "Theory of the Gimmick." *Critical Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 504. To a certain degree, Röggla's prose is hammering home the message in almost comical fashion.

258 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 192. See also La Berge, *Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 35. La Berge, here, is certainly right to speak of a model of "financial masculinity" that is reproduced from Trump's *The Art of the Deal* through *American Psycho* and Michel Douglas' performance as Gordon Gecko to Di Caprio's portrayal of Jordan Belfort and late influencers/pick up artists such as Andrew Tate.

259 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 7.

narrating I in this subjunctivized way of speaking. Nonetheless, considering the indivisibility of "ich" and "er/sie" in Röggla's prose, both turn out to be wholly contingent upon each other. The "ich" has no independent standpoint but neither does 3rd person perspective. Thereby, I argue, the pieces substitute the transference of inside knowledge onto the "wealthy Other, which is supposed to know for the subject,"[260] for the writing of power structures. The texts stage a hopelessly unequal competition between first- and third-person narration for the reader's attention that reproduces the political and social polarizations played out on the content-level of the short-stories.

At this point, one can conclude that Röggla cultivates the capacity of language practices to register the asymmetries of the socio-political order. In her pieces,

> 'anguish language' is itself a performative act that says something of the antagonism within and against personal and socio-economic crises otherwise elided by more conventional political responses.[261]

Throughout the set pieces, the narrating I vacates the position of centrality that usually comes with first-person narration. Instead, it is turned into a refuse of the literary attention economy. Its voice is expropriated by an imposing third-person monologue. That way, the representation of the austere discursive logic of crisis languages exposes something about the hierarchies of value inscribed into the vernacular of risk re-circulated in *die alarmbereiten*. Enlisted into narration as exchangeable producers of micro-fragments in the recombinant prose of crisis-management, the "ich" always risks being rendered surplus to the attention economy of the text. The narrative setup of "der übersetzer" is pretty telling in this regard. From the start, the narrative perspective of the "ich" is usurped by her seat neighbour who acts up as a market insider capable of translating the conceptual abstractions deployed in the self-representations of finance. Yet, this act of translation concerns less a decryption of the "foreign language" of capital markets than an

260 Tomšič, Capitalist Unconscious, 165.
261 Cunningham, "Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis," 6.

exposition of the relations of asymmetry perpetuated by neoliberal crisis-management, that is, the "abstract symbolic violence"[262] issuing from the redistribution of risk from top to bottom. The narrator is antagonized incessantly: from remarks addressing its "schmuddellook"[263] to the point where the "ich" is downright confronted with her superfluidity vis-à-vis the law of profit governing the economy. In contrast to the spectacular suicides of hedge fund managers, the demise of the narrator – associated with the recent suicide wave among the Indian peasantry – is denied any "nachrichtenwert" whatsoever. In this sense, the text marks out a constant negotiation of value that stretches from aesthetic judgements and denigrations of the education level of the poor to appraising the value of human life.

In the meta-representational reflections that characterize "recherchegespenst," now, the issue of informational value emerges even more overtly as a matter of class as it negotiates the "economy of attention"[264] that coincides with the neo-colonial division of labour. Humanitarian aid is shown as a crucial scene of crisis-management that gestures toward the disparities of public grieving.[265] In contrast to the neo-colonial subjects met in the margins of the piece, reduced to bargaining chips in the trade in attention, the personnel of international NGOs act as objects and protagonists of the writing process. From the start – "unheimlich schnell sei das ja gegangen" – these "organisationsmenschen" interfere into the representational act.[266] They constitute themselves as a powerful blend of "zuseher" (to take up the title of the first piece in the volume) whose display of interest in particular issues perpetuates the asymmetries inscribed in crisis-management: the unequal global distribution of vulnerability is re-doubled in an unequal distribution of newsworthy lives. The piece, thus, opens with the "beobachtung

262 LiPuma/Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, 26.
263 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 57.
264 Cf. Georg Franck. *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit. Ein Entwurf*. München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag. 13.
265 See also Judith Butler. "Precariousness and Grievability." *Verso Blog*. https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/2339-judith-butler-precariousness-and-grievability [last accessed 17.07.2023].
266 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 98.

einer neuen klasse"[267] that shows itself in the Global South or post-Soviet countries and even comes with its own, exclusive infrastructure.[268] Yet, the class-character of this social stratum is continuously effaced as is already indicated in the struggle between first- and third-person narration as to the correct denomination of this "NGO-pulk": whereas the "ich" prefers to speak of "klasse," her brother insists on "milieu" as a more marketable sales pitch.[269] Here, indeed, class struggle proves among other things a struggle about the term "class" itself.[270]

By means of this class description, then, "recherchegespenst" effects a *mise-en-abyme* of the class system into which representation itself is inscribed. This is further complicated by implicating – through the prism of freelancer journalism – the material conditions of writing into representation. Relating the representational act back to the economic pressures of self-employment, the piece short-circuits the NGO-ification of the social question with a negotiation of the effects on form exerted by the commercial press. This is given an existential spin when the narrator's brother draws a menacing comparison between the day-by-day status of freelance professionals and Scheherazade, the storyteller framing *One Thousand and One Nights*, who has to make up stories night by night to suspend her beheading. But whereas the drive to keep on narrating in the case of Scheherazade springs from the "drohung eines sultans"[271] – the death threat of a monarch – the journalist's injunction to keep on writing stems from the ambivalent freedom of the market in which the self-employed self-responsibly bears "die konsequenzen"[272] of aborting the writing process. Thereby, "recherchegespenst" offers a condensed genealogy of systems of domination. Shifting from the relation of lordship and bondage in *One Thousand and One Night* – characterized by a thoroughly personalized form of dependence – to the impersonal constraints of the market, the piece contextualizes freelance jour-

267 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 100.
268 Cf. Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 101.
269 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 98, 100.
270 See also Eva Blome, Patrick Eiden-Offe, Manfred Weinberg. "Klassen-Bildung. Ein Problemaufriss." *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 35:2. 62.
271 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 114.
272 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 115.

nalism as a recent mutation in capitalist employment relations wherein the narrator acts as her own boss ("denn ich sei ja mein eigener chef") but is at once at the mercy of "potentielle brötchengeber."[273] That way, the text marks out a writing process that is thoroughly conditioned by the ups and downs of precariously asymmetric work conditions.

The unequal attention economy delineated across the NGO-piece, thus, appears further aggravated by the subsumption of representation to the laws of exchange, that is, by the unequal distribution of "nachrichtenwert." This is crucially expressed by the metaphor of "recherchegespenst" itself as it encapsulates the sense of unpublished texts accumulated across the piece: research subjects that were discarded, investigative approaches that were given up, life stories that were recorded but then dismissed. The first-person narrator is described to be fascinated "von all den kleinen schwarzen löchern, die da produziert werden […]."[274] In that sense, the piece itself produces veritable research ghosts that become significant precisely in their capacity as unwritten artefacts.[275] The unfinished text is in itself indicative of the precarity of relations dramatized in *die alarmbereiten*. At once, however, it indexes the fade-out of those neo-colonial subjects whose predicament does not even make it into the final cut. The social invisibility of marginalized groups, hence, is re-doubled in the lost research notes and protocols that pervade the pieces.

In this sense, "recherchegespenst" translates the tensions of political economy into the conflict lines of writing: antagonism is encoded into literary form. This also counts more broadly for the volume overall. As the idioms of crisis circulating across the texts refract the conflicting social relations between Röggla's literary personnel, *die alarmbereiten* puts "den gesellschaftlichen Widerspruch"[276] at the heart of representation. Appearing as an overwhelming monologue that is, at once, split

273 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 114, 96.
274 Röggla, die alarmbereiten, 110.
275 See f. ex. Röggla, *das stottern des realismus*, 14ff. In a certain sense, this runs parallel to a gimmick frequently used in Röggla's poetological texts, when she points to the mass of unwritten works that overshadow her oeuvre.
276 Kathrin Röggla. "Blinde Flecken. Kritik und Realismus." *Die falsche Frage. Theater, Politik, und die Kunst, das Fürchten nicht zu verlernen. Saarbrücker Poetikdozentur für Dramatik*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit. 82.

internally, the set pieces stage in the collision between agentive perspectives the polarities at the bottom of emergency discourses. In this, it seems that the effacement of the enunciating subject functions as a pre-condition for the self-assertion of the 3rd person singular. Here, Anthony Iles' analysis of "anguish language" provides an intriguing point of comparison by citing an anonymous pro-capitalist pamphlet distributed in Zuccotti Park at the height of "Occupy Wall Street" which is worth quoting at length:

> I didn't hear America complaining when the market was roaring […]. Well now the market crapped out, and even though it has come back somewhat, the government and the average Joes are still looking for a scapegoat. […] Well, here we are. Go ahead and continue to take us down, but you're only going to hurt yourselves. What's going to happen when we can't find jobs on the Street anymore? Guess what: We're going to take yours. […] We don't demand a union. We don't retire at 50 with a pension. We eat what we kill, and when the only thing left to eat is on your dinner plates, we'll eat that. [...] we are going to survive.[277]

Commenting that this, too, is an example of "anguish language," Ilse interprets the leaflet as an aggressive attempt at "reconstruct[ing] a subject in a radically changed reality" which proceeds – as if it were "competition's interior monologue" – by "identify[ing] fully […] with the movement of capital […] as it squashes human life downwards."[278] Pointing out the tremors in the language of structural adjustment, the literary critic notes that the management of crisis is articulated in and through a declaration of enmity that projects systemic inconsistencies outwards. It is with this aggressive mode of articulation in mind that I want to show – in the following – how the monologues-that-are-none staged across *die alarmbereiten* are similarly driven by a logic of animosity in which third-person narration tries to persevere by deflecting the crisis into violent speech acts directed against the first-person singular.

277 Anon. Flyer distributed at Occupy Wall Street, c. 2011. Quoted after: Iles, "Anguish Language," 40–41.
278 Iles, "Anguish Language," 41.

7 Risk & Resentment: Writing the "Lärmkrieg" of Crisis-Management

It is, then, true that the communication situations depicted in *die alarmbereiten* are highly polarized. The agents of direct speech – 1st person narrators – seem to expire on the spot as they never manage to speak in their own name. Third-person actors, on the other hand, are presented as insolent loudmouths. In fact, the volume *die alarmbereiten* can be read as an early attempt to come to terms with those kinds of social types – "Verhinderungspersönlichkeiten" or "Wutbürger"[279] – that Röggla places under review in her later work of the 2010s. The sort of discord that characterizes the set pieces articulates itself in opposition to the technocratic risk scenarios of contemporary crisis-management. Interestingly, however, this contentious pose does not come along with a perspective of social upheaval. Rather, it demands the return to business-as-usual. The "kassandrasekretärin," for instance, contests climate science to keep on trusting in the central institutions of capitalist life. As such, the raging discourse of 3rd person perspective inheres an escalating dynamic. The more the authority of explanatory modes is compromised, the more first-person narrators are antagonized by their interlocutors. Again, one can find pre-figurations of this hostile discursive logic in Röggla's earlier work.[280] For instance, in *wir schlafen nicht* the depicted work environments of corporate consulting are said to be void of any socializing capacities ("keine sozialisation"), engendering instead a gruesome dynamic of competition wherein colleagues veritably give themselves the creeps ("sie gruselten sich voreinander") and experience each other as uncanny creatures ("unheimlich geworden").[281] It is thus not surprising that one of the last chapters in *wir schlafen nicht* – captioned "schock" – introduces the notion of "alarmismus" into her

279 Kathrin Röggla. "Lärmkrieg." *Engagement. Konzepte von Gegenwart und Gegenwartsliteratur*. Jürgen Brokoff, Ursula Geitner, Kerstin Stüssel (Eds.). Göttingen: V&R unipress. 439.

280 See also Alexandra Pontzen. "Unheimlich vertraut. Kapitalismuskritik und Ressentimentpoetik in Kathrin Rögglas *Nachtsendung. Unheimliche Geschichten*." *Literatur im Ausnahmezustand. Beiträge zum Werk Kathrin Rögglas*. Friedhelm Marx and Julia Schöll (Eds.). Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann. 145.

281 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 33, 201.

work.[282] In a retroactive reading, then, the "emergencylärm"[283] at the heart of *die alarmbereiten* appears as a subterranean strand of the New Economy that finally comes into its own in the orders of crisis-management scrutinized in Röggla's short-story volume.[284]

It might prove useful to reconsider the etymological proximity of the word "Alarm" to another keyword of Röggla's literary project: "Lärm" (Engl.: "noise"), since both notions are derived from the Italian exclamation "all'arme" (Engl.: "call to arms"). As indicated by the title of the short reportage *Lärmkrieg* (2014), which documents the legal and political disputes surrounding the extension of Frankfurt airport, Röggla draws a close line between conflict and noise. She considers the inherently conflictual character of a "doxological" political terrain, wherein knowledge seems to have de-differentiated into scalable information, colliding arts of persuasion, hostile rhetorical speaking modes, and mere differences of opinion. Yet, she thereby does not mean a transhistorical social phenomenon but something quite specific. Her work is preoccupied with the writing of a peculiar dynamic of social polarization that is associated particularly with the dissolution of attention into a rare resource of oversaturated media economies marked by an incessant competition for this most precious asset. [285]

Such is the case in "wilde jagd," which portrays the media haunting of a kidnap victim after her escape, thematizing the coalescing of personal crisis and attention economies. Here, expected return rates turn into a general mode of representation that encroaches upon the social relation itself. As the text suggests a proximity between the economic concept of "interest" and its everyday usage in terms of "being interested in" ("interessiert"), caregiving is gradually reframed as a form of labour: "aufmerksamkeitsleistungen, zuhörleistungen […]."[286]

282 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 186.
283 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 19.
284 See also Roxanne Philipps. *Die Regierung der Menschen erzählen. Figurationen der Gouvernementalität bei Streeruwitz, Meinecke und Mora*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann. 28; Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 78. Interestingly, Roxanne Philipps already notes a certain (albeit different) contentious pose in *wir schlafen nicht* in that the interviewees steadily challenge narrative authority, suspecting to be misrepresented ("zitiere mich ja richtig!").
285 See also Franck, *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit*, 13.
286 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 164.

Attention is considered an investment into a second-order commodity supposed to provide maximum levels of capital yield. Her initial victimization is duplicated in the sensation mongering of stalkers of various kinds that treat her as human capital. In this, her appearance is constantly re-evaluated as she is cautioned not to escape her ascribed position of passivity since active behaviour is rated negatively. So, as she fails to earn interest ("zinsen bringen"[287]), she is instantly considered disposable. A so-called "möchtegern-journalist" embodies this mediatized re-doubling of her first hijacking most violently. Giving full vent to his frustration with the lack of an exploitable news story, he denigrates the escapee as a non-lucrative investment ("geldanlage"[288]) not worth the attention given to her. The narrator is targeted by an unescapable motion of objectification, that at once brands her as abject ("abstoßend") or downright a "monster" once she proves an unprofitable investment opportunity.[289]

Depicted as part and parcel of an expanding attention economy, the languages of emergency documented in *die alarmbereiten* seem to thrive on resentment. This, interestingly, echoes Joseph Vogl's most recent proposal to link the polarization of contemporary society to a neoliberal market culture that exploits hostile sentiments to increase user-interaction and, thus, nurtures conflictual group dynamics as a matter of course. According to him, advanced capitalism gives way to a "structural populism."[290] The business model of the digital economy effects a sort of hyper-socialization by reinforcing cultural trends or behavioural patterns via feed-back circuits – rating engenders more rating, sharing triggers more sharing – that try to generate higher click-rates to optimize ad revenues and data brokerage. Inflammatory content drives engagement. Opinion markets and, more generally, the production of the social are thereby interfaced with the profit strategies of tech-capital. Highly attuned to the rating procedures of the commercial internet, resentment proves a particularly proliferous affective resource in that respect. As such, ressentiment is not considered a con-

287 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 164.
288 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 164.
289 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 168, 167.
290 Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 181.

tingent, subjective mood but marked out as a structure of relations that matches the compulsions of winner-take-all markets precisely insofar it is rooted in a rampant desire to valorise and judge.[291] Resentment is, hence, understood at once as a "product" of capitalist competition and a "productive force" that, moreover, has a stabilizing effect since it consistently misdirects away from the functional mechanisms, class antagonisms, and immanent purposes of capital accumulation.[292]

These cursory remarks on resentment as a peculiarly neoliberal moral principle, of course, are not the last word on the field of populism studies. But they seem to me quite helpful to stake out Röggla's literary examination of risk-management as a general paradigm of representation. Indeed, Röggla's prose traces the subsumption of the political under the "gerüchteform,"[293] as she prefers to frame it, giving way to a veritable "Lärmkrieg" in which subjects and interest groups stabilize their particularistic identities first and foremost through hostile speech acts. In contrast to our previous readings, however, it is in fact interesting that the short-story volume is rather unconcerned with the tangible depiction of high-tech. Actually, it is notable that the media landscape traversed in the texts is precisely not characterized by the presence of digital media. Rather, the pieces are set for the most part in extensively isolated situation rooms in which references to an exterior are imparted through analogue communication devices such as radios, letters, protocols, or telephones. There is a single instance in the volume – in the

291 Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 162–163.

292 Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 181.

293 Röggla, *das stottern des realismus*, 18. See also Dolar, Gossip, Rumors, and Philosophy, Online. Röggla's notion of "gerüchteform" might be considered a variation on the Marxian notion of "commodity form." Hearsay, as also someone like Mladen Dolar puts it, is effective precisely as it operates in an endless self-referential movement. Rumours come from an unspecified place, have no author, yet unfailingly yield effects. As such, rumour and the commodity can be analogized since both derive their force from their exchange-value. Hearsay is without foundation. Nonetheless, it asserts an inscrutable authority via its anonymous mode of exchange. Dolar, here, insists on the possible Freudian implications contained in the formula "rumour has it" by playing on the impersonal modality of hearsay as an id-ridden mode of speech. Thereby, he claims, rumours bring to the fore another face of the big Other: not a face of logos, truth, or knowledge but something that nobody quite believes to be true but that works nonetheless. Similarly, there is no referential guarantee attached to the second-hand information circulated in *die alarmbereiten*. Nevertheless, the inflationary exchange of opinions unfolds a social force that is difficult to contain.

piece "wilde jagd" – where new media do actually appear in the form of the internet ("netz") or a blog ("forum") as these become the site of a shitstorm.[294] But this exception just serves to prove the point. For in the mentioned scene, these means of communication merely accentuate a shitstorm that was already underway beforehand. It is, then, a specific mode of social/economic intercourse that is the focus of Röggla's texts and the subtraction of digital media serves the purpose of not getting sidetracked by the specious optics of interfaces.

That said, the piece "der übersetzer" is, again, particularly revelatory since it most obviously tackles a society under the aegis of finance capital. The text is driven by a resentful denunciation of first-person agentive perspective. In this, the false monologue of the self-declared translator works its way from neo-classical crisis theory toward the etymological roots of crisis in the medical language of Ancient Greece. As he puts his interlocutor under permanent scrutiny, his technocratic jargon slowly morphs into an assessment of her psycho-somatic state. First, her behaviour is deprecated, disapproving of slightest gestures such as looking out of the window or standing up. Then, her ascribed demeanour is branded as panic-stricken. Ultimately, the "übersetzer" diagnoses a chronic depression and a worsening physical condition: heavy breathing.[295] This merger of economic and therapeutic vocabulary, of course, recalls Koselleck's influential study of the historical semantics of "crisis" that follows the mutation of the concept into the "structural signature" of an era – shaped by the quarrels between the *Ancient Régime* and the forces of modernization – in which "crisis" denoted a moment of decision and undecided futures. However, this notion of crisis is precisely abandoned as it mutates into a permanentized – "fortlaufend" – state. This is echoed in the punitive appellation of 1st person narration. In a reverse image of the neoliberal idiom of self-optimization, the translator defines the personal crisis of the "ich" (consonant with a general crisis) as an insurmountable condition that can only be escaped by way of suicide. Unable to contain the causes of crisis, the translator exter-

294 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 171–172.
295 See also Moser, "Angebot ohne Nachfrage," 309–310.

nalizes it in an aggressive mode of address.[296] In this, the piece updates for the "age of austerity" (Cameron) Röggla's engagement with the New Economy in *wir schlafen nicht* where already business consulting is invoked as an anti-labour framework concerned with the removal of profit-decreasing elements:

> also wir haben ein einfaches ranking gemacht. die a-personen, das sind unsere top-performer, das sind die, die wollen wir auf jeden fall halten, die ganz starken leistungsträger […] dann gibt es welche, da sagen wir, die sind auch gut, aber wenn die gehen, bricht nicht alles zusammen. […] und dann gibt es die c-personen. […] die gerade lesen und schreiben können, die vielleicht wirtschaft studiert haben, aber sonst gar nichts. und da muß man sagen: mit diesen leuten können wir nichts mehr anfangen.[297]

Articulated in a language of natural selection, the economic reason displayed, here, nonetheless still tries to put on a human face by re-framing the layoff of personnel as a release – a "freisetzung" – that is erroneously considered "menschenunwürdig[]"[298] giving a sense of the neoliberal re-functionalization of freedom into a disorienting signifier that enables the cancellation of social safety nets. By contrast, the discourse of the "übersetzer" fully commits to the necro-economic implications of

296 See also Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55; Sotiropolous/Milios/Lapatsioras, *Demystifying Finance*, 121. The notion of "subprime" loans evoked in the pages of "der übersetzer" is also evocative in that regard. Irreducibly tied to the crisis of 2007–9, this signifier has more than once served to externalize the systemic risk accumulated on the world market onto the "irrational" behaviour of the poor, designated as prime recipients of subprime mortgages. Such an assessment, however, fails to account for the fact that the subprime market already constituted itself a crisis mechanism that mitigated "the limits of incorporation of social needs through the neoliberal model." It suppresses the specific function of these credits in the context of stagnating wages and a declining welfare state, managing aggregate demand by subsidizing private consumption via the non-public routes of financial markets. As such, subprime borrowing was already inscribed into a dynamic of crisis that traces back to the 1970s. It helped to plug the financial holes in the system. In this sense, the subprime mortgage crisis certainly functioned as a vehicle for unfolding the contradictions of the neoliberal compact. Yet, it in no way can be said to be the contingent, irrational origin of a crisis that is structural in nature.

297 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 84–85.

298 Röggla, *wir schlafen nicht*, 82.

structural adjustment policy. At the end, he goes so far as to suggest that the narrator should imitate "die martialischen todesarten" sought out by the bankrupt managers who committed suicide in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008 and throw herself out of the window to draw the logical conclusion from her lack of value to the economy. It is, thus, not surprising that the depicted coaching seminar does not pursue an epistemological interest. Instead, the "nachhilfestunde" proves a very different kind of "nachhelfen," namely assisted suicide ("wenn ich wolle, könne er gerne etwas nachhelfen"[299]), which the translator transcodes in an overidentification with capitalist competition as the actual shape of crisis resolution: the riddance of unproductive capital.

In other pieces, now, the ressentiment-driven reason displayed by 3rd person perspective does not always come with a Social Darwinist twist, but it acts just as well as a stabilizing affect that deflects the anxieties generated by compounding crises into tangible denunciatory formulas.[300] For instance, "die erwachsenen" can be seen to invert the language of pandemic-management to level the threat of "ansteckungswahrscheinlichkeiten" against a generation of children that appears increasingly alien to its elders due to its pessimism about the future:

> obwohl gewisse entwicklungen, die bisher in gymnasien und realschulen zu beobachten gewesen seien, nun auf die grundschulen übergriffen. als hätten sie sich alle darauf geeinigt. als würden sie gemeinsam an etwas arbeiten. das wisse ich doch: sie kommunizierten, diese kinder. da könne man nichts machen. sie nutzten alle kanäle, sie chatteten, sie simsten und twitterten. und es sehe so aus, als planten sie, alles mit ihren krankheitsszenarien zu überziehen, bis ein ganzes krankheitspanorma entstehe.[301]

The negative scenarios expounded in the short-story, from climate change to bio-diversity loss, are ascribed a certain contagion effect that the parent's association depicted in the text wants to keep in check by isolating a supposed patient-zero – the narrator's daughter – and put-

299 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 56, 69.
300 Cf. Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 182.
301 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 75, 86.

ting her "in quarantine."[302] The first-person singular is reminded "dass die gesellschaft mittlerweile das recht habe, sich gegen ihre inneren feinde zu wehren."[303] Raising fear against an "epidemic" of climate alarmism, the parental crisis-managers carry out a violently conformist re-definition of the worst-case, namely a rejection of capitalist performance culture (" es handle sich um eine form der verweigerung, die weite kreise ziehe"), that must be put under lockdown.[304]

In "die ansprechbare," again, readers attend to an extended but one-sided telephone conversation that traverses a variety of tipping-points, from the cooling down of the Gulf Stream to thawing permafrost. But while the text marks out the excesses of scale posed by the non-human timescales of climate change, it foremost presents readers with a discursive logic fraught by asymmetrical social relations. More than proposing an actual attempt at overcoming this deficit in representation, that is, the piece aims at depicting the underlying violence of a speech situation in which the narrator is pushed into passivity while the discussion is dominated by a 3rd person perspective that becomes completely caught up in her self-ascribed role of "kassandrasekretärin."[305] In this, a massive blame-shifting takes place. If at the beginning the muted narrator is accused of a so-called climate hysteria, the caller proceeds to outright assimilate the opposing discourse of her friend into her monological performance. As indicated by the title, the speech situation truly describes a form of address without response or recognition. Here, we see precisely how the language of emergency helps stabilize the capitalist order. The apparent dissensus of 3rd person narrators against the "emergencylärm" of crisis languages is phrased in denunciatory verdicts that distort the idiom of risk into a divisive and hostile act of deflection which averts any engagement with systemic causation. Consequently, the piece is entirely tangled up in displacement. When the "kassandrasekretärin" declares: "Auch sie beispielsweise könne, wenn sie wolle, die Dinge beim Namen nennen, auch wenn sie sich bei ihr ganz anders

302 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 90.
303 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 90.
304 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 86–87.
305 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 46.

anhörten,"[306] she, in fact, signals a de-signification of the ecological rifts at hand. Bit by bit, the subject-matter of the debate is scaled down such that in the end the "ich" itself – condensed in the image of the "telefongespenst" – turns into the object of panic.

Interestingly, Mark Fisher has proposed a similar tele-communicational synecdoche to register the entrapment of the subject in the experience of market power as "unresponsive, impersonal, centerless, abstract and fragmentary."[307] In fact, according to him, "[t]he closest that most of us come to a direct experience of the centerlessness of capitalism is an encounter with the call center."[308] The grievance pursued in the complaint filed to customer service is marked by permanent postponements. Discontent is articulated "in a vacuum, directed at someone who is a fellow victim of the system but with whom there is no possibility of communality."[309] As such, the experience of atomization in the networks of the call centre epitomizes a particular "political phenomenology"[310] that enshrines the sense that there is no alternative to market rule. The rage call is an address from below that remains impotent since the "legitimate object"[311] of critique perpetually retreats from experience. But thereby it expresses a "*negative atheology* proper to Capital: the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it."[312] Resentment, in this sense, functions as representational act that fills in a gap, yet in this necessarily misses its object: it makes the systemic disappear in the personalization of social relations.

In Röggla, now, this dynamic becomes even more apparent in the last tale of the volume – "deutschlandfunk" – which stages an increasingly hostile radio debate that eventually calls for the abandonment of the victims of a not further defined disaster. Initially, we encounter the tricky pronoun "wir," which seems to emerge out of a shared sense of emergency. But little by little the underlying violence of that pronoun

306 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 32.
307 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 64.
308 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.
309 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 64.
310 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.
311 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.
312 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 65.

is carved out. While the babble of voices clashing in the radio debate first expresses a desire for the imagined intimacy of the state of exception against the anonymity of the capitalist everyday ("wenn die menschen wieder grußlos aneinander vorübergehen, dann ist man wieder angelangt im alltag."[313]), this emergency solidarity soon is deciphered as a particularly deceitful superiority complex: "wir sind immer noch zu hilfe geeilt, wenn es irgendwo fehlte."[314] Similar to the twisted sense of collectivity encoded in the formula of a "weltuntergangsboot"[315] that is invoked in "der übersetzer," it constructs the dubious image that in the moment of crisis all differences between rich and poor are levelled. Yet, "deutschlandfunk," as the overdetermined title of the piece might already suggest, gives this idea of classless communality a further twist: the resentment against the sick, accused of perpetually demanding attention ("die ewig aufmerksamkeit wollten"[316]), turns into a stabilizing affect for the cohesion of the German nation: "aber wir lassen uns die freude nicht kaputtmachen, die freude, dass es *uns* noch gibt."[317] Resentment is tied to economic nationalism. Taking on a pseudo-rebellious posture, the "wir" constructs itself, in a reverse victimization, as an imagined "gebernation" that is unfairly taken advantage of and robbed of its self-enjoyment.[318] Eventually, that is, the "wir" is constituted by way of a demarcation from an imagined other that supposedly keeps things from returning to business-as-usual all while this conservative gesture is exaggerated as a form uncomfortable truth-telling ("ja, sprechen wir es ruhig aus"[319]).

This dynamic of exclusion, now, is also played out on the level of grammatical form in the pronominal shift from "wir" to "ich." For, as we come to learn, 1st person narration is assumed by exactly such a vulnerable individual left behind by the unnamed crisis event, which

313 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 180.
314 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 178; Cf. Sonja Lewandowski. "Wi(e)der eine Grammatik der Ausnahme. Kathrin Rögglas *die alarmbereiten*." *Kathrin Röggla*. Iuditha Balint, Tanja Nusser, Rolf Parr (Eds.). München: edition text+kritik. 69.
315 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 60.
316 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 188.
317 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 187 (emphasis added).
318 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 178.
319 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 186.

the "gebernation" so eagerly seeks to get past. In all this, though, the narrator serves as a mere recorder for the ongoing discussion, such that narrative perspective reproduces the mechanisms of its social ob- and abjectification. While the "ich" awaits its death in a hospital bed, the "wir" – slowly shifting back to the generic pronoun "man" – proposes to re-focus on the present by exorcizing the "hinterbliebenen" as a cumbersome reminder of the past that hinders the return to daily affairs: "*man* hat sich eben ganz auf die *gegenwart* zu konzentrieren."[320] Just as it is supposed to give way ("*platz machen*") for more important topics ("*für wichtigere themen*"[321]), it is displaced from the narrative act. In a kind of literary "[s]wiping away,"[322] the story ends exactly as the narrator makes room for higher valued themes. The radio feature is followed by a traffic report that leads over into one of the most casualized and anonymous of all mass deaths, highway fatalities, which is fully normalized in the cost-benefit calculations of economic life.

The position of the narrator in *die alarmbereiten* is, hence, always in (lethal) danger. In "wilde jagd," too, the voices of the victim's stalkers intrude more and more into her personal space: progressing "von draußen" into her "wohnzimmer," her "küche" then her "badezimmer" and ultimately "ins ohr."[323] The chasers outrightly force themselves upon the narrator only to inform her that now she is "schnee von

320 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 186 (emphasis added).
321 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 188.
322 Cf. Hito Steyerl. "How to Kill People: A Problem of Design." *Duty Free Art. Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*. London/New York: Verso. 12–13. This is an allusion to Hito Steyerl's re-reading of George Nelsons How to kill People (1963) – who defined killing as a matter of design – in the context of the mass expulsion of Kurdish populations in contemporary Turkey. There she focusses on how expatriation and neoliberal urban planning intertwine in a disruptive aesthetics of city re-branding that sees visual cut-and-paste techniques turn into technologies of invisibilization which erase the past to make way for the real estate politics of Turkey's regional imperialism: "The video uses wipes to transition from one state to another, from present to future, from elected municipality to emergency rule, from working-class neighborhood to prime real estate. Wipes as a filmic means are a powerful political symbol. They show displacement by erasure, or more precisely, replacement. They clear one image by shoving in another and pushing the old one out of sight. They visually wipe out the initial population, the buildings, elected representatives, and property rights in order to 'clear' the space and fill it with a more convenient population, a more culturally homogeneous cityscape, a more aligned administration and homeowners."
323 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 159, 160, 162, 164, 169.

gestern."[324] Eventually, there is a gap in the text marked by an irruptive "jetzt"[325] without any further clarification. In the aftermath, the babble of voices starts referring to the "ich" in the past tense – suggesting the occurrence of some kind of violent act ("man habe strenggenommen nicht zugesehen") – in order to forget about her ("sei jetzt nicht zeit abzudüsen?") and go hunting for the next news spectacle: "jetzt gehe alles wieder von vorne los."[326] All in all, then, this precariousness of first-person narration reproduces in literary form a specific dynamic of social polarization tied to the unequal distribution of risk and attention. As we have seen, this is put into an escalating narrative form in *die alarmbereiten*. Be it the collective enunciations of the radio debaters in "deutschlandfunk" or the sensation mongering mob in "wilde jagd," resentment is represented as a belligerent sentiment that functions as the subjective expression of the social polarization at the heart of neoliberal risk society and as such stabilizes the status quo powers. There is, thus, a hidden obedience in the rebellious posture of the resentment-laden discourse of 3rd person narration.

Röggla's textual montages, then, record the confluence of technocratic and populist jargons in the neoliberal administration of crisis. The hostile discourse of Röggla's resentful 3rd person narrators –imparted through a passive 1st person perspective – is depicted as merely the flipside of structural adjustment in that the miniaturization of crisis is complemented by various forms of scapegoating that unleash an aggressive defence of capitalist normality. In that sense, this kind of "regressive rebellion"[327] is made to appear as the subjective expression of a tightened competitive order. Tracking various strategies to narratively contain the destructive forces of capitalism, *die alarmbereiten* brings to bear two different crises of representation upon each other, namely the crisis of political representation manifesting in the populist moment post-2007ff. and the representational limit posed by global capitalism. In this, then, Röggla maps out a blocked political environment in which

324 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 165.
325 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 171.
326 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 172–173.
327 Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey. *Gekränkte Freiheit. Aspekte des libertären Autoritarismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp. 90ff.

not only any prospect of collective solidarity seems disabled, but dissent appears but in the guise of neoliberal a-sociality which if anything intensifies capitalism's centrifugal forces in a market-conform extremism. Her texts refuse the articulation of any political counter-image. Therefore, admittedly, it is fair to ask – in the vein of Brecht's polemic against Lukács – in how far this writing style is"part of the same process of impoverishment"[328] that it scrutinizes. That is, the fundamental atomization and enclosure of narrative perspective in *die alarmbereiten* might risk reifying the impasses of the present: the sense that there is no alternative. In a sort of conclusion, the last part of this chapter will, thus, focus – by way of the trope of disappearance that recurs throughout Röggla's work – on how the pieces in the volume cement the sense that crisis has essentially turned "stationary"[329] all while being disconnected from the moment of critique that it has historically been associated with.

8 "blank is beautiful": Crisis-Management as Unnoticed Catastrophe

In turning to the writing of structures, Röggla deploys a method of subtraction that makes the set pieces in *die alarmbereiten* appear at first strangely without history. There is in narrative terms no causal explanation of how these scenes came into being. The short-stories do not start with an exposition of the catastrophic events that preceded them and manoeuvred the characters into the strange constellations in which we encounter them. Just as has been discussed regarding Gibson's and DeLillo's engagement with the interface aesthetic of cybernetic capital-

328 Bert Brecht. "Against Georg Lukács." *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*. Ronald Taylor (Ed.). New York/London: Verso. 68. Brecht considers this a faux semblant of proletarian literature as "those writers who are conscious of the fact that capitalism impoverishes, dehumanizes, mechanizes human beings," nonetheless, "in their writing, appear to be less concerned with elevating man, th[an] rush[ing] him through events, treat[ing] his inner life as quantité negligeable and so on…"

329 See again Vogl, Kapital und Ressentiment, 9.

ism, the narrative situation positions us at the "edge of the construct."[330] Starting with "die zuseher," one is immediately thrown into a narrative environment permeated by absence. A protocol informs readers that the former chairman of the crisis cabinet has simply vanished without providing any further details concerning the circumstances of this disappearance. Neither are we instructed as to the motivations of the different meeting participants, not to speak of the exact purpose of this venue in the first place. Instead, the text does no more than keeping a record of the uneventfulness taking place in front the spectators as they, too, disappear one after another. Similar blackouts recur in most of the other stories in the volume which never really explain the series of incidents that preceded them. Nor do they elaborate the mysterious episodes of disappearing characters, such as for example the disappearance of the first-person narrator in the concluding sentences of "recherchegespenst" or the presumable demise of 3rd person perspective when the telephone connection breaks down on the last page of "die ansprechbare."

As has been elaborated above, the various texts in *die alarmbereiten* are traversed by "erinnerungslücken."[331] Corresponding to her dividualized prose, Röggla's pieces are inscribed with an extreme vulnerability in that the scene of action is utterly beyond the control of the enunciating subjects and is always-already placed under the sign of precarity.[332] The trope of disappearance is tied to this sense of instability. In one way or another, the short texts are permeated by gestures of vanishing. It is particularly intriguing, in this regard, that there is a relation between the volatilization of the volume's literary personnel and the precarious documentary forms that compose the texts. In fact, the association of disappearance with the motive of the "protocol" is introduced from the start in the first short story of the collection. Deploying the found manuscript trope, "die zuseher" takes off exactly with the remark that a meeting protocol has been lost during a non-specified occurrence

330 Clover, *The Matrix*, 8.

331 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, p. 60.

332 Cf. Suzanne Bordemann. "'wo ist denn das berühmte souveräne subjekt geblieben?' Über Rögglas Prosa des Prekären." *Literatur im Ausnahmezustand. Beiträge zum Werk Rögglas*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann. 101.

linked to the disappearance of the former minute keeper. The accompanying notice of loss, again, is documented in a new protocol kept by a nameless recording clerk. This and three other meeting protocols make up the entirety of the text's narrative arc, documenting step by step the disappearance of the remaining meeting participants. As such, "die zuseher" foreshadows the order of events recounted in the following text fragments. Across the volume, Röggla's prose creates a sense of catastrophic contingency that sets the tone for her investigation of today's bailout realities. In this, I argue, crisis-management is represented as a mode of governance in its own right that precisely seeks out the shock-effects generated by crisis to have a clean slate. In terms of neoliberal crisis theory, "blank is beautiful."[333] Along the production of blank subjects, as we have seen, the capitalist workaday is shown to be precariously maintained by last resort credits that are forgotten each workday anew for the economy to remain operational. To go back to Jameson's pointed delineation of the punctiform temporality of derivative trade, these set pieces do appear as de-historicized, perpetuated presents that are the result of always another narrative derivation.

This sense of obscurity is complemented by the effect of confinement created by the text fragments. The apprehension of an outside seems to vanish from literary representation altogether: the "da draußen" is engulfed in "dunkelziffern" that separate the scene of narration from any sense of shared experience. Nonetheless, the short stories are framed by a certain deixis that insinuates an elusive background which despite all leaves its mark on the stage of discourse. Indeed, the localization of the spaces of narration has some importance for the work of compression that goes into Röggla's set pieces. Her writing visits the unnoticed spaces of contemporary society: from a disused factory building ("der übersetzer") through an empty parking space ("die zuseher") to the gated spaces of NGO-business ("recherchegespenst"). This turn to the ruined spaces of recent capitalism, one could say, supplements the literary negotiation of neoliberalism's "schrottprämienerklärung[en]."[334] The minimal diegetic indications provided in the narrative margins

333 Klein, *The Shock Doctrine,* 3–24.
334 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 59.

are crucial to the historicization of the strange sceneries depicted in *die alarmbereiten*. For instance, the stage directions prefixed to "der übersetzer" situate the seminar room in the "oberschöneweide" district of Berlin that once figured as one of the key industrial quarters of German capitalism and housed amongst others the AEG factory complex.[335] The "seminarraum des weiterbildungsinstitues 'WCR' (chancen und risiken)"[336] is hosted in the empty remains of a production plant as if to perform the becoming-archaic of the dreamscapes of industrial modernity with their ideas of progress by juxtaposing them to the ostensibly interminableness of the coaching course and capital's compounding accumulation of collapse. In the ruins and relics that serve as a literary stage for Röggla's tableaux, then, "the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away."[337] In "der übersetzer," that is, the voiding of memory conjured in the notion of a global "betriebsalzheimer" is reflected – spatialized – in the setting of the text itself. The *tabula rasa* of the crisis-prone history of capitalism is shown to be inscribed into the space of narration itself.

But thereby the piece at once carries out a historization of said waning of historicity. By invoking the setting of a decommissioned factory, it supplements the problem of spatial representation with a temporal dimension. By choosing this location, Röggla broadens the view of the aesthetic dilemmas posed by capitalist globalization in that representa-

335 There is a connection, here, to Brecht's critique of photorealism, which notes that a photograph of the Krupp/AEG facilities in 1932 would have revealed next to nothing about their position in the German economy.

336 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55.

337 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 63. "Confronted with Easter Island or Stonehenge, it is hard not to speculate about what the relics of our culture look like when the semiotic systems in which they are currently embedded have fallen away. We are compelled to imagine our own world as a set of eerie traces. Such speculations no doubt account for the eeriness that attaches to the justly famous final image of the original 1968 version of *Planet of the Apes:* the remains of the Statue of Liberty, which are as illegible from the perspective of the film's post-apocalyptic and indeed post-human far future as Stonehenge is to us now. The examples of Stonehenge and Easter Island make us realise that there is an irreducibly eerie dimension to certain archaeological and historical practices. Particularly when dealing with the remote past, archaeologists and historians form hypotheses, but the culture to which they refer and which would vindicate their speculations can never (again) be present." See also Benjamin Noys. "The Breakdown of Capitalist Realism." *Mediations. Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 33:1–2. 162.

tion must not only account for the spatial disjunctions of the global economy but also the history of past labour that is at once fundamentally inscribed and erased in capitalist space. Against the memory gaps induced by the regime of crisis-management, Röggla's work traverses the modes of (dis)appearance making up the current moment of capitalist crisis. Not to be simply mistaken for theory in the guise of fictional writing, *die alarmbereiten* deploys the genealogical method characterizing the different variants of "Wissenspoetik" but gives it a particular literary spin. Whereas academic writing must present its arguments in a more or less sequential way, in Röggla's short pieces different time-layers collapse in condensed narrative presents. Her writing correlates aesthetic techniques of spatiotemporal compression with the very real spatiotemporal compressions making up global capitalism, where "the quantities of the past have been rendered invisible by the production process […] yet they now surround the worker in a proportion hitherto unthinkable"[338] and confront them as an alien power. *die alarmbereiten* is full of human-altered landscapes in which "all praxis seems to be snuffed out, abstracted, extinguished."[339] All that remains are anguished speech acts. This dynamic of erasure is particularly reflected upon in

338 Fredric Jameson. *Representing Capital. A Commentary on Volume I*. London/New York: Verso. 102, 94; Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 289. This simultaneous focus on capital's spatializing and temporalizing logic complements Brecht's proposition to re-trace the slippage of reality into the functional. It also echoes Jameson's update of the notion of "cognitive mapping." Since the 1980s, he has called for an aesthetic that charts the impossibility of a situational representation of the particular in relation to the world-system. But in his latest commentary on Capital, he has offered the most sophisticated answer to this representational dilemma yet. It short-circuits the issue of representing the vast spatial fixes of capital with its temporal dynamic. This stems from a re-reading of Marx that highlights the inconspicuous verb "auslöschen" – to extinguish – as the key to capitalist spatialization and temporalization. Contrary to a spontaneous anti-fetishist sentiment, it does not suffice to follow supply routes from soup to nuts to decipher the enigmas of commodity fetishism. This would just be to reify a particular sequence in the commodity-chain. Instead, "auslöschen" conceptualizes commodity abstraction as an "apocalyptic process […] where the passage from quality to quantity, from use value to exchange value, the very transformation of things into commodities, is very much a process in which 'all the sensuous characteristics [of the object] are extinguished' [Marx]."

339 Alberto Toscano. "The World is Already without Us." *Social Text* 34:2/127. 116, 114. The impossibility of representing capital is, then, linked back to its structural dynamic: "the capitalist process […] appears to disappear in its product." In this regard, the "disappearance of the past" functions as "an objective appearance" rooted in capitalist accumulation

Röggla's "der übersetzer." The translator's crisis monologue, with his demand for creative destruction, perpetuates in language the extinguishments of capitalist spatialization. As he negotiates the value of the narrator and the other seminar participants, the "übersetzer" insinuates a strange aesthetic identity between the empty persona of the "ich" and the empty industrial factory providing the setting for this set piece. The "ich" is re-imagined as the mere afterthought of the ruined landscapes it inhabits. That way, the absenting of the narrator on the level of textual representation is inscribed with a somatic and spatial dimension. Just as the space of narration is demoted as "immobilienschrott,"[340] the narrator is thoroughly inscribed into this wasteland.

A similar sense of ruination comes to the fore in the short text *Wachstumsmarathon* (2013) which documents Röggla's research into the global interconnections opened up in the derivative contracts concluded by risk-managers. In fact, her reportage is overwhelmed by the erasure of history in the speculative timescales of risk-capital. "O heiliges Industriedenkmal!"[341] the author exclaims at the sight of the Trepča Mines, situated in present-day Kosovo, that once were at the heart of Yugoslavia's economy, as the memory of this industrial past is extinguished in the short-term temporalities of accumulation. Capital lingers "hier eben nur sehr kurz".[342] It passes through this locale as merely another sequence in global value-chains. Like the setting of Oberschöneweide in "der übersetzer," there is a loss of reference attached to these landscapes of risk which – from the perspective of crisis-management – disintegrate into hazardous waste from the past and near- or long-term liabilities. As such, Röggla notes, these industrial ruins capture something of the recent European experience of crisis and stagnation. However, against the backdrop of this general sense of bankruptcy, the moment of crisis is not at all inscribed with a prom-

itself. Against such as backdrop, Röggla's multi-layered mode of representation provides a sense of "the hypertrophy of the material past with the seeming vanishing of the historical past."

340 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 57–58.

341 Kathrin Röggla. "Beitrag zu einem kleinen Wachstumsmarathon." *Engagement. Konzepte von Gegenwart und Gegenwartsliteratur*. Jürgen Brokoff, Ursula Geitner, Kerstin Stüssel (Eds.). Göttingen: V&R unipress. 450.

342 Röggla, "Wachstumsmarathon," 450.

ise of realism – the fabled return to reality – that undoes the "infinite complexity" of capitalism. Röggla's writing re-localizes the apocalyptic genre as an epistemic object and method of knowledge. The worst-case scenario seems to display all the characteristics of the apocalyptic, but it precisely does not function in the classical sense of a revelation. By reducing 1st and 3rd person narrators to "zuseher,"[343] lost in the "observationsmatsch"[344] of risk assessment, the pieces rather document the proliferation of disarray than an epiphanic moment. The alienated mode of narration at work in *die alarmbereiten* – creating the sense of a "fully separated society"[345] by fracturing literary viewpoint into isolation – returns to the anti-utopian impulse inscribed into the topoi of un-representability traced across this study. Enclosing narration into these capital-altered landscapes "mit ihrer wahnsinnigen geographie,"[346] it pinpoints the harnessing of ignorance as integral to neoliberal governance.

Across various emergency settings, *die alarmbereiten* thus acts out the perpetuation of capitalism in and through crisis. In a quasi-satiric passage, "der übersetzer" conjectures that the financial coaching seminar might go on even as classrooms have emptied out: "wenn die stühle nur noch von den ratten bewegt werden würden und die türen einzig vom luftzug zuknallten, gehe [die nachhilfe] weiter."[347] As if to invert the "oft-repeated quip about it being easier to imagine the end

343 Deleuze's remarks concerning post-war neo-realism with its focus on the devasted spaces of WWII resonate here: "deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction." The philosopher, indeed, notes the collapse of representation into what he calls "any-spaces-whatever" populated by "a new race of characters" that are "seers" rather than actors. (Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Transl.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. xi.)

344 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 13.

345 Endnotes. "A History of Separation." *Endnotes* 4.

346 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 25.

347 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 67. One might feel reminded, here, of *Cosmopolis* which does not only end in a rat-infested empty warehouse but whose plot is haunted by the opaque slogan that "A RAT BECAME THE UNIT OF CURRENCY." Albeit the image of the rat in relation to capital goes back even further to Marx. Picking up a passage from *Faust I* – a ballad that sings of a poisoned rat acting "as if he'd fallen in love" – Marx deploys the image of the rat to imagine capital as "an animated monster [*beseeltes Ungeheuer*] which begins to 'work,' 'as if its body were by loved possessed' [*als hätt' es Lieb' im Leibe*]" (Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 302). In this sense, the rat functions as a metaphor of an "undead temporal-

of the world than the end of capitalism," the pieces stage neoliberal crisis-management itself as an unnoticed catastrophe – a "lived apocalypse"[348] – interminably at work in the here-and-now. Crisis is not shown to make capitalism "pronounceable" again as a "contingent economic form."[349] Instead, *die alarmbereiten* anticipates something of the "apocalyptic tone" prevalent in the culture of the 2010s which is haunted by the sense that "if capitalism is not working, then nothing works."[350]

To sum it up: Röggla renders visible a transitional moment in which neoliberalism shifts gears toward a more xenophobic crisis-management mode. In this, her literary project is particularly concerned with a specifically technocratic, disciplined configuration characteristic of Germany and the wider DACH region. Röggla develops a mimetic critique that reproduces idioms of managerialism, consultancy, crisis communication, and security administration. Through repetition, rhythmic exhaustion, and depersonalized speech, the violence of economic rationality becomes audible. But while *wir schlafen nicht* captures the euphoric ethos of the New Economy, *die alarmbereiten* notes a mode of permanent alert: scenarios, simulations, and worst-case models organize subjectivity and governance. In her prose, however, this crisis rationality appears less as a rupture than a mutation. The flexible, self-responsible subject of the 1990s-2000s returns as an anxious, exhausted crisis subject. In this, she documents the anti-social effects of neoliberal governance. At once, she takes aim at the concomitant imagined communities of crisis-management that dissolve class antagonisms into a hostile "we" in which everyone is expected to contribute and those who do not are stigmatized as deficient or redundant. Productivity is enforced as a condition of belonging for the atomized subject of performance society.

ity." As a symbol of decay, the rat is not only branded as the other of civilization but also the end-product of the wastelands left behind by the capitalist system. (Sami Khatib. "The Drive of Capital. Of Monsters, Vampires and Zombies." *Coils of the Serpent* 8. 105)

348 David Cunningham and Alexandra Warwick. "Unnoticed Apocalypse. The Science-Fiction Politics of Urban Crisis." *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 17:4. 438.

349 Christopher Nealon. *The Matter of Capital*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 140.

350 Benjamin Noys. "The Untranscendable Horizon of our Time.' Capitalist Crisis and the Ends of Utopia." *States of Crisis and Post-Capitalist Scenarios*. Heiko Feldner, Fabio Vighi, and Slavoj Žižek (Eds.). Farham: Ashgate. 73.

It is in this vein that one can situate her work alongside a broader theoretical and literary exploration of crisis in recent times. Röggla's unfree, direct speech delineates what might be described as the unsaid grammatical blueprint of a late-neoliberal cultural imaginary, in which crisis becomes second nature. Her prose enacts a critique of Thatcherite realism, which as in literature, so in popular culture and neoliberal crisis-management, effects a "war on totality"[351] by collapsing social life into "individuals and families" while simultaneously withdrawing capitalism from representation. It takes into view the operative aesthetics of neoliberal crisis-management which do not only come with a proper "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière) but also of the possible. *die alarmbereiten* stages the anguished speech of resentful survival entities as an "efficient capitalist self-criticism" which ensures the perpetuation of the system precisely via its corrosive socio-political impact.[352] It is on this basis that the next chapter will examine how neoliberalism mobilizes the totalizing power of social atomization. The chapter will, however, also ask how literature more generally has fared against the enigmas of agency posed by these centrifugal historical forces as my analysis will try to connect capitalist macro-history and recent literary tendencies.

351 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 400.
352 Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment*, 171.

IV The Neoliberal "War on Totality"

In *die alarmbereiten* we have encountered a wasteland of sociability in which the only language of contrariness that is spoken is one of resentment and economic nationalism – a covert form of crisis-management which affirms the neoliberal externalization of risk. Disaster, thus, is marked out as the site of abusive survival communities that direct their growing discontent into the denunciation of the "hinterbliebenen" of crisis rather then address the roots of their distress. Stylistically speaking, this is encoded in a disquieting entanglement of direct and reported speech wherein an obnoxious 3rd person perspective intrudes into the discourse of a strangely impassive 1st person narrator which slowly but surely is projected into the actual object of anxiety: "ich werde doch jetzt nichts von konkreten auswirkungen faseln […] das werde ich doch nicht sagen, und dass das mein letzter satz gewesen sei."[1] The moment of crisis is hereby miniaturized in forms of reverse victimization that violently demand a return to capitalist business-as-usual: "man hat sich eben ganz auf die gegenwart zu konzentrieren."[2] Röggla's prose of depersonalization, hence, depicts a dispositive of crisis-management that is fully engulfed in the proliferation of anti-social effects. As exemplified by the short story "der übersetzer," crisis becomes the occasion for a crash course ("nachilfestunde"[3]) in market discipline that urges – to put it in Hayek's language – "the non-domesticated barbarians in our midst, who call themselves 'alienated'"[4] to dispel all doubts "an ihrer marktwirtschaftlichen totalüberzeugung."[5]

Akin to DeLillo's narrativization of the "enacted theory" of financial economics, then, *die alarmbereiten* comprehends the narrative and rhetorical production of alternativelessness at the heart of neoliberal governance from Thatcher and Reagan to the champions of austerity politics in the 2010s: "There is no Alternative." As a matter of fact, it

1 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 53.
2 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 186.
3 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 67.
4 Hayek, "The Atavism of Social Justice," 15.
5 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.

showcases in how far crisis is exploited to evidence the (a)social ontology of neoliberalism. Thereby, the short story volume accounts for neoliberalism as a regime of veridiction: "There is no such Thing as Society" is an ontological statement that sets out to enact what it claims to be natural.[6] Questions of representation have always been crucial to neo-classical economics, especially the design of market models which construct reality in such a way that it agrees with the ontological assumptions of the theory. Ever since the Colloque Walter Lippmann in 1938, the current has been concerned as much with the production of the economic truths it holds to be self-evident as it has been with lobbying activities.[7] For this reason, Pierre Bourdieu has conceived neoliberalism as the "implementation of a utopia" which "succeeds in conceiving of itself as the scientific description of reality" and, thus, works at "*making itself true* and empirically verifiable."[8]

What follows traces the outlines of a class struggle in theory. Thereat, it must always be emphasized that the neoliberal turn is not simply the result of contingent discursive changes but unfolded in reaction to the crisis of Fordism, proletarian intransigence, decolonization, and new social movements. On the following pages, however, my aim is to map out the narrative logics at work in the neoliberal battle of ideas and how the production of alternativelessness connects to the actual market reforms pushed through in the era of structural adjustment. This representational struggle was not confined to economic knowledge production. It unfolded within a broader cultural logic in which structural adjustment emerges as a recognizable aesthetic. I therefore want to establish a connection between neoliberal theory and a more general optics of alternativelessness in popular culture. Here, I am particularly interested in the ways both spheres are permeated by binaries between the micro and macro. From there, the analysis turns to literary texts that confront the shared problem of alternativelessness and representability via subjective accounts of precarity. In this poetics of precariousness,

6 Cf. Tomšič, "No Such Thing as Society," 54.
7 Philip Mirowski. *How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso. 48–49.
8 Pierre Bourdieu. "The Essence of Neoliberalism." *Le Monde Diplomatique*. https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu [last accessed 19.08.2023].

I identify figures of unfreedom, trauma, and deadness that encode a tenacious sense of futility: the spectre of a society without opposition in which recuperation and structural adjustment rule supreme. This is where a certain motif of permacrisis comes into view that violently perpetuates the neoliberal divide between the micro- and macro-economic. A brief close reading of Evan Dara's *The Flee* (2013) anchors this discussion. The novel negotiates de-industrialization through the motif of capital flight. This leads to an analysis of the – at times downright apocalyptic – narratives and representational abstractions (e.g. GDP) surrounding neoliberal globalization. These, finally, are set against the realities of imperialist competition, with a focus on the treatment of the lived experience of structural adjustment and international value-chains in the literary cultures of the Global South. In all this, the chapter foregrounds a twofold "war on totality"[9] waged by neoliberalism. This consists in the denial of capitalism's representability and, simultaneously, an attack on the foundations of social reproduction in the service of expanded capital accumulation.

1 Neoliberalism and Representation

Apart from the econometric models of general equilibrium treated in our reading of *Cosmopolis* (e.g., DSGE), the epistemological plausibilization of capitalist alternativelessness has most crucially been articulated in and through a trope of ineffability.[10] Neoliberalism's key intra-capitalist antagonist, in that regard, is Keynesianism, the central economic doctrine of the welfare state, which maintains the belief that the right political leadership can counteract the crisis dynamics of the capitalist system by stabilizing mass consumption. Against disdained "Keynesian delusions and misguided fantasies of global economic equality,"[11] the likes of Hayek, on the other hand, argue that counter-cyclical stimuli distort the reading of the "impersonal signals of the mar-

9 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 400.
10 See also Karen Iversen Vaughn. *Austrian Economics in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
11 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 17.

ket."[12] They impede negative feedback and hence economic self-regulation concerning the optimal allocation of resources. The neoliberal line of argumentation, thus, proceeds by presenting a seemingly self-evident choice – acquiescence to capitalism or supply-chain malfunction – that opposes complexity to an irresponsible "pretence of knowledge."[13] For the economic knowledge that is dispersed across a differentiated society cannot possibly be concentrated. The market alone can coordinate the activities of millions of people by condensing information about supply and demand in the form of price signals. In this sense, Hayek argues that the welfarist error consists in the "*fatal* conceit"[14] that market bumps must be corrected to avoid suffering. Similarly, his mentor Ludwig von Mises insists in a necro-economic instance of capitalist realism that there cannot be "an enforceable human right to subsistence."[15] The logic of negative feedback obliges that sometimes it is best to "sacrific[e] a few lives in order to serve a large number elsewhere."[16] Here, neoliberalism emerges as a tacit theory of false consciousness which suggests that the critique of market efficiency is caught up in appearances. It fills in the gaps in perception by treating the seeming inefficiencies of the market as only ever a *trompe l'oeil* effect that betrays a deeper rationality.[17] By contrast, the redistributive paradigm suffers from a lethal delusion that sets it on a straight *Road to Serfdom* (1944) which is grounded in the plot twist that to strive for "the great utopia" of "democratic socialism" – encompassing Bolshevism just as well as the New Deal – "produces something so utterly different that few of those who wish it would be prepared to accept the consequence."[18] Forwarded in the guise of anti-totalitarianism, the bottom line of neoliberal histori-

12 Friedrich A. von Hayek. *The Political Order of a Free People. Law, Legislation and Liberty Vol. 3*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 172.
13 See also Schäuble, "Germany and the Global Financial Crisis," Online.
14 Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 132 (emphasis added).
15 Ludwig von Mises. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes. 839.
16 Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 132.
17 Cf. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty Vol. 1*, 18–19. Hayek forwards an evolutionary argument which posits that the most successful social institutions prevail. Thereby, he construes human history as a civilizational meta-market wherein organizational forms compete, and "less efficient groups" are displaced by superior cultures.
18 Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 32.

ography is that social justice is but a false act. Tempering with the forces of the market cannot but have disastrous consequences, for interference with the signalling function of prices distorts the pristine mechanisms of supply and demand. This narrative logic reduces the subject entirely to the sphere of micro-economic behaviour; the macro level is projected completely beyond representation and hence political influence.

In this, neoliberalism establishes a curious causality between authoritarianism and economic redistribution or any interference whatsoever into the system of property ownership.[19] It comes as no surprise, then, that the underlying political program of the neoliberal project is quintessentially occupied with what Walter Eucken termed "the democratization of the world."[20] As Slobodian puts it, mass democracy is considered a problem: it implies "clamoring demanding masses, always threatening to push the functioning of the market economy off its track."[21] The "rise of mass enfranchisement"[22] in the course of decolonization had come to be regarded as a primary threat to the existing

19 The argument forwarded in Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* is not simply historical. It is presented as a logical sequence, a narrative of political causality. According to him, the planned order must override individual preferences that conflict with its goals. Because people differ in their values, planning sooner or later confronts resistance; pluralism becomes a practical problem. To maintain coherence, the state must suppress competing priorities, silence dissent, and impose a unifying, collective purpose. Liberalism, in contrast, is recast as the lone alternative to totalitarian temptation. As a diagnostic category, the concept "collectivism" plays a pivotal role in that regard. The term is designed to draw sharp boundaries around liberalism, while pairing socialism and fascism around perceived similarities such as central planning, coercion, and subordination of the individual. Hayek, thus, presents a political story that pits the logic of planning against the logic of freedom. Its narrative coherence is anchored in a frustration of alternatives. It is about an inversion of expectations – a plot twist so to say – in which the readership is led to realize it has misidentified the causal chain. The project that begins with a moral commitment to equality ends up reproducing the institutional logic of tyranny. As such, it hopes to induce a profound disillusionment with the promises of socialism, which explains its prominence in Cold War political thought.

20 Walter Eucken, Quoted After Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 17.

21 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 17.

22 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 264. "A neoliberal perspective on the history of the twentieth century amounts to an alternative account of the modern era. In a neoliberal history of the century, decolonization began in 1919; fascism looked promising to some until it raised tariff walls; the Cold War was secondary to the war against the Global New Deal; the end of apartheid was seen by some as a tragedy; and countries were secondary entities subordinate to the totality of the globe."

world-economic order. But in the imperialist centres, too, the fear of the multiple social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s triggered discourses concerning the "excess of democracy."[23] The neoliberal and -conservative talking point that "[w]hat Marxists mistakenly attribute to capitalist economics […] is, in fact, a product of democratic politics,"[24] then, formed part of a wider reaction against the welfare state which increasingly emphasized "the high cost of government regulation" as the key cause of the stagflation crisis of the 1970s.[25] In this context, it is especially the discourse on (consumer price) inflation that has been leveraged to subject social and labour market policy to monetary stability, since the "conquest of inflation" was considered "concomitant of the conquest of totalitarianism."[26] The key argument for central bank independence, as one of the architects of the ECB Otmar Issing phrases it, hence consisted in "reminding ourselves of th[is] fundamental link"[27] such that fiscal austerity almost imposes itself to keep inflation/totalitarianism at bay. In contemporary monetary policy, the look back on the 1960s-70s is thus captivated in light of a narrative of "great moderation" according to which any sign of inflation figures as the monetary embodiment of a "a populist and delusionary 'sell out'" (e.g., a wage-price spiral) and therefore in this curious chain of equivalence a stepstone on the road to serfdom.[28] That way, the neoliberal rhetoric of crisis functions as a "pedagogy"[29] of market discipline: a legitimation of austerity whereby the compromises of the post-war compact could be retracted. Against this background, binaries between the "free market" and "big government" came to dominate political narratives: excessive regulation, the spectre of inflation, national budget deficits (e.g., "debt ceiling,"

23 Crozier/Huntington/Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, 113.
24 Crozier/Huntington/Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, 73.
25 Murry Weidenbaum. "The High Cost of Government Regulation." *Business Horizons* 18:4. 46. See also Henri Lepage. *Demain le Capitalisme*. Livre de Poche. 40; Daniel Bell. "The Public Household: On 'Fiscal Sociology' and the Liberal Society." *The Public Interest* 38. 40.
26 Stefan Eich and Adam Tooze. "The Great Inflation." Vorgeschichte der Gegenwart. Anselm Doering-Manteuffel Lutz Raphael, and Thomas Schlemmer (Eds.). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 191.
27 Otmar Issing. *On the Primacy of Price Stability* [Speech]. Liberální Institut, Prague.
28 Eich/Tooze, "The Great Inflation," 184–185, 193.
29 François Cusset. *La Décennie. Le grand cauchemar des années 1980*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte. 92.

"Schwarze Null"), and cost-benefit ratios turned into decisive neoliberal ideologemes. The writings of James P. Buchanan, Zbigniew Brzeziński, Daniel Bell, Samuel P. Huntington, or Henri Lepage combine a certain rhetoric of common sense and social polarization with a jargon of limitation and fiscal impossibility.[30] But they also make a certain emancipatory offer: to minimize the role of the state – re-interpreted as a parasitic organism – in private life. The lean state and the privatization of life are presented as a neoliberal utopia. Thereby, interestingly, the anti-welfarist backlash against "the Keynesian destruction of the balanced budget"[31] has managed to tap into anti-government feelings and mobilize the market interests of specific stakeholders in the national economy (e.g., "small business owners," "sole traders,") in support of liberalization programs. Catering to racialized law-and-order and anti-tax/bureaucratic sentiments, pitting family values against the welfare state, neoliberalism brought together a conservative cross-class alliance, dubbed the "the silent majority," that coalesced over a combined fear of moral and economic decline.[32] That way it managed, as Chamayou puts it, to frame an "offensive against democracy as a struggle for democracy."[33]

A similar dynamic can be observed at the company level, where corporate PR has worked to steer the discontent of customers in a business-friendly direction. Multinational firms such as Shell, Monsanto, or Nestlé have embraced a form of counter-activism that aims to divide their critics. In this, they rely on dialogue to co-opt the more moderate elements of social movements that are open to negotiations. The re-education of idealists into realists meanwhile marginalizes the radical flank of activism. Eventually, pressure groups are split along the lines of constructive versus destructive critique.[34] What, thus, emerges next to its conservative variant is an ethical neoliberalism that comes with a cer-

30 See also Cooper. *Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, 25ff.
31 James M. Buchanan and Richard E. Wagner. Democracy in Deficit. New York: Academic Press. 131.
32 Cf. Melinda Cooper. 2017. *Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. New York: Zone Books.
33 Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 223.
34 Ronald A. Duchin. "Take an Activist Apart and What Do You Have?" *CALF News Cattle Feeder*. 14; See also Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 110ff.

tain promise of autonomy but, in this, contrasts the ineffectiveness of political mass action to personal responsibility and effecting change "from within" the corporate world. Again, then, the impossibility of macro-structural change is opposed to the possibility of micro-structural reform.[35] The idea of corporate PR has been to intervene proactively into the public debate instead of "wait[ing] until others [had] defined and legitimized the problems."[36] Similar to the neoliberal critique of the welfare state, the corporate response to the activist challenge has hence been to reset the terms of the debate by "align[ing] the positive aspiration of people with the market and the restoration of the capitalist ethic."[37]

Coming out of a self-critique of classical *laissez faire*, then, the neoliberal turn has not so much been defined by a unified ideology or strategy than a shared problem diagnosis: the threat posed by democratic powers vis-à-vis private property. Thus, the neoliberal approach certainly does not leave the market to itself. Rather, in the spirit of Gary S. Becker's general application of economics as "a policy of society,"[38] it has increasingly turned to the moderation of the socio-cultural setting that frames capitalist enterprise. In this sense, conservative and corporate strategists have multiformly worked at re-valuating the signifiers of political participation so as to coincide with the parameters of choice provided by consumer society, whilst "remov[ing] public decisions more and more from political control."[39] On the international stage, the so-called "Geneva School," which next to the fabled Mont Pèlerin Society figures as a major international merger of the different national filiations of the neoliberal project, has been most crucial to this meta-political offensive. Bringing together economists such as Hayek but also functionaries employed at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) – the predecessor organization of the World Trade

35 Cf. Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 181.
36 Richard Crable and Steven Vibbert. "Managing Issues and Influencing Public Policy." *Public Relations Review* 11:2. 10.
37 Hall, *Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, 218.
38 Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 146; Gary S. Becker. *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
39 Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 149, 157.

Organization – such as Jan Tumlir, it stands for the joint effort to lobby for an international legal framework that constitutionalizes the "encasement" of the market order from processes of democratization on "the scale beyond the nation."[40] In the process, this "new constitutionalism"[41] functioned as an effective closure of the political horizon by limiting the scope for intervention into the economy via a "cybernetic legal order"[42] that combines the price-mechanism with a system of intergovernmental laws and free trade agreements.

Re-purposing a term developed by Hayek – the notion of "xenos rights" – Slobodian, therefore, frames this constitutionalization of the non-human agency of price systems as a jurisdiction of the *alien* investor that marks the material realization of market discipline as a quasi-transcendental force.[43] Alternativelessness becomes the law. It is under this aspect that he presents neoliberalism as an objectified moral philosophy – a spiritualization of capitalism's rule by abstractions in the form of "xenos rights" – that puts into effect a fantasy of market homeostasis uninterested in equality.[44] Arguing for an "impersonal discipline,"[45] Hayek well and truly articulates a demand for dividuals: subjects fully exposed to and disciplined by market mechanisms. This petition is underwritten by a distinct rhetoric of pain that resounds across neoliberal discourses of adjustment. Claims for austerity are repeatedly framed as necessary shocks, hard truths, or painful but unavoidable cures. Pain, in this account, is not an unfortunate by-product of reform but its very medium. What is striking is how this discourse on the inevitability of suffering co-exists with an acute sensitivity to the affective states of markets. While populations are enjoined to endure hardship, markets are described as "nervous," "anxious," or "worried." The result is a redistribution of vulnerability. Pain is naturalized as a disciplining force for human subjects. Corporations, on the other hand,

40 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 8.
41 Stephen Gill. "*New Constitutionalism.*" *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change 10: 1. 23–38.*
42 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 274.
43 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 123, Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 42.
44 Cf. *Slobodian, The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism, 261–262.*
45 Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 205.

enjoy special projection. The moods of markets are carefully monitored and assiduously managed. In this inversion, neoliberal adjustment does not appear as a neutral process of economic rationalization. Rather, it marks a moral economy in which suffering is selectively assigned and systematically justified. This endorses a rules-based order in which the subject is assigned nothing more than the role of microeconomic initiative – with all the demands and burdens this entails – while the market system itself is placed beyond doubt. Its laws are to be executed without qualification: "the rules […] which we 'have to be made to obey.'"[46] As said, this narrative logic extends beyond economic theory. The socio-fictions of neoliberalism re-appear, in altered form, across popular culture. In what follows, I therefore trace the logic of impersonal discipline from austerity politics into the domain of mass-cultural phenomena in order to discern a broader culture of adjustment.

2 "constant […] frustrations": Cultures of Adjustment

> We're going through a difficult and painful re-adjustment. I know that we're asking for sacrifices from virtually all of you, but there is no alternative.
>
> — Reagan, *Address to the Nation* (1981)

Neoliberal ideologues assume that the market works its "magic"[47] (Reagan) by signalling appropriate behaviour or economic policy via price indexes and capital flows. A key concept in Hayek's theoretical apparatus, in that regard, is the neo-Greek neologism "catallaxy" which is introduced to replace the moniker "oikonomia." For the latter's etymological invocation of a small-scale household economy is found to be lacking regarding the complex interlockings of market competition. Inspired by the verb "katallasso" (καταλλάσσω), which oscil-

46 Hayek. *Rules and Order*, 45–46.

47 Ronald Reagan, Quoted after Jennifer Bair. 2015. "Taking aim at the New International Economic Order." *The Road from Mont Pèlerin*. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Eds.). 355.

lates ambivalently between "to exchange" and "to admit in the community" respectively "to change from enemy into friend," the new term by contrast is meant to designate a form of meta-governance which enframes micro-structural decision-making: "the order brought about by the mutual adjustment of many individual economies in a market."[48] Via this conceptual shift, now, Hayek also articulates the need for new "moral attitudes"[49] adapted to the anonymous rule of market mechanisms and not the personal bonds that characterize small-scale economies. For him, this implies doing away with what he alternately calls the "atavism" or "mirage of social justice" since it expresses, according to him, a "revolt of the tribal spirit against the abstract requirements of the coherence of the Great Society."[50] His neoliberal ethics request a voluntary conformity with market rules because failure to translate price signals into a corresponding profit-oriented behaviour results in an imbalance between supply and demand. Hence:

> It would mean not merely a personal loss, but a failure in their duty to the public, to employ a less efficient instead of a more efficient person, to spare an incompetent competitor, or to favour particular users of their products.[51]

Rational choice implies market discipline: The neoliberal subject acts upon price signals without ifs or buts. It is not confused by extra-economic considerations but opts for the most cost-efficient offer and conquers market shares wherever a contender leaves an opening. Otherwise, the information transmitted via the market would be distorted.[52]

48 Friedrich A. von Hayek. *The Mirage of Social Justice. Law, Legislation, and Liberty, Vol. 2*. London: Routledge. 108–109.
49 Hayek, "The Atavism of Social Justice," 7.
50 Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 144. My guess is that Hayek's reference to "the Great Society" is an attempt at subversion in that it re-signifies Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" program – a large-scale welfarist initiative launched in 1964 – which precisely stands in the tradition of the New Deal and Keynesian re-distribution agendas.
51 Hayek, "The Atavism of Social Justice," 13.
52 In Hayek's view, entrepreneurial elites act as a harmonizing factor in order to bring supply and demand closer to equilibrium. This puts him partly at odds with Schumpeter, who regards the entrepreneur as a disruptive force that produces imbalance in a system otherwise mired in repetition: the tendency towards balance, on the other hand, is considered a sign of innovative exhaustion.

Assuming the position of an ideal collective capitalist, Hayek brings to the utmost expression the underlying rationale of neoliberal austerity and adjustment policy: "maintenance of the new wealth which creates the new ambitions requires an acquired discipline which *the non-domesticated barbarians* in our midst, who call themselves 'alienated,' refuse to accept."[53] Foucault, now, is certainly right to insist on the liberationist promise of neoliberalism's emphasis on anonymous processes: "the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated."[54] The meritocratic principle is not incompatible with diversity. In fact, Hayek posits difference against equality. For him, however, this means above all that he recognises the market requires a highly differentiated system of labour-division. But in that vein, the market myth effects an all the more fervent naturalization of inequality since socio-economic hierarchies are rendered as the spontaneous outgrowth of a competitive order, which inevitably "must rest on constant undesigned frustrations of some efforts."[55] The market is considered an unbiased triage process that filters productive from unproductive lives: "That those who have to *offer* to their fellows little that is valuable may have to incur more pain and effort to earn even a pittance than others" is, thus, ultimately branded as the "necessary concomitant" of an impersonal market regime.[56]

Neoliberalism's construction of epistemological legitimacy, then, does not shy away from brutality. Measured against the allegories of control explored in this study and especially the violent speech acts documented in *die alarmbereiten*, it stands out, in fact, that if the proponents of the efficient-market-hypothesis aim at explaining away

53 Hayek, "The Atavism of Social Justice," 15.

54 Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 259–260. See also Buck-Morss, "Enviosioning Capital," 466. Buck-Morss points out that: "When Foucault praises the invisibility of Smith's hand because it does not allow the sovereign sufficient knowledge to control the social field of individual desire, he forgets the other side, that the desiring individuals also lack this knowledge, and that such knowledge is vital for effective political response. [Thus], Foucault' s affirmation of the incapacity to envision the economy can play into the hands of a reactionary nationalism that thrives precisely on the condition of blindness to the objective determinates of contemporary social life."

55 Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 171.

56 Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 254.

("wegerklären"[57]) the structural imbalances of the market they do not necessarily hide the destructiveness of the world-economy. This is tellingly acknowledged: capitalism "appears cruel."[58] Yet, these grievances are considered a misconception since market self-regulation is viewed as an intentionless process. It is not willed by an entity accountable to human morality or legislation. Moreover, the non-conscious violence enacted by competition is balanced out on a macro-structural level.[59] Fitting our analysis in the previous chapter, Carla Ibled in this sense speaks of an "optimistic cruelty."[60] The accumulated brutality that is experienced on the personal level is supposed to scale up to a general equilibrium. In the writing of neoliberalism's chief stylist, market discipline is reflected in a decidedly austere rhetoric that considers inequality the distinguishing quality of a complex civilization: "so long as it remains a progressive society, some must lead, and the rest must follow."[61] Poverty, in this sense, is not supposed to be abolished but to

57 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 62.
58 Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 98.
59 Cf. Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 231–233.
60 Carla Ibled. "The 'Optimistic Cruelty' of Hayek's Market Order: Neoliberalism, Pain and Social Selection." *Theory, Culture & Society*. 3; See also Lisa Duggan. *Mean Girl: Any Rand and the Culture of Greed*. Oakland: University of California Press.
61 Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 98. Even if Hayek argues that he is no Social-Darwinist, alleging his claims do not rest on geneticist arguments, the "survival of the successful" is at the heart of his theoretical work. (Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 112) It is, thus, not surprising that there are numerous synergies between neoliberalism and the New Right. Some of the leading personal of the AfD is recruited from the German Hayek Society. But also members of the Mont Pèlerin Society such as Charles Murray (the author of *The Bell Curve* which links inequality to differences in IQ) or Murray Rothbard (who equally links socio-economic hierarchies to biological realities) act as mediators between neo-classical economics and the far right. The "language of difference" elaborated in reaction to the Left's "language of equality" is a key connecting link between the Alt Right and neoliberalism. (Quinn Slobodian. "Anti-'68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals helped spawn the Alt Right." *Cultural Politics* 15:3, 372–386) It must be noted that the school of neoliberalism does not refer back to the Enlightenment and the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th century. Quite the contrary, it is the tradition of counter-enlightenment and restauration which emerged in reaction to 1789 (e.g., Edmund Burkes, Thomas Malthus, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, De Maistre) that underwrites the neoliberal defense of inequality. (Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 204–205) Hayek differentiates between the ostensibly authentic bourgeois culture of Anglo-Saxon provenance and the "tradition of Voltaire, Rousseau, Condorcet and the French Revolution which became the ancestors of modern socialism." (Friedrich A. von Hayek. "The Principles of a Liberal Social Order." *Il Politico* 31:4. 601) In an interview

serve as an incentive to perform in a hypercompetitive environment. Without socio-economic insecurity, the argument goes, there would not be sufficient incitement to take up lower-wage jobs.

But it is not only that a neoliberal ethics repudiates interference with the market's impersonal discipline. In line with his theory of positive/negative feedback, Hayek moreover argues that the detrimental effects of lacking competitiveness must figure as a warning for others. As Ibled puts it, he paints the market as a "stigma machine" whose remunerative or retributive consequences "need[] to be made visible – a spectacle that all can see" so that the information transmitted by the price system can truly take effect.[62] Here, too, the welfare state is considered an impediment that obscures the legibility of market signals. At times, therefore, Hayek's elaborations take on an overtly morbid tone, when he argues to conceive the poor as living deterrents that embody the failure to rise up to the challenge of market competition: "a certain percentage of the population must find itself in the bottom of the scale."[63] The spectacular representation of economic failure, thus, is meant to be complementary to the system of price signals, whose steering function is "taken into account only if the risk is borne not only by those who decide but also by their descendants."[64] If, then, there are more politically-correct, minority-friendly varieties of neoliberalism, committed to affirmative action and the creative industries, Ibled insists that nonetheless "the neoliberal project has adopted cruelty as its fuel from its inception." Fictions of equal opportunity and winner-take-all

with the German *Wirtschaftswoche* (1981), Hayek makes his hostility toward the poor most explicit. First, he argues that "Ungleichheit ist nicht bedauerlich, sondern höchst erfreulich. Sie ist einfach nötig." But then he gives this argument an ethno-nationalist twist. Joining in the conservative horror at a supposed overpopulation, he claims that some sort of market-based selection process is the only solution: social reproduction ("erhalten," "vermehren") should be reserved only to those "Völker" that developed efficient subsistence models ("ernähren"). In the end, Hayek recommends a form of Malthusian creative destruction that essentializes global inequalities. (Hayek, Quoted after Ralf Ptak. "Grundlagen des Neoliberalismus." *Kritik des Neoliberalismus*. Christof Butterwegge, Bettina Lösch, Ralf Ptak (Eds.) Wiesbaden: VS Verlag. 73)

62 Ibled, "Optimistic Cruelty," 14.

63 Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 290.

64 Friedrich A. von Hayek. *Rules and Order. Law, Legislation and Liberty Vol. 1*. London: Routledge. 177.

markets are not mutually exclusive. It is therefore that she notes the complementarity between neoliberal theory and "other cultural works" such as "trash reality TV" that caricatures the poor: "these examples of everyday sadism are faithful to the spirit of cruelty that neoliberal theory […] has contributed to shape."[65]

Thereby, in effect, Ibled is close to this study's dissection of structural adjustment as a recognizable cultural form. Of course, the first chapter has been more concerned with a science-fictionized aesthetic that taps into the narrative potentials of micro-electronics to think through the microscopic control mechanisms of capital. But in Röggla there is a move toward more everyday-like scenarios of structural adjustment – defamiliarized in an astute language criticism until the underlying violence of crisis-management is rendered recognizable – that points to the diffusion of neoliberal austerity logics into other cultural products. Weaving through numerous emergency discourses, *die alarmbereiten* produces a form of "condensed knowledge"[66] which brings forward the neoliberal unconscious – the production of alternativelessness – written into contemporary catastrophe narrations. Putting on display the hostile rhetorical gestures articulated in these cultural forms, it maps out a "*biopolitical program*" that "government-sponsored civil defense programs," "private survival/prepper programs,"[67] and popular disaster plots (with their exclusive concern for the survival of the nuclear family) unwittingly share. As such, I argue, the volume captures something of what the literary critic Jane Elliott has termed the "microeconomic mode." As in "der übersetzer," which ultimately confronts the narrator with the non-choice to adjust or jump out of the window, the pieces set us on the track of a narrative logic which transgresses high/low culture binaries and is characterized by a poetics of decision-making under crisis conditions. Even if the stories stop short of actual choice-making, since they are overtaken by events, they conjugate to its logical extreme the choice patterns that neo-liberal crisis-management presents its sub-

65 Ibled, "Optimistic Cruelty," 17.
66 Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode*, 4.
67 Horn, *Future as Catastrophe*, p. 94.

jects. As such, "der übersetzer" makes explicit what the literary and pop-cultural products that Elliott looks at rather imply:

> In this mode, abstraction results from a focus on delimited or capsule worlds in which option and decision, action and effect, have been extracted from everyday contexts and thus made unusually legible – for example, the life raft, the desert island, the medical experiment, the prison cell. Extremity registers in forms of painful, grotesque, or endangered embodiment […].[68]

In that capacity, the aesthetic of "*suffering agency*"[69] encountered in these cultural artefacts inflects the methodological individualism cultivated by the Chicago School and other neoliberal schools. It builds up on a similar subtraction of social relations to construct the rational-choice subject that the neoliberal ideology of price-signals is contingent upon. The life-and-death decision model posited in contemporary cage dramas, survival games, or post-apocalyptic scenarios (e.g., the *Saw* movies, the South-Korean series *Squid Game*, or the Netflix production *El Hoyo*) merely push the narrative reductions of the micro-economic mode to the extreme. A slightly different but comparable example might be found in the series *24* starring Kiefer Sutherland, which can be read as the quintessential television product of the "War on Terror." Exploiting the fictional conceit that the portrayed events take place in real-time (every episode corresponds to an hour in a 24h narrative), the show immerses the plot – the prevention of a terrorist attack – in an incredible sense of immediacy and urgency. That way, ethical or legal concerns are ultimately swept away by the pressure of events. Again and again, the geopolitical scenarios played out in the series shrink down into "capsule worlds" in which everything depends on the showdown between the protagonist and a suspected terrorist. Placed in an extreme state of exception, presumptions of innocence are suspended. In these delimited spaces, it is as if there were simply no alternative to torture. It appears as the only rational choice. The sce-

68 Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode*, 1.
69 Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode*, 1.

nario of the ticking timebomb, thereby, abstracts from all moral-social considerations and facilitates the violation of prior norms. As such, the popular show lends expression to the ideological legitimation of anti-terror laws and connected encroachments on fundamental rights. Playing into the neoliberal ideology of alternativelessness, it evinces once more how representation is a way of doing politics. In this sense, the deployment of the worst-case functions as an enabling fiction whose "aesthetic harshness" indexes the "conceptual violence required to redefine humans according to such logic."[70] By crafting plots that create the sense of an utter lack of alternatives (due to the horrific options that they present), this aesthetic phenomenon brings to the utmost expression the micro-economic imagination that is at the core of neoliberal policy-making. As such, however, these texts reproduce concomitant macro/micro binaries which precisely ground rational choice in the boundedness of knowledge: "processes must be guided by a supra-conscious order which cannot be the object of its own representations."[71] Indeed, the horror of the micro-economic mode described by Elliott is majorly rooted in the removal of these vistas of suffering from macro-social legibility.

But one must not stop at worst-case fictions or graphic portrayals of gore and splatter. In her study of the affective economy of neoliberalism, the cultural critic Lauren Berlant has identified a "crisis ordinary"[72] that extends far beyond the above-mentioned cases of extreme fiction, and which represents the social per se as a natural disaster or site of traumatic experience. Incidentally, her case in point is *Pattern Recognition* wherein she identifies all the hallmarks of contemporary "drama[s] of adjustment."[73] Gibson's then-near-future fiction articulates the neoliberal moment of global capitalism in a "vernacular of trauma"[74] in which the Cold War paranoia of the narrator's CIA father, now, functions as a general coping mechanism: a "psycho-logical prophylaxis […] [to] get

70 Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode*, 188.
71 Friedrich A. von Hayek. "Rules, Perception, and Intelligibility." *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*. London: Routledge. 61.
72 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 9.
73 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 77.
74 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 79.

on with ordinary business. Maintain morale."[75] In this gesture, though, the historical background is recast into a "deeply personal insult."[76] It is at once miniaturized and transformed into a series of random events in the face of which the narrator is encouraged to develop her affective skills all while acknowledging that "worrying about problems doesn't help solve them."[77] Thus, as our prior reading set forth, the novel's final plot twist sees the protagonist adjust "to a new paradigm of history"[78] by retreating from world politics into her private lifeworld.

Another reflection on the culture of adjustment can be found in Anne Boyer's meditations on contemporary illness. Boyer observes a trend to narrativize disease as "a story of 'surviving' via neoliberal self-management"[79] The popular representations of cancer that patients are confronted with come increasingly with the injunction to put in some "extra work" in a "false heroics" to "donate [their] courage to everyone" while keeping signs of weakness to themselves: "We are supposed to […], as in *Sex and the City*, stand up with Samantha in the ballroom and throw off our wigs […]."[80] Boyer finds this therapeutic discourse of empowerment[81] to be underwritten by a fundamental narrative "capitulation."[82] Just as it zooms in on the promise of individual

75 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 45–46.
76 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 137.
77 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 92.
78 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 352.
79 Anne Boyer. *The Undying. A Meditation on Modern Illness*. London: Penguin Books. 9.
80 Boyer, *The Undying*, 75–76.
81 Cf. Becker, *Economic Approach*, 10. One might here think of Gary S. Becker's maxim to apply the economic approach to all and everything, which leads him to argue that "most (if not all!) deaths are to some extents 'suicides' in the sense that they could have been postponed if more resources had been invested in prolonging life."
82 Cf. Daniel Worden. "The Memoir in the Age of Neoliberal Individualism." *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Eds.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 161ff., 172. As such, Boyer's reading of the genre of illness memoirs at once brings forward something about the more general memoir boom in the last couple of decades. The seclusion into first-person narration performed in the auto-fictional and memoir writing since the 1990s – rooted in the tradition of "New Journalism" developed in the late 1960s – has increasingly dramatized the inability to form "an ethical bond with others." Meanwhile, the market is encountered as a natural environment in the face of which narrative perspective fractures into a "solipsistic, isolated subject position." Worden considers New Journalism an overlooked genre that emerged in the shadow of debates as to the periodization of "postmodern" literature. He

agency – "privatiz[ing] survival" – it writes the broader picture out of view: the enabling conditions of sickness appear as simply "a given […] against which the personal drama is played out."[83] The transformation of the political order is foreclosed here. In place of structural change, societal grievances are displaced onto the figure of a deficient subject. As such, the genre proves a crucial site of the "cruel optimism" diagnosed by Berlant. Personal trauma is registered as just one more opportunity to prove oneself as a neoliberal subject against the contingencies of life. Yet, in "this version of freedom," it is precisely the micro-economic promise of "personal possibility" whereby the macro-structural framework conditions of choice are invisibilized: "Fate was shipwrecked, so in its place, they sent us agency."[84]

This *tour de force* across the de-realization of society in neoliberal culture and the concomitant production of alternativelessness could go on. But the cursory overview provided so far must suffice, here, to indicate the curious nexus of extremity and abstraction, trauma and subtraction whereby "the social whole simply disappear[s] from sight."[85] This does not necessarily imply a statement as to the aesthetic quality of individual artefacts. It, however, goes to show that the distribution of the sensible encodes a distribution of the possible. In the texts explored so far in this study, of course, the intricacies of representation and the production of alternativelessness are acutely reflected upon. In the fol-

proposes an "alternative literary history" that links the embrace of fragmentation and individualism in New Journalism to the anti-utopian gesture of neoliberalism and its critique of representation. This enables him to view today's memoir boom less as "a contemporary anomaly" than "an outgrowth of the already-vibrant tradition of nonfiction prose in the late twentieth century."

83 Ellen Leopold. *A Darker Ribbon. A Twentieth-Century of Story of Breast Cancer, Women, and their Doctors*. Boston: Beacon Press. Quoted after: Boyer, *The Undying*, 9.

84 Boyer, *The Undying*, 249.

85 Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital," 463. This quotation is a remark on neo-classical economics.

lowing, I therefore wish to return to the neoliberal "war on totality" beyond the more dominant segments of the culture industry. In vein of the aesthetic contemporaneities that intrigue this dissertation, I hope to refine the contextualization of the texts read up to here. For, it seems to me, the literary specimens at the heart of my enquiries make legible a certain liquidation of (individual) agency in arts and theory. It is this matter, then, that I want to pursue in the next section of this interlude.

3 Representations of Alternativelessness in Recent Literature and Theory

> Capital has always written the Factory.
>
> — Badiou, *Age of Poets*, 145.

In the texts that have been surveyed in the previous chapters, one could get the impression of a literature composed solely of minor characters which in some way or another act out the blockage of their historical moment. There is a pestilent sense of unfreedom as narrative perspective is captured by "fatalistic engines, drawing characters into deadly compulsions"[86] beyond their purview and grasp. From the zombiesque wired-in-brains populating Gibson's necromantic cyberspace ballad and the datafied literary cast of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* to the baneful, unfree direct speech of Röggla's crisis-management prose, I have traced various literary formalizations and extrapolative exaggerations of the kind of dividual subjecthood that Deleuze detects at the heart of control society. Even if these artefacts, then, share – as has been noted – in some of the internal mythologies of capitalist economics, we have dealt with literary articulations that more or less effectively work at a form able to capture something of the structural adjustment stipulated by neoliberal capitalism. So far, then, this study has come across its fair share of literary horror at the withering away of the human remainder from societal causality. In fact, these texts seem to confirm Sianne Ngai's remark that "bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its *own* 'powerlessness and

86 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 82.

superfluity in the empirical world' [Adorno]" has made it particularly "capable of theorizing social powerlessness."[87]

It is, thus, perhaps not surprising that sociologists like Didier Éribon have turned to more literary forms of writing, in his case "autofiction," to deliberate on the twilight of 20th century mass politics.[88] Similarly, Édouard Louis' socio-literary writing returns book after book to his personal family history to find the sources of the contemporary polarization of (French) society in the unfulfilled promises of a destroyed working-class culture. Albeit, out of this tradition, it is to my mind Annie Ernaux who hast provided the most concise expression to the social cutbacks and defeatism that have followed deindustrialization: "Une rumeur d'éschatologie politique montait. L'avènement d'un 'nouvel ordre mondial' [Bush Sr.] était annoncé. La fin de l'histoire était proche […]. Le mot 'lutte' était démonétisé, comme un relent d'un marxisme désormais ridiculisé, 'défense' désignait d'abord celle des consommateurs."[89] In this vein, the Nobel laureate works at a collective autobiography that protests the collapse of politics into the humdrum routine "de l'existence personnelle [où] l'Histoire ne signifiait pas."[90] Consistently refusing the first person singular ("je"), preferring to use more plural pronouns such as "on," "nous," or "ils/ells," *Les Années* (2008) taps into the genre of autofiction to re-politicize a seemingly post-political age where the disintegration of civic life provides new avenues for accumulation in the form of novel levels of individualization all while the downsizing of collective bargaining power enables capital to deal with each contestant as an isolated applicant.

In seeking out the personal as a site of history, Ernaux et al. explore the making of powerlessness by way of the subjective experience of neoliberal alternativelessness. The "literary sociology"[91] which has emerged in Germany during the 2010s echoes this. From Kathrin

87 Sianne Ngai. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press. 2.
88 See also Serge Doubrovsky. "Autobiographie/Vérité/Psychanalyse." *L'Esprit Créateur* 20. 90; Ruth Cruickshank. *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction. The Aesthetics of Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press. 61.
89 Annie Ernaux. *Les Années* [Ebook]. Paris: Gallimard. 6.197, 7.35.
90 Ernaux, *Les Années*, 6.5.
91 Böttcher, "Soziologie der Gegenwartsliteratur," 287.

Fischer's *Mit uns beginnt der Abstieg* (2012) to Anke Stelling's *Schäfchen im Trockenen* (2018) and Christian Baron's *Ein Manner seiner Klasse* (2020), there has been a return to class as an object of literary representation. Albeit it has seldomly assumed the state of a subject. Instead, discourses of shame, considering proletarian subjects from a perspective of victimhood, have been at the forefront of a debate on new risks of impoverishment. A certain literature of downward mobility has taken shape that narrativizes the prospect of widespread precarization but without offering any sign of (collective) resistance beyond the politics of resentment documented by Röggla. It appears like a *fait accompli*: "Vielen wird es im Verlauf der nächsten Jahre genauso gehen."[92] The point, then, is – as Röggla's play with pronominal shifters sets forth – that the personal emerges as a site of unfreedom in these testimonies of the neoliberal era. The promise of agency is deliberately or not presented as a conduit for an all the more pervasive heteronomy.

Marc McGurl's account of the so-called *Program Era* allows to situate these observations within the post-war institutionalization of literary production. Creative writing programmes consolidated self-reflexivity as a dominant literary mode that "partake[s] in a larger, multivalent social dynamic of self-observation."[93] This trend, he argues, intersects with a broader historical shift: the rising cultural and economic value of intimacy under the conditions of the information and service economy, where expressive self-disclosure increasingly functions as both affective currency and professional competence. Within this conjuncture, autofiction becomes legible as a symptomatic form in which the horror at the evacuation of the subject from social causality is internalized and narratively managed. It attests to a neoliberal culture of adjustment that fosters reflexivity less as critique than for the purpose of self-governance and -regulation. What is interesting, however, is that the currents presented above encode narratives of the recent past. As such, incidentally, they both fit Perry Anderson's claim that historiographical fiction today tends to codify "an experience of defeat," whereby he

92 Anke Stelling. *Schäfchen im Trockenen*. Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag. 166; See also Nachtwey, *Hidden Crisis*, 3.
93 Marc McGurl. 2011. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 12.

inverts Lukács' conception of the historical novel as the epic of bourgeois revolution.[94] Indeed, "trauma" manifests as a primary mode of expression "for describing the historical present"[95] and its impasses in which former self-evidences are shattered, while the social environment appears at once fragile and menacing but essentially without alternative concerning the deep blueprints of the politico-economic system.

Berlant, here, also refers to the French "cinema of precarity" that emerged around the turn of the millennium and forms a filmic counterpart to the defeatist working-class literature touched above. An interesting example that she cites, in that regard, is the movie *Ressources Humaines* (1999) by Laurent Cantet. Relating the social impact of neoliberal reforms by way of an intergenerational conflict that opposes the Fordist mentality of a veteran worker to the jargon of austerity spoken by his son (who now represents the dismissal plans of the management board), the film plays out the displacement of one mode of sociality by another. It stages the cancellation of the institutionalized post-war compromise between big business and organized labour. As such, it "melds melodrama and politics" into a *cul-de-sac* aesthetic that documents "a shift in precarity from a limited structure to a pervasive life environment" in which the annulment of personal life plans and historical horizons intertwine.[96] Precarity is, hence, not only crucially tied to fears about social relegation but also the exhaustion of modes of life and struggle. For one thing, then, the historiographic (auto)fiction of the last decades has been pervaded by texts that consider the contemporary period as the traumatic accumulation of "futures that failed to materialize and remained spectral."[97] As such, however, the narrativization of

94 Perry Anderson. "From Progress to Catastrophe." *London Review of Books* 33:15. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe [last accessed 25.05.2022].

95 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 9–10.

96 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 201.

97 Mark Fisher. *Ghosts of My Life. Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures.* Winchester/Washington: zero books. 107, 21. Mark Fisher, therefore, attests a "hauntological" condition to contemporary culture. (see also Derrida, Spectres of Marx, 202) Another, albeit less autofictional, example might be Sascha Reh's *Gegen die Zeit* (2015) which returns to the cybernetic experimentations under Salvador Allende, prematurely crushed by the military coup of Pinochet. But one could equally think of slightly older examples such as

defeat also holds a representational promise. For a "successful spatial representation" of global capitalism "need not be some uplifting socialist-realist drama of revolutionary triumph but may be equally inscribed in a narrative of defeat, which sometimes, even more effectively, causes the whole architectonic of postmodern global space to rise up in ghostly profile behind itself, as some ultimate dialectical barrier."[98] In exactly this sense, the turn to bifurcational moments in history gives literary shape to the assertion of new capitalist social relations: it tells the gestation period of neoliberalism. The depiction of the subject's capture in the micro-economic offers, if you will, a "novelistically-compelling 'plotting' of the emergence of Capital" as a "causal agency located not at the level of individual characters"[99] but rather an invisible limit that frames the scope of literary representation.

Related hereto, I would like to place a particular emphasis on two novels – David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011) and Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015) – which take up the issue of autofiction but to distort the form into a deceitful corporate memoir that akin to Röggla's *die alarmbereiten* problematizes the specious turn inward characterizing neoliberal culture. Wallace's posthumously published third novel functions like a historical fiction that recounts the neoliberal turn via the *de facto* privatization of the IRS, the American tax authority, in the course of Reagan's trickle-up reforms. In this, the theme of structural adjustment is yet again linked up with the co-optation of countercultural revolt ("rebellion against conformity became fashionable"[100]). Similar to the analysis forwarded in chapter I, *The Pale King* shows a market order able to "promote this or that corporate product as the way to escape the grey 1984 totalitarianism."[101] Thereby, interestingly,

Michel Houellebecq's *Particules Élémenataires* (1998) or Robert Menasse's *Don Juan de la Mancha* (2007) which both dramatize, in one way or another, the recuperation of 1960s counter-cultural promiscuity by the atomized, competitive order of neoliberalism.

98 Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 415.

99 Cunningham, "The Historical Novel of Contemporary Capitalism," Online.

100 David Foster Wallace. *The Pale King (An Unfinished Novel)*. London: Penguin Books. 146–147.

101 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 148.

the effort to reform the IRS into a "for-profit concern type of thing"[102] is shown to be precisely mediated via the liberationist promise of a lean state. Neoliberalism, consequentially, is decoded as the administration of "insignificance" which – while removing the macro-economic from democratic control – "flatter[s] all the little psychic delusions with which we deflect the horror of personal smallness."[103] That way, the ideology of the entrepreneurial self is represented as a form of behavioural management which taps into anti-conformist desires and the grievances of the subject: "corporations will be able to represent consumption-patterns as the way to break out."[104] "Alienation" – mocked by one character as "one of those big sixties words"[105] – is itself made profitable. Wallace paints a corporate America which deploys the very psychopathologies that it generates: "exploiting the psychological fact that most people are […] prone to the illusion that they and their problems are uniquely special."[106] Eventually, this is tied up in an almost cyberpunk-like imagery in which the corporation seems more like "a matter of metaphysics" while employees literally turn into human capital: in channelling financial "throughput," they are assimilated into the corporate body, "like 'made into a body.'"[107] The novel, hence, brings together some of the various facets of neoliberalism broached in this study. The "image of rebellion" is juxtaposed to the privatization of monetary politics into a "parallel world, both connected to and independent of this one."[108] At once, the narrator tries to figure the posthuman appearance

102 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 114; See also Richard Godden and Michael Szalay. "The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's The Pale King." *How Abstract Is It? Thinking Capital Now*. Rebecca Colesworthy and Peter Nicholls (Eds.). London/New York: Routledge. 106–107. According to Godden and Szalay, the novel, thus, challenges "the ostensibly public nature of the bailout […]: for Wallace, the U.S. Treasury […] undergoes effective privatisation during the 1980s. It follows for Wallace that tax dollars cease to be public monies, and that the state, in its efforts to secure the integrity of money during a turn to global finance, does so as one corporation (albeit a large one) among many."

103 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 145–146.

104 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 148.

105 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 142.

106 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 215; See also Stephen Shapiro. "From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King's* Cultural Fix." *Textual Practice* 28:07. 1251.

107 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 144, 368, 142; See also Godden/Szalay, "Bodies in the Bubble," 110.

108 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 151, 86.

of the corporation via the "terror of concurrent films like *Terminator* and *Blade Runner*."[109] Concocting a sort of historical novel of fiscal politics with the fictional conceit of a corporate memoir, the text portrays neoliberal capitalism as "a tyranny of conformist nonconformity."[110] As the narrator, while listening to the "CBS daytime network announcer's voice say, 'You're watching As the World turns,'" suddenly realizes in a quasi-parabolic scene: "I was free to choose 'whatever' because it didn't really matter."[111] It is, thus, that the novel forwards a figuration of neoliberal (un)freedom in which the promise of micro-economic agency acts as a medium of disempowerment.

McCarthy's *Satin Island* is another text that thinks along these lines. Composed out of the fictional fieldnotes of a corporate ethnographer, the text is fixated on the essential insufficiency of (literary) writing regarding a global system that appears "inherently unwritable" and, at once, "too voracious to let anything gather or accrue unconsumed before it."[112] Bringing the "death of the avant-garde" or "novel" to bear on the "end of history" narrative, *Satin Island* gives way to a view of capitalism as a totalizing loop that "[w]orm[s] its way into each corner of the citizenry's lives."[113] In this, the "general impossibility of writing a novel"[114] becomes a pretence to reflect on the futility of resistance, most notably through the example of the violently suppressed Genoa G8 Summit protest in 2001. Equipped with an all-embracing "sense of having come 'too late'" – objectified in a corporate machine which purportedly anticipates his every move – the storyteller announces that in the current order "it *is* all written down."[115] Fundamentally linking the theme of recuperation and structural adjustment, the political and aesthetic avant-garde are then consigned to a bygone (modernist) past. Anti-systemic resistance is deemed always-already incorporated: "The machine could swallow everything, incorporate it seamlessly, like a

109 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 82.
110 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 115.
111 Wallace, *The Pale King,* 224–225.
112 Tom McCarthy. *Satin Island*. London: Vintage Books. 16, 145, 86.
113 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 154.
114 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 221.
115 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 22, 152.

giant loom that reweaves all fabric, no matter how recalcitrant and jarring its raw form."[116]

This sentiment, now, is not only expressed in the medium of literature. It also resonates in radical theory as, for instance, in a self-critical account drafted by the anonymous collective Wu Ming (formerly Luther Blisset) exactly on the occasion of the 2001 demonstrations in Genoa. The group had, in fact, extensively mobilized in the run-up to the events, most notably in the form of the pamphlet *From the Multitudes of Europe* – modelled after their bestseller *Q* from 1999 – that conjured the peasant uprising against feudal principalities under the revolutionary theologian Thomas Müntzer as a "prefiguring event."[117] Linking the 1525 Battle of Frankenhausen to the alter-globalization movement that culminated in the protests against the G8 summit, Wu Ming hoped to conjure the image of an undead army that marches behind the living. It is this "mythopoetic" politics that is subjected to a bitter self-critique by the authors. Putting together a montage of the lethal crackdown of the G8 protests with the brutal suppression of the German Peasant's Revolt, they reflect on the representational failures surrounding their political activism. The point they are trying to make, in this, is that by applying a metaphoric of beleaguerment, they erroneously depicted contemporary capitalist power in feudalistic terms:

> […] empire was described more and more often as a castle besieged by a manifold army of peasants. That metaphor recurs in several texts and speeches. […] The summits were invariably held in heavily militarized areas […], which conjured up images of a regime under siege by protesters. Demonstrations took the form of 'blockades': the more the power wanted to keep the people out and away, the more the people forced the powerful to meet in ridiculously over-fortified garrisons. Metaphorically speaking, they closed themselves into castles. […]. Although it was inspiring and effective, the metaphor was a misrepresentation. There was

116 McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 37.
117 Wu Ming. "Introduction: Spectres of Müntzer at Sunrise/Greeting the 21st Century." *Thomas Müntzer. Sermon to the Princes*. London/New York: Verso. xix-xxxvi.

> no real siege going on, as you can't besiege a power that's everywhere and whose main manifestation is a constant flow of electrons from stock exchange to stock exchange.[118]

Failing to apprehend the new nature of abstraction, in their eyes, the alter-globalization movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s ended up in an insubstantial critique of capitalism. This misrepresentation – "mistaking the power's formal ceremonies for the power itself" – in the end "would prove fatal."[119] The movementist revolt against the symbolic bastions of authority is likened to a false act that misses the everywhereness of capital.[120] The analytics of power, instead, is shifted to the built

118 Wu Ming, "Spectres of Müntzer," xix-xxxvi.

119 Wu Ming, "Spectres of Müntzer," xxxvi. The use of feudal imagery is perhaps unsurprising, given that the peasant figure – dispossessed by neoliberal agrarian reforms in the Global South – was in part cast as the new revolutionary subject at the time. In the 1990s and 2000s, new peasant movements were regarded as a global avant-garde against neoliberalism and a central force in the anti-globalization movement, particularly Vía Campesina, an umbrella organization that has coordinated its members' actions at various international summits.

120 See also Deleuze, *Postscript*, 4–7. Here, one might also think of Deleuze's remark on how the critical language of the time borrows its battle slogans from the tradition of the old labour movement. Indeed, the metaphoric of besiegement re-works the image of the "mole" which from Marx through Lenin to Rosa Luxemburg has symbolized the (industrial) proletariat as the "gravedigger" of bourgeois class society, visualizing the shopfloor as the site of collective action and intervention. In the cycle of struggles opened by the organized movement of the industrial working-class, the proverbial "mole" would entrench itself in the "hidden abodes" of production or "weak links" in the articulation of imperialist power to surface in times of open conflict. Trying to account for the changing nature of capitalist power and abstraction, now, Deleuze argues that this argot of resistance increasingly misses the point, as "the burrows of a molehill" are superseded by the complex "coils of the serpent," supposed to represent the corporate-form as the key organizational unit of an expansive process that fragments the factory as an event-site by disassembling it across transcontinental production-chains. In Deleuze's understanding of the "new forces knocking at the door" – a science-fiction that is already happening – the "corporate situation" marks a distinguishing feature of the society of control. Against this background, the image of the snake is only one among many conceptual domains that is tested out in the attempt to elaborate "new weapons" of critique. In this, he does not necessarily seek out a meta-language but upends the theoretical models of neoliberal economics. Thus, Deleuze discards teachings "that corporations have a soul" – which he considers "the most terrifying news in the world" – whilst noting that corporations operate in "states of perpetual metastability." Deleuze likens the new organizational structure of the corporation, as it interconnects the old sites of enclosures, to the image of "a spirit, a gas" that almost invisibly makes seemingly distinct particles into a continuous aggregate body (maybe inspired by the "Ugly Spirit"

environment. Echoing two other, somewhat notorious, anonymous collectives – Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee – capitalist power is said to have become logistical. There is no secret other guaranteeing the efficiency of the symbolic order. Rather, mediated by "the neutral appearance of facilities" such as "Google's blank page," power "is now immanent in life as it is technologically organized and commodified."[121] The seeming spaces of human absence – container ports, oil refineries, data centres, etc. – manufactured by high-tech capital, thus, come to function as "*allegories* of the real expansion of capital relative to labour."[122] Whereas "[t]raditional power was representative," the idea is that in the 21st century capitalist domination "resides in the infrastructures of this world."[123]

There are, then, curious synergy effects between literary and theoretical defeatism in the post-89 imagination, which proves mesmerized by these logistical innovations and "the becoming concrete of the abstract"[124] that they ostensibly signal. Yet, as our combined reading of Gibson's and DeLillo's trendsetting aesthetics already suggested, there is in this always the danger of participating in the fetishization of capital by removing agency into abstractions altogether. Impersonal as these architectures or operating systems may seem, they are "institutions, replete with bureaucracies, measurements, agencies, rituals, lobbyists, and so on. They don't make or rule themselves."[125] It is, here, where the

from Burroughs' *Ah Pook the Destroyer*: a gas that possesses humans and manifests itself in addictive and compulsive patterns of servitude). The representational efforts of Deleuze's *Postscript*, hence, are not that dissimilar to the sprawling metaphoric employed in Gibson's cyberneticized fiction to track the coils of corporate power.

121 Invisible Committee. *To our Friends*. Robert Hurley (Transl.). Pasadena: Semiotext(e). 84.

122 Kevin Floyd. 2016. "Automatic Subjects. Gendered Labour and Abstract Life." *Historical Materialism* 24:2. 80.

123 Invisible Committee, *To our Friends*, 83.

124 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 201.

125 Alberto Toscano. "Burning Dwelling Thinking." *Mute Magazine*. https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/burning-dwelling-thinking.html [last accessed 03.04.2026]; See also Jürgen Habermas. "The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 11:1. Phillip Jacobs (Transl.). 5–6, 17. In the social-democratic spectrum, one might detect a similar impetus. Take Habermas' deliberations on the exhaustion of the representational tools of the old workers movement, announcing the coming of a "new Obscurity [*Unübersichtlichkeit*]." Embodied in the dismantling of the welfare state as well as the seeming impossibility of economic planning due to the increasing differentiation of the production process accompanied by the rising

concept of the "eerie" that has only recently been coined by Fisher comes in handy since it proposes to name a specific aesthetic response to the apparatuses of capital. The aesthetic category charts a post-humanist episteme marked by a preoccupation with the material "underside of contemporary capital's mundane gloss" in which humans appear as nothing more than "invisible connectors between automated systems."[126] As such, it hints at a certain fall for capital's "logistics of perception,"[127] whereby the world is precisely mapped after the imperatives of accumulation.[128] Someone like Allan Sekula has been particularly apt at naming the beguilement of art by the opaque optics of contemporary infrastructural space. In his lyrical photo-essay *Fish Story* (1995) – which focuses on the containerization of cargo trade – opacity is read as a thoroughly political phenomenon. For the container "obscures more than the physical heterogeneity of cargoes, but also serves to make the port less visible and more remote from metropolitan consciousness," which is all the more significant concerning the historical militancy of "seagoing and dockside labor."[129] In his view, the seduction of current aesthetic thinking by these seemingly depopulated sceneries – projecting the image of a post-anthropogenic capitalism – precisely participates in the phantasmagoria of a frictionless "New Economy" by obfuscating the labour accumulated in these environments: it redoubles the

"probability of dysfunctional secondary effects" – issuing from the unpredictable corollaries of an international arms race or ecological devastation – risk-management according to Habermas is the new order of the day. The idea of a totality is supplanted by a preoccupation with "the mysteriously encoded contingencies" of an essentially disclosed world. In line with the hypothesis of reflexive modernization, he notes the turn of complexity into an irreducible ontological horizon that effects the shrinkage of the "utopian content […] to the formal aspect of an undamaged intersubjectivity" while even older social-democratic promises become dubious.

126 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 77.

127 Paulo Virilio. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. Patrick Camiller (Transl.) London/New York: Verso.

128 See also Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 207ff. Toscano and Kinkle parallel Sekula with Harun Farocki who coins the notion of "operative images" which are models that "do not try to represent reality but are part of a technical operation" that complements the replacement of manual by mechanical labour on a representational level. (Harun Farocki, Quoted after: Georges Didi-Huberman. "How to Open your Eyes." *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?* Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (Eds.). Berlin: Walter König. 47)

129 Allan Sekula. *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag. 12.

container as the veritable "coffin of remote labor-power."[130] It is exactly in this sense, then, that Fisher describes Great Britain's busiest container harbour, the Port of Felixstowe, as a "sign of the triumph of finance capital," for the outward appearance of automation that it puts into effect – emancipated from the "clamour of the old London docks" – projects a dream image of capitalist power.[131] The built-space of capital functions like an aesthetic regime in its own right that comes with its proper distribution of the sensible and as such is instrumental in "facilitat[ing] the illusion of a 'dematerialised' capitalism" in which the antagonisms of the industrial age have been overcome.[132] For that reason, the figment of human-absent facilities can be read as another dimension in neoliberalism's concurrent war on society and totality insofar it obfuscates the underlying ensemble of social relations and contradictions.

Mark Fisher, thus, argues that the central enigma dissected by the coinage of the eerie is the problem of agency. Yet, it also appears that literature has largely opted, to quote Badiou, for the "figure of repetition" that writes the world of labour as it has been pre-written by capital.[133] Indeed, the motifs of superfluisation and death-in-life – contrasting

130 Sekula, *Fish Story* 137.

131 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 77; See also Anne Boyer. "Clickbait Thanatos." *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*. New York: Ugly Duckling Press. 113. Boyer speaks of a "clickbait Thanatos" (after the internet marketing practice) that superelevates innovations such as "Roombas [robot vacuum cleaners], twitter-bots, self-driving cars" into "automated ideations" that generate attention with the image of extinction but primarily express a certain class standpoint: "As techno-capitalists imagine the end of our labor, they imagine the end of their need for us […]."

132 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 77; See also Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Transl.). Manchester: Manchester University Press. 3–5. One might also think of Lyotard's infamous prognosis on the waning of meta-narratives, which registers some of these dynamics but endows them with a normative twist. Drawing a close link between a presumed "postindustrial" and "postmodern age," Lyotard argues that knowledge undergoes a fundamental transformation in this socio-cultural shift: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production." This is connected to a "hegemony of computers" whereby knowledge is "translated into quantities of information." As it goes through this "mercantilization," then, knowledge ceases to be grounded in meta-narratives: exchange-value – price signaling – becomes the new currency of knowledge-production.

133 Alain Badiou. "A Requiem for the Factory: On François Bon's *Sortie d'Usine*." *The Age of the Poets. And other Writings on Twentieth-Century Poetry and Prose*. Bruno Bosteels (Transl.). London/New York: Verso. 145.

the liquidation of agency to capital's surplus of life – have been traced throughout this dissertation. At the end of the last chapter, I therefore noted a specific turn on Jameson's zinger that it seems easier today to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism: there is a certain aesthetic "thirst for annihilation"[134] which suggests the only way to represent the present capitalist moment is by imagining the implosion of collective human life. For example, William Gibson, in one of his later novels – *The Peripheral* (2014) which splits the plot strand between a near- and a post-apocalyptic future – transcodes the "unthinkable complexity" ascribed to cyber-capital into an image of "excess complexity"[135] so as to narrativize the sense that early 21st century capitalism is at the precipice of disaster. Similarly, Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), using the devastations of Hurricane Irene as a narrative background, ruminates on a system that is simply too big to fail but also too monstrous to survive by: "the approaching storm was estranging the routine of shopping just enough to make me viscerally aware of both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy," making visible "the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor" that goes into commodity production.[136] In this sense, the novel proposes to "figure the global apocalyptically," yet the "vulnerable grid" of transnational commodity-chains is at once described to have morphed into the "majestic" but inevitable condition of life itself.[137] Disruption, thus, does not open a horizon beyond the temporary suspension of exchange-value. Instead, the interruption of the "tyranny of price"[138] – plotted as a thoroughly isolating experience – is likened to the totalling of living conditions, not least when the potential crisis of "water scarcity"[139] is invoked as looming at the horizon. Hence, the global is figured apocalyptically, while at once "the apocalyptic itself

134 Nick Land. *The Thirst for Annihilation. Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*. London: Routledge. 33.
135 William Gibson. *The Peripheral*. London/New York: Penguin. 107, 39.
136 Lerner, *10:04*, 19.
137 Lerner, *10:04*, 14, 4.
138 Lerner, *10:04*, 134.
139 Lerner, *10:04*, 222.

is being figured globally."[140] For, ultimately, the crisis of capitalist production also marks a global crisis of social reproduction. If, then, there is a sense of totality in this mode of representation, it is in the form of a disastrous totalization that eventually reproduces the powerlessness and enclosure of the subject into micro-economic coping mechanisms.

One can, hence, observe a dark twist in the future-is-now approach found in the early Gibson and DeLillo. Literary writing seems consigned to write the protocol of capital's grand accumulation of collapse. Contra modernist and even early neoliberal narratives of progress (recall Reagan's cyberpunk-like invocation of Silicon Valley entrepreneurialism), capital in these accounts is not imagined as an agency that shapes the future. Rather, the capitalist profit drive is seen to engineer an "excess complexity" (Gibson) or a "murderous stupidity" (Lerner) in the search for cheap labour or other cost-reducing schemes such as the construction of vulnerable just-in-time supply chains. In that vein, it is certainly legitimate to speak of an "emerging 'dwelling in the ruins' literature"[141] which is increasingly occupied with the entropic forces of capitalism. It is this sentiment, now, that I want to explore a little further in a short close reading of Evan Dara's *The Flee* (2013), which offers, for one thing, a strange thematization of "our human-altered world" via vistas of ruination and "depopulation"[142] but at once reads like an exploration of the political unconscious of this poetics of dilapidation. Thereby, I argue, the novel interrogates a sensibility which pronounces that "if capitalism is not working, then nothing works."[143] It brings into view an updated version of structural adjustment, where the assimilation to market contingencies has merged into a "great adaptation"[144] to a multidimensional permacrisis, which is in that sense subjected to similar procedures of naturalization in which macro-structural alternativelessness is counterposed to micro-economic survival.

140 Jennifer Ashton. "Totaling the Damage: Revolutionary Ambition in Recent American Poetry." *nonsite* 18 https://nonsite.org/totaling-the-damage/ [last accessed 10.07.2021].
141 Wakefield, "From Modernity and Progress to Resilience and Ruins," 7.
142 Toscano, "The World is Already without Us," 113, 116.
143 Noys, "Capitalist Crisis and the Ends of Utopia," 73.
144 Romain Felli. *The Great Adaptation. Climate, Capitalism, Catastrophe*. London/New York: Verso.

4 "The New Normal" in *The Flee*

The Flee offers an intriguing aesthetic-philosophical response to the Great Recession 2007–9. This is not achieved by making allusions to the banking crash. It is achieved by recreating an experience of expendability in the face of capital flows and local economic decline. The novel articulates a condition of superfluization, of lives abandoned by state and market, relegated to the hinterlands of financial metropolises. Through this setting, the text stages a "new normal"[145] in which capital's trajectories no longer intersect with the lives of the dispossessed. The dominant relation is one of disconnection between accumulation and social reproduction: populations share no common horizon of futurity linking them to capital. In this narrative, though, the referential function is at first suspended. Apart from localizing events, some sort of depopulation, in the fictional small-town Anderburg, Vermont, the novel is infused with an absent cause that escapes established common sense: "A mystery wrapped in an enigma."[146] Either the strange happenings in the provincial city are abstracted into metaphorical description ("it's like A-burg has an auto-immune disorder"[147]) or they are processed by way of rumouring:

> "Should I keep quiet when she said she heard that there's some kind of bug going around, some sort of illness [...]? So is that — is that what's really causing it all the leaving and the fear? Are the going people knowing something that they don't say because, because it will make things even worse? And for those, us, still here? What are we supposed to — ? Are there dozens — are there hundreds...? And we're not supposed to say anything? To just keep quiet and hope we don't get struck by — and our houses. They going to have any value?"[148]

Increasingly giving in to their powerlessness ("where is *my* agency?"), characters thus ruminate about "this thing" which is fully tinged in

145 Evan Dara. *The Flee*. Aurora Publishers. 23.
146 Dara. *The Flee*, 50.
147 Dara, *The Flee*, 58.
148 Dara, *The Flee*, 92.

the atmospherics of horror: "It's — it's like he — it's like his eyes were tracking some, like, invisible ghosts, like he was gone into offstage business, the angle of his head, the gap before his replies, he —"[149] There is, hence, no real narrative continuity besides a more or less gradual population drop indicated by the chapter titles: 1) 38,839; 2) 38,842; 3) 36,551; 4) 35,717; 5) 34,918; 6) 30,507; 7) 22,112; 8) 9441; 9) 336; 10) x. Slowly but surely, however, the economic roots of this eerie scenario are hinted at. First, the collapse of supply and demand, the prospect of insolvency, is remarked: "So what am I supposed to...? I have a half a truck of bread and bread products to deliver to the university three days a week. And my suppliers — I have a contract — !"[150] The fleeing, then, is rendered as a quasi-automatic response pattern: "Do they know what they're participating in? […] Still, they do it, they *do*… joining the ritual of ritual."[151] Almost in a paraphrase of Marx's formula of commodity fetishism ("they don't know it, but they are doing it"[152]), the mass exodus is marked out as an adjustment to the mute compulsions of economic crisis: the flow of people follows the flight of capital. Pursuing the social consequences of disinvestment, then, the novel's horror is more clearly redirected into an almost transcendental scare at capital mobility:

> "I go for a walk around downtown and: Steinbach, closed. Kitchen Etc., closed. OF course, Abernathy's, closed! And you know I want, I really want not to just click on Amazon, but what can...? Because like Amazon's nowhere so they can be anywhere, and sure that's handy but what I want, what I'm missing is what – here-ness […]. Damn, there isn't even a word for it, not one that gets close, it must be important... But that's it, you know, the grace of the heart that comes from something being here, just, right, here."[153]

In this sense, the novel's literary personal can be heard wondering about the civilizational implications of this crisis – "where are we in all this?

149 Dara, *The Flee,* 137, 44.
150 Dara, *The Flee*, 13.
151 Dara, *The Flee*, 141.
152 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 166–167.
153 Dara, *The Flee*, 76.

What is the weight of we?"[154] – only to go one decoding this "we" in thoroughly productivist terms: "*We* are a city that, over years and decades and centuries, manufactured dyestuffs and good stern wool; that contributed to the nation's richness of cotton and paper and shoes."[155] In that vein, this inner monologue intones the self-mystifications of regional industrialism ("Here, we worked and sent down roots. Here, we made lives.") but then revokes it just as soon to spell out the harsh reality of locational competition and the neoliberal world of borders: "No: *here* made lives."[156] As the "here" of the novel – that guarantees economic viability – is progressively thrown into crisis, the very *raison d'être* of Anderburg's inhabitants vanishes. Economic depression manifests as an ontological crisis wherein human existence itself is rendered dispensable.

If Röggla investigates the production of disposable subjects in the language of crisis-management, then, *The Flee* shows an entire town rendered disposable. In this, the novel's minimalism of expression carries out a violent undoing of language into stuttering, anguished utterances that redouble the horror-like sense of inevitability emanating from the crash of value-chains:

– And -
– And he, they –
– I mean, what I'm hearing is –
– What they're *say*ing is –
– It can't be avoided – [...]
– Just *too* much –! [...]
– That the city doesn't – [...]
– The whole thing's –! [...]
– *No* one –! [...]
– That the system always, always –
– That the structural, the systemic –

154 Dara, *The Flee*, 45.
155 Dara, *The Flee*, 45–46.
156 Dara, *The Flee*, 46.

– The instinctive –
– I – I must not be here –
– I must not be – [157]

One feels reminded, here, of Adorno's words apropos Beckett's *Endgame*: these interlocutors appear like empty personae through whom sound merely passes ("leere personae, durch die es wahrhaft bloß noch hindurchtönt"[158]). What is left of the subject is a quasi-disembodied voice, while rumour emerges as a primary discursive mode. The impending catastrophe appears without alternative despite being pronounced on the basis of mere hearsay: "I'm hearing [...] It can't be avoided." The "thing" cannot be named, but whatever is happening is simply "*too* much." Under this aspect, the city persists in a negative mode of existence: it just "doesn't." It drifts into inexistence: its population is rapidly dwindling while the economy is on the brink of collapse. In the grammar of the city's "does not" any positive content is subtracted until "no one" remains. Bringing this "structural" or "systemic" process to its logical conclusion, the babble of voices eventually cannot but end up in the bottom line: "I must not be here / I must not be."

To a certain extent, then, the horror encoded in this self-interrupting discourse is the fright expressed by small-town America at the prospect of becoming-surplus proletarian: "Existence is a question of quantities […]. And that's fine; that's absolutely great. But in an age of brute numerics, […], why do I not count."[159] This goes along with an utter disbelief at the seamlessness of it all: "That can't be true, there's no way that could happen, where would – I mean, what does that even *mean*? […] There'd be like total revolt and even before it could happen don't you think the state would step in?"[160] The novel stages an absolute inability to comprehend that hard-working Americans would be abandoned by the national economy. At multiple points in the text, this collective

157 Dara, *The Flee*, 83.
158 Theodor W. Adorno. "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen." *Noten zur Literatur II*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag. 202.
159 Dara, *The Flee*, 160.
160 Dara, *The Flee*, 57.

bewilderment manifests in scenes of mass convulsion in which the town's inhabitants lapse alternately into crying fits or apathy:

> Then stop. Corner of Bank and St. Paul. See. A woman in a beige belted coat. The brown-beard man waiting for the walk sign. That kid by the mechanical rockinghorse in front of A Single Pebble, the Chinese restaurant. The three policemen. *All of them: crying*. Standing in place weeping, openly or subtly. No mistaking it. Stiffness, single hands hiding eyes, face-glitter, movement slowed. *And it really is everyone*: Both car-drivers turning through the empty T-juncture. The jumpsuit man up the pole, working on electricity. A maybe thirty-year old mom wearing a fur-fringed hood, pushing a pram. A woman bent over a counter, waiting for customers in Solomon's cleaners. *All of them. Crying*.[161]

It is as if the experience of superfluisation temporarily manifested in a shock-induced paralysis. By way of this disoriented chorus and its clamour at the terror of capital flight, the novel, thus, acts out a certain endgame of the subject or, more precisely perhaps, the middle-class individual.

The exception is a couple of self-employed persons who over the course of the novel turn into something like prepper-entrepreneurs that try to make a living in this "new normal" in a sort of deferred (neoliberal) obedience: "So we do more, Carol says. So we work harder. Guys—I mean, come on: Rick and I had been wrangling this monster for nearly two years. Can't you."[162] This reclamation of agency, however, is always inscribed with a certain doubt. As indicated by the interrogative form, the speaker talks herself into believing this story of success through self-reliance and drudgery: "Resilience, man, good American resili— […] Good, American, entrepreneurial resil—"[163] But her misgivings are never entirely dispelled. Fittingly, the pronunciation of the moniker of "resilience" is again and again broken off such that it appears as an always-already thwarted effort. That way, eventually, adaptation

161 Dara, *The Flee*, 165–166.
162 Dara, *The Flee*, 65, 8.
163 Dara, *The Flee*, 23.

is narrated as the highest form of escapism. If other townspeople flee the city in search of new employment, these prepper-entrepreneurs flee reality by persuading themselves that crisis is an opportunity: "So maybe, now—finally—it's a level playing field. Maybe now I can have half a half a chance."[164] At one point, there is even an attempt at re-incorporating the events in the town into a sort of oikodicy: "—But what do you think: That this is random? That this is arbitrary...? This is the way things should be. There's no newspaper because people don't want a newspaper. If there's no library, it's because people do not need to use one any more. Things are going exactly as they should."[165] The devastations of crisis are mystified as the effect of bid and offer: things may appear cruel but this is just the market adjusting itself to weakening aggregate demand.

In the penultimate chapter, finally, there is an actual genre shift toward a post-apocalyptic Robinson Crusoe story which carries the neoliberal commando of adjustment to the extreme. If the novel so far has been marked by a digressive and dispersed mode of narration (where discrete, named characters only appear in seldom instances of direct speech), it is now focalized through one lone survival specialist (Marcus) who despite all holds on to a "business ontology."[166] Mixing up entrepreneurial language with resilience discourse ("His *adapatability*"[167]), this late-neoliberal Robinson gives his all to "revitalize A-burg […]—ignite!—a market."[168] What the novel traces in this chapter is a form of self-reflective writing that expresses an experience of abandonment. Faced with a radical decline in associational life, the figure retreats into homesteading. Collective resistance meanwhile is inconceivable to him. At one point, he comes across a series of graffiti that defiantly contest superfluisation: "we was here" / "we is everywhere."[169] Yet, this attempt at re-signifying the plural pronoun "we" away from the "business ontology" of locational competition only causes confusion in

164 Dara, *The Flee*, 44.
165 Dara, *The Flee*, 66.
166 Dara, *The Flee*, 195.
167 Dara, *The Flee*, 193.
168 Dara, *The Flee*, 195.
169 Dara, *The Flee*, 190.

the narrator. The full-time job of crisis-management is an atomizing experience. Fittingly, the last word of the novel returns us to the singular pronoun "I."[170] Individual prepping and entrepreneurialism, it seems, are all there is to him to resist the crises of capitalism.

In this respect, the novel engages with a broader societal trend of the recent decades. The neoliberal turn entailed a profound re-ordering of civil society. Its assault on the welfare state proceeded through the gradual constriction of those organizations alleged to drive rising social expenditure and, by extension, inflation. Empirical evidence shows that membership in most forms of collective organization – from churches and clubs to trade unions and political parties – has steadily declined over the past thirty to forty years. From an empirical perspective, this time period has been marked by an epidemic of isolation and loneliness.[171] Correspondingly, as Anton Jäger observes, "the repertoires of contestation and protest in the new century" have largely proven "fleeting and short-term."[172] The resulting condition of social separation constitutes the subjective bedrock of the neoliberal order, in which individuals are increasingly cast back upon a logic of personal responsibility that largely forecloses recognition of macro-structural agency. As far as literary trends are concerned, this has been reflected, as argues Shonkwiler, in an explosion of the memoir genre – particularly regarding fantasies of independent living or, as she calls it, "neo-homesteading."[173] *The Flee* picks up on this, especially the chapter in question. Reading like a satire of Thatcherite realism that plots the collapse of society into prepper-entrepreneurs, it renders the post-apocalyptic setting as a parable of constant work: "Surviving […] it's a full-time position."[174]

170 Dara, *The Flee*, 239.
171 Robert D. Putnam. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6:1.
172 Anton Jäger. "The Rise and Fall of the Project State: Rethinking the Twentieth Century." *American Affairs* 7:3. https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2023/08/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-project-state-rethinking-the-twentieth-century/ [last accessed 01.05.2024].
173 Alison Shonkwiler. 2020. "Neo-homesteading: Domestic production and the Limits of the Postwar Imagination." *Public Culture* 32:3.
174 Dara, *The Flee*, 221. See also Theodore Martin. *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press. 164.

That way, the novel brings forth a peculiar feature of neoliberal crisis-management. Neoliberalism survives its own ideological crisis by offering a plethora of micro-strategies to cope with the cancellation of its promises of upward mobility and emancipation.[175] In a sense, then, the novel is composed of nothing but "anguish language" as it documents a "desperate" multiplicity of "attempt[s] to reconstruct a subject"[176] in a context where old certainties no longer apply. As Marcus puts it, "he has found something that is vaster, objectively, even than his subjective experience of it."[177] By depicting this violent perpetuation of the macro/micro divide, *The Flee* might be said to constitute the quintessential narrative of resilience, if one thereby understands – in the words of the Rockefeller Foundation – the neoliberal conception of "crisis" as "the new normal."[178] In fact, the novel decodes an incipient Western declinism following the 2007–8 crisis that invokes something like an inversion of catch-up modernization: "We're joining the future. Everything everywhere turning into bits, into dust, to data, to imperishable prickles, and now we are too."[179] Suitably, the last and eleventh chapter refers back to the United States Bankruptcy Code. People are "filing for Chapter 11,"[180] deemed "the agent that keeps the zombies functioning"[181] by the Adam Smith Institute, that is, the state procedure whereby firms are kept alive despite their inability to service their debts. That way, the end of the novel gives a sense of a capitalism that appears too big to fail but that is also increasingly too big to survive by. Indeed, the chapter title hints at a certain population recovery but only insofar the economy is precariously bailed out in a vicious bubblenomic cycle. The novel shows that the perspective of alternativelessness is crucially linked to a state of atomization. It showcases that literary writing that does not counteract

175 Cf. Georg Seeßlen and Markus Metz. *Kapitalistischer (Sur)realismus*. Berlin: Bertz+Fischer. 38.
176 Iles, "Anguish Language," 41.
177 Dara, *The Flee*, 207.
178 Stephen Moss. "'Crisis is becoming the New Normal.'" *The Guardian*. http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jan/27/judith-rodin-warning-world-crisis-new-normal-rockefeller-foundation [last accessed 27.08.2023].
179 Dara, *The Flee*, 151.
180 Dara, *The Flee*, 233.
181 Tom Papworth. *The Trading Dead*. London: Adam Smith Research Trust. 41.

the collapse into micro-economics remains incapable of transcending the narrow horizon of permanent adjustment.

5 "A ()Hole Complex": Dystopian Teleologies and the Global South

If *The Flee*, hence, gives an acute formal representation to a broader sentiment of permacrisis, it also brings forward the sense of a fundamental deadlock in which contemporary society's life-source – capital accumulation – is at once the source of its unravelling. It registers the mutation of neoliberalism's anti-utopian politics analysed throughout this study into a full-scale dystopianism. At the very latest since the 2000s, there has been a tendency to figure the present capitalist moment in and through an imagery of ruination. Especially, urban space is envisioned as the site of an enduring, clandestine crisis. Take for instance the insurrectionary pamphlets of the Invisible Committee (Paris is "about to explode"[182]) or Cory Doctorow's *Makers* (2009) which pictures the slumification of the planet by way of a post-Fordist Detroit caught in a "[c]ascading failure" – "The shantytowns multiplied and multiplied."[183] Accordingly, as Doctorow's invocation of "a billion squatters worldwide"[184] suggests, survival is the way in which characters circulate in that type of recent literature. In this regard, though, *The Flee* points toward a further dimension of this bankruptcy discourse. As an epitome of the abandoned hinterlands of American empire, the deserted Vermont city is invoked as an example of a new catch-up narrative, which this time, however, does not circle around an idea of belated development. Instead, it conjures a vision of "third-worlding"[185] as it also reads in Gibson's *The Peripheral*. This scenario has certainly been a staple ingredient in alarmist conservative discourse. The military strategist Edward

182 Invisible Committee. *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angelese: Semiotext(e). 9; See also Cunningham/Warwick, "Unnoticed Apocalyspe," 435.
183 Cory Doctorow. *Makers*. London: Harper Collins. 154, 163; Cunningham/Warwick, "Unnoticed Apocalypse," 440ff.
184 Doctorow, *Makers,* 117.
185 Gibson, *The Peripheral*, 103.

Luttwark already warned in 1993 of the "Third-Worldization of America."[186] But one might, here, also think of more critical interventions such as Roberto Saviano's literary reportage *Gomorrah* (2006), which tried to render legible the "repeated apocalypse" wreaked by the combined forces of capital and organized crime in Naple's backcountry – pictured as the "infected appendix" of Europe – by remapping this stretch of land after the image of the Global South: "*Calafrica*," "*Saudi Calabria*," "*Sahara Consiliana*," or "*Terzo Mondo*."[187] Or, one might refer to the star architect Rem Koolhaas who argues "that to write about the African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London or Los Angeles,"[188] insofar he sees metropoles like Lagos "at the cutting edge of globalizing modernity, not despite but because of [their] apparently catastrophic form."[189] There is, then, in this ruin imagery a synecdochic inclination to assume that "[t]he periphery is where the future reveals itself"[190] (a quote attributed to J.G. Ballard by the Warwick Research Collective). That is, there is a tendency to refract the frustration of historical horizons via the postcolonial situation. One could almost be tempted to say that these dystopian extrapolations interchange the role played by past and future in modernist self-perceptions. If in the 19th and early 20th century the supposed pre-modern past is associated with savagery as in Hegel's construction of Africa as a continent without history,[191] in the early 21st century, it seems, barbarism is delegated to the future while the heydays of modernity are situated in a post-war past that has been irrevocably lost. Holding on to the all-too colonial substitution of movement in space for movement in time, the so-called periphery is not anymore considered a reminder of the past but a vista of a future-to-come. In this sense, there is certainly an implicit othering built into the dystopian teleology proposed by someone like Kool-

186 Edward Luttwark. *The Endangered American Dream*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
187 Roberto Saviano. *Gomorrah*. Virginia Jewiss (Transl.). London: Pan Macmillan. 17, 287.
188 Koolhaas, "To Lagos," 652.
189 Cunningham/Warwick, "Unnoticed Apocalypse," 440.
190 Cf. Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development*. Liverpool. Liverpool University Press. n. pag.
191 Cf. G.W.F. Hegel. *The Philosophy of History*. J. Sibree (Transl.). Mineola: Dover. 99; Achille Mbembe. *Critique of Black Reason*. Laurent Dubois (Transl.). Durham/London: Duke University Press. 11–12.

haas. Or, to put it otherwise, it is the world seen from a self-doubting Euro-American hegemony.

Against this background, it is however interesting that similar inversions of 20th century catch-up hypotheses can be identified in contemporary efforts at "'writing back' to the centre of empire."[192] In critical social theory, for instance, there are attempts to re-tell the history of neoliberalism from the perspective of the Global South. Authors like Samir Gandesha consider the strategies found in the backlash against decolonialization during the Cold War as laboratories for structural adjustment, be it the debt programs imposed on postcolonial governments in the 1980s or the numerous regime changes executed throughout the Global South.[193] Against transatlantic declinist narratives, then, the claim is that sanctions, military intervention, commodity and trade wars have been at the heart of neoliberalism's rules-based order from the get-go. Free trade or not, the world market has always been a battlefield. Today's "new normal" is the continuation of a longer imperialist weaponization of the economy.

The concept that undergirds these studies is that of "endocolonialism," a notion that can be traced back to the anti-colonial poet Aimé Césaire. For in his *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (1950), he develops the vision of a "boomerang effect of colonization" that contests the representation of European fascism as a relapse into pre-modern barbarism.[194] Instead, it foregrounds the decivilizing effects of imperial occupation and war on colonizing countries. Césaire, thus, argues (like George Padmore[195] before and Hannah Arendt[196] or Michel Foucault[197] after him) that fascism is firmly rooted in the tradition of modern imperialism, noting

192 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empires Writes Back*. London: Taylor & Francis. 96.
193 See also Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 7ff.
194 Aimé Césaire. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Joan Pinkham (Transl.). New York: Monthly Review Press. 41.
195 Toscano, "The Long Shadow of Racial Fascism," Online.
196 Cf. Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego/London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 155.
197 Cf. Michael Foucault. "Society must be defended." *Lectures at the Collège de France (1975–76)*. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (Eds.). David Macey (Transl.). New York: Picador. 103.

that the regime of total war "applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for [the colonized]."[198] In that regard, the colonial condition is not only understood to mark the underside of liberal modernity but to have shown the future of Western civilization, that is, "the negation of civilization"[199] inherent to bourgeois society. Today, then, building on this legacy, the idea of endocolonialism is re-asserted in attempts to write a counter-history of neoliberalism. Challenging the eurocentric construal of a "Cold" War, the idea is that neoliberalism was just as well manufactured in the civil wars waged in the Global South as it was by think-tanks such as the Mont Pèlerin Society, the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, or international financial institutions like the IMF and the WTO.[200] The inversion of the bigoted teleologies implied in visions of belated modernization, thus, serves to "deprovincialize" Global South spaces by envisioning them as "harbingers of worldwide shifts, crucibles for new forms of worldwide social conflicts, and situations from which to theorize the contemporary global situation."[201] In this sense, Césaire prefigures contemporary efforts that contest the delegation of the past to non-western regions by turning the argument around to argue that "the non-West is not just contemporary with the West, but ahead of the curve."[202]

Talks of "brazilianization,"[203] "carribeanization,"[204] "lebanonization,"[205] and so forth gain currency in (critical) attempts to rewrite the

198 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 36.

199 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 40.

200 Lazzarato/Alliez, *Wars and Capital*, 223–242; Samir Gandesha. "The Market Lives on Death: The Endocolonizing Logic of the Fascist Moment." *praktyka* 4:42. 97–98.

201 Jim Kim Watson and Gary Wilder. "Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial Contemporary." *The Postcolonial Contemporary. Political Imaginaries for the Global Present*. New York: Fordham University Press. 14–15.

202 Jean and John Comaroff. *How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers. 14.

203 Alex Hocchuli. "The Brazilianization of the World." *American Affairs Journal* 5:2. https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2021/05/the-brazilianization-of-the-world/ [last accessed 05.05.2022].

204 Adam Tooze. "The Caribbean, Central America and the 'Brazilianization' Thesis." *Chartbook Newsletter*. https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-newsletter-20?s=r [last accessed 05.05.2022].

205 Karl Sharro. "The Retreat from Universalism in the Middle East and the World." *Citizenship an Its Discontents*. Thanassis Cambanis and Michael W. Hanna (Eds.). New York: Century Foundation Press. 38–64. Sharro names a trend toward a sectarian capitalism that

story of global capitalism. The notion of a "()hole complex" introduced by the speculative realist Reza Negarestani, for instance, comes with the objective to unground the surface appearances of "contemporary world politics" via "the Middle East" and the "commotions" that the struggle for supremacy in the area triggers.[206] *Cyclonopedia* narrates the "militarization of the contemporary world" via the "mutual contaminations" between neoliberal war machines, jihadist terrorism, and oil-states as they are drawn into an escalating dynamic that feeds on permanent conflict.[207] This "porous realism,"[208] then, takes the antagonisms of the region as an epitome for things to come. As such, it comes with a thoroughly apocalyptic claim: it purports to reveal – from the perspective of the Middle East – the forces that inscribe global capitalism with a death-drive.[209] Thereby, Negarestani's theory-fiction is expressive of other post-western accounts of globalization which often come with a dystopian penchant. Consider the outlook forwarded by proponents of a cyberpunkish "Gulf Futurism," who refer back to *Cyclonopedia* to claim that the Arabian peninsula – "hyper-driven into a present made up of interior wastelands, municipal master plans and environmental collapse" – marks "a projection of our global future."[210] In a comparable fashion, Arundhati Roy drafts a "ghost story" of global corporate governance that starts from an outline of neoliberal crisis-management on the Indian subcontinent, where mega-cities are haunted by hundreds of millions of "poltergeists" brutalized and dispossessed in the making of the country's new upper-middle and billionaire class.[211] Rana Dasgupta's so-called "portrait" of 21st century Delhi points in a similar direc-

finds a succinct expression in the enmeshment of economic struggle and identity-based "culture wars" that has marked Lebanon since the civil war from 1975 to 1990. He discerns a wholesale retreat from universalism, even the limited modernizing project of liberal elites, which gives way to a sectarian polarization that ethnicizes economic conflicts by recasting them as irresolvable clashes of faith and identities.

206 Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 48, 59–60.

207 Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 55, 57.

208 Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 60.

209 Cf. Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 27.

210 Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria. "On Gulf Futurism." *Dazed*. https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism [last accessed 05.05.2022].

211 Arundhati Roy. *Capitalism. A Ghost Story*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. 8.

tion, as he notes that the city is "globally interesting" not because it is supposedly "on its way to maturity" but precisely "because it is already mature."[212] In his account, the megapolis is not caught in a temporal lag. Rather, "[t]o look at contemporary Delhi" means, in fact, "to look at the symptoms of the global twenty-first century in their most glaring and advanced form."[213]

It would, now, of course be mistaken to assume that the decentring of the "West" laid out in these specific synecdochical efforts, finally, reflects the fullness of global capitalism. There is a real risk of transmuting the subversive imagery of porous totalities itself into a totalizing representational system that makes the supposed hole stand in for the whole. As Adam Tooze cautions: For all the epistemological value that such representational operations may possess, one should always mind not to obscure "the process of uneven and combined development itself" that generates these effects of "similarity and difference."[214] His coinage of the notion of "carribeanization" precisely intends to pinpoint the splits in the Global South. Thus, he challenges the "brazilianization" thesis forwarded by Alex Hochuli by stating that it almost sounds "overoptimistic" when compared against larger trends in Latin America and the Caribbean. Brazil after all remains a regional giant in addition to being a founding member of the BRICS alliance. As such, it does not capture the experience of powerlessness marking Haiti, Honduras, or Nicaragua. For what it's worth, Brazil "is an actor as much as it is acted upon."[215] In this sense, these various representations – literary or not – should rather be juxtaposed to each other to show the antagonistic co-existence of "a multiplicity of globalizations, produced and managed by different state-capital machines"[216] so as to grasp something of the contradictions accompanying a multipolarizing world in crisis, where new players take the scene while poorer regions get caught in the middle of an intensified competition over the repartition of the globe.

212 Rana Dasgupta. *Capital: A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi*. Noida: Fourth Estate. 439.
213 Dasgupta, *Capital*, 439.
214 Tooze, "The Caribbean, Central America and the 'Brazilianization' Thesis," Online.
215 Tooze, "The Caribbean, Central America and the 'Brazilianization' Thesis," Online.
216 Lazzarato, *War and Money*, 45.

6 [Historical Intermezzo II] Imperialism and the Planetary Factory

Against this background, the dystopian narratives described further up encode a declinist geopolitical unconscious that, as Röggla puts it, so far always equated "globalization" with "Americanization" but now doubts that emulation of the West is still the way to go. The Austrian writer reads these temporal ideologies as symptoms of a shift in neoliberal globalization respectively in the distorted image of it that has been taken for reality. The launch of a new "great game" for spheres of influence destabilizes the self-teleologization of the West and, indeed, splits it apart.[217] A more polycentric competitive order, in which the supposed "end of history" in free trade crumbles, seems to be emerging. The last decade has increasingly given way to a sense of logistical vulnerability combined with the militarization of supply-chains and monetary instruments. Economic policy is flanked by geopolitical conflict, economic nationalism, and security doctrines which reflect an intensified competition over the re-composition of global value-chains, particularly the networks behind high-tech sectors. Business relations, once ideologically framed as engines of mutual prosperity, are increasingly cast in the language of perilous dependencies. Protectionist notions such as "resilience," "friend-shoring," or "de-risking" seem to replace "open market" parlance in the fight over the future distribution of power. Until recently the U.S. managed to establish a hierarchical yet viable balance of forces vis-à-vis competing powers. That *modus vivendi* no longer commands the coherence it once did. New regional power claims have asserted themselves, while the U.S. increasingly asserts discretionary authority over the international institutions and norms that it enforced in prior decades as the relative benefits of "free trade" arrangements diminish for Washington. However, the weaponization of the "rules-based order" decodes it as an imperialist order. The bid to reassert power implies that it was there all along. In retrospect, the fragile consensus that reigned the last mid-century can hardly be described in terms of peaceful coexistence or waning imperialist conflict, but at

217 Röggla, "Zukunft als literarische Ressource," Online.

best one of "antagonistic cooperation."[218] Despite marked shifts, then, there are stark continuities between the current weaponization of the economy and the alleged heyday of neoliberal globalization.[219] The making of transnational value-chains has been consistently undergirded by interstate competition; free trade ideals, promoting the dismantling of protectionist barriers and regulatory constraints, facilitated the imperialist capture of new markets.

It is, of course, true that the last decades of the 20th century have been marked by an ever-deeper world-economic integration. Production is "no longer defined by the workshop walls" but disassembled along just-in-time-value-chains that exploit regional wage differentials.[220] By the 2010s, trade in intermediate goods accounts for the majority of global commerce: National markets have turned into sub-units of a transnational economy "whose component parts are so functionally integrated that they do not operate with any independence," while competing conglomerates function as "organizational units within a larger mass of entangled global capital."[221] As Deleuze/Guattari observe at the onset of the 1990s, hostile political systems – be it liberal democracies, authoritarian states, or sectarian regimes – are re-coded into continuous "models of realization"[222] in the networks of global capitalism. They might be heterogenous but they "are nonetheless isomorphous with regard to the world market."[223] It is the rise of "Chimerica," the deep economic enmeshment between the U.S. and

218 August Thalheimer. 1946. *Grundlinien und Grundbegriffe der Weltpolitik nach dem 2. WeItkrieg*. n.p. Ed. Gruppe Arbeiterpolitik. 10.

219 Cf. Milan Babić. *Geoökonomie. Anatomie der neuen Weltordnung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp. 13ff.

220 Nachtwey, *Hidden Crisis*, 85–86.

221 William I. Robinson. *Can Global Capitalism Endure?* Atlanta: Clarity Press. 29–30; See also Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. "Trade in Intermediate Goods and International Supply Chains in CEFTA." *CEFTA Issues Paper* 6. https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/oecd-south-east-europe-regional-programme.html [last accessed 03.01.2025].

222 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*, New York: Columbia University Press. 106.

223 Deleuze/Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 106. As per Deleuze/Guattari, the rivalries of these "chains of variables" are entirely internal to the capitalist system: "[t]he social field no longer refers to an external limit […] but to immanent internal limits that constantly shift by extending the system." (Deleuze/Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 97)

China since the "opening up" under Deng Xiaoping, which epitomizes this pattern of globalization. However, this dynamic of global entanglement should not be imagined as an even, post-imperial, post-national process. World-economic integration advanced under a dollar-pegged market system, appealing to competitors by granting access to the vast U.S. consumer market and allowing some room for regional hegemonic efforts. Notwithstanding, American power was central in this process, as U.S. policymakers – across the 20th century – had come to link state interests to the health of the global capitalist order.[224] Rather than taking the neoliberal prescription of self-regulating markets at face value, one should therefore consider the constant adjustments and crisis-management vis-à-vis contenders whereby the Washington Consensus was inscribed.

To illustrate this point, a brief historical account focusing on the Pacific Rim, with particular attention to the U.S.-Japan dynamic and the case of China, is instructive. As we have already seen, the crisis of Fordism and the subsequent neoliberal restructuring can hardly be explained without reference to the intensified competition between the United States, Japan, the FRG and other Western European nations. However, the decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard, the monetary upheaval it unleashed, and the global reverberations of the Volcker shock were not the end of the story. Other trade and currency wars followed. During the 1980s, the dwindling of U.S. export competitiveness persisted. The sentiment of that period is encoded in the subliminal "Japan panic" of Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In fact, the capital inflows attracted due to high interest rates and the dollar's status as reserve currency of the world had propelled the greenback to overvalued heights. As a remedy, the U.S. leveraged its seigniorage position to implement the 1985 Plaza Accord and a suite of sectoral agreements – notably in semiconductors – that depreciated the dollar against the yen, the franc, the mark, as well as the pound sterling to restore the competitiveness of American industry.[225] Despite marking a setback for Japan,

224 Merchant, *Endgame*, 77.

225 Albeit employment level failed to be restored, held back by continued automatization: "the periods of growth following ever-deepening recessions have tended to be 'jobless recoveries,' in which the gap between restored growth rates and restored levels of employment

this settlement initially promised mutual gains, fuelling manufacturing booms across dollar-pegged Pacific Rim economies.[226] In the long run, though, the trade conflict hastened Japan's industrial decline, accelerating the transfer of capital from manufacturing into speculation while outbound foreign direct investment (FDI) surged, not least into China.[227] The bursting of the financial bubble in 1990 ultimately ushered in Japan's "lost decade" of economic stagnation:

> The crisis only worsened the position of Japanese manufacturers, who decisively shifted all but the most high-tech production offshore, where they could exploit cheaper labor pools elsewhere in Asia while also getting around U.S. tariff barriers.[228]

By the mid-1990s, this arrangement found itself once again on the brink. Given the looming spectre of a renewed Japanese collapse – all the more alarming due to the country's key role within the Pacific Rim – the U.S. Treasury pushed through, if you will, a reverse Plaza Accord: an engineered depreciation of the yen and the mark against the dollar. But while this intervention likely prevented a global depression, "it did so only by displacing the bubble onto the U.S. and new exporters that had pegged their currencies to the dollar."

> …the rush of growth centered on the newly-industrializing economies of the Pacific Rim that had been cultivated by dollar-pegged currencies and fed on excess Japanese capital which could no longer be invested domestically in either production or speculation, ultimately faced a similar bust in the Asian Financial Crisis of 1998 which threw many once-ascendant economies of the region into a deep stagnation.[229]

has widened with each crisis." (Phil A. Neel. *Hinterland. America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict*. London: Reaktion Books. 14)

226 Cf. Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble*, 59–74; Makoto Itoh. *The World Economic Crisis and Japanese Capitalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 83–97.

227 Brenner, The Boom and the Bubble, 110.

228 Neel, Global Crisis, 149

229 Neel, Global Crisis, 150, 152.

Only in the aftermath, as regional competitors faltered and Japanese capital sought new outlets, did Chinese manufacturers start outcompeting Thai, Malaysian, and South Korean firms.

> Following the early expansions of capitalist production elsewhere in East Asia, China was able to offer large territories for investment and a literate, cheap labor force unprecedented in its size, health and basic education. The labor supply added to the global capitalist system by this process was roughly equal in size to that of all the world's industrial nations combined. Moreover, this workforce had been produced by the socialist developmental regime, so its initial costs were external to capitalist production and the costs of its reproduction were easily externalized to internal peripheries still dominated by subsistence production – at least for the first couple generations.[230]

The making of transnational value-chains, then, is overdetermined by the centrifugal forces of imperialist competition, capitalist overaccumulation crises, and bubble and bust cycles. In this, dynamics of "dispersal" and "clustering" can be observed. As revenues and profit gains due to technological advantages stall, pushing capital markets to look for new investment outlets, re-location to lower-income regions becomes attractive. Corporate enterprise tries to exploit wage differentials to reduce "socially necessary labor costs and maximiz[e] the appropriation of surplus value."[231] However, offshoring itself is a costly operation. The built-up of new industrial zones is contingent upon investment into constant capital – that is, fixed assets such as transport infrastructure – but also expenditures for variable capital, that is, education or police spending to provide a trained, docile workforce: "Thus, even many 'cheap' locations may still be 'expensive' in all these regards,"[232] which is why capital flows frequently gravitate toward environments where such capacities are already in place as in the case of

230 Cf. Chuang. "Red Dust. The Transition to Capitalism in China." Chuang 2. https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/red-dust/ [last accessed 04.10.2023].
231 Intan Suwandi. Value Chains: The New Economic Imperialism. New York: Monthly Review Press. 54.
232 Neel, *Global Crisis*, 172.

coastal China. So, when production processes are split up and spread across the globe, this does not happen homogeneously. Instead, "one startup area surges ahead while others decline or grow more slowly."[233] Globally speaking, industrial activity tends to cluster in specific regions – frequently across borders – that serve as major nodes in the global production system, integrating various sectors and logistical services in an interconnected area.[234]

To read offshoring solely in terms of cost-benefit considerations would be reductive however. Surely, globalization was pursued to drive down costs. But international labour division is not purely technical as Beverly Silver notes. It reflects just as well a political calculus: a class project from above, aimed at disempowering labour by re-locating production away from sites of accumulated resistance:

> While labor has been weakened in the locations from which productive capital emigrated, new working classes have been created and strengthened in the favored new sites of investment. Thus, the cheap labor 'economic miracles' of the 1970s and 1980s – ranging from Spain and Brazil to South Africa and South Korea – each created new, strategically located working classes, which in turn produced powerful new labor movements […].[235]

Against the defeatist "race-to-bottom thesis" often prevailing in accounts of globalization, Silver insists that re-location to low-income regions has also been driven by an escape from collective bargaining power.[236] And what is more: she assumes that the various attempts by capital to "fix" labour unrest, in turn, contribute to the proliferation of workers' struggles worldwide.

233 Michael Storper and Richard Walker. *The Capitalist Imperative: Territory, Technology and Industrial Growth*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell. 71.
234 Storper and Walker, 83, 183; See also Neel, Global Crisis, 172ff.
235 Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 5–6.
236 Moreover, Silver argues that "in some situations just-in-time (JIT) production actually *increases* the vulnerability of capital to disruptions in the flow of production, and thus can *enhance* workers' bargaining power based on direct action at the point of production." (Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 6)

The globalization of production, thus, emerges just as well in response to proletarian intransigence than to profit squeezes or interstate competition. In the resultant, earth-spanning "geography of value" there is a constant battle "over how much value each firm can appropriate from the total flow and how it performs this appropriation," albeit, as a rule, "each lead firm in the sequence is able to appropriate disproportionate shares of the total value relative to those prior to it in the chain."[237] Against mirages of comparative advantage à la David Ricardo, the globalization of production is marked by an "unequal exchange that maximizes valorization for leading industrial capitals" :

> offshoring is 'profitable' because the bulk of the profit from the overseas production contracted by a multinational is ultimately recorded on the apex company's balance sheet. It is only in this fashion that Apple, a company that owns no factories, is able to be listed as a 'manufacturer' and derive profits from the manufacturing it contracts out to other firms. While this is profitable further down the chain, the share of profits captured by subordinate firms diminishes on average according to their level of subordination.[238]

The case of Apple is telling in that regard. For years one of the most valuable publicly-traded companies in the world, the core-firm itself does not own any factories, relying instead on a vast network of subcontracted manufacturing, most notably Foxconn, headquartered in Taipei, Taiwan, but operating primarily in mainland China. Separating control from direct production, the U.S. tech company appropriates a massive share of the value-added while minimizing material and labour cost expenses. Apple's dominant buyer position grants it monopsonistic power in the global electronics supply chain, enabling asymmetric control over suppliers and pricing. As such, the company exemplifies the functioning of ever-more complex commodity-chains marked by

237 Phil A. Neel. "A Tale of Two Ports. Africa, Asia, and the Subimperial Scramble." *Spectre Journal*. https://spectrejournal.com/a-tale-of-two-ports/ [last accessed 03.10.2025].
238 Neel, *Global Crisis*, 161, 163.

unequal market relations wherein entities that control critical nodes in the stack appropriate a "dark value"[239] from dependent suppliers.

In this hierarchical structure, lower-tier actors are compelled to secure cheaper inputs, scale up, and invest in downstream capabilities in order to capture "more of the total value flowing through the entire chain."[240] Exemplarily, Foxconn has exploited its position in the stack to expand beyond a mere assembler into a pivotal actor that itself shapes transnational value-chains. But the Chinese business location, too, has leveraged big tech's reliance on its "red" supply-chain – from mineral processing to advanced manufacturing – to climb steadily up the value-added process and assert greater economic influence. Against the backdrop of the last decades of neoliberal globalization, then, capitalist competition has crucially consisted in seizing larger shares of the surplus product put out by this stratified planetary factory: Imperialism names "the international hierarchy through which th[at] competitive struggle of capitalism plays out."[241] In this, America remains as core ordering power, able to project global influence via its financial might, the role of its domestic market as consumer of last resort, and strategic dominance over the tech-ecosystem backstopped by unmatched naval reach, overseas basing, and surveillance capacity. Nonetheless, it also experiences a certain loss of control within the uneven development and "sub-imperial scramble"[242] marking capitalism. Most powers "that emerge from the process operate 'regionally,'" as they "enforce market discipline in nearby geographic areas" but also "in the figura-

239 Robinson, *Global Capitalism*, 27. The global production system not only generates "dark value" but systematically externalizes environmental costs. Corporations headquartered in the Global North, like Volkswagen, shift emissions-intensive production abroad, yet retain the profits at home. Emissions are counted where production occurs, not where value is captured. This accounting logic obscures the extent to which industrialized nations have outsourced their carbon footprints while maintaining economic control. The result is a distorted climate politics, that ignores the transnationalization of production. Instead, a methodological nationalism prevails that casts countries such as China as the sole responsible for emissions on its territory, even as they serve as manufacturing hubs for Western consumption. Carbon leakage becomes a feature, not a bug, of global value chains: emissions fall territorially in Germany, but not globally – while profits continue to accrue in Wolfsburg, Munich, and Frankfort.

240 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

241 Merchant, *Endgame*, 98.

242 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

tive sense in which each exerts a disproportionate influence over certain sectoral regions of global trade," be it in agro-industry, finance, oil-business, hydrocarbons, etc.[243] In other cases, for instance, the PRC, the Gulf Monarchies, Japan, India, Russia, or the EU, chiefly Germany and France, the economic and/or military footprint is so extensive that strategic posture takes on a transcontinental scope. China, in particular, has consolidated its position as a high-tech superpower, capable of shaping alternative alliance structures such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that challenge the dominance of the G7. On all accounts, however, "the growing complexity of supply chains also reflects the power of mid-sized and other regional states to mediate the terms of the imperialist system."[244] What unfolds, then, is less a geopolitical succession than a diffusion of authority between competing "globalizations" that results out of the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism itself.[245]

Furthermore, the uneven development of capitalism produces a divergence within what is called the Global South itself. In the aftermath of WWII, circumstances looked quite similar across the decolonising world. From South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, societies bore the legacy of colonial plunder: chronically underdeveloped infrastructures, minimal industrial bases, and populations preponderantly employed in subsistence agriculture. The stark asymmetries in trajectories were not yet foreseeable. Across the 1970s, however, the "bifurcation of Third World destinies"[246] began taking shape. A new manufacturing core was

243 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

244 Promise Li. "Imperialism as Antagonistic Cooperation." *Spectre Journal*. https://spectrejournal.com/imperialism-as-antagonistic-cooperation/ [last accessed 05.10.2025].

245 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online. There is no space in this study to address Russian imperialism in depth, even if it brutally illustrates the argument forwarded here. Albeit Russia remains a minor actor in advanced high-tech sectors and lags economically behind East Asia, Western Europe, and North America, it wields outsized influence through other means: the structural leverage of its energy sector, the deterrent effect of its nuclear arsenal, or, for instance, support of foreign far-right networks. Of course, many transformative processes were already underway in the early 2020s. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine dramatically exacerbated them, unsettling the imperial order and contributing to the strengthening of ethno-nationalist tendencies across the "West."

246 Giovanni Arrighi. "The African Crisis. World Systemic and Regional Aspects." *New Left Review* 15. 5.

consolidating along the Pacific Rim, while development in much of Africa and Latin America stifled under the weight of structural adjustment and the 1980 debt crisis. Latin America's "década perdida" and the so-called "African Tragedy" stand in contrast with China's "economic miracle" and the "Four Asian Tigers" (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan).[247] Arrighi attributes this divergence, in part, to the devastating legacy of the slave trade, which had a lasting, demographic impact.[248] Circumstances in East China, by comparison, were more favourable to catch-up industrialization. Yet, the ascent of East Asian capitalism is tied even more so to American strategic thinking which considered a *cordon sanitaire* of capitalist stability in the region vital to its confrontation with the Soviet bloc. Unlike most "developing countries," which – "lacking large-scale external assistance" – could not sustain the extensive capital volumes required for "fast industrialization and urbanization," the Asian Tigers benefited from exceptional treatment.[249] Investment deficits were financed less through the conditional lending regimes of structural adjustment programs and rather via U.S. aid designed around Cold War imperatives. Chinese state-capitalism, again, charted a path by pursuing a gradual and selective opening strategy that avoided shock-therapy.[250] Albeit, the strategic re-alignment with the United States during the 1970s played its part as it granted access to Western markets, technology, and limited capital flows. And, as noted, investment inflows from crisis-stricken Japan in the wake of the Plaza Accord also complemented China's transition into global capitalism. Hence, even in this ostensibly autonomous trajectory, the

247 See also Mike Davis. *Planet of the Slums*. London/New York: Verso. 13.

248 Arrighi, "African Crisis," 23, 25–26. Arrighi argues that the slave trade left a legacy of low population density and small local markets that persisted through the colonial era. Only after the 1980s collapse did Sub-Saharan Africa's structural labor deficit become a surplus, reflected in rising migration despite the breakdown of urban labor markets and narrowing rural–urban income gaps.

249 Robert H. Wade. "Escaping the periphery." *WIDER Working Paper* 101. 11. https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2018-101.pdf [last accessed 05.10.2025].

250 Isabella M. Weber. *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate*. London/New York: Routledge.

dynamics of development remained entangled within the strategic and financial architecture of imperialist competition.

In any case, the sharp differentiation in post-colonial outcomes unsettles the notion of a coherent "South" and, more fundamentally, destabilizes the neoliberal teleology that casts Euro-American capitalism as the inevitable horizon of global modernity.[251] As suggests Tooze's "carribeanization" thesis, the re-perspectivization of neoliberal globalization from the fractured destinies of the Global South helps broaden the view. The story of global capitalism has been less one of gradual alignment than one of constant designed and undesigned frustrations of development perspectives. If post-war Italy, France, Germany, and Japan – shattered by years of "total war" – could catalyse industrial renaissances by deploying the newest technologies of the time, they did so at a moment when ample space for growth remained and war-torn Europe offered a vast terrain for reconstruction investment. By contrast, international markets today are crowded, oversaturated by a "global redundancy of productive and technological capacities,"[252] making further industrial expansion very difficult.[253] This manifests in falling output prices that do not only impede profitability and hence new investment, but function as the "mechanism transmitting this problem across the world"[254] insofar they mediate global standards of productivity with which developing nations inevitably compete.

> The massive productivity increases already achieved by the North, as well as late industrializers such as China, have led to drastic declines in manufacturing prices that 'discourag[e] newcomers in developing countries from entry' into global markets. […] Both the industrialized North and the global South struggle to further expand manufacturing […]. Con-

251 Cf. Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online. This footnote applies to the entire paragraph above.
252 Benanav, *Future of Work*, 24.
253 This goes against established neoliberal wisdom as conditions should, in theory, favour growth: weak labour movements, downward wage pressures, social cutbacks, privatization policies, etc. (Merchant, *Endgame*, 55–56)
254 Benanav, *Future of Work*, 24.

> tinuous productivity growth has progressively rendered manufacturing unable to act as a development lever.[255]

Albeit "output-led deindustrialization," then, initially took root in the core industrial economies, it soon extended to Southern Europe and, finally, the rest of the world across the 1980–90s, which more or less "'imported' deindustrialization from the advanced countries."[256] As Phil Neel puts it, "[l]ow profitability" might promote "offshoring of production," but this primarily contributes to "unbalancing trade" and, hence:

> enabling more extreme labor disparities in the relative sense (measured in, say, comparative unit labor costs between countries) and in the absolute sense, as firms scour the globe for ever-cheaper labor inputs and begin to reproduce traditionally coercive labor regimes less and less dependent on the wage relation itself.[257]

The 1980 debt crisis was the great accelerator of these trends. The market reforms promoted by the IMF and World Bank but also liberalizers from the South such as Hernando de Soto primarily triggered patterns of growth that tended to undermine long-term economic potentials. Dani Rodrik, in fact, speaks of a process of "premature deindustrialization."[258] Many nations across the Global South have emerged severely weakened after decades of ongoing neoliberal crisis-management, experiencing de-agrarianization (i.e., the decline of people occupied in rural economies) without corresponding job creation in manufacturing or the larger formal labour market. Largely, the ex-colonies experienced a "lumpen-development"[259] into primary resource economies ("primarization") by way of debt peonage. Consequently, in these places, urban growth has been largely disconnected from industrialization. The U.N.

255 Moraitis, "De-Industrial Nightmare," 528 ; Dani Rodrik. "Premature Deindustrialization." *Journal of Economic Growth* 21. 8.
256 Neel, *Global Crisis*, 115; Rodrik, "Premature Deindustrialization," 4.
257 Neel, *Global Crisis*, 165.
258 Rodrik, "Premature Deindustrialization," 4.
259 Amin, *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism*, 43–64.

effectively speaks of a "Challenge of Slums"[260] which describes a process of urbanization driven by "the reproduction of poverty, not the supply of jobs."[261] By pushing vast segments of the population that formerly lived in rural economies into market dependence, structural adjustment programs (i.e., agricultural deregulation) have forcefully contributed to a de-peasantization across the non-western world:

> In actual fact by 1950, some two-thirds of the world's population remained in agriculture, the vast majority self-sufficient peasants or herdsmen. Even in the high-income countries, some 40 percent of the workforce was in agriculture. It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that a tipping point was reached: the agricultural population of the high-income countries shrank to a vanishing point, and globally, for the first time in thousands of years, the majority of the world's workers were no longer working in the fields.[262]

However, as said, this process has seldomly materialized in a rise in regular employment in capitalist industries. The peripheries of capitalism have in one way or another been integrated into transnational value-chains, but in the system of global labour arbitrage large segments of the population chronically cycle between formal and informal labour relations. From 1980 to the late 2010s, around 1.5 billion people have been added to global labour markets. Yet, these wage-dependent masses, which now outnumber the global peasantry, have largely encountered a "low-labor demand economy."[263] This has posed a serious representational problem, which finds itself reflected in the "conceptual crisis" that characterizes the genealogy of the notion of "informal labour" itself.[264] In the rhetoric of the International Labour Organiza-

260 UN-Habitat, *Global Report on Human Settlements*, Online.
261 Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 15–16.
262 Endnotes "A History of Separation," Online.
263 Benanav, *The Future of Work*, 39.
264 Aaron Benanav. "The Origins of Informality. The ILO at the Limit of the Concept of Unemployment." *Journal of Global History* 1:14. 116, 107, 125; See also Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 148–149, 71. Jameson's new reading of *Capital Vol. I* – claiming that it is fundamentally about unemployment – responds precisely to such impasses in contemporary theories of labour, which prove unable to account for those "massive populations […] excluded

tion (ILO), the term has always rather marked a gap filler to describe the "liminal spaces" between unemployment, unwaged employment, and formal employment.[265] It was supposed to pinpoint a-typical forms of work. Yet, according to a 2015 statistic by the ILO, only 26% of the global workforce holds a permanent employment. Under that aspect, "non-standard employment" proves a "misnomer" and instead emerges as the standard of a neoliberal world-economy which operates on (racialized) vulnerability as multinationals roam the planet for cheap labour "to compete in oversupplied global markets."[266] Against earlier models that still treated informality as "a transitional moment on the way to formal employment and unemployment,"[267] the neoliberal era has been marked by the normalization of wageless or underwaged economies that, nonetheless, are not only fully integrated into value-chains but

from the modernizing projects of First World capitalism." As he connects unemployment to the inequalities of the world economy, Jameson's re-interpretation, hence, asserts itself as a "contemporary reading" exactly by stating that in the course of capitalist globalization Marx's notion of "structural unemployment" – the "industrial reserve army" as him and Engels term it – has moved from "a secondary feature of this system […] to the very forefront," specifying, however, that this does not mean that the unemployed are "expelled from capital," but rather "fulfil an economic function by way of their very non-functioning."

265 Benanav, "The Origins of Informality," 107, 124–125. What is more, the opposition between formal and informal labour misrecognizes the extent to which the formal, state-regulated sector itself has been permeated by clandestine labour relations.

266 Benanav, *The Future of Work*, 55–56. "Around the world, the reality is that neoliberalism does not bring an expansion of high productivity- and therefore high-wage-jobs. There is a larger problem here. It is now clear that information technology, or what is called the fourth technological revolution, cannot do what the first three technological revolutions could do. With earlier technological revolutions, you had a deepening of capital, but you ultimately had a widening of capital as well, so that the jobs lost as a result of capital deepening were compensated for by the expansion of capital and the expansion of higher productivity jobs overall. Today, you don't have that. Even as services become more important, apart from a small layer of services at the top, most service jobs are low-productivity, low-wage jobs."

267 Michael Denning. "Wageless Life." *New Left Review* 66. 89. "The phrase that came to dominate official discourse – the 'informal sector' – was coined in the early 1970s by a British development economist, Keith Hart, who was studying the communities of Frafra migrants from northern Ghana living in the Nima shanty town on the northern outskirts of the old city of Accra. […] The term was quickly adopted by the [ILO] in a 1972 study. […]. The 'informal sector' became the master trope for representing wageless life in cities around the world."

are the most drastic crystallization of the "perpetual metastability"[268] administered by neoliberal control society.

The planetary factory built across the last decades, then, intertwines incongruent employment relations that range from gig jobs in "New Economy" professions to violent forms of exploitation in extractive industries. It encompasses multibillion-dollar technology corporations alongside coercive labour regimes in the UAE or the informal labour markets emerging in the shadow of the European border regime (e.g. in agriculture, construction, or care work). It features the "bloody Taylorism"[269] practiced in special economic zones such as Ciudad Juárez, Mexico or Shenzhen, China. It extends to crowd- or click-workers in Nairobi, Kenya, the high-tech enclaves of low-waged software development in Hyderabad, India, or the automated chip manufacturing facilities in locales like the Hsinchu Science Park in Taiwan. And it extends to artisanal mining in the Katanga (copper) or Kivu (coltan) region of the DRC. In this, finance, the so-called information society, and the logistical sector do not stand in opposition to industrial capital but entertain a complementary relationship. They are crucial "to connect the various geographically dispersed units of former large industrial complexes,"[270] while assimilating manufacturing to the volatility of stock-trade and price developments. Production and circulation are tightly integrated in "responsive supply chains" that "can respond in shorter timeframes both in terms of volume change and variety changes"[271] so as to "switch off" labour when markets demand. This develop-

268 Deleuze, *Postscript*, 5, 4. From here, perhaps, a gap in Deleuze's *Postscript* can be identified. It is right that capital's inability to absorb big chunks of the global workforce into the wage-nexus is briefly noted as the underside of control society. Yet, Deleuze's marginal remarks on the "extreme poverty" reigning in the "shanty towns or ghettos" of world capitalism only remain a sidenote. (Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript," 6–7.)

269 Dyer-Witheford, *Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*, 73.

270 Adam Turl. "The Changing Working Class. Is the U.S. becoming Post-Industrial?" *International Socialist Review*, 52. http://www.isreview.org/issues/52/postindustrial.shtml [last accessed 11.05.2022]. Adam Turl therefore rejects the concept of "post-Fordism," arguing that "de-industrialization" mystifies a process of de-concentration that disperses the production apparatus along transnational commodity-chains.

271 Martin Christopher. *Logistics and Supply Chain Management*. Harlow: FT Press. 99. See also Jasper Bernes. "Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect." *Endnotes 3*. https://www.endnotes.org.uk/issues/issue-3/jasper-bernes-logistics-counterlogistics-and-the-communist-prospect [last accessed 03.04.2026]

ment has "at once enlarged the pool of workers on which capital could draw, and enabled capital to disassociate itself from these workers."[272] Instability is not dysfunctional to this neoliberal order. On the contrary, it goes hand in hand with global insecurity. The disconnection between social reproduction and the valorization of capital lies at the very core of neoliberal globalization.

This is also tied to the governability of neoliberal societies across the North-South axis since the legitimacy of political systems has been crucially vested on cheap production.[273] The threat of supply-chain disruption and concomitant price hikes has important political implications,

272 Dyer-Witheford, *Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*, 145.

273 This consent by shopping is built on increasing private debt, which, in turn, materially tethers subjects ever-deeper to the status quo via the punitive compulsions of mortgage markets. The rise of real estate and rental price caused by asset price inflation has, in this regard, already been naturalized. Inflation surges in consumer goods or grocery and energy prices, by contrast, still tend to go along with decreasing approval ratios for incumbent governments: decreasing purchase power indexes increasing discontent. Lazzarato, therefore, insists on a rephrasing of the notion of human capital. For the majority of the population, the promise of entrepreneurial empowerment does not hold. Rather, it boils down to the management of one's debt portfolio, while luxury contra mass consumption becomes ever more crucial to the absorption of overproduced commodity masses. If the fabled Ich-AG figured as a "last avatar of individualism," then here it appears devolved into an amortized subject held accountable for the failings of the market, which are externalized onto society by state bailouts. (Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 24) Mike Davis's research into the disaster shelters built by the superrich also fits this bill. In fact, he considers this dystopian form of luxury consumption expressive of a larger shift in the accumulation regime. For that reason, he proposes to reconsider the hidden Keynesian tenets built into post-war theories of the spectacle or tertiarization that tend to see the massification of consumer culture as the ultimate expression of a "late" capitalism. Rather than an irreversible development of market society, Davis notes a slow move toward a production paradigm based on luxury goods and services, which is itself made possible by growing social inequality. In a country such as the U.S., in fact, the share in total consumer spending of the top 5% highest-income households has increased in between 1992 and 2012 from 27% to ca. 38%. While consumer industries progressively switch to luxury items, the masses have to take on loan after loan to finance their foundering consumption. (Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk. "Introduction." *Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism. Evil Paradises*. Mikes Davis and Daniel B. Monk (Eds.). New York/London: New Press. xi-xii; see also Martin Ford. *The Rise of the Robots*. New York: Basic Books. 198) Jodi Dean agrees to this observation: "The emphasis on consumption might have highlighted a feature of Fordism, particularly insofar as Fordist economic strategies depended on keeping wages high enough for consumers to purchase the goods they produced. In contrast, neoliberalism relies on the inequality of rich and poor […]." (Jodi Dean. "Complexity as Capture – Neoliberalism and the Loop of Drive." *New Formations*. 145) Equally, Srnicek notes that in the internet economy there is

wherefore logistical security has become a "profound concern" for states and multinationals that has prompted "a range of new forms of transnational regulation, border management, data collection, surveillance, and labor discipline, as well as naval missions and aerial bombing."[274] Military and corporate logistics are increasingly entangled – especially via the "discourse of resilience" – as supply-chain management becomes a key site of "contemporary warfare."[275] As such, they serve to secure the imperialist fix to the profitability and legitimacy quandaries of the neoliberal moment. The relative affordability of life in the capitalist centres is contingent upon the spoils of globalization. If workers throughout the supply-chain – say in countries like the DRC – were paid wages equivalent to those in the Global North, or even just a living wage, the consent manufactured by cheap consumption would falter. One can catch a taste of this fragility in the discontent provoked by inflationary pressures stemming from energy price shocks and supply-chain bottlenecks. The planetary factory is, thus, highly racialized, riven by a "flexible global colour line separating the formal and informal economy, and waged from wageless life."[276] This division of labour allocates precarity and disposability along hierarchies of citizenship, migration status, and geographic origin, enabling capital to externalize the costs of social reproduction while intensifying extraction from lives deemed surplus. What has, then, been termed the cyberneticization of capitalism earlier in this study is underpinned by a distinct global division of work that is based in an intricate, racializing interplay of advanced technology, cheap labour, and abandonment. At once, as outlined above, this process is shot through with bigoted narratives that project a distorted developmental timeline onto the world. Dreaming up skewed causalities based in cultural pathologies or other colonial tropes, these tempo-

a trend toward luxury e-services: "Whereas the tech boom of the 1990s at least left us with the basis for the internet, the tech boom of the 2010s looks as though it will simply leave us with premium services for the rich." (Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 121)

274 Deborah Cowen. *The Deadly Life of Logistics. Mapping Violence in Global Trade*. Minneapolis/Londong: University of Minnesota Press. 15, 2.

275 Cowen, *Deadly Life of Logistics*, 3.

276 Chris Chen. "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality. Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism." *Endnotes* 3. Chris Chen, here, re-activates a coinage by the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963).

ral ideologies obscure capitalism's combined and uneven development by severing locales from their imperial entanglements – both past and present. In doing so, they ultimately erase the labouring multitude upon which the global economy has long depended and continues to rely.

7 "The Economy" and its "Externalities"

This disappearance of labour from representations of the economy is no bug. It is a structural feature of the abstractions that underpin market orthodoxy. Within the neoliberal canon, the lived realities of "global proletarianization"[277] are rendered invisible. Instead, the market appears as a disembodied entity, where human agency is subordinated to the impersonal discipline of price signals. The infamous commodity parable *I, Pencil* (1958) by Leonard Read, popularized by Milton Friedman on his PBS show *Free to Choose* (1980), is paradigmatic in that regard. It naturalizes global supply-chains while erasing unequal market relations and the class content of commodity-production. In a provocative manner, the story argues that no one person knows how to make a pencil. Indeed, the pencil-narrator claims:

> The absence of a master mind, of anyone dictating or forcibly directing these countless actions which bring me into being. No trace of such a person can be found. Instead, we find the invisible hand at work.[278]

Supposed to ridicule the idea of a planned economy, the parable notes that knowledge is distributed across a myriad of actors. It is only the "uninhibited" action of "creative know-hows," guided by price signals, that allows for the pencil's manufacture.[279] Yet, the very framework of this commodity-narrative contributes to the production of ignorance. Conjuring the "magic of the price system,"[280] Friedman abstracts labour

277 Karl Heinz Roth. "Global Crisis- Global Proletarianization." *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios*. Andre Fumagadalli and Sandro Mezzadra (Eds.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
278 Leonard E. Read. *I, the Pencil*. New York: Foundation for Economic Education. 9
279 Read, "I, the Pencil," 9.
280 Milton Friedman. "Milton Friedman - I, Pencil." *Youtube*. 31 July 2012.

into circulation and information. Everything is framed as an input, whether direct producers now consciously participate in this chain or not. The "miner of graphite in Ceylon," "the logger in Oregon," or the "president of the pencil company," all appear as equal contributors to the "miracle" of the pencil: "There isn't a single person in all these millions […] who contributes more than a tiny, infinitesimal bit of know-how."[281] The pencil is, thus, presented as a neutral product of free exchange and choice. Why, then, the surplus acquired in the process – to which everyone is supposed to have contributed equally – is not distributed equally is absent from this story. The fixation on information exchange omits that workers do not have equal negotiating power in global markets. Capital flows freely, while labour mobility is constrained by border regimes. Blanking out economic compulsions and other forms of coercion, the example narratively flattens power. It turns a deeply hierarchical system of labour division into a peaceful, harmonious story of market coordination.

These "acts of exclusion"[282] are entirely functional. As Timothy Mitchell points out, the production of "externalities" is constitutive of the market system. Crucially, of course, this applies to property titles, or for instance the ecological consequences of goods manufacturing:

> to sell the cement a factory produces, the management of the factory must prove they own the product. They must deny the claims of others who may demand some share, such as the kiln workers who produced the cement but may not have been fully compensated for the value contributed by their labor, or those who supplied the machinery or the raw materials, as well as those who demand compensation for the damage pollution has done to their health and other outsiders. By proving ownership, the managers exercise a form of exclusion, the power to deny the claims of others.[283]

281 Read, "I, the Pencil," 8.
282 Mitchel, "Dreamland," 22; See also Michel Callon. "An Essay on Framing and Overflowing: Economic Externalities Revisited by Sociology." *The Laws of the Markets*. Oxford: Blackwell. 244–269.
283 Mitchel, "Dreamland," 22.

In the neoclassical language of free trade and price signals, however, these externalities are at best framed as "'market failures' where the price mechanism that governs exchanges fails to reflect the true costs involved" in a transaction.[284] Yet, this diagnosis performs a classic displacement: externalised costs are treated as exceptions even though those "external" elements (unpaid labour, environmental damage, colonial legacies, etc.) are indispensable to capital accumulation. The same logic of exclusion operates at the macroeconomic scale in the construction of GDP. Consider, again, the case of Apple: The iPhone, assembled globally – from the mines of the Congo to the factories of Shenzhen – appears in U.S. national accounts as an American contribution to GDP as if the design studios of Cupertino generated the bulk of its final value. Production costs abroad vanish into the background. What remains is the margin captured in California and reported as "value added" in the U.S. The metric, thus, conceals asymmetries between core and periphery. Stylized as a measure of domestic production, it purports to chart the "value," (which, in neoliberal parlance, is synonymous with "price") of all goods and services produced within a nation's borders.[285] As such, though, it scarcely accounts for the internationalization of manufacturing inasmuch the spatial organization of value-production "diverge[s] from its geographical distribution."[286] GDP operates as a mechanism of epistemic enclosure that attributes to the "domestic" sphere the fruits of a global labour regime. As John Smith has argued, it would be more accurate to "redefine GDP as a measure of the part of the global product

284 Mitchel, "Dreamland," 21.

285 Cf. John Smith. 2016. *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century.* New York: Monthly Review Press. 262. Smith relates the common notion of "GDP" and the related "value-added" concept to the neoclassical presumption that "value" aka "price" is wholly subjective, determined on the marketplace while production recedes offstage. There is only "buying and selling." The "arrow of time" is reversed as the marginalist doctrine holds that value arises from consumer evaluation. Marketability reigns supreme over production. By that measure – in the case of Apple – statistics are perfectly justified in downplaying the expenditure of labour-power abroad and recording the majority of value as domestic product. As such, "GDP" functions as an ideological construct that reinforces an imperialist worldview in which the capitalist core is portrayed as "productive" while the periphery is "dependent." The metric erases the structural dependence on super-exploited labour.

286 David Harvey. *The Limits to Capital*. London: Verso. 441–442.

that is captured or appropriated by a nation."[287] In that sense, concepts like GDP are technologies of representation that depend on drawing boundaries between what is counted as part of the (national) economy and what is left outside it.[288] Capital incessantly produces worldwide interdependences, celebrating "globalization" as a motor of shared prosperity and a sign of its cosmopolitan vocation. Yet, the core instruments by which economic performance is measured efface the very entanglement on which capital accumulation depends. By performing this demarcation – an exclusion that re-doubles capitalist ownership structures – these metrics do not describe a pre-existing reality but establish efficiency for economic abstractions.

The production of statistical intransparency is crucial to this dynamic. As Thomas Piketty argues, the neoliberal rollback of redistribution was accompanied by a dismantling of fiscal instruments that generated data. Deepened globalization has, of course, played a role in this. Portfolios were internationalised, while locational competition incentivized tax cuts and lighter administrative oversight. But the generation of data gaps – facilitating tax havens and concealing wealth – was also a political process. In the neoliberal offensive, strong fiscal-data systems came to be regarded as impediments to the liberalization of capital flows.[289] As these registers weakened, public data grew less reliable and capable of mapping the global holdings of the rich. The erosion of wealth taxes contributed particularly to this statistical opacity, hollowing out fiscal accountability itself. Once the parameters of "the economy" were fixed in this way, the leeway for redistribution contracted: locational competition displaced political contestation, recruiting parties, regardless of political couleur, into a logic of "Standortnationalismus" that binds legitimacy to the performance of the national economy in global markets. This applies across the North-South axis. Under the compulsions of the planetary factory, as all economic zones strive to move "downstream," the language of competitiveness prevailed. The vision of "development" was recast in terms of market conformity, narrowing

287 Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century,* 278.
288 Mitchel, "Dreamland," 23–24, 31.
289 Cf. Thomas Piketty. *Capital and Ideology*. Arthur Goldhammer (Transl.). Cambridge/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 552–557.

the horizon of political possibility to the efficient management of integration into value-chains.

On this foundation, the neoliberal order constructs its institutional architecture. The conceit of a self-regulating order – that escapes all "pretences of knowledge" – is encoded in a set of representational tools and laws that precisely work to ensure the intangibility of capital. From Hayek to Friedman, the ambition of neoliberalism has always reached further than positing the market as a transcendent sphere not to be mingled with. It entails the projection of a rules-based global order designed to shield corporate activity from national jurisdiction or democratic disruption. Capitalist interests were supposed to be secured at once through binding supranational regimes and the "creation of an 'offshore world' of tax havens"[290] that institutionalizes the ever-present threat of capital flight. The neoliberal fix to international capitalism across the 1970s, hence, does not display a belief in a "zero-state society."[291] Rather, it stands for a non-majoritarian form of governance (e.g., "market-conform democracies" as Angela Merkel once put it) that constitutionalizes the structural leverage of capital in "a worldwide institutional grid that offers [it] multiple exit options."[292] As such, it does not imply a rejection but rather a reconfiguration of the nation in that a world of borders – enabling offshoring, tax evasion, wage differentials, untransparent money flows, special economic zones, etc. – facilitates corporate unaccountability, capital flight from redistributive policies, and stokes up the locational competition over investment-friendly framework conditions.[293]

An extreme version of this pursuit of a capitalist polity beyond (economic) democracy is articulated by a member of the Mont Pèlerin Society who has openly allied with the far-right since the 1970s, Murray Rothbard, to advocate neo-nationalism and separatism as ways to crack-up sovereign states into smaller, more malleable entities and, thus,

290 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 267.
291 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 267.
292 Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore. "Variegated Neo-Liberalization." *New Constitutionalism and World Order*. Stephen Gill and A. Claire Cutler (Eds.). New York: Cambridge University Press. 129.
293 Slobodian, The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism, 267.

open new territories for unfettered enterprise. Espousing a model of "laissez-faire segregation" that weaves "together principles of decentralized capitalist competition and racial homogeneity," Rothbard, his disciple Hans-Hermann Hoppe, and other acolytes recommend secession as the prime means of disruption: "For them, secession was the path to a world that was socially divided but economically integrated – separate but global. […] Secession was the means; anarcho-capitalist society was the end."[294] The idea is to, thereby, "break the clock of the welfare state" and "repeal the twentieth century,"[295] insulating private capital in unregulated economic zones held together by ethno-nationalist frameworks. As such, it is a precursor to the brand of right-wing accelerationism represented most prominently in the mid-2020s by Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. Above all, though, this ambivalence within neoliberalism signals the intricate dialectic between economic nationalism and multinational capital that characterises the globalization process.

Interestingly enough, in fact, the neoliberal protection of capitalist interests via border proliferation is echoed in the organizational form respectively the subsidiarity principle of multinational corporations: conglomerates are by definition plural entities which are composed of several hundred subsidiaries, investment funds, trusts, foundations, and subcontractors, dispersed across multiple territories and independent from a juridical point of view, such that the company becomes unassailable as a definable legal object.[296] In neoliberal business theory, correspondingly, the firm has been redefined as a "fiction" that, actually, diffuses into a nexus of contracts between individuals such that the company cannot be held accountable as a whole.[297] Thereby, neo-classical economics also reacts against prior anti-corporate discourses. The post-WWII years, in fact, were marked by a thoroughly political understanding of large-scale enterprise as a site of power whose decision-making capacities rival that of official governments. Interestingly,

294 Quinn Slobodian. *Crack-Up Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books. 100–101, 105.
295 Murray N. Rothbard. "A Strategy for the Right." *Rothbard-Rockwell Report*. 16.
296 Cf. Alain Deneault. *Le Totalitarisme Pervers. D'une Multinationale au Pouvoir*. Paris: Éditions Rue de l'Échiquier. 7.
297 Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling. "A Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behaviour, Agency Costs, and Ownership Structure." *Journal of Financial Economics* 3. 311.

this conception of corporate management as a "private authority"[298] was not restricted to critical theory but broadly recognized by the business theory of the time. Not surprisingly, opposition to the capitalist order was articulated in an imagery of beleaguerment. As Staughton Lynd, a key figure of the peace movement, put it at the height of the Vietnam War, the struggle against the military-industrial complex must "lay siege to corporations."[299] The neo-liberal re-invention – philosophically and legally speaking – of the firm, then, proposes to withdraw it from representation and thereby prosecution: issues of power and authority are replaced by indictments limited to contractual relations and individual mis-management.[300] In this sense, the irrepresentability of the economy is a key element in the neoliberal production of alternativelessness. The assertion of complexity articulates a theoretical and juridical offensive against the regulation of capitalist enterprise: "it seeks to make itself ungovernable, but only so it can govern others."[301] Insofar the market is constructed as a liminal aesthetic-epistemological object, it is supposed to set absolute limits to political action. The assertion of the essential unknowability of the economy finds itself re-doubled in a corresponding international constitutional order. It comes with a thoroughly post-democratic motion to amplify the "transcendent" character of market forces in an institutional framework that takes the "conception of the world economy" to "the edge of representation, in a perpetual state of morphing and transformation, encased by a grid of rules."[302]

It is, of course, the depiction of such technologies of representation that was the topic of my readings of Gibson's and DeLillo's cybernetic tales. Making capital whole again implies the mass-manufacture of invisibilities. In that sense, these literary texts addressed the violence

298 Beardsley Ruml. "Corporate Management as a Locus of Power." *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 29:3. 229.
299 Staughton Lynd. "Attack War Contractors Meetings." *Handling Protests*. New York: Conference Board. 5.
300 Cf. Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 91ff. The discourse of ethical consumption ties in with this de-responsibilization of the firm. In any case, the liability for the ecological and human costs of production is externalized.
301 Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society*, 240; See also Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital," 463ff.
302 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 282.

hidden in the production of capital's ineffability. In both novels, *Neuromancer* and *Cosmopolis*, we encountered a hierarchy of speed and dematerialization in which the "plot of concrete" is increasingly left behind by ever-greater economic abstractions: "the material crush, […] the obsolescences, going mostly unseen."[303] In Röggla's *die alarmbereiten*, too, the suppression of the "hinterbliebenen" – the leftovers – of capitalist crises proved a key narrative concern. In all these texts, representation transpires as an adjoint mode of power. Despite all, however, the reference to the "poltergeists" haunting the capitalist hypercentres dispenses with focalization. They remain, as it reads in *Pattern Recognition*, a "wound, speaking itself wordlessly in the dark."[304] The realms of "dark value" stay an unnarrated, strangely othered absent space of Western capitalism: "dusty sultanates, paranoid people's republics, [and] hellhole rebel states."[305]

According to Michael Niblett, such elision of the lived reality of exploitation upstream the value-chain is perhaps not so surprising. In literatures written from the cores of value-distribution, the globality of commodity-production – "where it is not repressed" altogether – tends to appear as a "distant and dimly perceived limit," which indexes some irrepresentable totality. By contrast, "for peripheral literatures the situation is somewhat different."

> On the other side of the international division of labour this horizon is more immediate and pressing, its historical character more apparent.[306]

Indeed, how different the register becomes when one turns, for example, to the poetic expressions arising from the "hidden abodes" of the so-called workshop of the world, that is, to the emergent literature of Chinese migrant workers. Of course, China itself is riven by core-margin relations and much of literary production comes from metropolitan centres. Here, however, we are dealing with artefacts composed by

303 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 65, 83.
304 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 316.
305 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 75–76.
306 Michael Niblett. "World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature." *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 16. 20.

authors whose lives are circumscribed by the *hukou* regime that polices internal mobility and assigns these subjects a peripheral position. Yang Lian, thus, speaks of a lyrical genre that confronts "a world of mutes" with a "poetical consanguinity which has linked true life to true language" to supersede the voicelessness of

> villages abandoned by innumerable young people who turned their backs on their homes, bewildering cities, barren as deserts, the degrading work environment of the labourers in the lowest strata of society, and also their state of mind, so much more desolate and miserable than the world around them.[307]

Against the abstract triumphalism of exploding growth-rates, in which workers remain unnamed, these poets reflect the phenomenology of migrant factories and construction booms, the bodily stress that sustains the "economic miracle" of Sino-Capitalism. They direct attention to the holes in the whole. In Xie Xiangnan's *Orders of the Front Lines* this shift is visualized in an utterly excremental language:

> My finest five years went into the input feeder of a machine / I watched those five youthful years come out of the machine's / Asshole-each formed into an elliptical plastic toy, / slippery, sometimes orange, / sometimes bright red and green eggshells. / (I've heard they're shipped to America, shipped / to Western Europe as Christmas toys, sold one after another / to blue-eyed children . . . .)[308]

The planetary factory is rendered as a digestive organism that excretes the lyrical subject's youth. It is congealed and commodified into the form of a plastic toy, shipped abroad to pump up export statistics and stage the wonder of Christmas in affluent Western households. Or take Zheng Xiaoqiong's poem *Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station*,

307 Anom. "Judge's Comments. Guo Jinniu – Going Home on Paper." *A Massively Single Number*. Yang Lian (Ed.), Brian Holton (Transl.). Bristol: Shearsman Books. 113–14.
308 Xie Xiangnan. "Orders of the Front Lines." *Iron Moon. An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. Qin Xiaoyu (Ed.). Eleanor Goodman (Transl.). Buffalo: White Pine Press. 79.

which juxtaposes the circulation of goods with the forced mobility of migrant proles as global labour division links "an inland village / to a factory by the sea / all the way to a shelf in America."[309] Bound to the aseptic rhythms of the assembly line, the lyrical I is however permitted only the most fleeting speculation about the itinerary of the commodity in which its life force was poured. The imaginary projection is swiftly foreclosed by the disciplinary temporality of the factory: "She rubs her swollen red eyes / and sticks herself back / into the flow of products."[310]

But this workers poetry does not give in to resignation. It also marks a rebellion against the inexistence of labour in the balance sheets of global capital. Xiaoqiang contrasts the "language of severed fingers" to "the GDP's language" and the "language of official projects."[311] Zheng Dong calls upon his suffering comrades to "let our severed fingers make it to California / to collapse in front of the bosses' properties / let them entwine them like ferocious ghosts …."[312] This poetry aims to express what is obscured in the fetish of commodities:

> In one minute, how much wood can be sawed
> how many meters of cloth can be woven
> how many batteries can be assembled
> all of this can be calculated
> but how much sweat can flow in a minute
> how much dust and dark particulate can be taken
> into the lungs and organs
> how many people wander out of their villages
> how many fingers are eaten by machines
> how many loved ones are separated by blood
> that can't be calculated or figured… [313]

309 Zheng Xiaoqiong. 2016. "Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station." *Iron Moon. An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. Qin Xiaoyu (Ed.). Eleanor Goodman (Transl.). Buffalo: White Pine Press. 183.
310 Xiaoqiong, "Woman Worker," 183.
311 Xie Xiangnan. "Language." *Iron Moon. An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. Qin Xiaoyu (Ed.). Eleanor Goodman (Transl.). Buffalo: White Pine Press. 122.
312 Zheng Dong. "Book of Sorcery." *Iron Moon. An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. Qin Xiaoyu (Ed.). Eleanor Goodman (Transl.). Buffalo: White Pine Press. 163.
313 Xiaoqiong, "Woman Worker," 183.

Zheng Xiaoqiong, here, testifies to the experiential incongruence between the law of value and the material realities of drudgery. No metric could represent the value-added to smartphones by suicide prevention nets in Shenzhen factories. If "losing one's name, getting a serial number" is the first step in *A Product's Story*, as she puts it in a poem of the same name, then poetry must turn to the "love hidden in […] shared rented rooms, doors without keys, iron ladders to upper berths …" to escape that namelessness.[314] In this vein, the lyrical subject declares:

> I remember their faces, their wild eyes and subtle trembling / their calloused fingers, their rough and simple lives / I say quietly: they are me, I am them / our grief and pain and hope are kept silent and forbearing / our confessions and hearts and loves are all in tears, / all is as silent and lonely as iron, or as pain / I say, in the vast crowds, we are all alike / we all love and hate, we all breathe, we all have noble spirits / we all have unyielding loneliness and compassion!

Defying narratives of futility and devastation by factory discipline, the poet conjures a language of shared anguish that means to overcome separations, recognizing the pain of others in one's own pain, and hence to restore a new sense of solidarity and perhaps even working-class agency. Similarly, Guo Jinniu, in a requiem to his fellow Foxconn workers, vows to lyrically memorialize those who were suicided in capitalism's political economy of premature death:

> This is the 13th jump in six months. In the past, those twelve / names / dusts just settled / […] / My friend gone home paper … rarely does anyone recall that in Room 701 of this building, / you occupied a bunk …[315]

Consequently, his lyrical enunciations increasingly take on a collective character, aspiring to speak the language of himself and his fellow co-workers, whose "Motherland" had recast them into a class of

314 Xie Xiangnan. "A Product's Story." *Iron Moon. An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. Qin Xiaoyu (Ed.). Eleanor Goodman (Transl.). Buffalo: White Pine Press. 117–118.
315 Guo Jinniu. 2105. "A Massively Single Number." *A Massively Single Number*. Yang Lian (Ed.). Brian Holton (Transl.). Bristol: Shearsman Books. 150.

vagrants without secure civic standing: "it organized us a Temporary Residence Permit. / Our Motherland, it accepted the Temporary Residence Fee I handed over."[316] Moving from landlocked provinces such as Hunan, Sichuan, Hubei, Anhui, Gansu, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan or Henan to the Pearl or Yangtze River Delta, this proletarian mass forms the backbone of the new riches of metropolitan China but is admitted to the booming cities only on the provisional terms set by capital accumulation. It is this "Massively Single Number"[317] of internal migrants that forms the subject matter of a kind of poetry that challenges win-win growth narratives. It is about bearing witness, but also a form of protest via poetry as the lyrical act resists the evacuation of proletarian subjectivity from the storytelling and "representative excrescence[s]"[318] of the global market, which only recognize abstract quantities while letting billions go uncounted.

Nonetheless, as we have seen, this does not tell the whole story of capitalism either. The fates of the former "Third World" have diverged. While Chinese migrant poetry fits into the canon of industrial and factory literature and addresses the unity-of-opposites between the production of wealth and misery, the situation is different in many prematurely deindustrialized regions of the Global South.[319] Not without reason does Mike Davis, author of *Planet of Slums* (2006), argue that:

> At a high level of abstraction, the current period of globalization is defined by a trilogy of ideal-typical economies: super-industrial (coastal East Asia), financial/tertiary (North Atlantic), and hyper-urbanizing/extractive (West Africa).[320]

316 Guo Jinniu. "A Massively Single Number." 150.
317 Guo Jinniu. "A Massively Single Number." 150.
318 Alain Badiou. "The Factory as Event-Site," *Prelom. Journal for Images and Politics*. Alberto Toscano (Transl.). 173.
319 This bifurcation becomes apparent when one cosinders that the rise in Chinese incomes "accounted for almost 75 percent of the global reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty" since ca. 1980. Cf. World Bank and DRCSC. 2022. *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. ix. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/e9a5bc3c-718d-57d8-9558-ce325407f737/content [last accessed 03.04.2026]
320 Mike Davis. *Old Gods, New Enigmas*. London/New York: Verso. 7.

Davis is, of course, aware that this does not capture all the particular manifestations of the capitalist totality. This list cannot, for example, fully cover the itineraries of post-Soviet countries, Latin America, or the Gulf States. He is concerned with something else: a propaedeutics of seeing that registers the moving contradictions of global capitalism by "scan[ning] the future from the simultaneous perspectives of Shenzhen, Los Angeles, and Lagos" to discern "how heterodox social categories might be fitted together in a single resistance to capitalism."[321] The aesthetic sensibilities developed by critical literary writing can be instructive in this regard, especially when it comes to the lived reality of global proletarianization with all its inconsistencies. Thus, the "challenge of Slums" – the violence of abandonment – has also posed itself to literary writing. The critic Michael K. Walonen, in this respect, notes the emergence of something like a "slum novel"[322] in which the world is written from the informal economies that sprawl in the shadow of neoliberal re-adjustment. He constellates such diverse works as Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), César Aira's *La Villa* (2001), or Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992) in an attempt to trace the subterranean connections between these diverse responses to the new condition of global proletarianization. Abani's novel, set in 1983, for instances takes us to the shantytowns of Lagos, Nigeria amidst shock-therapy. As such, it narrativizes the austerity programs of neoliberal debt policy as a consequence of which large swathes of the rural population flee the countryside to settle in newly emerging slums.[323] In *La Villa,* largely taking place in the poor districts of Buenos Aires, readers similarly come across a city terraformed by neoliberal reforms, in which bourgeois neighbourhoods are increasingly gated from the hidden abodes of slum-dwellers that live on the waste left behind by the rich:

321 Davis. *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 7.
322 Michael K. Walonen. *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 79ff.
323 Cf. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction,* 92ff.

> Se habián hecho invisibles, porque se movián con discreción, case furtivos, de noche (y solo durante un rato), y sobre todo porque se abrigan en un pliegue de la vida que en general la gente prefiere no ver.[324]

Both, thus, emplot stories of survival in contexts where "los pobres se quedaron sin mundo."[325] They concretize the transformation of city-life in the late 20th century all while providing a counter-narrative to those euphemistic neoliberal discourses which describe informal labour as a form of micro-entrepreneurship that leads an "invisible revolution" against state bureaucracy (picked up, in fact, by propagators of micro-loans as the road to poverty reduction).[326] The critical impetus of these texts, thus, consists in writing against the invisibilization of class society in the triumphalism of neoliberal globalization discourses: "[…] dicen: 'ya no hay pobres.' – 'Y sin embargo, hay.'"[327] In *Animal's People* this insistence on the persistence of abject poverty, now, gets an apocalyptic touch in the double sense of revelation and catastrophe: "All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us."[328] As the latent threat articulated in this quote indicates, though, there is an attempt in Sinha's novel to exceed the level of personal survival (embodied by the protagonist Zafar). Processing the Bhopal gas leak in India by way of the fictional city Khaufpur – the worst industrial disaster in history with an estimated 10,000 casualties and countless more consequential damages – it charts links to numerous other contaminated places around the world:

> Is Khaufpur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each one has its own Zafar. There'll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in

324 César Aira. *La Villa*. Emecé: Buenos Aires. 12; César Aira. *Shantytown*. Chris Andrews (Transl.). New York: New Directions. 7. "The collectors had become invisible because they operated discreetly, almost furtively at night […] but above all because they took refuge in a social recess that most people prefer to ignore."
325 Aira, *La Villa*, 82; Aira, *Shantytown*, 67. "The poor have been left without a world."
326 Cf. Hernando de Soto. *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*. London: I.B. Tauris; See also Oks/ Williams, "Slow Death of Global Development," Online.
327 Aira, *La Villa*, 83; Aira, *Shantytown*, 67. "'There are no poor people anymore.'" "But there are."
328 Indra Sinha. *Animal's People*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 366.

> Hanoi and Manila and Halabja and there are the Zafars of Minamata and Seveso, of Sao Paulo and Toulouse and I wonder if all those weary bastards are as fucked as I am.[329]

As the novel, then, describes the collective resilience of an urban slum community, it by and by narrates a common but unknown struggle against a capitalist economy of premature death that transgresses continents. Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, finally, tells the multi-generational tale of a shantytown on the outskirts of Martinique's capital Fort-de-France. It does so through the voice of an elderly woman who recounts her family history from 1820 up to the late 20th century. Juxtaposed to a multitude of different media such as journal excerpts, letters, or fictional notebooks (most notably the memos of an urban planner), this testimony circles back and forth between past and more contemporaneous forms of resistance to bring into view the collective self-determination of Martinique's slum population "raccrochés à lui [la ville] par milles fêles de survie."[330] In this, the text works upon the novel-form itself, enmeshing written and oral culture, to grasp an urban multiplicity that is radically excluded from promises of capitalist industrilization: "Un prolétariat sans usines, sans ateliers, et sans travail, et sans patrons, éperdus dans les djobs, noyés dans la survie, et menant son existence comme un sillon entre des braises."[331] Drawing a strong connection between neoliberalism's "end of history" regime and the "planet of slums" that emerges in the scorched earth of creative destruction "comme un sillon entre des braises," the novel brings into view "en ville *une contreville*" that despite its essential exclusion has an "oxygénant" effect on the social totality.[332]

Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* can be considered part of these Global South literatures that reconsider the story of neoliberal globalization through "the part of those without part."[333] The novel is con-

329 Sinha, *Animal's People*, 296.
330 Patrick Chamoiseau. *Texaco*. Paris: Gallimard. 347. See also Sarah L. Lincoln. "Conquering City: The Poetics of Possibility in *Texaco*." *small axe* 36. 12.
331 Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 345.
332 Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 61, 396.
333 Jacques Rancière. *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*. Steven Corcoran (Transl.). London: Continuum. 35.

cerned with the underside of cyber-capital, that is, the fundamental contemporaneity of extractive labour to what is today understood as Industry 4.0. Further, it places the history of structural adjustment in the *longue durée* of imperialism, while a certain confrontation between Chinese and Euro-American capitalism can already extrapolated in the margins of the novel. As such, *Tram 83* is chiefly concerned with investigating in how far the unevenness produced by capitalist development gives way to effects of difference and similarity that precisely facilitate the derogatory temporal ideologies broached above. To that effect, the text inflects neoliberal crisis discourses in and through Congolese history by counterposing the "very abstract and terribly concrete"[334] dimensions of contemporary capitalism. In this, neoliberal structural adjustment is made to appear as a "*governance of the vanquished.*"[335] The establishment of market-based rules intervenes after the defeat of the decolonial project in the DRC and the continued submission of the newly independent country to the imperialist powers has been determined. Depicting the mutual conditionality of economic power and military force, *Tram 83* contextualizes "adjustment" in relation to the demise of anti-imperialist struggle and concomitant projects of a post-colonial African socialism. As such, it conjures a setting that is already post-apocalyptic: "Le monde est irrécuperable."[336] The end of a world – the project of a fully decolonized "Third World" – has happened and the events of the book take place in the aftermath. If the risk discourses dissected by Röggla in *die alarmbereiten*, in fact, at times tend to ontologize precarity by positing a certain "universal existential vulnerability,"[337] Mujila contrasts these cataclysmic scenarios with a resolute historical narrative of (post)colonial dispossession in which liberal modernity has always spelled devastation. That way, the death-in-life aesthetic noted above is re-signified to address the unequal production of impossibility, vulnerability, and superfluidity on a global scale. In this vein, I want to turn in the last chapter of this study to a

334 Henri Lefebvre. "The End of Modernity?" *Key Writings*. Stuart Eiden (Ed.). London/New York: continuum. 94.
335 Lazzarato, *War and Money*, 97.
336 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 143.
337 Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode*, 136.

piece of literature that re-writes the experience of structural adjustment from the perspective of a not-all-that-peripheral labour all while tracing the proverbial "cancellation of the future" traced throughout my analyses back to a postcolonial condition thoroughly marked by the persistent impact of colonial violences.

My wager is that the writing of Fiston Mwanza Mujila, born in the mining town Lubumbashi but domiciled in the Styrian city Graz since 2009, provides a thorough historical narrativization of structural adjustment that connects neoliberalism across the North/South axis. Upon this, it is striking that the core concerns of the previous chapters return in an extraordinarily condensed manner in Mujila's debut novel. There is the representational challenge posed by the dividualization of the subject, the sense of impossibility in the face of a seemingly autonomized capital that appears larger than life, the engagement with the morbid temporalities secreted by crisis, and crucially the linkage of structural adjustment to the recuperation of anti-systemic critique. All these aspects are rendered in a particularly powerful necro-aesthetic that gives shapes to a fundamental horror at the working dead but also a multi-layered scene of action caught between past and present, marginalization and globalization, failed revolution and salvaging for the future. Incorporating the spatiotemporal logic of capitalism into literary form, Mujila takes on the representational challenge posed by capitalism by moving up and down in time, making it thereby appear as a thoroughly historical process marked by the production of unevenness "as a matter of course."[338]

But I also reckon that the novel in question presents an opening toward the contestation of the aesthetics of inevitability dissected so far. If *The Flee* at the end returns to the singular pronoun I – as literary characters are utterly incapable of imagining a form of collective agency – *Tram 83* experiments in writing a plural subject. Countering the reduction of Africa to an image of wasted life, the novel pictures informality as a site of resistance. Surely, the text does not withhold any brutalities. Survival is the key mode in which characters circu-

338 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development. Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 12.

late in the novel. But it is also re-politicized. The informal, footloose proletarians "*sans* usines" who take the scene in Mujila's writing act as scrupulous analysts of the forces that produce their disposability to the global economy. In *Tram 83* the macro is never far off the micro. There is a sense that the fixation on the personal ends up in a *cul-de-sac* narrative, which, at worst, reproduces colonial tropes. That is why the depiction of the subjective is always mediated by a sense of the global. The representation of violence is always cross-circuited with the world-market. Mujila's prose takes pains to establish the heteronomy of the literary scene of action. It is almost as if the novel constantly strived to break free from the enclosure into the micro-economic, which in the context of the DRC comes along with the (neo-)colonial vision of a country without history. Constantly reminding readers of the macro-economic determination of the scene of action, *Tram 83* works at an elaborate "deprovincialization" of the extraction enclave at the centre of the plot. A literature of the "global Congo" emerges that functions as a critical counter-narrative from below and insists on a worldliness which is systematically denied. Against the dominant teleological narratives of structural adjustment that smooth over imperial plunder, this literature operates precisely in the gaps where things fail to add up. It confronts a historical record in which the Congo's indispensable position in the machinery of capitalist development is discounted. And what is more, it challenges the neoliberal collapse of society into survival-monads in that the text attempts to invent – against all odds – a collective agency where it is denied on all sides.

V The New Wretched of the Earth: *Tram 83* as a Novel of Structural Adjustment

In the following chapter, Mujila's *Tram 83* will be probed as to the literary strategies it devises in addressing the representational challenges posed by structural adjustment in the Global South. It is, of course, notable that the setting of the novel differs quite significantly from the gated hyper-centres of finance and tech-capital visited in DeLillo's and Gibson's work. Equally, it does not fit the emergency discourses dissected in Röggla's *die alarmbereiten*, which are, in fact, underwritten by a distinctly eurocentric perspective on the risks of the world-economy in that they crucially circle around the securitization of an imagined "gebernation" and, thus, an affirmation of the border regimes of global capitalism. By contrast, Mujila's *Tram 83* seems to take us to the so-called "periphery" of the world-system from which the "higher" functions in the global hierarchy of capitalist operations (stock-exchange, the "New Economy," cybernetics, etc.) appear absent. Indeed, the novel's scene of action – a mining frontier with ill-defined borders – initially proves highly localized. Yet, as I want to argue, the text develops a discourse of historicity that cannot be dissociated from a globalized framework. For one thing, it creates proximities to the broader Global South, be it linkages between the Middle Passage and the colonial railway system established in the so-called Scramble for Africa, references to the Non-Aligned Movement, or Chinese-Congolese encounters that act at once as signals of multipolarization and traces of an alliance forged in the decolonial era. On the other hand, Mujila's novelistic debut is concerned with "structural adjustment" in a way that suggests neoliberalism is at its most radical when it operates far off the fabled "Global Cities." The text is, thus, mired in a vocabulary of adjustment whereby it investigates the workings of an economy at the interface of the world-market and the local teleologies of capital. In this, *Tram 83* counteracts the de-historicizing discourses that complement the "end of history" thesis in policy debates on the Congo DRC. The entire novel unfolds as if to undermine the effacement of history encoded in the origin-narrative

that is conjured right at the start – "Au début était la pierre" – so as to oppose it with the *longue durée* of "une ville devenue pays par la force des kalachnikovs."[1]

In a first instance, therefore, I want to give a sense of the novel's setting and, crucially, the cast of characters that populates it. Further, it is important to me to compile some of the key tropes, formal features, and finesses of spatiotemporal representation whereby *Tram 83* unfolds its discourse of historicity and navigates the nexus between the global and the local. As said, the scene of action is a mining town, the generically called "Ville-Pays," that is situated against a large outback antithetically referred to as "Arrière-Pays." Even if the nation serving as literary background remains unnamed in the novel, then, the split political geography traversed throughout the text makes allegorical gestures to the uneasy relationship between the DRC and the province of Katanga, infamous for its vast mineral riches and its short-lived secession from Kinshasa in the wake of the country's independence from Belgium. In this sense, the representation of time and space is inscribed through and through with historical indexes which mark out the multiple crises perturbing the city by situating it at once in a global, national, and continental dynamic. As Kasongo Molenda Kapanga puts it, we are dealing with a "roman-parabole sur fond congolais" that recalls the anti-colonial national liberation movement, the history of (neo-)colonialism, or the Great African War (1998–2003), and reflects upon the dialectical reversals between popular insurrection and civil war in relation to the flourishing of extractionist industries.[2] Taking place in between a decaying railroad station, a complex network of mining galleries, shagged out rented flats, and a bar that gives the novel its name, *Tram 83* introduces readers to the unstable social world of an extraction enclave – a sort of special economic zone – that rises out of the infrastructural ruins of Belgian imperialism, the deadlocks of decolonialization, neoliberal re-adjustment policy and the debris of a global commodity culture.

1 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13, 28.

2 Kasongo Molenda Kapanga. "Derrière l'Immédiateté, Les Points Nodaux dans le Récit Congolais : Deux Générations d'Écrivains." *Francofonia. Studi e Ricerche Sulle Letterature di Lingua Francese* 76. 26–27.

Against this backdrop, the novel tells the story of the struggling novelist Lucien and the disillusioned communist become professional hustler Requiem, whose lives are in one way or another punctuated by the frustration of historical alternatives. The former's biography is, indeed, presented as one of defeat. In the first description of the character, he is introduced as an emaciated silhouette into whose body the waning of the anti-colonial era is materially inscribed: "Lucien en chair et en squelette […]. Qu'une époque passait, qu'une civilisation trépignait."[3] His counterpart, on the other hand, is pictured as the epitome of the cynical subject who deals in ominous commodities (called "ma marchandise" throughout) and entertains a wide web of deceitful relations whereby he mines other people's lives to extort a profit from them: "L'innocence est une lâcheté. Il faut vivre avec son époque, mon frère."[4] Requiem stylizes himself as a veritable entrepreneur of the self that has firmly internalized the systemic violence of his "époque." Taking on an anti-utopian opportunism, he aggressively rejects any historiographic pretences in order to fully commit to the necro-economic urgencies of market exchange: "Il devait livrer une marchandise, *sa vie en dépendait*."[5] In this capacity, interestingly, he acts as a sort of consultancy agent who holds ready an extensive rule of conduct designed to advise his erstwhile comrade to adjust to the "Nouveau Monde" which, in fact, is the explicit content of his "Règle numéro 1."[6] Lucien, in contrast, expresses a reluctance to adapt to this new rules-based order. Instead, he holds on to what he calls "L'Afrique des Possibles" – the title of his would-be "théatre-conte."[7] Displaced to the enterprise zone Ville-Pays, he is thus harshly reminded by Requiem that "Nous ne sommes pas à Moscou"[8] whereby the demise of anti-imperialist internationalism *tout court* is indexed. In this sense, he berates Lucien to leave "les ténèbres de l'histoire" into the post-history of a thoroughly presentist economy of pre-

3 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 17.
4 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 19.
5 Mujila, *Tram 83,* 14 (emphasis added).
6 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 27.
7 Mujila, *Tram 83,* 65.
8 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 27.

mature death: "Ici, on ne veillit pas, on existe tout simplement."[9] By way of the conflict between the free marketeer and the novelist, then, Mujila stages a certain meta-historical sense of revolutionary failure that is embodied in different shapes by these two figures. Whereas Lucien asserts the position of a nostalgic subject that charts history as a continuous disaster ("Je suis titulaire d'un diplôme de licence en histoire. En catastrophe."[10]), Requiem advances a thoroughly presentist ideology that vows to become one with this catastrophic unfolding. This antagonistic relation is the focus of the plot wherein the two increasingly come into conflict with their surroundings. Eventually, Lucien's literary pretensions are rejected by the local population while Requiem's blackmail tactics backfire and a bounty is put on his head. In the end, both flee the city amidst a popular revolt to defend the titular bar against a demolition campaign from above. As such, this escape symbolizes the loss of protagonicity that they fall victim to on the level of narrative form.

At once, then, *Tram 83* is populated by a huge background cast such that occasionally Lucien's and Requiem's misfortunes appear like a sideshow, a story amongst many others, in the busy simultaneity of Ville-Pays. Narrative form is continually marked by disruptions and contingent encounters, be it mining accidents or the sudden initiation of sexual relations – indicated by speech fragments such as "Vous avez l'heure?" or "pourboire" – that again and again interrupt direct dialogue. Albeit, most overwhelmingly, the novel's hectic and cluttered bustle finds itself sedimented in the page-long lists that pile up over the course of the novel:

> Ou musiciens par inadvertance ou prostituées du troisième âge ou prestigiateurs ou pasteurs des églises de réveil ou étudiants aux allures de mécano ou médecins diagnostiquant dans les boîtes de nuit ou jeunes journalistes déjà à la retraite ou travestis ou bradeurs de chaussures de second pied ou amateurs de film porno ou bandits de grand chemin ou proxénètes ou avocats radiés du barreau ou hommes à tout faire ou ex-transsexuels ou danseurs de polka ou pirates de mer ou demandeurs

9 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 19.
10 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 62.

> d'asile politiques ou escrocs de bande organisée ou archéologues ou chasseurs de prime à la manque ou aventuriers des temps modernes ou explorateurs à la recherche d'une civilisation perdue ou vendeurs d'organe ou philosophes de basse-cour ou vendeurs d'eau fraîche à la criée ou coiffeurs ou cireurs ou réparateurs de pièces de rechange ou veuves de militaires ou obsédés sexuels ou férus de romans à l'eau de rose ou rebelles dissidents ou frères en Christ ou druides ou chamans ou vendeurs d'aphrodisiaques ou écrivains public ou vendeurs de vrais faux passeports ou trafiquants d'armes à feu ou portefaix ou brocanteurs ou prospecteurs miniers à court de liquidités ou frères siamois ou mamelouks ou coupeurs des routes ou tirailleurs ou aruspices ou faux-monnayeurs ou militaires en mal de viol ou buveurs de lait frelaté ou boulangers autodidactes ou marabouts ou mercenaires se réclamant de Bob Denard ou alcooliques invétérés ou creuseurs ou miliciens autoproclamés 'maîtres de la terre' ou politiciens 'm'as-tu vu' ou enfants-soldats ou coopérants à bras-le-corps milles projets cauchemardesques de construction de chemin de fer et d'exploitations artisanales de minerais de cuivre et de manganèse ou canetons ou dealers ou aides-serveuses ou livreurs de pizza ou vendeurs d'hormones de croissance, toutes sortes de peuplades envahissent le *Tram 83*, en quête d'un bonheur bon marché.[11]

The titular nightclub, here, functions as a site of "informal overactivity."[12] Indeed, the bar *Tram 83* is invaded by a curious cast of varyingly moneyed "peuplades." Some of the mentioned figures waste their money as adventurous tourists to run after exoticized images of Africa. Others work in the environs of the stonepits by earning their money in the entertainment industry built around the gold rush or trying to enlist disappointed miners into their religious respectively political promises of salvation. In this, *Tram 83* literalizes the metaphorical implications of the so-called shadow economy by making night-time the primary setting of these business transactions but also plot action in general: "la nuit est leur principal fonds de commerce."[13] Most characters, how-

11 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 20–21.
12 Xavier Garnier. "Writings of the Subsoil in the Contemporary Congolese Novel." *Journal of World Literature* 6. 138.
13 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 30.

ever, are in some way or another linked to the mining economy: private militias, corporate attorneys, or the casualized labour force toiling in the mines.

Ville-Pays, hence, is home to a variegated population of "creuseurs" that almost seems to merge with the peculiar human-altered terrain of the city 's mining basin:

> […] les habitants de la Ville-Pays creusaient dans leurs jardins, leurs maisons, au salon, dans les W-C. dans les chambres à coucher et même au cimetière. Toujours au cimetière, parfois, des funérailles se transformaient en festivités après la découverte, au hasard, d'une pierre à teneur considérable. On creusait même à la gare […], surtout de nuit, parfois même avec la complicité du bourgmestre du coin qui piochait aussi dans ses bureaux, s'affairant à fouiller de fond en comble les édifices publics.[14]

From extraction in terms of resource plundering to extractive practices in an expanded sense, there are people digging literal and metaphorical holes to extract a little profit for themselves everywhere throughout the novel. The extractive operations of capital are omnipresent. As noted, this even takes possession of the reading process as the main narrative strand is continuously disrupted, while one eavesdrops – mines data – on dirty secrets, pick-up lines, contract negotiations, or other business transactions. In this vein, the so-called "cycle de la Ville-Pays"[15] is described to be governed by a total commoditizing logic that turns people themselves into mining galleries by extracting value from the biological body from birth to death. Ravaged by gravediggers in a figurative and literal sense, made explicit by the linkage between extraction and funerals, "the infrastructure" of social life "is literally taken apart"[16] with the condonement of local authorities who participate themselves in this curious privatization of public property.

In that sense, then, the background cast of *Tram 83* can be seen to act out the footloose character of labour in the extraction enclave:

14 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 150.
15 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 101.
16 Eli Jelly-Schapiro. "Extractive Modernity at Large." *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 0:0. 16.

> […] on se réintègre dans le cycle de la Ville-Pays, on pèche, on creuse, on fouille, on cueille, on invente, on baise, on transpire, on vend, on échange, on colporte, on abuse, on corrompt, on boit, on chie dans les escaliers, on s'identifie au jazz, on nargue les touristes blancs… Tout se liquide, à chacun d'inventer son système.[17]

Production, exchange, and consumption dissolve into one another: from excessive expenditure ("on baise […], on boit, on chie dans les escaliers, on s'identifie au jazz"), through the diverse facets of subsistence or extractive labour ("on pèche […] on creuse, on fouille, […], on transpire"), to selling, trading, exchanging rumours, and committing fraud ("on vend, on échange, on colporte, on abuse, on corrompt, […], on nargue les tourists blancs"). Echoing Marx's and Engel's quip on the daily cycle of a prospective communist utopia, where everyone is able "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, […] without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic,"[18] the town's propertyless inhabitants – "trimbalant de nombreux mois de non-paiement"[19] – are compelled "d'inventer" their own "système" to extract a living in the pervasive informal economy narrated in the novel. Turned into a peculiar cast of crisis-managers, the city-dwellers, thereby, manifest as a workforce "which precisely through its footloose life" – responding incessantly to tightening cash flows – "proves itself also as abstract."[20] The verb "débrouiller," re-iterated here and again in *Tram 83*, functions as a signal word in that regard, as it does not only encapsulate the fact that "[t]oday it is estimated that less than 5 percent of the Kinois [Kinshasa's population] earn a regular salary,"[21] but takes up what is considered the "unofficial civic slogan"[22] of the city.

17 Mujila, *Tram* 83, 101.
18 Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. "The German Ideology." *Collected Works* Vol. 5. C. Dutt et al (Transl.). London: Lawrence and Wishart; New York: International Publishers; and Moscow: Progress. 47.
19 Mujila, *Tram* 83, 29.
20 Ranabir Samaddar. *Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 109.
21 Michela Wrong. *Living on the Brink of Disaster in the Congo*. London: Harper Collins. 152.
22 Davis, *Planet of the Slums*, 191.

Befitting this aesthetic of footloose labour, now, the novel's setting is traversed by international and internal migratory flows. The story already begins with the flight of Lucien from the backcountry as he seeks refuge in the mining town. More generally, the titular bar is frequented by a whole cast of so-called "touristes" that are either said to have no profit interest ("touristes sans but lucrative") or to pursue lucrative goals ("touristes à but lucratif"), be they diamond merchants, railway agents, Chinese businessmen, or other tradesmen. Mujila, here, satirizes the Belgian term "association sans but lucratif" (a.s.b.l.) by letting the difference between these two types of tourists erode over the course of the novel, making a mockery of the juridical distinction between non-profit and for-profit entities that these designations are derived from. This also counts for the other line-up of expats populating the town, the so-called "rebelles dissidents," political exiles that follow the call of the separatist leader "Général dissident" who simultaneously acts as a large landowner and capitalist that attracts a swelling workforce which seeks its fortunes in the mining business. That is, here, too, it soon becomes clear that political and economic exiles merge into an undifferentiated extractionist army of "creuseurs" befitting the convergent populisms of gold fever and separatism that animate the special economic zone that is Ville-Pays:

> Creuseurs ou rebelles dissident ou touristes à but lucratif ou étudiants, dénominateur commun: la ruée vers l'or qui commençaient à la gare […].[23]

As this quote has it, the novel places the crumbling train station adjacent to the titular bar at the centre of the differentiated mobilities depicted in the novel. The circulation of characters in and through the plot is short-circuited with the disruptive circulation time of the railroad. One need only think of the young academics hurriedly leaving their classrooms to catch one of the irregularly incoming and departing trains:

23 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 139.

> Les cours de l'après-midi étaient perturbés […] par des étudiants qui vidaient les lieux avec leurs cliques et leurs claques car rater ces trains-là c'est pisser dans sa culotte, cher intellectuel.[24]

According to Jacob G. W. Soule, *Tram 83* displays a heightened awareness "of the tropes of the railway as a metaphor for the excessive stimulation of base desires"[25] – most forcefully at work in Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (1890) – as is explicitly expressed in the novel: "À force de grimper sur ces trains de malheur, l'homme devient un animal, ne pense qu'à satisfaire les plaisirs du bas-ventre."[26] Fittingly, Lucien invokes the prospect of a "[l]ittérature-locomotive" as he desperately seeks to reproduce "dans [s]es phrases les souffles de vie qu'ont ces trains-là, les trains d'ici."[27] It would, thus, seem that the novel – similar to what Brooks observes with regard to Zola – thereby "furnish[es] in the core thematic of the railway station the motor power by which the plot moves forward."[28] Yet, there are notable differences to Zola's "mise-en-abyme"[29] of the novel's principle of movement. In *Tram 83*, the train station is evoked as a "construction […] inachevée"[30] that allegorizes the arrested economic development of the city. It does not act as a symbol of industrial progress. Rather, it stands in for a certain postcolonial impasse. In the novel, then, the railway figures less as a narrative motor than a medium of disruption ("nos trains n'ont plus la notion du temps"[31]) that positions the extraction enclave from the start in a fundamentally destabilized temporal order.

As such, it plays a key role in the novel's historical narrative. The unfinished railway system, first, recalls the locomotive as an instrument of territorial expansion that put into practice the colonial mapping of the Congo indicated by the constant reference to the 1884/5

24 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 15.
25 Jacob Guion Wade Soule. *The City Novel after the City: Planetary Metropolis, World Literature*. Ph.D. Duke University. https://hdl.handle.net/10161/20119. 2019 [last accessed 07.07.2022].
26 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 72.
27 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 191.
28 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 45.
29 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 45.
30 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 14.
31 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13.

Berlin Conference that organized the imperialist partition of Africa ("la construction métallique rappelle les années 1885"[32]). Yet, secondly, the incompleteness of the station underlines a neoliberal turn toward privatization, corresponding to a form of imperial domination characterized by extraction and lumpen-development, that finds itself fundamentally reflected in the dismantling of the train station and other public infrastructure. Here, too, the novel provides a more or less precise date ("vers les années 1990"[33]) to situate the kind of "accumulation by dispossession" (i.e., neoliberal privatization) that replaced the developmentalist perspective of early decolonialization. In the novel, this is narrated in terms of an austerity measure that unfolds as a series of progressive expropriations by externalizing the energy costs of the extraction business onto the propertyless population. Enforced by "le chef rebelle de l'époque," the predecessor of the dissident General, these "histoires de délestage" are described as a form of cost transfer that means to ensure the ongoing energy supply of "les usines d'exploitation des minerais chères aux tourists."[34] Driven by the expansive profit interests of the extraction business, the exploitation rate is tightened incrementally "[a]u fil du temps."[35] In a brutal *mise-en-scène* of structural adjustment, electric power is, thus, first cut to four days a week, then the decree is adjusted to two, later one day, until the lower strata are left with merely two hours. As social infrastructures are pushed to the limit, the novel, hence, gives a sense of the de-territorialized, market-based imperialism that has replaced direct colonial rule. It stages an informal economy that takes place amidst the capitalist ruins of premature deindustrialization imposed by neo-colonial debt diplomacy.

Against this backdrop, scarcity and resource conflicts are represented fundamentally as the effect of a politico-economic crisis program realized by the nexus of finance, extraction, and (private) military coercion, which merge in a very literal under-mining of livelihood conditions. Not surprisingly, financial power is less trackable, more anonymous in the novel. Albeit there are subtle absences that leave a trace

32 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 100.
33 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 98.
34 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 98.
35 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 98.

in novelistic representation. In an unintended echo towards DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, the reference to the meltdown of the Tokyo stock exchange ("la bourse de Tokyo est en chute libre"[36]) perhaps catches the eye. Generally speaking, however, financial abstraction is more an indirect presence in *Tram 83* by way of the ravages it gives way to: "toutes ces crises boursières qui défraient la chronique."[37] Interestingly, at one point in *Tram 83* the intractable third-person narrator that pops up here and there in the novel, in fact, proposes to lead back a crucial stylistic feature of the text itself to the collateral damages of crisis:

> Au *Tram 83*, impossible de converser sans être interrompu! Avec la crise et les affrontements qui nous avaient vus nous frotter les uns aux autres, les canetons étaient devenus plus agressifs, exigeants, allant jusqu'à vous tirer par le chemise. "Et nous, qu'est-ce que nous allons manger si vous devez rester dans vos petits coins ?"[38]

The pick-up lines that steadily perforate the narrative speak to this. Circulating in and out of the text without any seeming connection to the plot, these floating sentences are, here, crucially re-inscribed into the realist effort of the novel as they come to materialize the intricacy of the financial and the informal economy on the level of literary form. These dislocated speech fragments do not just have disruptive effects on the novelistic framing of direct speech. Rather, insofar they are shown to mediate the social disruptions triggered by economic crisis, they "serve to redefine the very grounds upon which the scenes of address gain shape in the primary instance."[39] The intrusive flirtation practiced by the sex workers, then, is not only modelled after a competitive logic insofar remarks such as "Vous avez l'heure?" invoke time as a measurable and therefore scarce resource.[40] If these quotations always-already

36 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 22.
37 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 231.
38 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 210.
39 Ato Quayson. "Shakara Baby-Chicks and Locomotive Tales. Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*." *Arcade. Literature, Humanities, & the World*. https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/shakara-baby-chicks-and-locomotive-tales-fiston-mwanza-mujilas-tram-83 [last accessed 07.05.2022].
40 See also Schuller, *Realismus des Kapitals*, 258.

refer back to the imperatives of the market as an absent cause, the text further qualifies the exceptionally meddlesome behaviour displayed by the sex workers as a survival strategy in response to crisis.

By way of such formal features (or tropes such as the train station) that interface the informal economy and the world-market, *Tram 83* narrates the synthesis of structural adjustment with extractionism. Depicting a casualized labour force that inhabits a space at the other end of supply-chains, the novel stages a risk-society on steroids that is in the last instance terraformed by international investment flows and volatile exchange rates. As I will explain in greater detail in the following, this further manifests in an aesthetics of brutal concretion. Capital's rule by abstractions is often represented as a thoroughly violent reality that inscribes itself into the body. Take the biologization of economic re-adjustment that can be observed in the women frequenting the titular bar who are subjected to permanent rejuvenation ("Elles luttaient avec acharnement contre la viellesse"[41]) to maintain market value. In telling the story of a sub-Saharan mining frontier, the text brings forward the structural violence of a rules-based market order as it connects to material forces on the ground.

1 Necro-Aesthetics: The Violence of Abstraction

> In naming objects, it's a world of monsters that the poet brings forth against the indistinct grey of the world.
>
> — Césaire, *Return to my Native Land*, 5.

In historical terms, the forms of political and economic violence represented in *Tram 83* are conveyed most tangibly via the highly stratified, spatial order that serves as its background. Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonial settlement, the social geography of Ville-Pays is thoroughly inscribed with a history of segregation "entre

41 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 23.

la partie européenne et les populations africaines."[42] The entire urban stage of action is haunted by the spatial strategies of imperial occupation roughly dated back to the early 20th century: "Vers les années 1910–1920."[43] Urban space is compartmentalized into the bidonville "Zone Rouge," the gated community "Saint-Athanase" with its population of generally white businessowners, and the middling quarter "Vampires" inhabited by a comprador (petty-)bourgeoisie descending from a caste of colonial administrators and valets.[44] Yet, if in Fanonist terms the colonial world is a "world cut in two,"[45] the postcolonial settlement depicted in *Tram 83* is more fractured. The nomenclature of backwardness encoded in the secession of Ville-Pays from the "inutilement vaste"[46] Arrière-Pays already indicates the reproduction of centre/periphery binaries within sub-Saharan space. The spatial organization of *Tram 83* is marked by a proliferation of subdivisions in every "lieu de socialization"[47] as if to confirm Requiem's credo that in Ville-Pays "les plus puissant écrasent les puissants, les puissants défèquent dans la bouche des faibles, les faibles séquestrent les plus faibles, les plus faibles s'achèvent entre eux, se font voir ailleurs."[48]

As such, the representation of space in *Tram 83* is not only expressive of the "splintering urbanism"[49] that Mbembe deems central to late 20th and early 21st century capitalism in the Global South. In fact, it has a disruptive effect on narrative form. Again and again, Lucien and Requiem are confronted with the sectarian violence of gang-dominated zones that function like worlds upon themselves, often ending up in custody of rivalling militias, which adds to the atmosphere of extreme precarity conjured in the novel. Take the so-called "Mine de l'Espérance"[50] which is separated from the surrounding city by barbed wire. It is noted that

42 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 38.
43 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 38.
44 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 122.
45 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Constance Ferrington (Transl.). New York: Grove Weidenfeld. 39.
46 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 29.
47 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 116.
48 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 45.
49 Achille Mbembe. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15: 1. 28.
50 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 139.

access to this area is restricted by the ruling General depending on the demands of rich "tourists." But it is at once policed by "multiples services de sécurité" which circumvent these state decrees and whose arbitrary violence is contingent on volatile market-mediated "intérêts à l'order du jour."[51] As the monopoly on the use of force, then, is distributed across space, "the symbolics of the *top*" is recreated everywhere anew, giving a sense of the "private indirect government" that acts as a medium for structural adjustment in the postcolonial settlement.[52]

This militarized violence is inscribed in a broader economy of premature death. Occasionally, *Tram 83* embarks on page-filling death-statistics. Here is an excerpt from pp. 101–103:

métiers correspondances décès.	
Mineurs ou creuseurs, cà dépend	Éboulements
	Suicide (pendaison, overdose…)
	Radioactivité
	Drogue ou alcool traditionnel
	Vendetta
	Maladies sexuellement transmissibles
Canetons	Avortement Accouchement
	Viol Pneumonie Séquestration
	Maladies sexuellement transmissibles
[…]	[…][53]

The novel, thus, constructs veritable "literary war bulletins"[54] that fit the narrative de-securitization evoked throughout the novel by the steady risk of cave-ins: every descent into the "Mine de l'Espérance" proves a gamble on the "espérance de vie" (which, as insists Requiem, does not amount to much more than "quarante et un ans, que l'on veuille ou

51 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 140.
52 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 29; Achille Mbembe. *On the Postcolony*. Berkely: University of California Press. 67.
53 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 101–103.
54 Friedrich Engels. "Preface to the 4th German Edition." *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol. I*. Ben Fowkes (Transl.). London: Penguins Books. 120.

non!").[55] Of course, this representation of violence is also given a more personal touch. The aggressive rejection of Lucien's "théâtre-conte" by the audience of the titular nightclub probably stands out, all the more since the brutal call to conform to the consumer tastes of the bargoers is strangely perpetuated by the inhospitable terrain of the town's hollowed-out public infrastructure: "Sang, bave, larmes, sûrement qu'il venait d'égarer ses jambes en tentant de s'agripper à un train de marchandise! On continua à le molester, à le trimbaler sur les rails."[56] Truly, the use of force is a ubiquitous presence in the novel, be it on the level of "subjective" or "systemic violence."[57]

As the representation of violence, then, coincides with a certain violence of representation, the extractive economy is thoroughly associated with death. The concrete mention of labour in the pits always seems to end up in the narration of a mining disaster. As Requiem exclaims "la même intrigue dès qu'on arrive au monde":

> Tu débutes caneton ou biscotte ou enfant-soldat. Tu passes étudiant en grève sans bout du tunnel ou tête brûlée… Si tu as de la famille dans les trains, tu travailles dans les trains ou sinon, tel un navire, tu échoues au bord de l'espérance, suicidaire, coupeur de route, creuseur aux dents sales, mécanicien, dormeur public, commissionnaire, garçon de courses des touristes à but lucratif, vendeur à la criée de cercueils de seconde main… Le destin vous est déjà scellé, le parcours tracé d'avance… Destin scellé comme celui des locomotives transportant des moribonds et des marchandises avariées.[58]

There is no sense of future in the cyclical view of time elaborated by Requiem. The image of history that is drawn is one of neo-colonial per-

55 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 101.
56 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 87.
57 Slavoj Žižek. *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador. 1–2. This distinction is taken from Žižek who argues "that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence […] is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent."
58 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 116.

enniality: the displaced of the "civilisation du chemin de fer"[59] appear as the revenants of the colonial atrocities of earlier centuries. This image is sutured by the evocation of a second-hand trade in coffins which adds to the de-historicized description of the postcolonial situation as the eternal return of the same. The novel is, thus, permeated by a sense of horror at the seeming inevitability of servitude that this "protracted splattering of human bodies"[60] indicates. There is a peculiar "dialectic of death and realism"[61] at work in *Tram 83* in that the showcasing of excessive violence cannot be played off against the inconspicuousness of market power. Rather, the violence of abstractions only comes to the fore in the violent outbursts that punctuate the novel.

That said, *Tram 83* does play quite openly with the trope of the living dead. Take the case of Boubacar who makes a short anecdotal appearance in the novel. Nicknamed "Lazare" (after the biblical figure from the *Gospel of John* raised from the dead by Jesus), he is said to have survived eight cave-ins which forced him to literally feast on the corpses around him to avoid starvation.[62] Again and again, characters mutilated by the extractive economy are, hence, described as "mort vivant," "revenant," "un zombie."[63] The mining galleries are filled with exhausted subjects whose predicament is narrated in terms of undeadness: "La journée, ils erraient tels des zombies dans les concessions minières."[64] There is also the recurring image of vampirism underlined by naming one of the central quarters "Les Vampires."[65] In any case, the novelistic setting is made the site of "Gothic invasions"[66] to put it in the words of Aimé Césaire. The extractive impulses pervading the text are crucially rendered in a necromantic metaphorical register that recodes the informal proletariat of Ville-Pays in terms similar to the "working dead" already encountered throughout this study.

59 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 39.
60 Steve, *Splatter Capital*, 45.
61 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 238.
62 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 78ff.
63 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 117.
64 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 20.
65 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 37.
66 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 41.

Tram 83, thereby, returns the zombie trope to the image of the labouring undead prevalent in the cultural history of Haiti, where the *zombi* initially emerged as a distorted account of colonial exploitation and the brutal reification of the black body in the Atlantic slave trade.[67] In this, Mujila takes up a re-appropriation of the zombie metaphor that can be observed more commonly in the sub-Saharan popular culture of the last decades, where the association of zombiism with mindless consumption dominant in Hollywood horror is reworked in ways that are rather reminiscent of "the African diasporic experience."[68] *Tram 83* is not a lone case in current Congolese literature in this regard. A similar association of extraction with undeadness can, for instance, be found in Sinzo Aanza's *Généalogie d'une Banalité* (2015) where the inhabitants of a mining quarter are described to surge from the earth ("surgissaient alors de la terre") – invoking biblical images of the resurrection of the dead ("'ambiance biblique de la resurrection des morts") – in a sort of "dépression collective."[69] In any case, by recentring the maltreated bodies of "the unseen labourers of a global imperial economic order,"[70] the usage of the zombie metaphoric in *Tram 83* uncovers the critique of exploitation that pertained to the imagery of the walking dead roaming the Haitian plantations. Albeit that is not to say that the trope does not undergo any changes in this movement across centuries. According to David McNally, the recent recurrence of zombie imagery in urban folktales and Nollywood's horror industry, in fact, carries a certain "*defetishising* charge" that verbalizes "a thoroughgoing mistrust of the claim […] of the so-called information economy, that we have transcended the economics of materiality."[71] According to his interpretation, these supernatural stories are subliminally "driven by a materialist impulse to search out the site where the labouring bodies are at risk."[72]

67 Cf. McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 211ff.
68 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 210.
69 Sinzo Aanza. *Généalogie d'une Banalité*. Forts-de-France/Paris: Vents d'Ailleurs. 165.
70 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 211.
71 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 201.
72 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 201. See also Davis, *Planet of the Slums*, 194. In this, he disagrees with Mike Davis who relates these expressions of urban folklore back to changes in material conditions. Tracing the devastation of the DRC's economy by the alliance of Mobutu's kleptocratic regime and the shock doctrines of structural adjustment, Davis

In McNally's reading, however, it is the literary engagement with these monstrous aesthetics that really unfolds their critical potential. His case in point is Ben Okri's *Famished Road* cycle (1991–1998) which he perceives to negotiate popular folklore in two combined operations. For one, Okri "dissolves folklore into the space of history"[73] by marking these idioms as situated responses to a particular experiential horizon. Building on this, the horror tropes found in urban argot are remodelled as "strategies of de-familiarization" that undercut the fantasies of dematerialization in dominant financial thought.[74] Urban marketplaces appear as bizarre locales filled with "[s]pirits and other beings" that also come to "buy and sell,"[75] that is, participate in the occult procedure of commodity exchange. Likewise, the process of enrichment goes hand in hand with strange physical disfigurations and personality changes such as in the case of Madame Koto, a key figure in *The Famished Road*, who is described to become "in the collective eyes of the people, a fabulous and monstrous creation" the wealthier she gets: "People came to believe that Madame Koto had exceeded herself in witchcraft."[76] Capitalist accumulation is thereby narrated in and through bewildering images of transmogrification that try to come to terms with the strangeness of it all. "By enlisting these witchcraft-idioms in the service of a radical aesthetics," Okri crafts a "dialectical optics that estranges the modes of perception and cognition associated with commodified life"[77] and concretizes capitalist abstractions in monstrous terms.

There are, now, some apparent analogies and maybe even outright allusions to *Famished Road* in *Tram 83*: Okri's book cycle, albeit making some gestures towards Nigeria, takes place in a country that is never named as such, while the first sentence in Mujila's novel ("Au début était

observes that the populations of the Congo's urban areas have responded to the dismantling of social infrastructure by re-establishing forms of rural self-help and subsistence farming to cope with premature deindustrialization. This, he claims, has coincided with the elaboration of new cultic practices that produce "a reenchantment of [this] catastrophic modernity," befitting a historical context in which politics has been utterly discredited.

73 McNally, *Monsters of the Market,* 250.

74 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 250.

75 Ben Okri. *Famished Road*. London: Vintage Book. 15–16.

76 Okri, *Famished Road*, 374.

77 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 250.

la pierre") echoes the beginning of Okri's magnus opus ("In the beginning there was a river"). But above all the similarities are to be found in literary form. Mujila's writing, too, is "born at the intersection of many languages,"[78] unsettling all-too easy divisions between gothic and realistic representation by dissolving these mythologizing discourses into a highly historicized time-space. In depicting Ville-Pays as an economy dealing in death, the novel, for instance, takes up a discourse that is prevalent among the inhabitants of Kinshasa according to Thierry Mayambe Nlandu, namely the perception of the city as a "*cadavre*," often expressed via the pun "*Kin-la-poubelle*" which distorts the wordplay "*Kin-la-belle*" that once served as a moniker for the capital of the DRC.[79] But the recurrent theme of death, equally, draws from contemporary theoretical discourses, among which Mbembe's notion of "necropower" perhaps stands out since it does, indeed, suggest that neo-colonial "*deathworlds*" confer onto subjugated populations "a status of *living dead*"[80] and, thus, forwards a certain secularization of the zombie trope by means of political theory. Against this backdrop, *Tram 83* can be said to rework idioms of urban horror just like the thanatological discourses popular in today's Humanities into devices of de-familiarization to bring forward the unity of accumulation and destruction in the political economy of Ville-Pays. In trying to come to terms with the realities of postcolonial adjustment, the novel elaborates a necro-aesthetic that oscillates between capital's rule by abstractions and the terrible concreteness of the extractive operations proliferating in the novel.

What is interesting, now, is that this work of estrangement also takes place on more minuscule linguistic levels. Here, Mujila's writing displays some proximities to Röggla's "Spracharbeit." *Tram 83* nestles in

78 Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Helene Iswolsky (Transl.). Bloomington: India University Press. 471.

79 Thierry Mayamba Nlandu. "Kinshasa: Beyond Dichotomies." *African News Bulletin* 347. 2. See also Sarah L. Lincoln. *Expensive Shit: Aesthetics Economies of Waste in Postcolonial Africa*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Duke University 3–4. If one follows Lincoln, two common topoi of African Literature come together in this pun: first, that of shit as a mode of political critique and, second, that of waste which ranges from notions of Africa as the "dumping ground" of the world to the critical figuration of Africa/Africans as waste product(s) of globalization.

80 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 40.

the gaps of Belgian/French language to probe whether it can "bear the burden"[81] of the strange experience of postcolonialism. The quip on the juridical category of the "association sans but lucratif" has already been noted. But I shall try to illustrate this with an example that could easily be overseen yet condenses the literary stratagems traced so far by pushing an already idiosyncratic saying into a metaphorical register that synthesises historical realism with a horror aesthetic:

> Pour remettre le train sur les rails, la Communauté internationale avait soutenu les dix-neuf conférences nationales souveraines qui avaient *accouché d'une chauve-souris*.[82]

Referring to the peace talks after Katanga's secession from the DRC, the quote reworks a French expression – "accoucher d'une souris" – supposed to articulate a grossly disappointing outcome to a process initially invested with many hopes. Albeit the saying goes back to a fable by Jean de la Fontaine where the labour pains of a mountain raise the image of a gigantic city being born. Eventually, however, the rock mass only delivers a small mouse:

> Une montagne en mal d'enfant / Jetait une clameur si haute / Que chacun, au bruit accourant, / Crut qu'elle accoucherait sans faute / D'une cité plus grosse que Paris. / Elle accoucha d'une souris.[83]

In a sense, this returns us to the bible quote opening the novel. The mineral riches out of which Ville-Pays supposedly emerged, ultimately, give birth to what is seen as an aberration of a nation. But by stretching the existing figure of speech even further, the genesis of the extraction enclave is represented in the image of one of the gothic creatures *par excellence*, as if to suggest the special economic zone bore a certain resemblance to these winged blood-suckers. Twisting the vernacular of

81 James Baldwin, Quoted in Chinua Achebe. "English and the African Writer." *Transition* 75/76. 349.
82 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 28 (emphasis added).
83 Jean de La Fontaine. 1668/2003. "La Montagne qui accouche." *Fables*. Paris: Hachette. 153–154.

imperialist Belgium/France so as to squeeze out the sense that "something not-quite-real is at work within global capitalism,"[84] Mujila compiles a necro-aesthetic language through which to read the extractive operations of capital which "will not let go while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited."[85] *Tram 83,* hence, makes the violence of capitalist abstractions painstakingly clear, while not making the economic character of violence disappear behind the horrifying depiction of this protracted mutilation. Tapping into the gothic insinuations of the imaginary of extraction, that is, the novel encodes an elemental terror at the persistence of neo-colonial relations. In this, though, the obscene display of violence itself is crucial. Be it the violence of private militias or mining accidents: splatter is the message.[86] It literalizes the extreme precarity of living conditions and the injunction to become human capital which takes on a morbid meaning in the shadow economy of the extraction enclave. The novel constructs a poetics of capitalist concretion that redoubles the mute compulsions of economic relations in a "dialectic of 'real' and structural violence."[87]

2 "pour des horizons inconnus…": Narrating the Global Congo

In that vein, *Tram 83* proposes to think the extraction enclave "à partir du lieu morbide," whereby the novel responds, in a sense, to Patrice Nganang's call for a "roman du détritus" of the 21st century formulated

84 McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 21.
85 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 915.
86 Cf. Mark Steve. *Splatter Capital*. London: Repeater Books. 14.
87 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* 240. Toscano/Kinkle's case in point here is the 2010 movie *Dream Home* by Pang Ho-Cheung, which juxtaposes a social realist account of Hongkong's real estate market and the existential anxieties of the city's lower-middle class with elements of gory splatter. However, she does so not in an irrational outburst of violence but for cold calculated reasons, speculating that the mass murder might de-gentrify the place and, thus, depress the price for the flat that she can no longer afford. The authors call this a form of "property horror" that draws its sense of aesthetic terror precisely from "the social structure of ownership."

in his 2007 *Manifeste d'une nouvelle Littérature Africaine*.[88] The violent concretion of capitalist abstractions in the novel's necro-aesthetics navigates "the seemingly incongruous conjunction of 'abstract' and 'scarring' modes of capitalisation."[89] In this, the novel stages the confrontation between aesthetic styles of various provenance. It takes up tropes from Franco-African literature such as the bar as microcosm or the ubiquity of scatological body imagery.[90] Also, as we have seen, *Tram 83* reworks idioms of zombiism and vampirism that are a relatively new addition to sub-Saharan popular culture according to the anthropologist Luise White.[91] At once, the kind of language-work[92] marking Mujila's writing participates in a multi-lingual Austrian literary field.[93] Against this backdrop, the excessive enumerations, the necro-aesthetic imagery, the lascivious language games, and macabre wheeling and dealing charted across the text do not mark the other of realism. Rather, these engage

88 Patrice Nganang. *Manifeste D'Une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine.* Paris: Éditions Homnisphères. 263.

89 WReC: *Combined and Uneven Development. Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 70.

90 Cf. Quayson, "Shakara Baby-Chicks and Locomotive Tales" Online. Here, Alain Mabanckou's 2005 *Verre Cassé*, where narration takes place around the riotous history of a shabby bistro with the telling name "Le Crédit a Voyagé," is only the most obvious point of reference.

91 Luise White. *Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 29, 197–98.

92 Filip Noubel. "A Literary Landscape in Flux." *Global Voices*. https://globalvoices.org/2021/11/12/a-literary-landscape-in-flux-fiston-mwanza-mujilas-take-on-congolese-and-diasporic-literature/ [last accessed 10.08.2023]. Mujila himself argues that: "Un écrivain a comme outil principal la langue. Quand je me suis installé dans la Mitteleuropa, je me devais pour survivre comme auteur non seulement d'apprendre la langue allemande mais d'échafauder une généalogie littéraire. J'écris en français et en allemand mais ce dernier prend souvent le dessus. Je suis habitué à parler de littérature dans cette langue. Quand je suis en France, on me définit comme écrivain autrichien. À Vienne on m'identifie comme écrivain de Graz, et en Allemagne comme écrivain autrichien. Au Congo on m'identifie comme écrivain congolais mais vivant en Autriche. Mon identité est polyphonique et mouvante. […]. Graz et Lubumbashi sont mes points de ralliement et d'observation, lieux à partir desquels j'élabore mon discours. […]. En Autriche, je me considère comme congolais, africain ou encore écrivain black autrichien, parce qu'être écrivain noir en Autriche n'est pas la même chose qu'être noir en France ou en Belgique. Je respecte ceux qui utilisent le terme d'Afropéen, mais chacun peut se définir à sa manière. L'Europe est grande, je préfère donc me référer aux termes d'Afrofrançais, Afrobelge, Afroautrichien pour mieux contextualiser."

93 Wiebke Sievers. "From Monolingualism to Multilingualism? The Pre- and Post-monolingual Condition in the Austrian Literary Field." *Austrian Studies* 26. 53. In 2009 Mujila became Graz's first writer-in-residence ("Stadtschreiber") from the African continent.

in a subcutaneous production of referentiality. Despite its parabolic gestures, then, *Tram 83* resists an all-too easy indexification as a "national allegory"[94] that would narrow down the scope of the text to a Congolese literary canon in development which merely emulates the trajectory of allegedly more mature Euro-American traditions. Instead, it challenges the "border regime"[95] erected by the proverbial "World Republic of Letters" with its inbuilt eurocentrism and methodological nationalism. The

94 Aijaz Ahmad. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso. 96, 102; Neil Lazarus. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 104; Fredric Jameson. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15. 69; Edwin Nasr. "Misery in Hindsight: On Nadine Labaki's Capernaum." *Jadaliyya*. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38447 [last accessed 01.06.2022]. Jameson's 1986 essay *Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* has received numerous criticisms, among which the Marxist literary critic Aijaz Ahmad probably stands out, who famously contested Jameson's argument for homogenizing the literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in terms of a "civilizational Other" determined by the "singular 'experience of colonialism and imperialism,'" as if "suspended outside" any future historical development. On the other hand, Neil Lazarus proposes to read Jameson's article as if he "ventriloquis[ed] [a] putative 'first-world' reader." That is, the text could be understood to stress exactly the issue of allegorization in the context of postcolonial nation-building, insofar it problematizes a dominant pattern of aesthetic reception that consists in the assumption that whatever the specific content and/or form of an artwork, it is made to speak for the nascent country as a whole. Edwin Nasr's succinct re-formulation of Jameson's argument regarding the contemporary film industry can prove helpful to substantiate this take on the matter. Nasr notes that cultural production in postcolonial states is permeated by a "tension" between, on the one hand, "compliance to an aesthetic regime of representation (imposed by festival and distribution circuits)," and, on the other hand, the desire to export a favourable "image" of a supposed national culture. Thus, he observes, for instance, an increasing hostility in Indian cultural policy toward the cinematic representation of slum life, up to the point that there are calls to censor "depictions of 'abject' poverty," as these contradict the branding of India as an upstarting middle-class economy. The other way around, as is for example the case with the 2018 Lebanese movie *Capernaum* (where a young boy sues his parents for birthing him), the voyeuristic display of poverty is encouraged as long as the structural-historical conditions that enable immiseration are avoided (e.g. by echoing "NGO discourses on 'cultures of poverty' and the necessity of fertility-reducing programs"), whereby "a cinematic possibility for international foreign aid to represent itself" is produced. In Nasr's rereading, then, the problem of national allegory emerges as a general mechanism of the global culture industry. There is no similar attention to the imagined community of the nation in the reception of aesthetic commodities from the U.S. or Western Europe. In one way or another, it seems that cultural production in postcolonial contexts is exposed to competing regulative ideals, be these concerned with nation-branding or humanitarian interventionism, that try to promote certain trademarked "images" of the nation on global markets.

95 Aamir Mufti. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 9, 33ff.

novel demands different topo-interpretive units. Indeed, *Tram 83* can be considered a case of what Wlad Godzich termed "emergent literatures," as it does not fit (into) the taxonomies of the prevalent literary paradigms but rather calls for their transformation.[96]

That said, one might, now, refer back to the notion of a "peripheral realism" elaborated by the Warwick Research Collective. This seems all the more plausible since the concept aims to conceptualize aesthetic patterns that involuntarily or not register the interlinkage of "fictitious capital, the most virtual or immaterial form of capitalisation, and primitive accumulation, the most bloody and material."[97] From this ensues a particular interest in "sites of combined development, where historically non-homogenous and symbolic forms" are supposed to coexist, giving way to a textual production "whose geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state but a broader entity."[98] Against this

96 Wlad Godzich. "Emergent Literatures and the Field of Comparative Literature." *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noaekes (Eds.). Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. 35. See also. Robert Stockhammer. *Afrikanische Philologie*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag. 197; Stockhammer, "Welt- oder Erdliteratur?" 146–147, 139, 137. Against this background, it is paramount to point out that what trades under the header of something like "world literature" is itself riddled with gaps and hidden violences, as explains Stockhammer, who points to the faulty synonymization of "Welt" and "Earth" encountered throughout the vast theoretical corpus on the matter that has emerged since the 1990s. In Goethe's coinage, in fact, the world of "Weltliteratur" is consistently smaller than the earth, in a way that recalls Hegel's limitation of "Weltgeschichte" to Europe, North Africa, and some parts of Asia. The rest of the planet, by contrast, is excluded from his philosophy of history – not because he is ignorant of the existence of these regions but since he does not rank them as part of the "world." One might add that the Three Worlds Theory forwarded first by Alfred Sauvy in his 1952 article *Trois Mondes, Une Planète*, still attests to this constitutive small-sizedness of the world vis-à-vis the planet Earth, this time around however with an anti-imperialist intent.

97 Cf. WReC: *Combined and Uneven Development. Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 70.

98 Franco Moretti. *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Marquez*. Quintin Hoare (Transl.). London/New York: Verso. 50. See also Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 405; WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development,* 62. The WReC takes its cues from Moretti's *Modern Epic* (1996), albeit Jameson provided the blueprint for the hermeneutic optics of a peripheral realism in his remarks concerning the peculiar case of Enlightenment Scotland, which he provocatively situates as the "last of the emergent First World countries" and the "first of the Third World ones." Marked by the paradoxical simultaneity of an incipient industrialization, the integration into an imperialist commercial system, and the clan economy of the Highlanders, he, in fact, attests to the Scottish lands a "strategic yet ec-centric position" that provided a crucial context for Adam Smith's pio-

backdrop, then, the WReC intervenes into the ongoing debate between modernism and realism by arguing that realist representation in the context of the so-called periphery does not confine to the binaries structuring this schism.[99] That is, the challenge "to convey the palimpsestic combinatory and contradictory 'order' of peripheral existence" often coincides with a clash of aesthetic forms wherein the meaning of realism is reworked.[100] In this sense, well-worn clichés must be undone since the "technical devices conventionally associated with modernism" – such as "digressions, restlessly shifting viewpoints, subversions of conventional causality, chronological disjunction, recursiveness" – do more than construct "autotelic" literary forms.[101] Rather, they are deployed under the compulsion to explore new ways for representation in response to the rapid and violent changes wrought by the incorporation of liminal territories into the world-market.

In the background of these reflections, however, we find a notion of "non-synchronicity" that goes back to Ernst Bloch's account of the persistence of (semi-)feudal social structures and corresponding cultural holdovers within interwar Europe: there are "[t]imes older than

neering into classical economics and Walter Scott's conception of the historical novel alike: positioned at "a certain strategic distance" from the enforcement of capitalist production and markets as a total social fact, these authors, according to Jameson, were situated in a historical conjuncture that enabled them to articulate "new paradigm[s]" for a "new reality," which tended to elude those completely "immersed in it" in the capitalist heartland of England. This is not to say, that the so-called "core" is not itself traversed by processes of peripheralization, yet these divisions remain "more deeply concealed […] beneath the second nature of spectacle."

99 See also Fredric Jameson. *The Modernist Papers*. London and New York: Verso. 165–167. Counter to tradition (especially, too, Marxist orthodoxy), Jameson proposes to read a novel like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in terms of a radical transformation of "the modernist formal project" in response to the peculiar position of Ireland in the British Empire. In this sense, he makes the "pastiche of styles" reproduced throughout Joyce's Dublin epic legible as "an enumeration of […] the styles of the imperial occupying armies," such that the novel's "essential linguisticality" appears underwritten by an inadvertent realist impulse. It encodes the splits traversing the semi-colonial space of Dublin. Similarly, the WReC envisages Gabriel García Márquez' *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967) as a narrative marked by the multi-generational shock-experience of the integration of an isolated village into the world economy.

100 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 72.

101 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 54–55.

the present [that] continue to effect older strata,"[102] that is, capitalist modernity is traversed by non-capitalist outsides that engender desires and (aesthetic) ideologies incongruous with the advance of industrial capital and expanding market relations. By contrast, someone like Nganang firmly insists that the contemporary African literary field cannot be explained in the terms of non-synchronicity and expresses the demand for a fundamental "changement épistémologique."[103] In this sense, the Cameroonian-American writer forwards a trenchant critique of ahistorical visions of the so-called periphery that would still construe African societies according to the coexistence of temporalities that belong to different historical stages of human civilization. His explicit object of critique, in this regard, is what he considers a certain "idéologie villagiste"[104] that mystifies the uneven spatial regime of globalization in an essentialist aesthetics of difference. In this vein, Nganang proposes to historicize past anti-colonial literature in contrast to the post-independence literature of today. Whereas the former tends to postulate "le lieu villageois" as a site of withdrawal and seeks out (seemingly) pre-capitalist residues as vestiges of anti-colonial militancy, the latter dwells in the experience of atomization, differentiation, and power made in the city, which he considers the decisive site of subjectification in contemporary African societies. The epistemological challenge for literature that he, thus, identifies is the experiential horizon of the fundamentally polyglot megacities sprawling on the continent. If he considers, then, writing "à propose de l'Afrique"[105] an inescapable

102 Ernst Bloch. "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics." *New German Critique* 11. Mark Ritter (Transl.). 23.

103 Nganang, *Manifeste,* 263. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty. 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 9. One can, here, also think of Chakrabarty's invective against positing Europe as the telos of modernity. Indeed, Chakrabarty argues that the notion of "asynchronicity" recodes the unevenness produced by capitalist globalization as a gradation between non-contemporaneous stages of history.

104 Nganang, *Manifeste*, 261, 41–45. It is important that Nganang's reading here comes specifically from his assessment of the Rwandan genocide which he links to "la pensée identitaire" that motivated the pogroms. He articulates a fundamental critique of recent dissident literature in that he reprimands it for considering the massacre as an exceptional event instead of reading it as symptomatic of contemporary relations of violence on the continent.

105 Nganang, *Manifeste*, 259.

predicament, he does not argue for the return to an imagined autochthon African identity. Quite the opposite, Nganang holds that in turning to the urban spaces that make up contemporary African societies, literary writing will be confronted with cities that do not lag behind but are at the forefront of contemporary processes of globalization. The urban, hence, is not only found to establish the contemporariness of African life.[106] The "ville africaine" is, in fact, viewed to condense the experience of neoliberal deregulation and the chaotic complexity of the global condition.[107] Nganang's *Manifeste*, thus, turns the tables around by attributing a "pre-emptive" quality to African cities that literature must live up to (not least so as to intervene pre-emptively into violence's enabling conditions).

It is, now, difficult to precisely situate Mujila's *Tram 83* vis-à-vis these diverging theoretical attempts at disarticulating the identitarian enclosures of world literature. One cannot dismiss that *Tram 83* plays with a certain "aesthetics of peripherality."[108] The novel is fundamentally about the "minerais de sang" extracted by the enclave's wretched "creuseurs" and the export of these bloody commodities to the rest of the world: "Cauchemar 1, une locomotive plaine à craquer de minerais quittant dans un vrombissement infernal le quai 18 pour des horizons inconnus…"[109] However, the text does not tell a story of incorporation into capitalism. There is nothing anachronistic about the nexus "sexe-coltan"[110] narrated in the novel. It is rather portrayed as a primary resource economy that is specific to the present capitalist moment. As such, it is positioned in a *longue durée* of extractionist practices not in some kind of "waiting-room"[111] of history. More than reconstructing the literary scene of action along an aesthetics of non-synchronicity that would assume the coexistence within the same epoch of segments

106 Nganang, *Manifeste*, 262.
107 Nganang, *Manifeste*, 262–264.
108 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development,* 57. It must be noted, though, that the WReC critique Moretti's rather unilateral research optics that blend out the multi-directional exchange between metropoles and peripheries, as if there were a more or less one-way export of aesthetic styles from core to margin.
109 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 19, 144.
110 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 38
111 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 9.

which belong to different stages, *Tram 83* foregrounds the epistemic challenge posed by the interface of neoliberal and postcolonial capitalism all while interrogating the mystification of this relation. In this, then, the novel comes to reflect on capitalist globalization from the standpoint of extraction in sub-Saharan Africa: neoliberal (crisis) discourses are refracted via (recent) Congolese history. But this literary circumnavigation of the Congo's globality does not iron out the very real and violent mechanisms of peripheralization that have historically been involved in the making of the world-market. If, in fact, the impact of colonialism is largely absent from Nganang's *Manifeste* – there is a curious jump in his elaboration from the time of slavery to the "tragedy" of post-colonial dictatorship[112] – then *Tram 83* narrativizes the persistent impact of imperialism as the decisive historical fact in the construction of the extractivist paradigm reigning in the contemporary DRC. In that sense, Mujila's literature of the detritus is more firmly postcolonial, if that signifier (without a hyphen) does not just designate a period that chronologically follows colonialism but indicates its ongoing repercussion in the ex-colonies.[113] That way, the dialectic between centre and periphery (so central to dependency theories and world-systems analyses in the backwater of anti-imperialist critique) is not so much abolished in his work than subjected to a nuanced representation that explores the impasses written into this binary. In scouting the global incursions of the Congo, *Tram 83* is far from writing out the significance of place. Instead, the extraction enclave is constructed as a multi-layered historical sensorium for the moving contradictions of globalization, whereby the novel lends critical legibility to the temporalizing and spatializing logic of contemporary capitalism.

Something similar can also be observed in Mujila's other work in which again and again the DRC is considered a laboratory for neoliberal adjustment policies. Consider the self-described elegy *Kongolesische Messe*, written on the occasion of the 2017 *documenta*, that addresses

112 Cf. Christopher L. Millers. "Review: *Manifeste d'une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine*. By Patrice Nganang" *Research in African Literatures* 40:1. 173. Millers notes that the tragic is Nganang's key concept in the manifesto.

113 Cf. Bill Ashcroft. 1996. "On the Hyphen in Post-Colonial." *New Literatures Review* 32. 23–32.

the mechanization of an extractive workforce labouring interminably in the service of debt recovery plans: "Tag für Tag dieselbe Geste […] graben, denn deine Glieder müssen zerschlagen / werden / […] damit du teilnehmen kannst am Lauf der Welt."[114] But also consider the 2021 short story *The Lumumba Business* which confronts the conflicted legacy of the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the realities of a contemporary mining business totally subjugated to the volatilities of global copper price markets. In this, the text links financial value to the ups and downs of job markets in a way that is necro-economic through and through, as market-driven mass layoffs are shown to trigger a brutal wave of suicides: "So, as the ores go, we go."[115] Here, then, the collapse of the future is investigated from a postcolonial perspective that addresses the fundamental entwinement of monetary governance with processes of vulnerabilization. That said, it is *Tram 83* which nonetheless forwards the most thorough take on these matters in aesthetic and narrative-formal regards and as such acts as a template for his later literary engagements.

In any case, however, Mujila marks one of the foremost representatives of a newer literary generation[116] from the DRC that is acutely concerned with what Silvia Riva calls the "Global Congo,"[117] that is, the consideration of the Congo as a place that complicates totalizing dichot-

114 Cornelia Wilß. "Weltwortreisender. Der Autor Fiston Mwanza Mujila." *Faust Kultur*. https://faustkultur.de/literatur-portraets/weltwortreisender/ [last accessed 22.05.2022].
115 Fiston Mwanza Mujila. "The Lumumba Business." *The American Way: Stories of Invasion*. Orsola Casagrande and Ra Page (Eds.). Manchester: Comma Press. 52.
116 Kapanga, "Récit Congolais," 16. Kapanga distinguishes three larger periods in the modern history of Congolese literature, starting with the colonial epoch from 1885–1960 (e.g., Lomami Tchibamba, Antoine-Roger Bolamba), followed by the short Lumumbist period and the era of Mobutu's Zairean regime from 1960–1997 (e.g., Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Georges Ngal, Ngandu Nkashama, etc.), and finally the ongoing sequence of crises and permawar that roughly took hold around 1998 (e.g., Mujila, Sinzo Aanza, Koli Jean Bofane, José Tshisungu, Blaise Ndala).
117 Cf. Silvia Riva. "Global Congo. Politiques et esthétiques d'une littérature (et d'une critique) mondiale." *Continents Manuscrits 15 (Global Congo)*. http://journals.openedition.org/coma/5572 [last accessed 29.07.2022]. See also Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, Francesca Orsini. "Significant Geographies: In lieu of World Literature." *Journal of World Literature* 3. 290–310. Riva, here, takes up the concept of "significant geographies" to work out those historical, socio-economic, and cultural coordinates that matter for a given literary program irrespective of the centre/periphery binaries structuring dominant reception paradigms.

omies insofar it is at once at the core and at the margin of the capitalist world-system. This, of course, concerns the integration of the country's mining industry into transnational economic networks. It also concerns, however, the rich yet often overlooked cultural linkages that the DRC has entertained with the rest of the Global South – especially in the early days of independence – and that authors like Mujila, as part of the collective *Libr'écrire* from Lubumbashi initiated by the Haitian writer Jean André Constant, try to incorporate into their writing (more on this later in subchpt. 6).[118] But nonetheless Riva stresses the violence that is crucially written into these processes of "internationalization" which are "so intrinsic to Congolese history."[119] Next to Mujila, one of her key cases in point, in this regard, is Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament*, which via its subtitle links "today's corporatization" of the country's mineral riches to the Berlin Conference of 1884/5. In this, the novel develops a perspective on globalization that could be summarized with an iconic remark by Jennifer Wenzel, who noted that "[i]f the Congo did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it."[120] From the industrial to the digital revolution: the exploitation of the Congo's resources (be it the rubber harvested under Belgian colonialism, or the mining of copper, coltan, tantalite, and uranium) has been essential to successive phases of world-market expansion.[121] In a great reversal of policy discourses, the country is represented as the very condition of capitalism's historical dynamic.

Fittingly, Bofane carries these queries over into an investigation of today's Congolese economy as a "laboratoire du futur"[122] that does not only suggest the invisible participation of the country in global value-chains, but a certain becoming-Congo-Inc. of the world, as the social crises wrought in the historical peripheries of global capitalism

118 See also Nicolas Martin-Granel. "D'une rive l'autre: Question de Génétique et Poétique." *Continents Manuscripts* 11. http://journals.openedition.org/coma/6277 [last accessed 07.06.2022].

119 Silvia Riva. "Congolese Literature as Part of Planetary Literature." *Journal of World Literature* 6. 220.

120 Jennifer Wenzel. "Remembering the Past's Future. Anti-Imperialist Nostalgia and Some Versions of the Third World." *Cultural Critique* 62. 1.

121 Koli Jean Bofane. *Congo Inc. Le Testament de Bismarck*. Arles : Actes Sud. 271ff.

122 Bofane, *Congo Inc*, 289.

fold in on the imperialist cores. In fact, throughout the novel, the placement of the DRC in international commodity-chains is rendered in the cybernetic terms of an "algorithme" that inscribes the economy with a tendency toward war: "l'algorithme demeura brûlant," expanding further and further into all parts of the global economy "quelque part entre Washington, Londres, Bruxelles et Kigali."[123] Intriguingly, in this, the novel is among a series of more recent literary attempts that process the new itineraries between China and the Congo as a central theme.[124] That is, Bofane assesses the patterns of a multipolarizing world-system caught in a new bloc confrontation between a presumed Pax Americana and an alleged Beijing Consensus. Plot-wise, this is staged via the encounter between the half-pygmy narrator Isookanga and the Chinese entrepreneur Zhang Xia, while formally it is registered in an intricate plural linguistic framework in which each chapter title is doubled by a Chinese translation. Thus, eventually, the militarization of accumulation is figured in terms of an incipient "Great-Power competition" with the Congo as a key site in the resource conflicts of the future.

Bofane, Mujila but also the already-mentioned Sinzo Aanza, thus, exemplify a certain "writing of the subsoil" in recent Congolese literature that addresses the "geological scandal" of the Congo as a "vector of globalization."[125] As such, these accounts of the commodity wars at the heart of global capitalism almost stand opposite to novels such as *Neuromancer* or *Cosmopolis* that reveal their underlying resource regime only in the briefest glimpses and otherwise are pervaded by a sense of immaterial accumulation. Here, one might adapt Patricia Yaeger's Jamesonesque call to track the "energy unconscious" of literary artefacts: the narrative occlusion of the economy's material basis constitutes "a symbolic move" whereby a specific "class position in a system of mythic abundance not available to the [extraction] worker who lives in carnal exhaustion"[126] is asserted. The "corps raidis à force de radio-

123 Bofane, *Congo Inc*, 271–272.
124 Cf. Duncan M. Yoon. "Afropolitanism and Afro-Chinese Worlds." *PMLA* 136:5. 792–799.
125 Garnier, Writings of the Subsoil," 133.
126 Patricia Yaeger. "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale-Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power and Other Energy Sources." *PMLA* 126:2. 309–310.

activité,"[127] as one of Mujila's first descriptions of the extractivist labour force of Ville-Pays reads, remain muted in these accounts of the Wall Street-Silicon Valley nexus: "a wound, speaking itself wordlessly in the dark"[128] that is only invoked as a sublime absence without exploration of the more concrete links between global capitalism and its hearts of darkness. Sure, it might be objected that in *Tram 83* it is the capitalist hypercentres that do not make it into novelistic representation. It tells primarily the nightmarish story of (if you will) the "origines inconnues" of the conflict resources that leave the country "pour des horizons inconnus…."[129] Nonetheless, as I have set forth, the effects of capitalist abstractions are palpable throughout the text. In fact, the novel precisely confronts the fetishist structure of extractive labour itself, as it does not only address the invisibilization of work in the shadow circuits of today's supply-chains but its disappearance in "life," that is, the obscuration of the capitalist character of extractive labour in an economic process that at first appears fully need-centric. In fact, the languages of survival spoken by the novel's various characters (e.g., "Il devait livrer une merchandise, sa vie en dépendait"[130]) are decoded as distorted expressions of a market-mediated condition of crisis-management. If, initially, financial power seems absent from the scene of action, it soon re-emerges as a driving force behind much of the informal economic activities going on in the text. It is thereby, then, that *Tram 83* gives novelistic form to the political economy of the "Global Congo."

127 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 16.
128 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 316.
129 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 144.
130 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 14.

3 [Historical Intermezzo III] Neoliberal Development and Warfare

> in democratic countries the violent nature of the economy is not exposed (ie is concealed), in authoritarian countries it is the economic character of the violence that is not exposed.
>
> — Brecht, *Journals (15.12.1940)*, 119.

Before continuing this line of analysis – especially concerning *Tram 83*'s treatment of the de-historicizing discourses that surround extractive labour – I want to engage in another historical intermezzo that pinpoints the conjuncture of violence and neoliberal re-adjustment. In that regard, the novel has already done some groundbreaking work in that Mujila brings into view that segment of the contemporary "cyber-proletariat"[131] that is largely absent in the imagery of the "Information Society" and related "end of work" stories. It puts into focus an export economy – oriented "pour des horizons inconnus" – populated by a vulnerable workforce that extracts the "blood diamonds of the digital era,"[132] especially coltan which is essential to the semi-conductor industry. In this, the novel is also acutely aware of the longer history of the extractionist dispositive as it registers the neoliberal turn in the scramble for the Congo basin. Mobutu's Zaire (from 1971–1997 the DRC was called Zaire) was "one of the first recipients in the early 1980s of a harsh structural adjustment regime" that enforced the dismantling of "public institutions and the formal economy through privatization and liberalisation."[133] At once, the novel links this "distinctively exploitative form of proletarianization"[134] to an imperialism that exerts power via

131 Dyer-Witheford, *Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*, 12ff.

132 Jeffrey Mantz. "Blood Diamonds of the Digital Age: Coltan and the Eastern Congo." *Global Studies Review* 4:3. 12–14. See also Christian Fuchs. 2014. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge. 130. In a similar vein, Fuchs argues "that iPhones and Nokia phones, iPads and iMacs are 'blood phones,' 'blood pads' and 'blood Macs.'"

133 Lee Wengraf. *Extracting Profit: Imperialism, Neoliberalism, and the New Scramble for Africa*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

134 Owen Dowling. "The Political Economy of Super-Exploitation in Congolese Mineral Mining." *Peter Peckard Memorial Prize*. https://www.magd.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-04/the_political_economy_of_super-exploitation_in_congolese_mineral_mining_-_peter_peckard_prize_2020_-_owen_dowling.pdf [last access 04.04.2026]

economic abstractions or delegated military force and less by way of direct territorial rule. *Tram 83*, then, gives a sense of a "racialized global division of labour"[135] in which the violence of extraction, the liberalization of trade, finance, and the high-tech sector are complexly feedback-circuited. In a very schematic sense, "[t]he systemic development of modern 'Globalised Capitalism' has produced Silicon Valley at one pole, and the DRC at the other."[136]

What, thus, emerges is a picture of super-exploitation in which the most abstract forms of accumulation (sovereign debt, price markets, etc.) are intertwined with the least mechanized such as extractive labour in the mining sector.[137] *Tram 83*, thereby, depicts a political economy of premature death where physical violence facilitates the "continued devaluation of Congolese labour power," which, in fact, proves essential to a global industry dependent on the provision of cheap raw materials.[138] The novel, thus, suggests that extraction under conditions of permanent conflict is not necessarily diminutive but perhaps rather conductive to profitability. Challenging the all-too comforting dichotomy between democratic and authoritarian regimes, *Tram 83* filters out a certain unity of opposites in that they are co-dependent aspects of global capitalism that do not simply co-exist but produce each other. The "Général dissident," in that respect, typifies Fanon's anticipatory critique of an emerging postcolonial "bourgeoisie" which acts as an "intermediary" for international corporate interests to compensate for a lack of domestic capital.[139] That way, the novel also accounts for the short-lived developmentalism of the early decolonial era, which wagered in vein of Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) on catch-up industrialization to escape colonial dependencies. In *Tram 83*, the prospect of economic independence remains a "construction inachevée." Instead, a sense of historylessness prevails in which the aspiration to escape

135 Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality," Online.
136 Dowling, "The Political Economy of Super-Exploitation," 13; See also Martin Arboleda. *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
137 Cf. Samaddar, *Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age*, 15.
138 Dowling, "The Political Economy of Super-Exploitation," 12–13.
139 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 122.

the status of a primary resource economy has been sidestepped by the maxim "[qu'il] faut vivre avec son époque," i.e. structural adjustment.

From here we can read to the historical interface between the postcolonial predicament and neoliberalism. For if, in fact, the issue of development in the 1960s was still discussed under the "rubric of modernization versus dependency," then the terms of this debate have completely shifted in the course of the neoliberal turn.[140] Meticulously retracing the struggle between the GATT and poorer nations advocating for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), Slobodian speaks of a veritable clash of "world economic imaginaries."[141] Advocating new trade rules instead of holding on to the cornerstones of the colonial market system, the NIEO represented a "scaling up of the democracy principle to the international level"[142] that was in direct opposition to the constitutional order envisaged by neoliberal reformers, who rather sought to encase markets from popular intervention in a supranational legal system. In fact, the politics of the GATT were underwritten by a particular historiography of the 20th century which considered the anti-colonial uprisings of the post-war period as the quintessential "threat to the integrity of the world trading system."[143] Calls for reparations or the nationalization of foreign-owned property were considered, in the words of chief economist Jan Tumlir, a "degenerative development"[144] that needed to be put in its place. The primary leverage for this backlash, eventually, was the massive debt wave that swept the Global South at the turn to the 1980s. In fact, in the years before, "low interest rates, high

140 Sarah Babb. 2005. "The Social Consequences of Structural Adjustment." *Annual Reviews* 31. 199.

141 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 223.

142 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 242.

143 Slobodian, *The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, 248–249. One could trace a genealogy from these defences of empire to contemporary discourses of Western decline that were expressed particularly explicit at the 2020 Munich Security Conference, which lamented an increasing "westlessness." (MSC. *Munich Security Report*. https://securityconference.org/publikationen/munich-security-report-2020/ [last accessed 12.05.2022]) For some time, now, the transatlantic alliance has been perceived to leave a "geopolitical gap" that is exploited by revisionist powers such as the BRICS states. In that regard, then, "westlessness" foremost implies a lacking integration with "Western" economies. (Heiko Maas. *Speech at the 56th Munich Security Conference*. https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-munich-security-conference/2308256 [last accessed 05.05.2022])

144 Jan Tumlir. "National Sovereignty, Power and Interest." *Ordo* 31. 21.

inflation, and a glut of 'petrodollars' led international banks to invest in the developing world" but when, as a consequence of U.S. central bank policy – the so-called Volcker-Shock – "global interest rates rose dramatically […] these debts became unsustainable."[145] The result was a departure from protectionist politics in favour of privatization, the deregulation of commodity prices, and the unfettered opening up of postcolonial markets for multinational capital.

As Giovanni Arrighi notes, however, this backlash is often mystified. Sub-Saharan poverty is culturalized or naturalized in policy debates: be it ethnic tribalism, poor leadership, adverse climatic conditions, or tropical diseases. Intending to decode the moniker of the "African Tragedy"[146] – as the drop of Africa's share in global GDP across the last half-century is often termed – the world-systems analyst by contrast emphasizes the material underpinnings of this transformation. In this, he deems the personal enrichment by comprador elites rather subsidiary to the devastating effects that the restructuring of the world-economy in response to the crises of the 1970s had on sub-Saharan regions.[147] As a matter of fact, what has been analysed above under the header of financialization inaugurated a cardinal redirection of global money flows. In the period of Bretton Woods, the U.S. acted as the world's major source of capital export. But the economic policies that the global hegemon resorted after the de-pegging of the Dollar effected a major change of course: "the U.S. government started to compete aggressively for capital worldwide, to finance a growing trade and current account deficit in its own balance of payments."[148] The neoliberal response to the crisis of Fordism, thus, did not only liquidate the legacy of the

145 Babb, "The Social Consequences of Structural Adjustment," 200.

146 Colin Ley. "Confronting the African Tragedy." *New Left Review* 1:204. 33–47; Easterly and Ross Levine. "Africa's Growth Tragedy. Policies and Ethnic Divisions." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112:4. 1203–1250; Peter Lawrence. "The African Tragedy: International and National Roots." *The Political Economy of Africa*. London: Routledge.

147 Arrighi. "African Crisis," 11.

148 Arrighi, "African Crisis," 21–22. "Thus the United States, which in the 1950s and 1960s had been the major source of world liquidity and of direct investment, in the 1980s became the world's main debtor nation and by far the largest recipient of foreign capital. […]. This was a reversal of historic proportions, that reflected an extraordinary, absolute and relative, capacity of the U.S. political economy to attract capital from all over the world. It is likely

New Deal "but also, and especially, the Fair Deal for poor countries ostensibly launched by Truman in 1949."[149] The enabling conditions of postcolonial developmentalism thereby vanished. Instead, the new Washington Consensus invited poor countries to "play by the rules of an altogether different game":

> to open up their national economies to the cold winds of intensifying world-market competition, and to rival each other and First World countries in creating within their jurisdictions the greatest possible freedom of movement and action for capitalist enterprise.[150]

Some countries such as China, now, proved able – due to Cold War geopolitics and advantageous preconditions such as a structural abundance of cheap labour – to exploit the reflated demand on U.S. markets by manufacturing "goods that North American businesses no longer found profitable to produce."[151] In many "developing nations," by contrast, the result of this deviation of investment flows was predominantly "premature deindustrialization." Under the debt-imposed pressure to make domestic markets amenable for transnational capital, economies such as that of the DRC were limited to the role of raw material suppliers while extractive rentiers were de-incentivized from resuming industrialization in any meaningful way.[152]

It is against this backdrop that the economist John Toye speaks of a downright "counter-revolution in development economics."[153] The expansionary fiscal programs that carried the assertion of a "Third World" from the 1955 Bandung Conference onward crashed. In fact, the era of structural adjustment meant for large parts of the "developing world" a period of extended crisis, political instability, and economic

that this was the single most important determinant of the contemporaneous reversal in the economic fortunes of North America and of the bifurcation in the economic fortunes of Third World regions."

149 Arrighi, "African Crisis," 21.

150 Arrighi, "African Crisis," 23.

151 Arrighi, "African Crisis," 23.

152 Arrighi, "African Crisis," 31.

153 John Toye. *Reflections on the Counter-Revolution in Development Economics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

stagnation, or devolution. The hollowed-out states that resulted, in turn, have become increasingly dependent on so-called humanitarian aid which itself comes with adjustment imperatives: in Africa most notably the obligation to cooperate in the externalization of the European border regime south of the Sahara. These odds have not been changed much by the "2000–15 commodity supercycle" that was impelled by Chinese growth and which has rather locked these economies even more profoundly "into low-tech, undiversified export profiles":

> [East] Asian success, in short, has obscured a bleaker picture in the rest of the world. […]. Most emerging markets have not found an engine of growth comparable to manufacturing – most have grown over the last few decades, but dependence on services and commodities exports has not made them rich.[154]

It is mostly extractive rentier elites that have profited from the resource-based economic growth, which otherwise has failed to absorb larger numbers of "low- and high-skilled workers at decent wages" such that – combined with considerable population growth – the commodity boom of the early 21st century did not halt the increase in "unoccupied laborers, concentrated in massive slum-cities like Karachi, Lima, Jakarta, Lagos, and Cairo."[155]

For most emerging economies, then, market liberalization spelled economic and political de-stabilization. The grand capitalist claim to "develop" the planet has fallen short. Instead, the period of neoliberal shock-therapy ushered "in a never-ending chain of civil wars, massacres and military interventions."[156] Global value-chains pried apart valorization and social reproduction, dissolving regional support systems.

154 David Oks and Henry Williams. "The Long, Slow Death of Global Development." *American Affairs* 6:4. https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2022/11/the-long-slow-death-of-global-development/ [last accessed 18.08.2023]. Manufacturing displays productive dynamics that other sectors do not. Historically, few nations achieved a high-income status without building a larger industrial basis. Exceptions are a couple of oil-countries. Mostly, however, success stories have been short-dated, e.g., the "Ivorian miracle" or the eclipse of Ethiopia as "the China of Africa."

155 Oks/Williams, "Slow Death of Global Development," Online.

156 Goldner, "The Historical Moment that Produced Us," Online.

This rupture produced a global disorder that required continuous, violence-based regulation, blurring the line between military and police operations. After the USSR collapsed, the U.S. managed this disorder permanently rather than seeking stable social outcomes.[157] Its strategy often relied on regulatory violence that erased the distinction between war and peace. If debt-driven imperialism is one face of the system, then military intervention is the other. War has increasingly functioned as a medium of structural adjustment that forces the adversary "to negotiate his integration into the system according to the rules."[158] Potential targets were states, social movements, or guerrilla forces that obstructed U.S. and Eurocentric markets, disrupted the circulation of goods and capital, or resisted the "liberation" of the workforce. From the late 1980s onward, U.S.-dominated economic and military globalization advanced through a dual process: on one side, a "balkanization" achieved by dismantling national sovereignties and regulatory frameworks; on the other, a simultaneous re-assembling of this fragmented landscape into integrated economic spaces.[159]

Ellen Meiksins Wood has been particularly cogent on this topic, arguing that figures like Bush, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Cheney redefined U.S. strategy around a doctrine of pre-emptive, open-ended conflict that claimed the right to strike not only in anticipation of future danger but even in its absence. Coupled with the suppression of dissent at home, this strategy turned military action into spectacle: periodic, high-intensity interventions meant to advertise U.S. power precisely because that power could not physically dominate every terrain. What is more, this display of dominance – most starkly in the form of aerial

157 Vincent Bevins. *The Jakarta Method*. New York: Public Affairs. The Cold War was marked by frequent military interventions and in much of the world resembled a "hot war." As Bevins argues, episodes of U.S.-backed mass violence – from the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66 to Operation Condor – formed part of a transnational project of violent political reengineering aimed at aligning "Third World" societies with a U.S.-led capitalist order.

158 Jean- François Lyotard. "Terror on the Run." *Terror and Consensus. Vicissitudes of French Thought*. Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip R. Wood (Eds.). Stanford: Stanford University Press. 26. "Postmodern politics are strategies of management, wars are police operations."

159 Cf. R.S. "Européennes 2024." *Des nouvelles du front*. https://dndf.org/?p=21431 [last accessed 15.11.2025]

bombardment – enacts a determinate global social relationship that expresses in an extreme way the role ascribed to post-colonial proletarians: powerless subjects over whom historical and political forces unfold without their control. For Wood, such operations were hence never solely about discrete objectives. War might have responded to some identifiable tangible threats to U.S. policy. But it was also a structural requirement. Military intervention functioned as a mechanism to re-order the world such that capitalist expansion could proceed, and subordinate states could be managed.[160] The U.S., thus, supplied the force required for global capitalism to extend as widely as possible. Indeed, the mandate to defend a (neo)liberal rules-based order coincided with the claim to unrivalled military supremacy, which at times entailed the occasional regime-change operation. This, in turn, formed the precondition for a decades-long phase of international competition in which countries – primarily the United States' partners – could stake out claims to the world market without having to secure that economic activity through military power of their own.

However, as this account already shows – and as the tendencies towards stagnation outlined so far also suggest – the spectacle of war is not enough to fill the gaps in global power projection. In that vein, a delegation of authority to sub-imperial agents and lower-order militias can be observed. This dynamic may perhaps be metaphorically captured via so-called "network-centric warfare," a tactical innovation of the 1990s that de-centralizes decision-making rather than operating on topdown direction. Such outsourcing of violence is both cost-effective and politically expedient, providing the veneer of multilateralism and plausible deniability (Apple, for instance, can attribute the brutality of cobalt mining in the DRC to local actors rather than the imperatives of global profit).[161] Yet, it also empowers regional and local powers, opening up the field "for a new subimperial scramble, triggered by conflicts playing out in the lower layers of the global economy."[162] However, the proliferation of hegemonic claims produces a new unpredictability.

160 Cf. Ellen Meiksins Wood. 2005. *Empire of Capital*. London/New York: Verso. 144ff.
161 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.
162 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

The emerging reality of polycentric confrontation gives rise to strategic uncertainties that disrupt established action-reaction patterns.

One might now be tempted to think that with the rise of China, a new – Beijing – consensus would offer itself as an alternative capable of re-establishing order. But it is not that simple. Surely, the PRC presents itself as a new party of stability and peaceful exchange that still adheres to a version of a rules-based order or international law. In particular, the propagated principle of "win-win cooperation" ties in with old justifications for capitalist globalization. This involves a new developmentalist teleology in China's image, which offers East Asian catch-up industrialization as the way to go for the rest of the former Third World.[163] In the 2010s, the African continent was hailed as the "next factory of the world,"[164] suggesting a community of interests between "abundant Chinese capital seeking avenues for global investment" and "the massive potential of the African market."[165] Notwithstanding, the already-mentioned commodity super-cycle, largely driven by the exponential growth of the PRC, has not yet delivered on such promises. What is more, even at the height of China's foreign aid in 2015, U.S. development and military aid in Africa remained far larger. China's real weight on the continent remains in the sphere of commerce, above all in primary resource imports and industrial exports, placing it alongside the EU as one of Africa's key trading partners.[166] Dependencies, thus, persist while much-heralded infrastructure projects often fail to deliver on their promises:

> By the end of the 2010s, the entire African continent was thereby littered with these mirages: the specter of Chinese projects scattered across the savannah like the imperial outposts of an empire that exists only in the mind.[167]

163 Cf. Justin Yifu Lin and Yan Wang. "China-Africa win-win strategy for job creation and transformation." *Great Insights* 3:4. 6.

164 Irene Sun Yuan. *The Next Factory of the World*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

165 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

166 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

167 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online. "[M]any of these projects are even referred to as 'Chinese' projects because they subcontract much of their on-the-ground work to Chinese construction firms, despite the main contractors originating elsewhere," for instance "Emirati, Turkish, South Korean, Japanese, and Indian firms."

Commentators such as Phil Neel or Irene Yuan Sun flip the narrative in that regard. Rather than executing a long-term plan, Chinese firms in Africa mostly arrive for blunt economic reasons: overcapacity, rising costs, and crowded domestic markets.[168] State policy usually follows private capital, moving in only after firms have already staked out profitable markets.

> Projects like the BRI [Belt-and-Road Initiative] are not meticulously planned by top leaders; rather they are loose 'policy envelopes', whose parameters and implementations are shaped by internal struggles for power and resources. They are kept deliberately vague to accommodate these diverse interests, creating wide latitude for them to influence, interpret and even ignore top leaders' wishes.[169]

In that sense, the international relations of PRC businesses can hardly "be aggregated into a single, unified Chinese position under tight central control."[170] This does not controvert the global aspiration of China's ruling class. But it does caution against mistaking narratives of power for the messier realities on the ground, where the spectacle of development policy often remains, as Mujila would write, a "construction inachevée." For strategists and economists, of course, the fiction of coherent power projection has its uses: it follows a speculative (bubblenomic) logic that smooths volatility into a coherent vision. Yet, once the gaps in geopolitical self-presentations are pointed out, the limits of developmental reach become visible. When it comes to plugging the holes, the PRC is also unable to act as capitalism's trustee of last resort.

As early as the 1990s, Samir Amin proposed the term "empire of chaos"[171] to describe a prospective moment of disarray, in which capitalist development founders – first in the peripheries, where the crisis of accumulation becomes permanent, and gradually spreads throughout global capitalism. Robert Kurz, again, deployed the term "Weltord-

168 Sun Yuan, *The Next Factory of the World*, 9.
169 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.
170 Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri. *Fractured China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 3.
171 Samir Amin. *Empire of Chaos*. New York: Monthly Review.

nungskriege" to name a type of crisis-management via military intervention, in which war operations aim at containing regions rendered ungovernable by globalization's contradictions. As capital withdraws and value-creation stalls, state structures erode, giving rise to conflicts that are less strategic than symptomatic: wars of disintegration.[172] Most recently, Hardt and Mezzadra noted the rise of a "global war regime" in which military and economic governance are deeply intertwined, as ever more actors compete in the "worldwide remaking of spaces of capital."[173] This trajectory has steadily accelerated from the global War on Terror through Russia's war against Ukraine, feeding a spiral of militarization driven by attempts to manage imperial decline. In this, conventional armed conflict merges with non-kinetic and population-centric warfare. Often, war functions less as a means of territorial control than a technique of disruption: a way of dismantling rival geo-economic networks and other strategic advantages. In this, regions are rendered chronically unstable, deprived of the capacity for infrastructural reconstruction or sustained administrative cohesion. Hybrid imperialism plays an eminent role here, enlisting local and sub-state actors into broader military architectures. At the edge of this logic lie zones of death in which populations are exposed to forms of violence that mediate the existence of a pre-eminent power without reciprocal vulnerability. Crucially, even where violence is framed under the premise of humanitarian intervention, the claim that force is exercised on behalf of the assaulted party remains deceitful. More often, the violences of competing powers converge in the shared immiseration and brutalization of civilians, for whom war appears less as rescue than the cumulative effect of rival strategies of domination that enshrine the subaltern status of the oppressed. The notion of a "global war regime" captures this configuration. It names a condition of destabilization that takes the form of escalating multipolarity, in which the contest over systemic alternatives is forcefully displaced by culturally/ethnically/religiously charged conflicts. Power fragments outward in processes

172 Robert Kurz. *Weltordnungskrieg*. Bad Honnef: Horleman-Verlag.
173 Michael Hardt and Sandro Mezzadra. "A Global War Regime." *New Left Review*. doi.org/10.64590/yel [last accessed 21.11.2025].

of delegation and multiple alignments, while (sub-)imperialist forces exploit the inner divisions of subordinate nations and constellations of allied rivals take shape – actors whose strategic competition coexists with convergence in practices of ancillary imperialism.

Joshua Craze concurs, underlining that this constellation is not bipolar. Various forces compete, unable to establish a new viable balance of power. In this, the fundamental principles of capitalism are increasingly implemented by violent means, from secession wars, through proxy conflicts, up to the direct confrontation between hostile imperialist blocs. This is especially clear in the case of the Sudanese civil war (2023ff.), where "centrifugal fragmentation"[174] is fueled by a constellation of regional actors for whom land is primarily a commercial asset. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are chiefly bankrolled by the UAE, which seeks to consolidate control over the country's gold trade, secure a Red Sea port, and appropriate fertile agricultural land. Behind the Sudanese army stand Egypt alongside a loose ensemble of Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Yet, as Craze notes, "there is no geopolitical logic of alignment at work here: each country functions like a joint-stock company, taking its profits where it can, even if the consequences are politically incoherent."[175] The UAE finances the RSF but also purchases gold from the army and even supports Islamist factions aligned with it. Any presumption that these states would prioritize a stable, sovereign Sudan under a single government is therefore unsettled. Violent instability, in fact, is oftentimes more favourable to "neo-colonial plunder."[176]

A similarly fractious logic is evident in the DRC, where the legacy of the Great African War (1996–2003) and the two decades of intermittent conflict that have followed continue to shape the political economy of the country. The Congolese state is traversed by a dense network of local and transnational actors, each pursuing access to mineral wealth through both overt intervention and proxy networks. Rwanda has repeatedly projected force across the eastern provinces, supporting armed groups and controlling key mining corridors. But other neigh-

174 Joshua Craze. "Sudan's World War." *New Left Review*. doi.org/10.64590/1un [last accessed 21.11.2025].
175 Craze, "Sudan's World War," Online.
176 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.

bouring countries have also exploited border regions for strategic and economic gain. Multinational corporations are tightly enmeshed in this war economy. The "traditional condominium of core states" also remains an influence in the region, albeit more so via NGO-funding, supply-chain-management, or "avenues of financial influence, such as the IMF and World Bank."[177] Yet, "while funding and high-tech support for these efforts may come from the United States, and arms might be bought from Europe, South Korea, or Israel, it is Africans who do most of the day-to-day fighting and dying"[178] in these commodity wars.

The result is a landscape of delegated violence in which global capitalism and local conflict are irreducibly connected. In this, as said, instability facilitates the extraction of wealth on terms that undermine independent regional development, with warlords and dictatorial regimes often acting as enforcers of international corporate interests: their violence against civilian populations triggers mass displacement, wrecks subsistence economies, and opens the way for land grabs and mining concessions. Prolonged violence contributes to the production of masses of "footloose labour"[179] with no other means of earning a living than giving their bodies to extraction business – a population which Mujila's *Tram 83* so intricately ventriloquizes. The novel captures this imperial scramble. It offers a compelling account of the entanglements between postcolonial labour, violence and a new de-territorialized imperialist structure. The divide between "Arrière-Pays" and "Ville-Pays" encodes quite neatly a condition of rural exodus in which the "informal overactivity" in and around the extraction business acts as an economic structure of last resort for a displaced workforce.

In this, though, the novel balances the experience of independence as a mask for neo-colonial interference with the word-historical significance of decolonialization, giving way to an intricate vision of postcoloniality marked by images of complicity and (informal) resistance. In the following, I therefore want to analyse how the text confronts the

177 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online.
178 Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online; See also Samar Al-Bulushi. "What is AFRICOM?" *Teen Vogue*. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-africom-us-military-africa [last accessed 21.11.2025].
179 Samaddar. *Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age,* 109.

"tragedy" of incomplete decolonization by reconstructing the languages of critique re-circulated throughout the text to come to terms with the postcolonial predicament. *Tram 83* negotiates – much in vein of our previous readings – the theme of recuperation, this time with a specific focus on the tensions between national liberation and structural adjustment. In that regard, the text engages in a thorough act of historicization[180] that undoes the naturalization of "underdevelopment" all while testing the legacy of anti-colonial internationalism so as to probe new ways to establish solidarities along the worldwide extractive operations of capital. In this, literary writing and revolution are intimately tied in *Tram 83*. Again and again, the fate of literature appears as the site where the discontents of decolonialization are dramatized. In asking whether the aesthetic forms recirculated in the novel can "carry the weight"[181] of the experiential horizon of postcoloniality, Mujila subjects them to a literary stress test that investigates the possibilities for writing in the aftermath of failed liberation. Eventually, I intend to end this chapter on a more affirmative note by suggesting that the novel seeks to break with the anti-utopian impulse written into the narrative of an "African Tragedy." If Sharae Deckard argues that "there is no exit from the violence of neoliberal capitalism" in the novel apart maybe from "the resourcefulness of language,"[182] then I want to show how *Tram 83* slowly but surely faces the challenge of representing the "new wretched of the earth"[183] as Mujila himself proposes to call the labouring masses roaming his novel. Bringing Congolese history in dialogue with radical Caribbean currents (e.g., Fanon, Césaire, and Glissant), the text, in fact, stages a conflict between narrative fore- and background through which the narrative's peripheral characters rebel against the asymmet-

180 See also Jennifer Wenzel. *Environmental Crisis and World Literature*. New York: Fordham University Press. 87–88. In her study of literatures of the Niger Delta, Wenzel contrasts policy debates that de-realize the region's historicity with a "world-imagining from below" in literary and cinematic works that "make imaginable" the Nigerian state, multinational corporations, and distant consumers as parts of a shared structure of petro-violence.

181 Achebe, "English and the African Writer," 349.

182 Deckard, "African Resource Culture," 252.

183 Pedro Monaville. "Sex, Beer, and Ndombolo." *Africa is a Country*. https://africasacountry.com/2015/11/sex-beer-and-ndombolo-an-interview-with-fiston-mwanza-mujila [last accessed 01.06.2023].

ric character-system of the novel and, hence, briefly bring into play the possible emergence of a plural subject that, in the words of Glissant, "consent[s] not to be a single being"[184] anymore.

4 "Resource Curses" & "Failed States": Undermining Neoliberal Historiographies

> […] the great Outside is the fantasy that covers up the Real that is already right here.
>
> — Khatib, *No Future*, 641.

We can, now, return to *Tram 83* and its unearthing of the temporal ideologies motivating the politics of structural adjustment in the Global South. The novel presents itself as an astute literary analysis of the discursive practices underlying neoliberal crisis-management, or, more precisely the ideologemes forwarded in the adjustment policies applied to sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s. In fact, I argue that the generically named setting of *Tram 83* functions as a quasi-allegorical laboratory for the specific "end of history" narratives applied to the African continent: most notably the so-called "resource curse" thesis prominent in policy language since the 1990s. In these debates, the African continent is essentialized as a place of insurmountable failure, encoded especially in "failed nation" discourse, that the novel registers specifically by way of the depreciation of Ville-Pays as a "pays n'existant que sur papier."[185] In this regard, already the opening sequence reads like an obscene comedy of these chauvinist scenarios, concluding with the taunting comment: "bref, on connaît le scénario,"[186] which sets the tone for a critical counternarrative that proposes to reconstruct an experience of postcoloniality that is indissociable from the ideologies of time surrounding extraction business.

184 Manthia Diawara. "One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara." *NKA. Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28. 5.
185 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 66.
186 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13.

Here, I would like to point to Eli Jelly-Schapiro's reading of *Tram 83* which proposes to conceive it as a novel of so-called primitive/original accumulation. In this, she takes up a concept that goes back to Marx's satire of the kind of origin narratives prevalent in bourgeois economics which trace the incipiencies of capitalist class society to a mythical past in which a "frugal elite" peacefully establishes itself on top of society while a lazy majority finds itself at the other end of this original distribution of riches.[187] Countering the structural similarity of these genesis stories to the function of Original Sin in Christian theology, Marx repurposes the notion of "original accumulation" in terms of the violent establishment of the conditions of capitalist production by picturing capital – in a gesture of de-sublimation – as "com[ing] into the world […] dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt."[188] What he terms "so-called" primitive accumulation, by contrast, is read as a figure of concealment that hides the essential violence – the history of expropriations – involved in positing the presuppositions of capital accumulation. Schapiro, now, observes correctly that the formula has been re-activated in recent decades in response to neoliberal strategies of disruption, privatization, and shock-therapy. As such, it has increasingly been redefined as a structural feature of capitalist globalization and become a crucial concept in the inventory of contemporary crisis theory by giving an astute expression to the sense that "capitalism can escape its own contradictions only through expanding," that is, creating again and again "[f]resh room for accumulation."[189] Pointing to this revival, Schapiro suggests that "[p]rimitive accumulation has likewise become a core concern of 'world literature,'" since it oscillates between the "local articulation of the global capitalist order" and its "planetary shape."[190] Next to Mujila's oeuvre, she cites Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), Amitav Gosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), and Hernán Diaz' *In*

187 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 873.
188 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 926.
189 David Harvey. *Spaces of Capital*. New York: Routledge. 257; See also Khatib, "No Future," 642–643. Khatib argues that the "*Ursprung* which literally means 'primal-leap' has to be repeated always anew in order to keep capitalism alive," meaning that it "does not designate a primitive stage of capitalism that took place 'once upon a time,' but the non-historicizable origin and starting point of each stage of capitalist accumulation."
190 Jelly-Schapiro, "Extractive Modernity at Large," 2.

the Distance (2017) as key exponents of this trend. In this sense, *Tram 83* is read in terms of a "cultural form" that is tuned to the repetitive structure of the capitalist process as it "traces the routes of continuity between original and latter-day histories of dispossession – the history of the present, and the presence of the past."[191] That said, the affinity of this "hermeneutic orientation"[192] to the reading of *Tram 83* forwarded in this study is apparent. Yet, it seems to me, that Schapiro's analysis misses out on the opportunity to connect this conceptual angle to the conflict of temporalities acted out in *Tram 83* by focussing mostly on the economic side of the "persistent centrality […] of [the] extractive industry."[193] Nonetheless, the notion of "original accumulation" offers an apt vocabulary through which to read the accumulation of origin stories throughout the text. It is interesting to note that Mujila's prose repeats precisely the two-fold procedure of Marx's operation of ideology critique by juxtaposing the narrative of "so-called" primitive accumulation to a historical process of expropriation and structural adjustment. That is, it forwards an ironic exaggeration of the fantasy logic involved in neoliberal market reforms and programs of economic re-primarization by charting some of the neo-colonial narratives that continue the discursive construction of Africa as a continent without history.

From the start, the issue of neoliberal shock-therapy is depicted in conjunction with a specific politics of time that executes a "violent (catastrophic) reopening of the question of the origin."[194] As said, the novel's opening paragraph parodies the *Gospel of John* by referring to "la pierre" as the original principle of Ville-Pays: "Au commencement était la pierre."[195] Here, the notion of a primary resource is literalized. The novel satirically summons the procreative power of mineral resources to suggest that property relations flowed from the innate qualities of

191 Jelly-Schapiro, "Extractive Modernity at Large," 2.
192 Jelly-Schapiro, "Extractive Modernity at Large," 2.
193 Jelly-Schapiro, "Extractive Modernity at Large," 13.
194 Sandra Mezzadra. "The Topicality of Pre-History. A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of 'So-Called Primitive Accumulation.'" *Rethinking Marxism* 23:3. 302–321.
195 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13.

an "ancestral"[196] stone-object: "la pierre *provoqua* la possession."[197] The recurring declaration of the "retour de l'homme-animal"[198] also fits into these politics of time. Mired in the topic of genesis that permeates the novel, it encodes the foundational operation of the Hayekian project traced throughout this study which is precisely grounded in an act of de-historization that views capitalism as the mere instantiation of natural laws.[199] In this sense, *Tram 83* links the neoliberal naturalization of market existence to the fetishist projection of a country without history.[200] That way, structural adjustment policy is shown to be underwritten with temporal ideologies that hallucinate contrived origins for extractive capitalism. In the novel, that is, the mining industry intriguingly derives its legitimacy from the narrative production of an origin that represents the neo-colonial resource grab as "a planetary inevitability."[201] The subject of scrutiny, then, is the talk of "resource curses" that took hold in mainstream economic debates in the 1990s and recalls ideologemes of the historyless continent as it posits underdevelopment as innate to primary resource economies such as the DRC. As such, this neoliberal origin narrative suppresses any historical and/or structural explanation that would contextualize present-day inequalities in the larger history of imperialism and postcolonial adjustment policies. Instead, it insinuates

196 See also Jordy Rosenberg. "The Molecuralization of Sexuality: On some Primitivisms of the Present." *Theory & Event* 17:2. muse.jhu.edu/article/546470 [last accessed 20.07.2022]. I follow Rosenberg's contestation of the so-called ontological turn exemplified by philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux whose pre-occupation with a pre-conscious "ancestral realm" he does not only deem "uncomfortably close to the commodity-logic of late capitalism itself" but expressive of a "primitivist fantasy that hinges on the violent erasure of the social."

197 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13 (emphasis added).

198 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 243.

199 Hayek repeats the narrative logic of "so-called primitive accumulation" delineated by Marx in that he posits socio-economic hierarchies as the natural result of free market competition.

200 See also Mujila, *Tram 83*, 86, 189. Sometimes this takes on a satirical character. Take the case of Malingeau wo numerously indulges in the othering of African societies but whose own re-adjustment into a cynical "escroc" is precisely sutured by the metaphor of the human-animal as his speech more and more resembles that of a barking dog ("aboyant Presque") such that his primitivist beliefs are themselves rendered into an object of ridicule.

201 Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 27.

that economic weakness is instantiated by the natural environment.[202] History, thus, is reduced to an eternal resource-cursed present that – as one may adapt Negarestani – "was here even before human existence, waiting for a host"[203] in subterranean mineral basins.

Tram 83, now, suggestively plays itself with this ideological assumption, be it in the representation of the titular bar in terms akin to "la grotte de Lascaux" or when someone utters that: "le temps n'avait plus de raison d'être, nous étions en 2069 ou en 1735 ou en 926 ou à l'âge de la pierre taillée."[204] In such instances, the novel ambivalently acts out the voiding of history implied in the mythologies of extraction. In a similar vein, tourists are seen frequenting a "féticheuse professionelle" who mediates between "le monde visible et le monde invisible"[205] in order to communicate with this ultimate commodity. Further, the workforce employed in the extraction business is portrayed in terms of an extensive, quasi-religious practice: "C'était presque une religion à l'époque."[206] With Requiem constantly chasing his "sacrée"[207] commodity, dragging Lucien along with him, this commodity-fetishism also has important narrative consequences. Throughout, "la pierre" is conjured to instantiate scene-changes or motivate narrative twists, such that it seems to act as a vehicle for the episodic narrative unfolded across the pages of *Tram 83*. As the social relations between the miners assume "the fantastic form of a relation between things,"[208] it is as if – to pick up Negarestani again – the stone-object were a "supreme 'narration lube'" that concatenated textual "plot holes"[209] in the novel's subsoil. In this, however, the novel does not only lend shape to the ideologies of history that permeate the extraction economy. In fact, the commodity-fetish-

202 Cf. Nnimmo Bassey. *Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa*. Nairobi/Oxford: Fahamu Books & Pambazuka Press. 12; See also Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 194. Especially, Jeffrey Sachs' and Andrew Warner's 1995 paper *Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth* and Terry L Karl's 1997 *The Paradox of Plenty* were key in popularizing this deterministic view.
203 Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 27.
204 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 22.
205 Mujila, *Tram 83,* 152–153.
206 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 152.
207 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 90.
208 Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 165.
209 Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 13.

ism put on show in Mujila's writing is made legible as a "violent erasure of the social"[210] that stands in stark contrast to the brutal and extractive risk-society narrated in juxtaposition.

The novel, thus, time and again returns to the effacement of the DRC from history characteristic of globalization discourses past and present. Thereby, it takes up a question posed in a workshop co-hosted[211] by Mujila himself on how to write (about) the Congo in the face of its ongoing obliteration from history: from the image of the darksome continent paradigmatically formulated in Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890) to the undoing of the Congo's contemporaneity encoded in ideologemes of failed statehood which go so far – as did the *Foreign Policy*'s "Failed States Index" from 2009 – to declare that "The Democratic Republic of the Congo does not exist."[212] *Tram 83* retraces the shifts in capitalist globalization not only be reconstructing changes in political economy. Rather, theses structural transformations are at once read through the mutating strategies of othering whereby the Congo is effaced from history. Under this aspect, the necro-aesthetic charted before can be read as a counter-aesthetic to the de-historicizing temporal ideologies secreted by shock-therapy. If the neoliberal politics of time staged throughout *Tram 83* mythologize "la pierre" as a parasitic substance prior to the antagonistic structure of commodity-extraction, then the novel's dialectic of death and realism literally undermines the violent erasure of the social by violently concretizing the history of neoliberal re-adjustment. In fact, the object-narrative is itself re-inscribed with an imagery of protracted splattering through which a certain return of the repressed – the bloody contradiction between mining labour and extractive capital – is pictured. Take the character Mortel Combat, nicknamed after a popular martial arts videogame renowned for its gory finishing moves, who develops a vampiresque theory of value in his belief "que ce sont les cadavres qui procréent

210 Rosenberg, "On some Primitivisms of the Present," Online.

211 Cf. Martin-Granel, "Question de Génétique et Poétique," Online.

212 Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills. "There is no Congo." *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/03/18/there-is-no-congo/ [last accessed 19.05.2022]; Aaron Bady. 2022 "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz." *Guernicamag*. https://www.guernicamag.com/aaron-bady-once-is-a-mistake-twice-is-jazz/ [last accessed 10.05.2022].

les pierres."[213] The vitalisation of "la pierre" as an entity larger than life that places the enclave under a quasi-mythical resource curse is, hence, constantly undermined. In a remarkable proximity to Marx's quip that "[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks,"[214] the surplus of life attributed to the ancestral stone-object is re-rooted in a violent history of exploitation. In this sense, it could be said that Mujila's writing takes on in literary form the mantle of Fanonist critique. For it is Fanon who developed in his 1952 *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* one of the most succinct critiques of such metaphysical narratives by outlining that the jargon of being which the black person comes upon in the encounter with the imperialist world brutally encodes the essential exclusion of black subjectivity from the social ontologies of the colonizers.[215] That said, there is not only an imitation but an actualization of Fanon's critique in Mujila's writing in that it addresses the figures of concealment and ideas of social order inhering the neoliberal "end of history," most notably by counteracting the erasure of (neo-)colonial history in a literary language which accentuates the antagonistic logic of the extractive labour regime.

In this sense, the novel confronts the extraction enclave as a place that is overdetermined by the ambivalent traces of the past, which resurges on every street corner:

> […] rue de l'Indépendance, rue de l'Armistice international, rue des Fossoyeurs, rue des Minerais, rue du Cuivre, rue de la Révolution 1, rue de la Révolution 3, rue de la Révolution vraie et sincère….[216]

Thereby, the text engenders a sense of the novelistic scene of action as a gigantic "site archéologique."[217] The investigation of the extractive operations of capital in Mujila's *Tram 83* is thoroughly marked by a gene-

213 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 154.
214 Marx, *Capital Vol I*., 342.
215 Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Charles L. Markmann (Transl.) New York: Grove Press. 109–110.
216 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 125.
217 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 151.

alogical effort that by and by unearths an alternative origin-narrative underwritten by "la force des kalachnikovs."[218] In this, though, the novel offers a longer historical view. It does not only return to the decades of structural re-adjustment but also the so-called "Scramble for Africa" let loose at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85 with the intent of partitioning the continent between the major European powers and where Belgium secured key areas around the Congo River. The significance of this date is notably underlined by Hannah Arendt, who argues that this year signals the beginning of capitalist modernity insofar it crystallizes the transition to a system of direct imperialist rule over "foreign people all over the world."[219] Similarly, in *Tram 83* the date 1885 figures as the cipher of an original trauma that cannot be dissociated from the material history of the place, first and foremost the train station "dont la construction métallique rappelle les années 1885."[220] Mentions of Henry Morton Stanley, commissioned by the Belgian king Léopold II to claim the Congo, abound in the novel. His name is embedded in the recurring refrain about the worn-down train station outside the titular bar, which picks up a saying by the colonial explorer that "without the railroad, the Congo is not worth a penny."[221] From page one the unfinished station in the middle of Ville-Pays stands at the centre of narrative form like a gloomy memorial of colonialism:

> La gare du Nord se dévergondait… Elle se résumait à une construction métallique inachevée, démolie par des obus, des rails et des locomotives qui ramènent à la mémoire la ligne de chemin de fer construite par Stanley […].[222]

218 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 28.
219 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 209; Cf. Robert Stockhammer. "Hier. Einleitung." *TopoGraphien der Moderne. Medien zur Repräsentation und Konstruktion von Räumen*. München: Fink Verlag. 12–13.
220 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 100.
221 Henry Morton Stanley Quoted after Sofia Samatar. "Fiston Mwanza Mujila & Roland Glasser." *Bomb Magazine*. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/fiston-mwanza-mujila-roland-glasser/ [last accessed: 01.06.2022].
222 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13,

The vocabulary is already telling here. It is as if the train station itself triggered a permanent return of the repressed. The metallic apparatus constantly "rapelle" the Berlin Conference, while the locomotives "ramènent" into memory the railroad construction undertaken in the violent annexation of Congolese territory.[223] The representation of time and space in the novel, hence, is marked by the sometimes open, sometimes unconscious presence of the historical past. This is fundamentally encoded in a form that at times displays a prosimetric character. Across the novel, the just quoted passage on the "Gare du Nord" is abbreviated or extended into a refrain that is repeatedly incantated throughout the text. Thus, for example, the above-mentioned passage on the "histoires de délestage" in and through which the ex-colony was re-adjusted to the interests of capital is interrupted by a long passage that roots the energy-intensive machinery belonging to the "tourists à but lucratif" in a colonial past:

> […] elles datent de l'époque de la construction de la gare, qui se résume à une construction métallique inachevée, démolie par des obus, des rails et des locomotives qui ramènent à la mémoire la ligne de chemin de fer construite par Stanley…[224]

Then, a few pages later, in a passage on the migrant workforce toiling in the mines, this tract on the city's central station is simply abridged into a short-cut history: "la gare dont la construction métallique rappelle les années 1885."[225] As these samples illustrate, the connective function of narrative prose, driving forward plot action, is again and again interspersed with a floating refrain that encapsulates the history accumulated in the built-environment of Ville-Pays. These micro-fragments constantly turn upon themselves and, thereby, disrupt narrated time by

223 See also Stockhammer, "Hier. Einleitung," 12–13. Stockhammer describes a photo from the Berlin Conference that most probably shows Henry Morton Stanley himself pointing on a map of the African continent. As if to counteract the designation of the DRC as a "pays n'existant que sur papier," this scene illustrates that the power coming from indexical gestures on a "piece of paper" proved indispensable to imperialist conquest and domination.
224 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 98.
225 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 100.

inserting additional layers that indicate the (dis)continuities of colonialism. Yet, sometimes, it does so in an elliptical manner that shortens the formula into an increasingly cryptic set phrase which denotes nothing but a riddled "construction métallique"[226] voided of any historical reference. If you will, the text hereby materializes in literary syntax a certain waning of historicity whereby readers are compelled to go back and forth to make sense of this motific structure and extract the historical content inscribed therein. Modelled after a dialectic of dead and living labour, *Tram 83* explores in the materiality of form the temporalities secreted by the regime of structural re-adjustment in which (to recycle an ingenuous quote already cited in the chapter on Röggla) "quantities of the past […] surround the worker in a proportion hitherto unthinkable" at the same time as these find themselves effaced in the "furious present of capitalist 'creative destruction.'"[227] In "making strange basic prosaic functions,"[228] that is, the novel crafts a peculiar historical realism out of an almost poetic prose that moves in spirals and, thereby, brings forward and at once undermines the de-historicizing, ideological operations that efface the Congo's central importance to contemporary capitalism.

In this, the novel stretches the vocabulary of "creuser" – from the literal mining business to the excavation of a historical unconscious – to engage in a "cognitive mapping" that counteracts the sense that the representational challenge posed by present-day capitalism is a "primarily spatial problem."[229] Instead, it addresses the extinguishment of history in the process of accumulation. In this sense, the capitalist technologies of invisibilization traced in this study are re-focussed through the prism of a "resource conflict dystopia"[230] such that the recurring erasure of the Congo from the story of globalization and the illusions of a dematerialized economy appear as two sides of the same coin. Sharply delimited

226 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 139.
227 Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 102.
228 William Watkin. "The Materialization of Prose: Poiesis versus Dianoia in the Work of Godzich & Kittay, Shklovsky, Silliman and Agamben." *Paragraph* 31:3. 352.
229 Toscano, "The World is Already without Us," 116.
230 Cf. Sharae Deckard. "Trains, Stone, and Energetics: African Resource Culture and the Neoliberal World-Ecology." *Neoliberalism, World Literature, and the Culture of Discontent*, Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro (Eds.), Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 244.

from ahistorical renderings of postcolonial statehood, Mujila's prose develops a multi-layered historical composition that synthesizes historical realism and horror. Thereby, *Tram 83* responds – much in the vein of Röggla's take on the "betriebsalzheimer" of the current capitalist moment – to the spatiotemporal compressions of the world-market with its proper techniques of spatiotemporal compression. In supplementing the representation of globalization's spatial disjunctures with an account of the historical content sedimented into a planet terraformed by capital, the novel morphs the construction of a continent without history into a continent supercharged with history.

5 "Le Monde est Irrécupérable". Decolonialization and Narratives of Defeat

There is, however, another facet to the discourse of historicity unfolded in *Tram 83*, which rather relates to the historiographic project articulated by the would-be novelist Lucien. The author-persona purports to write a world-history out of the ruins of what he calls "L'Afrique des Possibles," including in his tale characters such as "Che Guevara, Sékou Touré, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Lumumba, Martin Luther King, Ceauşescu, sans oublier le Général dissident."[231] Professing to glean for lost futures in the remnants of the anti-colonial movement, he thus figures as a literary proponent of the current of "mythopoesis" represented most importantly by the Luther Blissett/Wu Ming collective which precisely advocates for a kind of historical fiction that uncovers the might-have-beens of history. As the future has come to be seen in terms of the eternal return of capitalism, the idea is to relocate the utopian element in the past to engage in a form of mythmaking from below that re-signifies the historical process as a series of bifurcations and roads not taken.[232] As such, this retrospective utopian impulse represents history as the accumulation of abandoned revolutionary projects. The figure of Luc-

231 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 65.
232 Cf. Wu Ming, "Spectres of Müntzer" xix-xxxvi.

ien might be considered a literalization of this trend as he charts the ruination of revolutionary dreams. At once, though, there always pertains a certain sense of foreclosure to his project which Lucien wryly admits when he fashions himself as a "titulaire d'un diplôme de licence en histoire. En catastrophe."[233] In this sense, the reading process is not only moulded by the traces of the past but also the perpetual encounter with a future denied.

Lucien's quest to write a stage-tale about the foregone possibilities of an independent African continent is crucial to the historical narrative developed in *Tram 83*. In fact, the unfinished book project is superimposed with the project of decolonialization. Echoing the unfinished train station – according to "légende" the quasi-mythical origin of so many "guerres de libération" – both are depicted in terms of a "construction […] inachevée."[234] In that sense, the novel is filled with nods to the ill-fated demise of the "Third World" and its promise of a different globalization.[235] Interrogating the remnants and ambivalences of anti-imperialist internationalism, the text for instance lines up the "offensive cubano-éthiopienne début février 1977" in the territorial conflict over Ogaden (after Somalia's invasion of the region) only to go on reciting the story of Cuban war veterans who sing about how they ended up being devoured ("poussés à s'engouffrer") by Stanley's "train direction la Ville-Pays" to devote their lives to goldmining in the "Mine de l'Espérance" which, now, has replaced the revolutionary hopes of yesteryear.[236] This can be applied to Ville-Pays overall, which is depicted in allusion to Katanga as a country midwifed "par la force des kalachnikovs" in defiance of the "gouvernement central, malgré ses soldats

233 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 62.

234 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 14.

235 Cf. Bevins, *The Jakarta Method*, 13. The original notion of the "Third World" was modelled after the 1789 revolution of the so-called "Third-Estate" against the Second and First Estate of the combined clergy and aristocracy.

236 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 81. See also Deckard: "African Resource Culture," 253. According to Deckard, the locomotive hereby is constructed as a "dialectical" image that at once conveys a certain comedic fatalism: it "invoke[es] both the long history of imperialist exploitation and the resistance movement which arose in opposition to it," but does so "through the jaded eyes of political disillusion."

formés en Chine, au Soudan, en Angola et à Cuba."[237] As such, it indicates – in a dig at Mao's saying that "political power grows out of the barrel of the gun"[238] – the inversion of the fight for national liberation into a sectarian struggle over mineral resources. In this vein, the novel narrates the takeover of a comprador bourgeoisie, especially in the form of the dissident General, that opts out of anti-imperialist internationalism in favour of a regional separatism allied with an extractive foreign capital: "De toutes les bourses, les peuplades prenaient d'assaut la capitale de la Ville-Pays."[239]

Here, in fact, *Tram 83* charts the bifurcations in the project of a Third World itself. The Chinese soldiers that defended the "gouvernement central" in a sort of Afro-Asian solidarity, now, have made way for "touristes chinois" that stand in for the new South-South development agenda of the Belt and Road initiative.[240] This divergency is significant as Duncan M. Yoon argues: "Congolese literature has long invoked China as a trope, reaching as far back as the years of independence and the ensuing Congo Crisis" such that the shifts in "China as a trope" refract China's new economic role in Africa and broader drifts in the alliance system of the anti-colonial movement.[241] As the mining frontier, then,

237 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 28. The reference to the rebel armies equipped with "machettes" and "flèches," supported at the front by a "féticheur," functions as an allusion to the nominally Maoist Simba and Kwilu insurgencies against Mobotu's seizure of power which often were poorly armed and performed occult rituals to terrify enemy forces.

238 Mao Tse-tung. "Problems of War and Strategy." *Selected Works Vol. II*. Oxford: Pergamon Press. 224.

239 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 29.

240 Cf. Duncan M. Yoon. "Figuring Africa and China: Congolese Literary Imaginaries of the PRC." *Journal of World Literature* 6. 191; Mujila, *Tram 83*, 252–253. Yoon argues that the representation of Chinese tourists in *Tram 83* suggests "they are not entirely of the same ilk," even if they are described "as emphatically for profit." For one thing, they "provide asylum" to the protagonists. Moreover, Chinese characters are again and again shown to engage in generous activities such as ordering rounds for the entire bar (when the national team had won a football game against the Cameroon) or offering to pay for food "si c'est la faim qui te fait perdre les pédales."

241 Yoon, "Figuring Africa and China: Congolese Literary Imaginaries of the PRC," 192. Take Mudimbe's 1973 *Entre les eaux* which juxtaposes the Maoist inspiration of the guerrilla rebellions against Mobutu to the appropriation of Maoism by the Mobutu regime itself. If in the context of guerilla warfare Maoism was infused into "a revolutionary politics against the Cold War and an inchoate postcolonialism," then under Mobutu "Maoism no longer symbolized a politics of opposition based on mobilizing the peasantry, but rather authori-

is roamed by capitalists from North to South all while absorbing former revolutionaries abandoning the project of anti-imperialist internationalism, the promise of a "nouveau monde" is constantly re-called yet as realized in the image of capitalist globalization.[242] This contradictory legacy is to a certain degree encoded in the recurring ideologeme of the failed nation-state in that it evokes ahistorical visions of the "Third World" that would associate the term with failed catch-up modernization but also the promise of another world that, indeed, today "n'exist[e] que sur papier."[243] Befitting Lucien's self-description as a licensed disaster historian, Ville-Pays is represented as a post-apocalyptic landscape marked by the ruin of "L'Afrique des Possibles," that is, the irreversible loss of a world: "Le monde est irrécupérable."[244] That way, *Tram 83* gives representational form to the making of the extraction enclave in and through the defeat of the decolonial moment in which the utopian impulses of the term Third World – signalling the self-affirmation of a new actor on the world-stage – declined into a signifier of third-rate nationhood.[245]

These gestures to the global moment of anti-imperialism, now, call for a de-nationalization of any historical-allegorical reading of the novel. One might, here, follow Perry Anderson's analysis of the mutations of

tarian power through a personality cult and state propaganda, as exemplified by Mobutu's abacost and publication of the *Little Green Book*. During the Cold War, Maoism thereby manifested as a paradox in the Congo, simultaneously inspiring both rebels and dictator. The end of Mobutu's dictatorship saw the rise of Chinese foreign direct investment in the DRC during the first twenty years of the twenty-first century. China as a trope in Congolese literature reflected this change."

242 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 33.

243 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 66.

244 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 143 See also Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 9. Interestingly, Lazarus argues that the field of postcolonial studies emerged in response to the demise of the Third World. It "breathed the air of the reassertion of imperial dominance in the 1970s. […]. The decisive defeat of liberationist ideologies […] was fundamental to the emergent field, whose subsequent consolidation, during the 1980s and early 1990s, might then be seen, at least in part, as a function of its articulation of a complex intellectual response to this defeat."

245 Cf. Clovis Maksoud. "Redefining Non-Alignment: The Global South in the New Global Equation." *Altered States: A Reader in the New World Order*. Phyllis Bennis and Michael Moushabeck (Eds.). New York: Olive Branch. 34. The abandonment of the term as a signifier of political contestation was historically sealed when in 1992 the former non-aligned nations chose to discard the notion in favour of the geographical construction of a "Global South."

historical fiction across the 20th century. The British intellectual, in fact, notes a shift away from the implication of the historical novel in the process of nation-building. Intriguingly, he localizes this change most crucially in the context of forestalled decolonialization, for which, according to him, the historical experience of Latin America and especially Haiti provided the blueprint. To illustrate his point, he contrasts two novels from roughly the same period. First, he takes Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, fittingly published in the run-up to the nationalization of the Suez Canal, which is still carried by a "historical formulation of the idea of progress"[246] as it depicts the fortunes of a merchant family in the context of a young and modernizing Egypt. To this, Anderson opposes Alejo Carpentier's 1949 *El Reino de este Mundo*, which processes the defeat of the first anti-colonial revolution – the Haitian slave revolt from 1804 – and thereby sets a literary precedent for later meta-historical reflections on the eclipse of the Bandung Era.[247] Following Anderson's analysis, one can, now, argue that Carpentier anticipates the discourse of historicity unfolded in *Tram 83* (which itself continually recalls the intersections between African and Caribbean history). In *El Reino de este Mundo* every insurgency eventually devolves into its opposite: starting with the futile effort of Mackandal, a black Jacobine, to expulse the white settler-colonialists from the island, through Henri Christophe's transformation into a despot, to the Mulatto Republic that emerges at the end of the novel and which re-subjects the black population to servitude. In Carpentier's account of the Haitian rebellion, the struggle for liberation takes on the character of a false act: history appears as the perpetual acting out of still-born revolutions. Incidentally, this tragic view of history is an explicit point of reference for another Caribbean author, Édouard Glissant, in his attempt to grapple with the specious temporality of post- or neo-coloniality.[248] In fact, according to him, Carpentier's meta-historical narrative of defeat reflects a historical phase marked by the fundamental absence of events or "cuts," whereby he

246 Georg Lukács. *The Historical Novel*. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Transl.). Boston: Beacon Press. 174

247 Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," Online.

248 Édoaurd Glissant. *Caribbean Discourse. Selected Essays*. J. Michael Dash (Transl.). Charlotteville: University Press of Virginia. 79–83.

means something double: 1) the fact of being "cut off from the world" as in the international isolation of Haiti after 1804; 2) the abolition of a "cut" that slices through time in a radical break with colonization.[249] Thereby, he returns us to the shift in the notion of crisis from an event that cuts through chronological time to an epochal term. In his *Discours Antillais* (1981), in fact, Glissant envisages the departmentalization of the oversea regions of France initiated in 1946 in terms of the perpetual production of impossibility – a "dead-end situation"[250] – that finds itself materialized in an economic structure based in the thorough dependency of a de-industrialized archipelago from metropolitan commodity-production wherein opting out of the French state-system is made to appear as an utter impracticality. Thus, the sense of impossibility pertaining to the "end of history" finds an acute and early expression in the traumatic account of colonial continuities.[251]

249 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 7; Nick Nesbitt. *Caribbean Critique. Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 144–145.

250 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 1.

251 This shift in the "political unconscious" of the historical novel might be further illustrated with a short comparison between two oil narratives that precisely showcases – in the medium of literature – the displacement of a developmentalist perspective by a "resource curse" thesis: Abdul Rahman Munif's 1984 *Cities of Salt* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* from 2010. The former is, in fact, the crucial point of reference for Amitav Gosh's coinage of the genre of petrofiction, as it narrates the eruption of fossil capital into a traditional Bedouin context but at once negotiates the prospect of catch-up modernization facilitated by the nationalization of oil reserves (Amitav Ghosh. "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel." *Incendiary Circumstances*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 138–151). Habila's novel, on the other hand, is placed in the petro-industrial complex of the Niger Delta, telling a story that revolves around multinational corporations and an informal labour regime policed by criminal practices but that is rather removed from any supposed developmentalist paradigm. The differences between these two cases are striking. In *Cities of Salt*, oil is first and foremost present as an absent object of negotiation. If it appears as a narrative force, it does so as a commodity not in terms of its physical properties. In Habila's oil novel, by contrast, subjects turn into objects of the petro-environment that surrounds them. The non-human world appears much more alive and active than the human world. Habila depicts a landscape of "dead matter" that is "suffocated by a film of oil." (Helon Habila. *Oil on Water*. New York: Norton. 9–10) What, hence, emerges is the image of an exhausted economy that displays little of Munif's sense of "lost opportunity for the independence and development of the Arab world" associated with oil reserves (Amy Riddle. "Petrofiction and Political Economy in the Age of Late Fossil Capital." *Mediations* 31:2. 56). Petroleum, here, appears as some sort of ultimate commodity that functions – as Negarestani puts in his traversal of the phantasmagorias and death-cults spawned by the fossil industry – like an "autonomous terrestrial conspirator." Assuming a capacity for autonomous self-expan-

That said, it is another Martinican, Aimé Césaire, who acts as the key conversation partner for *Tram 83* in that regard. His tragedy *Une Saison au Congo* (1966) – reconstructing the final days of Lumumba – is crucially echoed in Lucien's "théatre-conte" which itself circles around the fall of Lumumba: "la chute d'un ange."[252] For Césaire, in fact, considers the experience of the "Congo Crisis" (1960–65) a quintessential object-lesson in neo-colonialism. In this astonishing piece, the defeat of decolonialization is acted out via the Belgian-supported secession of Katanga and the role of the UN Security Council, re-enacting the fate of Lumumba, who was abducted and executed by separatists with the approval of Belgium and the U.S. – a constellation only uncovered decades later, and one that lays bare a new form of neo-colonial interventionism. The deposition of Congolese democracy is staged as a centrepiece of Cold War power politics. In so doing, the Martinican poet turns the Lukácsean conception of progressive realism, which also serves as a crucial contrast foil for Anderson's analysis, upside-down. Georg Lukács has, of course, influentially insisted that political literature need not act like agitprop – articulating moral ideals "which reality is requested to fulfil" – but simply register the inner tendencies of history, since he considers the emancipatory forces leading to the overcoming of class society integral to "the self-movement of this reality itself."[253] Césaire's turn to the tragic in *Une Saison au Congo*, now, counteracts this triumphalist vision. Here, history is not on the side of the oppressed. Instead, the piece draws its critical impetus from dramatizing precisely the defeated struggles of the forgotten of history

sion, oil is represented in the image of capital. It is imagined as "a sentient entity" that seeks the infiltration of all sectors of planetary life. It is almost as if this ascription of a surplus of agency to the subterranean asserted that the logic of capital emanates from the natural properties of petroleum itself. (Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*, 27) That way, however, the environmental and social havoc wrecked by oil business risks being delinked representationally from the historical circumstances that enable its extraction, trade, and combustion.

252 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 65.

253 Georg Lukács. "'Tendency' or Partisanship?" *Essays on Realism*. Rodney Livingstone (Ed.). David Fernbach *(Transl.). Cambridge: MIT Press.* 37, 42. According to Lukács, the Marxist novelist, thus, has to reflect these tendencies in a recognizable narrative form that expresses an unmistakable "partisanship for the class that is the bearer of [this] historical progress."

"allegorized in the violent disappearance of Lumumba."[254] This becomes most noticeable in the re-arrangement of Lumumba's speech of independence. If the original address started off with an optimistic pronouncement of economic development, the literary adaptation shifts the emphasis toward the "oubliés" of history "que l'on déposséda, que l'on frappa, que l'on mutila" evoked only in the latter parts of the actual speech.[255] Inverting the teleological fallacies of catch-up growth discourses, the piece provides an early rebuttal of the naturalizing narratives that have come to dominate thinking about the so-called "African Tragedy." By contrast, it crafts a thoroughly historico-political tragedy that testifies to the violence whereby the decolonial project was subdued and deleted from memory.

This tragical sense of defeat is omnipresent in *Tram 83*. In the historical narrative that the novel provides, it is not "the emergence of the nation, but the ravages of empire; not progress as emancipation, but impending or consummated catastrophe"[256] that are at stake. The text follows up on the mutation of the nation-building exercises of the historical novel – the epic form of modernity according to Lukács – into the images of negative growth prevalent in current historiographic narrations. As such, it grasps and reworks what Anderson describes as the curious "centrality of dictator novels in th[e] cluster of writing"[257] published in the aftermath of the Bandung Era. In exactly this sense, the list of characters supposed to be included in Lucien's stage-tale concludes with the enumeration of the dissident General, a Mobutu-type of character, which gives the series of names recited by the aspiring author a bitter aftertaste. The list starts off with Che Guevara and Sékou Touré, further mentioning Lumumba or Martin Luther King. Then it is sutured by the names of Ceaușescu and the "Général dissident," marking an involution in the anti-imperialist moment that the commander-in-chief of Ville-Pays already carries in its title: the inversion of "dis-

254 Anjuli I. Gunaratne. "*Corps perdu: Une Saison au Congo* and Aimé Césaire's Theory of Tragedy." *Research in African Literatures* 51:2. 195.
255 Aimé Césaire. *Une Saison au Congo.* Paris: Éditions Points. 30–31; See also Gunaratne, "Aimé Césaire's Theory of Tragedy," 195.
256 Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," Online.
257 Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," Online.

sidence" into a means of power. In the vein of Césaire's tragic play, the novel, thus, stages the extraction enclave as a focus point of suspended liberation. What is more: by making the demise of decolonialization's past futures the *sine qua non* of its historical realism, *Tram 83* navigates the saturation of former liberationist ideologies. Insofar literary spacetime, then, is entangled in the multiple histories of anti-colonial struggle, the extraction enclave is staged as an epicentre of recuperation in which the co-optation and neutralization of former languages of (anti-colonial) dissidence is exemplarily acted out.

6 Market Disharmonies: Dissidence and its Discontents

> Today, therefore, for workers to speak as if the […] counter-revolutionary condition did not exist is ahistorical, yet for workers to speak *as* post-Thermidorians is to *in-authenticate* their speech, to *re-naturalise* it.
>
> — Roberts, *Alter-Realism*, 97n7.

What is important in this is that the novel steadily transcodes the aesthetic into the political and vice versa. The history of anticolonial aesthetics is sampled into a kind of post-revolutionary realism that fundamentally poses the question of the timeliness of form. Mujila seems crucially intent on charting the critical limits of the dissident languages developed in response to the postcolonial predicament. Thereby, *Tram 83* implements a specific take on the notion of "reprendre" elaborated by Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, which envisages the re-uptake of "an interrupted tradition […] in a way that reflects the conditions of today" instead of reifying it in a nostalgic musealization of the past.[258] Against this backdrop, I argue, the titular bar takes on the character of a social laboratory by means of which the text explores the subtle differences

258 Valentin-Yves Mudimbe. 1991. "'Reprendre': Enunciations & Strategies in Contemporary African Arts." *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*. Susan Vogel and Ima Ebong (Eds.). München: Prestel Verlag. 276.

that define criticism from ideology. One could, of course, superficially read the bar as a case of self-exoticization. To some extent, it appears like a textbook example from Binyavanga Wainaina's satirical piece *How to write about Africa* (2006) wherein the Kenyan author ironically remarks on the ubiquity of such places in African literatures: "You'll also need a nightclub called Tropicana, where mercenaries, evil nouveau riche Africans and prostitutes and guerrillas and expats hang out."[259] But Mujila takes these clichés head-on to engage in a provocative re-functioning of the bar-trope into a fictional gimmick that accentuates the specific function of literature as a descriptive and notational apparatus able to synthesize some of the heterogenous realities of a disconnected social field.[260] In this sense, the bar is more than a realistic portrayal of Congolese nightlife, even if it resonates with Nlandu's elaborations on Kinshasa's bar culture.[261] Rather, it constitutes a seemingly impossible meeting-place that functions like a necessary diegetic pre-requisite for literary fiction to rise to the challenge of postcolonial urban life in the first place. It marks a crucial speculative construction that enables the narrative act to transgress the atomization of social experience.

In this, the novel takes up a theme that has been pushed in recent decades by literary collectives such as *Libr'écrire*, namely the conception of Congolese urban space as an "épicentre littéraire."[262] Fittingly, on the level of novelistic diegesis, Ville-Pays seems way more entrenched into global commodity culture than it is connected to Arrière-Pays despite the apparent geographical adjacencies. More than a regional centre that mostly attracts local musicians or artists, the city is depicted as a central juncture in the so-called Global South. Thereby, the novel traces, for instance, the "new connections that have recently been made with the

259 Binyavanga Wainaina. "How to write about Africa." *Granta* 92. https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/ [last accessed 20.05.2022].

260 See also Norbert Niemann. *Erschütterungen. Literatur und Globalisierung unter dem Diktat von Markt und Macht*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag. 46. Norbert Niemann argues something similar in his reading of Alain Mabanckou's *Verre Cassé*, where the bistro at the centre of the narrative is considered a "Mit- und Aufschreibesystem" and as such a counter-model to an otherwise unresponsive urban reality.

261 Nlandu, "Kinshasa: Beyond Dichotomies,"

262 Dominique Ranaivoson. "Entretien avec Fiston Mwanza Mujila." *Études Littéraires Africaines* 27. 46–54.

Caribbean […] and the Lusophone space" in and by French-speaking Congolese literature (see also Mujila's latest novel *La Danse du Vilain* from 2020, which is crucially preoccupied with the historical relationship between Angola and the DRC).[263] The novel's outlook, hence, is decidedly transnational, tracing cross-continental itineraries that are generally neglected in the dominant systems of literary history. In this, the enmeshment of Lubumbashi, Mbuji-Mavi, and Kinshasa into the allegorical space of Ville-Pays serves to re-imagine these spaces as trading and testing centres for aesthetic forms re-circulated back and forth between earth regions.

This cultural exchange is most intriguingly symbolized by the musical backdrop of the novel with the bar as the quintessential site of social interaction. Hosting musicians and genres from across the Global South or transatlantic black culture, the nightclub is the scene of a never-ending import of gigs judged as to their timeliness by the Tram's unapologetic consumer masses:

> Each time we are ushered into it we have the benefit of a band playing and are given elaborate descriptions of the provenance of the bandsmen (they come from various parts of the world, including South America), the sources of their music (a medley of jazz, salsa, Zairean-infused rumba, and several other music types), their playing styles (good, bad, and plain mournful), and even of the clothes they wear.[264]

Thereby, the text is moulded into a melting pot of aesthetic styles that collectively shape the novel's soundtrack. According to Srilata Ravi, referring back to Mbembe and the Djiboutian writer Abdourahman Waberi, the urban musical scene depicted in the form of the nightclub, realizes a series of "afropolitan wanderings"[265] that negotiate the encounter between contemporary cultural forms which in one way or another are moulded by postcolonial mobilities. Given the novel's

263 Riva, "Congolese Literature as Part of Planetary Literature," 219n8.
264 Quayson, "Shakara Baby-Chicks and Locomotive Tales" Online.
265 Srilata Ravi. "Urban Musical Cultures and Postcolonial Mobilities in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* and Wilfried N'Sondé's *Fleur de Béton*." *Essays in French Literature and Culture* 52. 83.

essential musicality, the 33 chapters that make up the text can be seen as a series of "33 tracks" which re-improvise "other texts circulating in global popular culture and in francophone contexts."[266] Against this backdrop, it is redundant to point out that the critical impetus of *Tram 83* consists in challenging "concepts of homogenous national cultures" or "'organic' ethnic communities."[267] Multiplicity is the background noise of the novel and in this it is far from painting simply a celebratory, peaceful picture of global exchange. In fact, the text precisely charts the discourses of cultural hybridization and authenticity that are invoked as reservoirs of political contestation in a world-market context so as to act out the critical limits of these languages of dissidence against the background of the titular bar.

Oftentimes, this testing and probing is already indicated in the chapter titles such as in section 13 named "Cahier d'un retour au *Tram 83*"[268] which reworks Césaire's poetic debut *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* from 1939. In this track, we see the confrontation of a program of "négritude" with the panorama of the titular nightclub. If the work of the early Césaire tends to reject an agenda of cultural hybridization and instead encourages the endorsement of black values against the prospect of assimilation, then in the installations of the *Tram 83*, described as completely "surpeuplées,"[269] transculturation appears utterly irreversible. Of course, "négritude" does not come down to a mere identarian project. Rather, it articulates a revolt against the nullification of black existence by instigating black people to auto-construct as a plural subject with a proper destiny in the world.[270] In contrast, the return to the titular bar is fully governed by a "no future" sentiment. The audience is not united by the sense of a shared heritage but divided by the imperatives of market competition. Against this backdrop, it seems, the exultated return to an imagined native land loses its ideological bearings. That way, the novel confronts past languages of critique and current

266 Ravi, "Urban Musical Cultures and Postcolonial Mobilities," 85.
267 Homi K. Bhabha. The Location of Culture. London/New York: Routledge. 5.
268 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 105.
269 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 105.
270 Cf. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 60.

realities to give representational form – through their polarities – to the socio-political state of affairs in the extraction enclave.

The sense of division that is thereby created is all the more accentuated when the text starts parodying idealist musings from the other side of the emancipationist spectrum, namely theories of hybridization as for example in the section header prefacing chapter 9. Here, the nightclub is referred to as a "symbole d'une société en parfaite harmonie, métissée, brassée," gesturing ironically to the concept of cultural "métissage," only to transfigure it step-by-step into a spermatic image of failed cross-fertilization: "éjaculations précoces."[271] In this, the novel satirically re-works the various ideas of (dis-)harmony and copulation associated with the notion of "métissage," which are worth recovering here to give a sense of the dialectical reversals that *Tram 83* traces again and again in the "reprise" of older and more recent discourses. Etymologically speaking, the word goes back to the time of the Spanish Empire, where "mestizaje/mestizo" designated something akin to racial intermixing and marked the constitutive other of an emerging racist ideology of blood purity: the so-called "limpieza de sangre." This meaning of the word persists up until the clinical discourse of Vichy France where the term is associated with a state of disharmony ("métissage dysharmonique"[272]) understood as the central cause for civilizational decline.[273] But, as insists Robert Young, this colonial obsession with the "spermatic economy" of "interbreeding" is equally mired in fantasies of assimilation that violently recode the body of the "native" as an object of penetration and gradual "whitening."[274] In the cultural politics of the post-war era, however, the colonial discourse of "métissage" has been increasingly subjected to a re-interpretation that shifts the concept away from notions of racial inferiority to a more affirmative vision of transculturation. Take for example the Cuban authors

271 Fiston Mwanza Mujila, *Tram 83*, 77.

272 René Martial. *Les Métis*. Paris: Flammarion. 43. Martial was a French anthropologist who climbed the career ladder during the period of the Vichy Regime and actively collaborated with Nazi Germany.

273 Cf. Jennifer Yee. "*Métissage* in France: A Postmodern Fantasy and its Forgotten Precedents." *Modern & Contemporary France* 11:4. 415.

274 Cf. Robert J.C. Young. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Race, and Culture*. London/New York: Routledge. 170–171.

José Martf, Nicohis Guillén, or Nancy Morejón, who de-biologize the concept of "mestizaje" to re-signify it into an enabling concept capable of forging new solidarities. The circulation of the term in the contemporary Humanities, though, is most crucially mediated by Glissant who ties into this re-reading. Albeit it must be said that he does not invest it with a utopian impulse. Rather, he simply means to oppose a concept of cultural homogeneity by presupposing "métissage" as an irreversible "absolute fact.[275] Nonetheless, there is a line of critique levelled against the philosopher that precisely takes this notion as an entry point to construe his theoretical project as an apotheosis of the global market order. For someone like Peter Hallward, Glissant's vision of multiplicity boils down to an "aesthetic of reconciliation" that is underwritten by presumptions of a "pre-established harmony" and, thus, all-too easily maps onto a neoliberal vision of globalization.[276] Curiously, then, current debates re-work older talking points. The ambivalent linkage between interbreeding and assimilation in colonial discourses returns in the suspicion that the new notion of "métissage" articulates a cosmopolitan utopia of globalization which conceals underlying relations of inequality. It, thus, becomes clear that the genealogy of the concept is lined by inversions. The aim of this short excursion, then, is not to commit to a specific take on the notion but to suggest that it is these flows and counter-flows of meaning which form the subtext of the novel's invocation of the notion of "métissage." In fact, Mujila's play on the harmony/disharmony binary that recurs along the de- and re-coding of the concept displays a satirical awareness of the complications troubling the attempted re-interpretation of the term into a utopian or anti-racist signifier.

The description of the so-called Hope Mine as a "véritable tour de Babel" that acts as "la principale pomme de discorde entre les différents protagonistes" is telling here.[277] Far from inspiring solidarity or attesting

275 Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 251. The English translation glosses over the differences between *créolisation* and *métissage* by indifferently rendering them as "creolization."

276 Peter Hallward. *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 6. 123.

277 Mujila: *Tram 83,* 139.

to a pre-established harmony, the landscapes of "métissage" depicted in the novel are divided by economic interests and unequal access to resources. In that vein, the text concludes in a more than plain language, which inverts the heading of chapter 9, that the multiple "services de sécurités" that compete for excavation rights "ne vivaient pas en parfaite harmonie."[278] The vision of harmonious hybridization is satirized into an image of "violent intermingling."[279] In this, "métissage" turns into an "amours fous force" bestowed on the most vulnerable clients of the bar: "les clients les plus minables."[280] It is, hence, entirely consistent that the invocation of the bar as a site of peaceful transculturation, eventually, leads over into the tale of a mining disaster. As if written off from Hayek, it turns out that the harmony in question is market equilibrium where homeostasis respectively re-adjustment demands that some must be allowed to die to make way for stronger competitors.[281] Rather than a harmonious "métissage" of cultures it is more an intensified competition that can be observed in *Tram 83*.

Concerning the musical background itself of *Tram 83*, now, it is the genre of jazz through which these reversals are most blatantly acted out. From the start, it is presented as a recuperated musical form thoroughly inscribed into a history of globalization. When we enter the titular bar there are bands playing the classics of the genre: from John Coltrane to Dizzy Gillespie's 1942 *A Night in Tunisia*. Yet, the consumption of jazz appears largely dissociated or extracted from black culture.[282] There is no trace of Miles Davis' "cool" posture in defiance of the white-supremacist demand for a docile and entertaining – "grinning"[283] as he calls it – racial Other. If the "mask of the cool" was marked by the search for a "new public face"[284] able to express an utter indifference to the white gaze, then in *Tram 83* jazz has turned into a quite antithetical

278 Mujila: *Tram 83*, 139–140.
279 Ravi, "Urban Musical Cultures," 86.
280 Mujila: *Tram 83*, 77.
281 Montag, "Necro-Economics," 13.
282 Cf. Mujila, *Tram 83*, 24–25.
283 Alex Haley and Miles Davis. "The Playboy Interview." *Miles Davis and American Culture*. Gerald Early (Ed.). Columbia: University of Missouri Press. 199–200.
284 Joel Dinkelstein. "The Mask of the Cool in Postwar Jazz and Film Noir." *The Cultural Career of Coolness*. Ulla Haselstein et al. (Eds.). Lanham: Lexington Books. 122.

"stratagème"[285] where the coolness of self-control cultivated by early jazz musicians is substituted for the imitation of jazz as a commodified indicator of coolness. Thus, it is ironically the white "tourists" from whom the locals learn the semiotics of jazz. As such, it is depicted as an initiation rite whereby the bargoers inscribe themselves into the economic cycle of the city:

> […] on écoute le jazz parce qu'il faut écouter du jazz quand on dort sur des billets de banque, qu'on livre quotidiennement sa marchandise, qu'on s'occupe d'une usine d'extraction, qu'on est cousin du Général dissident […]. Le jazz est un signe de noblesse, c'est la musique des riches et des nouveaux riches, de ceux qui construisent ce beau monde cassé.[286]

Along these lines, the genre's improvisatory process – its "terrain abrupt" – is re-imagined after neoliberal creative destruction.[287] Taking on jazz-like properties, here, means to free oneself of historical baggage under a constant injunction of re-improvisation in the face of a precarious reality. In this, something strangely apocalyptic pertains to the consumption of jazz in the novel. Dislocated from the history of black emancipation, it functions as "la seule identification à une certaine bourgeoisie, la bourgeoisie de la dernière heure"[288] which recognizes in jazz's improvisatory process a catastrophic forgetting of history. In this capacity, jazz is continually depicted as a cultural commodity consumed by the nouveaux riches to announce their advent in the exclusive circles of the wealthy. Yet, as a sign of capitalist "nobility" it functions precisely insofar no one has any idea about the evolution of the music genre: "sur ses origines, ses développements, ses grandes figures."[289] The consumption of jazz functions as an empty ritual that is endlessly re-enacted in the dancehalls of the nightclub in a collective performance of the fantasy of social mobility underlying the rush on rare ores: "Le jazz est le seul levier dont se sert toute racaille du *Tram*

285 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 26.
286 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 24–25.
287 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 24.
288 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 25.
289 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 24, 149.

83 pour changer de classe sociale."[290] Jazz, thus, appears as an elemental vehicle for the libidinal economy of the global market order. The bargoers "épousent les manières" of the "touristes à but lucratif" in the hope of economic success.[291] Insofar the consumption of jazz is traversed by such a class split, however, it is the site of an "antagonistic aesthetization" in that the lifestyle promises of the market are negatively experienced as the "illusionary concretion for others."[292] Jazz, then, assumes a highly ambivalent position in the text. It stops functioning as a form of critical self-assertion. But as a commodified product it is marked out by the text as a contradictory terrain where class differences are played out.

That said, the probing and testing that characterizes *Tram 83* takes on an even more perplexing character when the novel traces a reversal of Césaire's *Retour au Pays Natal* into the "mouvement de l'Authenticité"[293] referenced throughout the novel, which invokes the program of so-called "zaïrianisation" supposed to articulate precisely a "Return to Authenticity."[294] Expressive of a certain desire for re-territorialization, the image of an autochthon culture conjured here, however, is not the mark of a residual temporality. Rather, it is fully situated within the sequence of postcolonial nation-building as Authenticity/Zairization[295] names the official state ideology under Mobutu, where the language of dissident decolonialization (spoken by someone like Lumumba) is

290 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 25.

291 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 24–25.

292 Wolfgang Fritz Haug. "Commodity Aesthetics Revisited. Exchange Relations as the Source of Antagonistic Aesthetization." Radical Philosophy 135. 23.

293 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 193.

294 Mobutu Sese Seko. *Address to the Conseil National Extraordinaire, Dakar, 14 February.* https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/1971-sese-seko-mobutu-address-conseil-nationale-extraordinaire-dakar-14-february-1971/ [last accessed 25.07.2022].

295 See also Peter Forbath. *The River Congo*. New York: HarperCollins. 1 ; Jean-Pierre Langellier. *Mobutu*. Paris: Perrin (biographie). 169. Here one might reflect on the peculiar neologism "Zaire" itself which already marks a thoroughly transcultural construct. Supposedly derived from a local designation for what is today called the Congo River, the name is alternately sourced back to an incorrect Portuguese pronunciation of the Kikongo word *nzadi* or *zere*, roughly translating to "the river that swallows all rivers," or is presented as the synthesis of multiple Bantu toponyms for the river. In any case, the artificial character of the neologism can hardly be denied, as it is either marked by the insisting presence of colonial language politics or the product of a supra-ethnic homogenization that passes over possible cultural differences among the various groups composing the population of post-independence Congo. The term, thus, simulates authenticity to salvage new authentic origins

re-functioned to legitimate the concentration of power in the hands of new economic elites.[296] Thus, as is the case in one of Mujila's short-stories, the name "Lumumba" is stripped of its ability to articulate an anti-colonial critique. Instead, it is incorporated into the language of power ("Even his executioners have become certified *Lumumbistes*!") and, eventually, turned into "a business venture" that fundamentally re-defines the meaning of the name: "Lumumba means money."[297]

It is interesting, now, that it is Requiem, of all people, who articulates the most radical opposition to the sloganeering recourse to an "authentic" African identity, opting instead for an "idéologie de rupture avec le cordon ombilical."[298] One might at first feel reminded, here, of Fanon's critique of black essentialism ("My skin is not a repository for specific values"[299]) since Requiem unapologetically dismisses any imagined return to some precolonial African roots. Yet, it would be misguided to simply read this passage in an affirmative way. Rather, we can witness another reversal that is all the more significant concerning Requiem's conversion from a Marxist student into a free marketeer. His rejection of the sacred figure of the bond is consonant with the levelling effects of capitalist exchange delineated already in the *Communist Manifesto*: "all that is holy is profaned."[300] Seeking to cut all family ties that might bind him to an ethnic heritage, Requiem abandons his birthname in an effort to impersonate the compulsions of the economy. The novel lists as many as 60 pseudonyms which are worn alternately as he purports to speak for instance for the market itself ("alias marché") or the Tokyo Stock Exchange ("alias La Bourse de Tokyo").[301] In a gesture of capitalist ventriloquism, Requiem strips in and out of these "titres de

for (economic) power, which Mobutu himself, inadvertently exemplifies in the mantra of the "Three Z's" ("Notre Pays, Notre Fleuve, Notre Monnaie," all named *Zaire*) that intricately links the construction of a new national identity to the introduction of a new currency.

296 Cf. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 81, 148ff. It is partly in relation to the backlash against Lumumba that Fanon analyses the "pitfalls of national consciousness," stating that in the context of post-independence new elites emerge who mobilize the language of nativism to find popular backing for the establishment of a new national bourgeoisie.

297 Mujila, "The Lumumba Business." 57.

298 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 193.

299 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 6.

300 Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 476.

301 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 43–44.

noblesses" as if he could only ephemerally assume an identity by forgetting his past selves and getting fully absorbed in capitalist markets. He is, thus, a dividual in the truest sense of the word. His name-shifting is fully adjusted to the boom and bust of commodity markets: "aux saisons et descentes dans les dédales du Polygone de la Mine de l'Espérance."[302] If Fanon's "radical break"[303] with his Antillean past, making the cause of Algerian independence his own innermost cause, marks an act of anti-colonial universalism, then Requiem's break fully seeks to give himself over to the abstract universality of capital. Enjoying his de-personalization in the flux of money, he, hence, appears as a peculiar revenant of Eric Packer and the other bunch of neoliberal "psychos" encountered throughout this study.

One could of course, now, ask whether it is not precisely in the shape of Requiem, embodying the Schumpeterian figure of the entrepreneur ("the true severer of all connections"[304]), that the novel presents an opening. It would, then, be the economic trickster who acts as a force of transgression by unleashing the profaning forces of the world market to leave behind a social field denuded of "sacralities" or "authenticities" wherein competition can finally run rampant unhindered by umbilical bonds. Yet, in this, Requiem rather seems to be charging open doors since the contentious posture presented by his ideology of aggressive particularization first and foremost promises more of the same: "On ne trafique pas avec son destin, radotait le Négus. […]. La pauvreté est héréditaire comme le pouvoir […]."[305] Positing a vision of inequality

302 Mujila, *Tram 83,* 44.

303 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 25.

304 Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development*, 134.

305 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 229. See also Mujila, *Tram 83*, 41. It is in a similar vein that the novel traces the critical limits of the image of nomadism, which today oscillates between the romanticization of flexible labour in neoliberal management literature and the anti-statist vocabulary of post-68 thinkers such as Deleuze/Guattari: "[…] ils n'ont pas les pieds sur terre. Nomades, ils viennent et partent comme […] les indépendances, les guerres de libération, l'urgence de déféquer dans les escaliers d'un immeuble entre deux délestages." Related to the coming and going of decolonial movements but also the history of "délestages" undergirding the depiction of structural re-adjustment in the novel, the image of nomadism is, thus, fundamentally inscribed with a historical index. Caught in the rhythm of incoming and departing trains, responding incessantly to tightening cash flows (as in the case of the sex workers), steadily "inventing" new "systems" to earn a living in the economic cycle of Ville-Pays, the labour of extraction as represented in the novel appears irrevocably footloose.

stripped of the superstition of ethnic bonds but veiled in the naturalized appearance of market competition, Requiem reformulates the neoliberal narrative of the false act traced throughout this study. He affirms the naturalizing discourse of the "African Tragedy" by absolutizing economic disparities in a fatalistic narrative which assumes that the tragic error (the "hamartia" in Aristotelean parlance) issues from the very act of trying to struggle against a "tragédie [qui] est déjà écrite."[306] In this, of course, he is fully conform with his consultancy of Lucien in the rules-based order of this "Nouveau Monde." Performing the futility of resistance by returning to the failure of a post-capitalist future over and over, Requiem upholds that one should acquiesce to the pre-written tragic script of a perennial neo-colonial fate: "la même intrigue dès qu'on arrive au monde" – "nous en préface."[307]

As this cursory analysis of some of the critical idioms compiled into *Tram 83*, then, illustrates, the novel can be read as a negotiation of a post-revolutionary condition in which former liberationist ideologies are annulled, co-opted, corrupted, or realized in the distorted shape of capitalist globalization. What is interesting, in this regard, is that the inverted or recuperated critical languages charted across the text can in one way or another be matched with two dominant poles of the capitalist process: the dissolutive dynamic of market forces that level all "authenticities" or the construction of territorialized, sectarian identities competing over rare resources. In this capacity, their ability to articulate dissensus or antagonism is seriously hampered. In juxtaposing these languages of dissidence to the unapologetic background of the titular bar, the novel delineates the critical limits that define critique from market utopia. As such, it consistently resists an identificational reading. Instead, it enforces a certain distance vis-à-vis the various protagonists with their respective agendas. There is a thorough labour of

In light of these postcolonial mobilities, the promise of rootedness appears fundamentally undermined. Similarly, however, the perspective of nomadism – when probed against the reality of migration in the extraction enclave – loses its critical edge. Instead, it appears as a mere statement of facts, as labour is forced to become abstract to keep up with the capital's proper nomadic movements.

306 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 142.

307 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 116.

negation at work in *Tram 83* that has a representational effect precisely insofar it maps the complicity of the charted utopian impulses in the reproduction of the given order of things.

7 The Uproar of Minor Characters

> The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims 'There have never been people here,' the missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute.
>
> — Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 216.

That said, it is Lucien's "théâtre-contre" in and through which the novel's engagement with the deficiencies of critique is most explicitly and self-reflexively articulated. The stage performances of the author-persona regularly fall victim to the ridicule and scorn of the bargoers. Throughout the story, his artistic endeavours are met with downright hostility. The audience at the titular *Tram 83* is bored by the moral portraits expressed in his stage readings. At times, the crowd phrases an outright shame ("Vous nous faites de la honte"[308]) at Lucien's interest in aesthetic history which almost reads like a hedonist vulgarization of the Platonist critique of art's mimetic qualities: "'Regardez où ça peut mener à force d'imiter les touristes!' / 'Vous étudiez aussi les filles ou c'est seulement l'histoire?'"[309] This negative attitude is most violently expressed in the above-referenced castigation of Lucien, which is staged as a rejection of the request to support the aspiring author: "investissez sur cet homme."[310] In mixing the wounding of Lucien's body with the hostile physics of the rail tracks, this refusal is acted out and perhaps overdone

308 Mujila, *Tram 83,* 63.
309 Mujila, *Tram 83,* 62. Fittingly, he is eventually expulsed from the city indiscriminately with Requiem when the latter's extortion schemes fall apart.
310 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 83.

in such a gory manner that the text performs the very "incompatibility of Lucien's literary vision with the material reality of City-State."[311]

This blatant display of bathos, then, is not done for comic relief but with the intent of producing a "concentrated literary exposure of social contradiction."[312] In that sense, the gestures of animosity that Lucien is confronted with should not be read as mere signs of anti-intellectualism. Instead, there is an argument to be made that Lucien does, indeed, demean his compatriots by engaging in "an essentially derivative discourse."[313] Aaron Bady makes this case most incisively by pointing out that the stage-stale ultimately proposes to "re-write Aimé Césaire's *A Season in the Congo*."[314] But whereas Césaire dramatizes and allegorizes the tragedy of decolonialization, Lucien's tragic pessimism for the most part of the novel fails "to realize that in writing tragedy a second time, he will produce a farce."[315] Césaire's tribute to Lumumba marks an act of defiance that presents – contra official Belgian history – "decolonialization as a struggle and not as a gift bestowed to the colonized by the colonizer."[316] In this, the assertion "Je pense aux Oubliés" re-articulates the "primary assertion of human modernity since Descartes' 'je pense'"[317] and, thus, pinpoints the world-historical significance of decolonialization. It verbalizes the emancipation from imperialist othering to announce the arrival of a new subject on the stage of world-history. Lucien's stage-play, on the other hand, is given to downplay the event of independence. Expressive of a certain kind of "anti-imperialist nostalgia,"[318] it risks absolutizing the past in an unavoidable return of the

311 Alexander Fyfe. "Infrastructure and the Valences of the Literary in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 63:2. 9.
312 Keston Sutherland. *Stupefaction. A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms*. Calcutta: Seagull Books. 46.
313 Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz" Online.
314 Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz" Online.
315 Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz" Online.
316 Gunaratne, "Aimé Césaire's Theory of Tragedy," 194.
317 Nesbitt. 2013. *Caribbean Critique,* 115.
318 Wenzel, "Anti-Imperialist Nostalgia," 22. "The postcolonial state may be a development from within, rather than an erasure of, the colonial system and global capitalism, but that fact does not obviate its existence. Critiques of neo-colonialism, as urgent as they certainly are, still risk another kind of amnesia, forgetting independence (even if it was not liberation) rather than forgetting colonialism."

same and, thereby, mortifies present and future in a dystopian teleology. This line of critique is expressed by the audience itself by confronting the aspiring writer with the simple but clear remark: "À quoi bon faire son intellectuel partout si l'équation doit rester la même."[319] In their eyes, Lucien's mythopoesis is undistinguishable from Requiem's quip that "la tragédie est déjà écrite."[320]

To my mind, it is therefore precisely the recognition-effect of his historical narrative that meets the fierce resistance of the bar's attendees. His tragic tale essentially "*recognize[s]*" the historical "horizon as closed"[321] and, hence, involuntarily re-iterates the narrative of the end of history. It is precisely this tragic recognition that is refused when Lucien's art is found to disrespect "les gars qui ont vécu" whereby the audience reacts to an earlier statement made by the author-persona: "La mort ne possède aucune signification puisqu'on n'a jamais réellement vécu."[322] This passage almost reads like a direct quote from Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001), wherein the Cameroonian philosopher scrutinizes the forgetting of "*time as lived*" in the representation of African societies, noting similarly that despite their post-racial musings liberal discourses of cosmopolitanism still seem unable to think "the African human experience" without recurring to some kind of "*negative interpretation*" that treats it as an epithet for lack, ahistorical poverty, and tribal violence.[323] For that reason, Mbembe identifies in such "languages of life" less an essentializing vitalist ideology than a certain resistance against the reduction of Africa to a stand-in for "all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished."[324] Lucien's literary enterprises, thus, do not simply collide with the ludic excesses of the bargoers. The indignation of "les gars qui ont vécu" can be read as a contestation of the "special unreality"[325] ascribed to Ville-Pays in its representation as a nation that only exists on paper. By way of narrating Lucien's low points

319 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 143–143.
320 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 142.
321 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 239.
322 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 86, 56.
323 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 8, 1.
324 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 15, 1.
325 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 4.

as a poet, the novel negotiates not only the failure of literary critique to effect political change in the context of the extraction enclave but also its reception as a language of foreclosure.

Let us dwell briefly on the ambiguities of this grotesque mode of expression. Kapanga, in fact, argues that Mujila makes extensive usage of a "populist trope"[326] in that he negotiates the carnivalesque hustle and bustle in the extraction enclave as an expression of power. This is also something Mbembe has observed in his writings on dictatorial forms of governance in Africa, remarking that obscene imagery, such as the supposed ridiculing of leaders by means of phallic symbology, does not necessarily resist domination but often mimics the "stylistics of power"[327] itself. Under this aspect, the public mockery of the dissident General's genitalia after Requiem's leak of nude pictures to the public marks a rather realistic scenario; all the more since the "imbécilités proférées à l'endroit de son zizi maigre"[328] seem constrained to the level of wish-fulfilment while the dictator remains firmly in power. Nonetheless, Mbembe urges to take seriously the language of hedonism sounded in these contexts. It expresses a refusal to be reduced to the image of suffering.[329] Similarly, I would argue, the "aesthetic of vulgarity" at work in *Tram* 83 is fundamentally ambivalent in the way it "opens up a space for enjoyment at the very moment it makes room for death."[330] One the one hand, the novel plays with the popular idiom of the "*ville morte*,"[331] yet it also marks the informal sector as an "economy of resistance" wherein urban dwellers insist "with both self-conscious

326 Kasongo Mulenda Kapanga. 2020. "UDPS Opposition Populism in the DRC and Its Reflection in Two Congolese Novels." *English Studies in Africa* 63:1. 167.
327 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 115.
328 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 259.
329 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 131–132.
330 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony,* 115. See also Alenka Zupančič. *The Odd One In. On Comedy.* Cambridge/London: MIT Press. 216–217. "It is a fact that keeping comedy going in critical situations can be a form of resistance, resistance to that tendency of completely reducing the subject(ivity), say, to a victimized 'suffering flesh' or to some other all-absorbing determination […]. It could [also] function as that distance that ultimately helps to sustain the very oppression of the given order or situation, because it makes bearable and induces the illusion of an effective interior freedom."
331 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 194.

laughter and pride" on an undying surplus of desire where otherwise "the logic of the market leads to total despair."[332]

That said, the political significance of the novel's informal overactivity can be rendered more precisely. In the novelistic soundscape, musical medleys fuse with random noises taken from the urban sprawl. There are always some sort of "deals-in-the-making,"[333] while disembodied voices repeat the same pick-up lines day in, day out. Again and again, the main narrative strand is interrupted by some kind of contract negotiation, mischievous mockeries, lustful interjections, or other random snippets of conversation that are, in fact, "scene-setting."[334] *Tram 83*, thereby, creates the sense of a space hopelessly overrun by an erratic shadow economy. This (aesthetic) effect of urban hyperactivity is amplified by a literary style which strings together sentences that span entire paragraphs without full stops or commas. Just as there is no rest in Ville-Pays' sprawling economy, readers are rendered out of breath by the endless lists filling the pages in the attempt to capture the town's multiplicities. *Tram 83* curates a cacophonous, urban soundtrack that constitutes the indispensable literary background against which the events of the novel unfold. Making excessive use of the trope of the "superfluous passer-by,"[335] especially in the form of floating sentences, the text at times gives the impression of an attention deficit. Many occurrences are only dwelt upon for a short time and then make way for others. It is in this sense that *Tram 83* reflects on the uneven distribu-

332 Nlandu, "Kinshasa: Beyond Dichotomies," 8. See also T. L. Cowan. "The Land of the Living in the Necro-Zone: Linking Border Stories with Prison Stories in Yadira De La Riva's *One Journey* and Liza Jessie Peterson's *The Peculiar Patriot* on the Cabaret Stage." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 12:4. 16.

333 Quayson, "Shakara Baby-Chicks and Locomotive Tales" Online.

334 Quayson, "Shakara Baby-Chicks and Locomotive Tales" Online.

335 Roman Jakobson. "On Realism in Art." *Language in Literature*. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Eds.). Cambridhe/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 25–32. This literary device has, first, been coined by Jakobson with regard to Russian realist literature. The particularity of this specific figuration of the trope of the "stranger" consists in its apparent superfluidity vis-à-vis the plot. It has no direct relation to the events or characters that are otherwise portrayed. Narratively speaking, that is, this figure has no "logical" reason for appearing in the text. Yet, it often acts as a medium for important narrative shifts. As such, the effect of this device is an unsettling one. The superfluous passer-by it is not simply a minor character but challenges the hierarchy of characters so far established in the realist novel.

tion of visibility that characterizes the internal attention economy of the text itself. Steadily haunted by a busy simultaneity of voices, the novel gives a sense of those peripheralized figures whose stories are not written down. In a way, the endless lists found throughout the text precisely point toward this incompleteness of representation. By means of these failed totalizations, the novel draws a balance sheet of the anonymous minor characters marginalized in the narrative act.

The namelessness of most of the literary personnel, now, is itself marked by hierarchies that silently differentiate between the variegated visitors of the bar. At times, the international "touristes" exert power without uttering a word by commanding imitation effects such as in the case of jazz. The identity of unpropertied locals, on the other hand, is under a constant threat. Here, anonymity is rather expressive of a looming (economic) superfluidity. In the novel, this is most saliently illustrated in the representation of sex workers:

> Elles […] portaient des noms à consonance étrangère, Marilyn Monroe ou Sylvia Vartan ou Romy Schneider ou Bessie Smith ou Marlene Dietrich ou Simone de Beauvoir, question de marquer leur présence au monde.[336]

At first, as Schuller notes, this descriptive gesture seems ornamental. But it is underwritten by a complex dialectic between representation and market exchange.[337] To claim their existence in the world, that is, the sex workers give up their names and take up pseudonyms from the celebrity culture of the former colonial metropoles.[338] The specific

336 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 23.

337 Cf. Schuller, *Realismus des Kapitals*, 151.

338 Schuller, *Realismus des Kapitals*, 155–156. One could of course also think, here, of Homi Bhabha's locus classicus of postcolonial studies *Signs taken for Wonders* (1985), which proposes to read for the fracture lines in colonial rule, suggesting that the symbols of masterhood are prone to be estranged by such citational gestures. Bhabha identifies in the language politics of English colonialism the "effect of an ambivalence" that issues from a misreading – a failed imitation – by the colonized, which subverts the production of a subservient colonial Other by distorting the authority commanded by the emblems of power. (Homi K. Bhabha. "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry* 12:1. 153) Yet, it seems ahistorical to transpose this interest in the symbolic deficiencies of 19th century colonial authority to the de-terri-

aliases make no difference so long as these brand names bear the "consonance étrangère" of global commodity flows. In the absence of a government-guaranteed citizenship, these characters seek an ersatz identity supplied precisely by international markets. In this sense, they engage in a relentless auto-commodification that also makes itself felt in narrative form. As has been elaborated, the sex workers frequenting the bar continually offer their services by entering contract negotiations with the protagonists. Yet, in most cases these have no demand for their labour:

> – Vous avez l'heure?
> – Vous voulez quoi! Tu n'es pas au parfum de cette crise toi!
> […]
> – Donnez-nous cent…
> – Pourboire…
> – Ça parle de toi?[339]

Narratively speaking, the linguistic labour that they informally put up for sale does not manage to be subcontracted into the novelistic construct of *Tram 83*. Unlike Röggla's unfree direct speech, where subjects only enter narration inasmuch they act as temporary vectors for the self-perpetuating discourse of crisis-management, these unidentified sex workers are not even accredited as such. Most of the disembodied voices fail to materialize as narrative servomechanisms and escape namelessness. In meta-literary terms, that is, the aggressive counter-question "Ça parle de toi?" underlines the essential marginality of these nameless subjects in the main plotline: They are denied protagonicity. This conflict between narrative fore- and background is given a more explicit expression toward the end of the book when Lucien,

torialized imperialism investigated in *Tram 83*. The subversive character of hybridization or failed citation is not evident here. These names refer to nothing but their exchangeability. It would, hence, be mistaken to consider the nicknaming practices of these figures as a subversion of "the rules of recognition" structuring these signifiers of Euro-American soft power. As Schuller explicates, the citation of cultural emblems observed here rather marks a crucial act of disidentification whereby the sex workers enter the sphere of exchange in the first place.

339 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 206, 211.

talking to Émilienne who provides shelter for the author, refuses "l'argent sale"[340] earned in the sex business that she operates. Upon this, she scrutinizes his moralistic judgement and points out that he also does not have any jobs to offer to this female surplus proletariat: "As-tu du travail à leur donner?"[341] This should not only be read as an exposure of the hypocrisy of the aspiring author whose unwaged literary exploits have precisely depended on this "dirty money" which he has accepted so far without any services in return: "Un type qui arrive chez une femme qui lui donne à boire, à manger, à se vêtir, de l'argent de poche mais qui se lève un bon matin avec une histoire de conscience !"[342] It, moreover, refracts the internal attention economy of the novel, which is characterized by a highly gendered split between a male-dominated centre-stage and a soundscape composed crucially by the obtrusive, crisis-driven courtship of a female workforce facing superfluisation as it is denied permanent employment economically and narratively speaking. The relation between fore- and background, thus, is recoded as fundamentally exploitative. Just like Lucien lives of Émilienne's reproductive labour, the textual economy lives on the scene-setting labour of floating informal voices uttered preponderantly by female sex-workers. The already-noted interruption of direct dialogue ("Au *Tram 83*, impossible de converser sans être interrompu!"[343]) is hence rendered legible as "un acte de légitime défense."[344] What appear as random soundbites prove a sort of (narrative) contract negotiation by way of which alien passers-by try to broker their way into the plot and leave their namelessness behind.

In this, the novel can at once be seen to engage in a more meta-market reflection in that this play of absence and presence is also linked – via Lucien's literary failures – to the hierarchies structuring international book markets. Taking up the theme of Lubumbashi/Kinshasa/Mbuji-Mavi as suppressed literary epicentres, *Tram 83*, indeed, reads

340 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 240.
341 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 239.
342 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 240.
343 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 210.
344 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 239.

like a satire of the "NGOization"[345] of the African literary field and its dependence on private donorship as a consequence of structural adjustment programs. Plotwise, this is crucially mediated by the figure of the Swiss publisher Malingeau compared to whom Lucien is placed himself in a position of marginality: "L'éditeur incarnait l'espoir"[346] to leave behind his state as an unknown author. As such, Malingeau acts like a cultural broker who first presents himself as a facilitator only to intervene increasingly into Lucien's book project by demanding more and more ludicrous revisions to make it fit the vague tastes of a non-African audience.[347] In that sense, the fictional literary agent could be considered a particularly vulgar embodiment of the hierarchies structuring literary markets. In fact, he holds (in the words of Pascale Casanova)

345 Sarah Brouillette. "On the African Literary Hustle." *Blind Field Journal*. https://blindfieldjournal.com/2017/08/14/on-the-african-literary-hustle/ [last accessed 04.05.2022]. Sarah Brouillette's investigation into the transformation of literary publishing in Africa since the 1970s provides an instructive materialist template through which to read this sequence. As a consequence of structural adjustment programs issued by the IMF and the World Bank, the field of African literature, an already weak economic sector, has become entirely dependent on private donorship, while distribution systems, literacy programs, and public libraries were dismantled to meet austerity budgets. The emergence of mass local readerships was, thereby, stalled, such that literary production became ever more reliant on foreign markets to absorb cultural commodities from the continent. Similar to the rest of the economy, postcolonial literary markets, thus, were subjected to a renewed, neo-colonial dependence on international funding which "has stepped in to fill some gaps left in the wake of state-based support." Albeit this financial assistance has "been relatively modest and precarious." Key nodes in the networks of anglo- or francophone African literary writing, such as the famous Caine prize, the Kwani Trust from Nairobi (Kenya), Nouvelles Éditions Africaines du Sénégal, or éditions clé from Yaoundé (Cameroon), hence, are backed by international money-givers. According to Mujila himself, the situation is worse, though, in the francophone publishing scene, which remains highly centralized, with Paris as "the only center of gravity, and often, of legitimacy," marginalizing even larger European cities like Brussels or Geneva. In Africa, again, Senegal and Cameroon might act as literary hubs, yet their standing is eclipsed by the anglophone literary scenes of Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. Meanwhile, in the DRC, in the absence of a sensible national cultural policy, literary publishing is more or less entirely dependent on private capital. All of this is not entirely new of course, but in good neoliberal spirit "funding through state departments," for example in the context of "Cold War cultural diplomacy campaigns," has increasingly given way to private funding mechanisms, shaping a situation where writers "are more dependent on each other as cultural brokers, on international donors, and on foreign markets, than they are on the existence of a local readership for literary works." (Noubel, "A Literary Landscape in Flux," Online)

346 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 70.

347 Cf. Deckard, "African Resource Culture," 256.

the power over "who can be declared a writer, who can make legitimate aesthetic judgements (ones that will endow a given work with a specific value), [or] the very definition of literature."[348] In the end, his incoherent demands go so far that they actively impede the writing process.[349] Ultimately, therefore, it is the very volatility of these requirements that

348 Pascale Casanova. "Literature as a World." *New Left Review* 31. 81.

349 Mujila, *Tram* 83, 212–215. First, for instance, Malingeau requests Lucien to scale down the amount of characters while later he finds fault precisely with the low number of figures. At one point, the publisher throws overboard the entire concept of the piece by demanding that it takes place in Colombia or that Lucien should just abandon his project and write poetry about Mauritania. Malingeau, thereby, treats place as an exchangeable asset value for literary markets without any deeper connection to the history of these areas. In her analysis of the underlying economics of the African literary field, Brouillette has noted that the donor-financed system promotes certain aesthetic sensibilities or regulative ideals. In this, she is guided by a reading of NoViolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel *We Need New Names*, which is set in a Zimbabwean slum whose population is afflicted by chronic underemployment, devalued currencies, and the AIDS pandemic, while NGOs monetize this suffering by making a spectacle out of charity work. From several sides, the writer, therefore, has been accused of indulging in what has been called "poverty porn" in recent decades. For instance, Ikhide Ikheloa dismissed an earlier short story ("Hitting Budapest") by the author, which became the first chapter of the novel, for catering to a touristic white gaze that expects ever new exoticized images of the darkest continent: "She sure can write, unfortunately her muse insists on sniffing around Africa's sewers." (Ikhide Ikheloa. "The 2011 Caine Prize: How Not to Write About Africa." *NEXT Newspaper*. https://xokigbo.com/2012/03/11/the-2011-caine-prize-how-not-to-write-about-africa/ [last accessed 20.05.2022]) By contrast, Brouillette insists that the novel is rather concerned with "the conditions of poverty porn's *production*," which feast on the demise of the development state, premature deindustrialization, and crushed "fantasies of full labor participation." Reminiscent of Röggla's "recherchegespenst," the humanitarian sector here manifests itself as a crisis-management business that does not lend a voice to the subjects of charity but perpetuates their namelessness precisely as it mediatizes them as victims. Yet, the novel itself does not write these material conditions out of literary narrative. Rather, in Brouillette's reading it is precisely by implicating the hierarchies of the media attention system and publishing business in literary form, that the novel manages to be a "self-reflexive work about not wanting to be pigeonholed." (Brouillette, "On the African Literary Hustle," Online) To my mind, Mujila's meta-market reflections, too, navigate these economies of literary production with their inbuilt exotisms and superimposed regulative ideals. As Aaron Bady remarks, Mujila's prose insists "on having it both ways." Faced with an incompatible set of (mostly negative) guidelines on how (not) to write about "Africa," engaging in mutual accusations of either catering to touristic fantasies about Africa as a signifier of abject poverty (encapsulated in the accusation of producing "poverty porn") or subscribing to (petty-)bourgeois class politics in the form of a disengaged cosmopolitanism "leaving the continent behind," *Tram 83* provides at once a "gleefully amoral farce" of the imperialist gaze and "a deadly serious anatomy of the Democratic Republic of Congo's mining frontier." (Aaron Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz" Online)

is the message not their specific content. In that sense, the failed work of art concretizes the power imbalances of the World Republic of Letters. The injunction to perpetually adjust to the shifting demands of Malingeau lays bare Lucien's precarious status on the literary market, as he, too, persistently faces the threat of regressing into namelessness. The same is true for Requiem, who carries the sex workers' strange nicknaming practices to extremes by cultivating a recombinant nomenclature that changes according to context in a perpetual venture to adjust to market fluctuations. In the end, his fabled adaptability – "prétextant que sa vie lui appartenait"[350] – is demystified as he loses his status as a protegee of Chinese investors who balance his economic value against the bounty put on his head by the dissident General.[351] Despite all, then, there always pertains a latent namelessness to the two protagonists. The ending makes this brutally clear when Malingeau feels obliged to say the quiet part out loud and recall his superiority in the global order of things: "je suis quand même né à Genève."[352] As Lucien and Requiem are stripped of their protagonicity and recede into anonymity, the Swiss investor violently puts the two in their place by reminding them of the neo-colonial chain of command: "Ne m'adresse pas la parole sur ce ton-là."[353]

In folding the material conditions of the African literary field into the narrative of the extraction enclave, the novel thus links the hierarchies of "world literature" to the global colour line that conditions international labour markets. *Tram 83* is, therefore, always also a novel about the politics of literary writing. In a different kind of representation of representation, it turns the act of literary representation itself into a meta-critical object of the novel. Thereby, the strained relation-

350 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 43.

351 Cf. Alain Mabanckou. *African Psycho*. Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes. One might here also refer to Mabanckou's *African Psycho* (2003), which is narrated from the perspective of an aspiring killer who desires to escape his marginal existence in a spectacular act of violence yet proves utterly inapt to the task. Declaring his intent to kill in the first pages, readers soon realize that the protagonist is clownishly incapable of murder. In the last chapter, we thus learn that the victim has been slayed by another man, while the supposed "African Psycho" turns out to be an antitype to the rich Patrick Bateman in Ellis' *American Psycho*, dreaming about the murder in his Dostoyevskan basement.

352 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 261.

353 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 261.

ship between the author-persona and Ville-Pays' "riotous multiplicity"[354] simultaneously says something of the exclusions of the literary market-system and the invisibilities of capitalist labour division. Truly, Mujila's prose gives its due to the "labor theory of character" developed in Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many* which argues that the space taken up by major characters in a novel is conditioned by the space that minor characters occupy and that as such the character-system established in a given narrative world embodies an ensemble of social relations.[355] In this sense, the conflict between fore- and background that characterizes *Tram 83* textually materializes an uproar of the novel's subordinate characters against the internal attention economy of the text with its inequal distribution of character space. At once this formal structure – this poetics of informal labour – "imaginatively comprehend[s]"[356] the functional differentiations and stratifications at work in the extractive operations of global capitalism.

8 Re-Writing the "African Tragedy": Enter the Chorus

> […] the catastrophe that *we are* […]
>
> — Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 29.

Despite these formal experimentations, the novel nonetheless appears at first like a closed (tragic) narrative. The story starts with a border transgression – the arrival of Lucien in Ville-Pays – and ends more or

354 Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz," Online.

355 Alex Woloch. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 26ff.

356 Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 27. Woloch makes this case specifically for realist literature: "The nineteenth-century novel's configuration of narrative work – within the context of omniscient, asymmetrical character-systems – creates a formal structure that can imaginatively comprehend the dynamics of alienated labor, and the class structure that underlies this labor. In terms of their essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), minor characters are the proletariat of the novel; and the realist novel […] makes much of such formal processes."

less at the same place with Requiem and Lucien escaping the city. Under this aspect, it would also seem fitting that the novel's last chord, in the style of a movie ending, zooms out of the puzzling events surrounding the two characters while the music resumes playing at the bar, simulating a dubious return to normality: "C'est à ce moment précis que la trompette entrait en scène reprenant *un air connu* dans toute la Ville-Pays."[357] Fittingly, the opening score and ongoing refrain of the book is taken up again on the final page as if to underscore the perenniality of the postcolonial order challenged unsuccessfully throughout the novel. It seems that the "équation" stays essentially the same:

> Le saxophone alors renaissait de ses cendres, puis s'employait à grignoter l'espace conquis par la trompette. La batterie, en deux temps, se mêlait à son tour à ce bal des carnassiers, qui résonnait dans la gare dont la construction métallique inachevée, démolie par des obus, des rails et des locomotives qui ramenaient à la mémoire la ligne de chemin de fer construite par Stanley, des champs de manioc, des hôtels à bas prix, des gargotes, des bordels, des églises de réveil, des boulangeries et des bruit orchestrés par des hommes, toutes générations et nationalités confondues."[358]

However, there is a slight shift in emphasis here from the wreck and wreckage of colonialism to the essential musicality that invigorates this ruined landscape. If the novel introduces readers to a de-historicizing origin story where the people are fundamentally missing, then the end of the text stresses the "bruits orchestrés" of a plural subject. In line with the conflict between fore- and background traced so far, it is as if the novel tried to point to a potential "people to come"[359] that emerges in and through music.[360]

357 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 261 (emphasis added).
358 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 261.
359 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 216; Fredric Jameson. *Allegory and Ideology*. London/New York: Verso. 297.
360 Cf. Bongani Kona. "Using language without restraint to show the energy of the 'Wretched of the Earth' – Fiston Mwanza Mujila." *Johannesburg Review of Books*. https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/01/15/conversation-issue-using-language-without-restraint-to-show-the-energy-of-the-wretched-of-the-earth-fiston-mwanza-mujila-chats-

Read backwards, a certain disruption of the novelistic "distribution of the sensible"[361] can be apprehended, in that those peripheralized in the textual attention economy – remaining nameless, floating voices throughout – insist on their presence in the "équation." To put it in Fanon's words, the literary form of *Tram 83* materializes "a flaw that outflaws all ontological explanation."[362] Social antagonism, as in the case of the non-integrable sentences of the sex workers, is encoded on the level of literary form itself where it forms an insoluble remainder that cannot be effaced. There is, thus, a constant pressure of anonymous forces on and within the seemingly hermetic edifice of the novel.[363] Yet, the text does not provide a direct representation to these masses. Instead, it points to "the very absence where they could appear."[364] In tracing the critical limits of established patterns of dissidence against the background of the titular bar, *Tram 83* does not simply engage in a tragic narrative. It takes a distance from the languages of foreclosure spoken by its central protagonists. Sure, it cannot be dismissed that Mujila's novel is rife with failure. It is everywhere, negotiated in terms of failed nation-building, failed revolution, failed decolonialization, failed internationalism, or in the more arcane form of work accidents due to rundown infrastructure. Nevertheless, the novel does more than re-double the narrative of the "African Tragedy" in a tragic narrative outcome

to-bongani-kona/ [last accessed 09.05.2022]; Roger Behrens. *Die Diktatur der Angepasste. Texte zur kritischen Theorie der Popkultur*. Bielefeld: transcript. 225. Read that way, the novel's engagement with jazz obtains a more subversive note. For one thing, the refrain-like structure that characterizes the novel has something of the circular rhythmicality of jazz. On another note, the obscene interjections that traverse *Tram 83* recreate a trait of the artform that cannot not so easily be identified with the boom and bust of Ville-Pays' economic cycle. Jazz is, in fact, among the first music genres to feature laughter on vinyl records (e.g., Gillespie whom Mujila explicitly cites as a source of inspiration), interfering with the sense of presentism manufactured in the culture industry. By reproducing this subversive play with sonic signatures in literary form, the novel showcases the frictions between the antagonistic elements making up the text in the form of a highly competitive literary attention economy. Overcrowded by "audio-spectres" (Mark Fisher) – the fading voices of those who did not make it into the final cut – the traces of production are not extinguished in the literary object but put into starkest relief.

361 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 34.

362 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

363 Cf. Benjamin Noys. "'The Masses Make History.' On Jameson's *Allegory* and *Ideology*." *Historical Materialism* 29:1. 3.

364 Noys, "The Masses Make History," 3.

to the novel. Rather, the expulsion of the "tragic heroes," after which things seemingly return to normal, brings in the element of a collective enunciating subject.

In this, the novel re-calls the Haitian Revolution plays that can be found in the radical Caribbean currents with which Mujila's writing engages in a steady dialogue. Take Glissant's 1981 play on the revolutionary Toussaint Louverture. Working through the vicissitudes of the slave revolt, the play ends with the representation of a manically laughing Toussaint who proclaims in his prison cell that he has lost his ability to write. Everything that he notes down turns into its opposite: "Toussaint" inverts into "traitor," "discipline" into "tyranny."[365] In this, the notion of the revolutionary tragic developed by Engels and Marx is radicalized: if for them the tragedy of someone like Thomas Müntzer (a rebel leader during the Peasants' War) comes from arriving too early in times not yet rife for revolution, then in Glissant the tragic flaw ineluctably arises from the inherent contradictions of the revolutionary process between political leadership and the masses.[366] Yet, precisely in this confrontation *Monsieur Toussaint* "brings in the chorus"[367] to think through these impasses. Instead of reifying the tragic twist into a meta-historical absolute, Glissant's revolutionary meditations propose to re-centre the chorus as a more active agency: the figure of Toussaint even "in his most isolated, private moments is haunted by a constitutive collective"[368] of the living and the dead that incessantly challenge all-too easy equivalences between the revolutionary movement and its assumed political representatives.

That said, we can observe a similar subversion of the focus on the individual protagonist across *Tram 83* as it again and again plays with the discourse of tragedy. The critical impetus of Mujila's writing program, therefore, is less to be found in the ambivalent languages of dis-

365 Édouard Glissant. *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play*. Lynne Reinner (Transl.). London: Publishers. 115–116.
366 Slavoj Žižek. *Incontinence of the Void. Economico-Philosophical Spandrels*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 249.
367 Jeremy Matthew Glick. *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetic, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution*. New York/London: New York University Press. 85–125.
368 Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic*, 110.

sidence traversed throughout and literalized primarily in the figures of Requiem and Lucien. Rather, it is at work in the novel's narrative subsoil in a constant conflict between fore- and background that, eventually, is resolved in the expulsion of the key protagonists from the stage of action. In the end, there is an ominous plural subject – indicated by the pronominal shifters "nous" and "on" – that takes the stage and challenges the focalization of the narrative through the respective languages of foreclosure intoned by Lucien and Requiem. The literary critic Aaron Bady goes so far to suggest that the two "are always the objects of this novel, not its subjects," watched and judged by the peculiar tragicomical chorus that quintessentially "emerges when music calls it into existence."[369] A passage at the end of the novel renders this contradictory dynamic quite well, as it shows precisely the materialization of the "missing subject"[370] through an act of collective listening to the performance of the so-called "Diva des chemins de fer" while Requiem and Lucien turn their backs to the affair:

> […] quelle voix, quelle voix, quelle voix, elle nous pénétrait, nous écorchait, nous piétinait, nous déchirait, partir, naître, rêver, on pensait à ceux que la terre avait engloutis, tous ceux que les trains avaient emportés à la suite d'un déraillement, l'amertume et les yeux rivés sur ceux qui partirent chercher leur vie de l'autre côté de l'océan et qui ne sont jamais arrivés trahis par les vagues, quelle voix, Requiem ricanait d'arrogance, Lucien s'accrochait à son stylo et griffonnait le bonheur est un rêve violent […].[371]

The plural subject that emerges is composed of the living and the dead, introducing a temporal loop between the past and the present that is marked by a remarkable sense of solidarity which is rather at odds with the economic rivalry otherwise exhibited in the novel. As individuals, thrown into all the vicissitudes of competition, these floating voices are forced to sell themselves piecemeal. But this sense of separation

369 Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz," Online.
370 Divya Dwivedi. "The Transitivity of 'We' and Narrative Legions." *Style* 54:1. 12.
371 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 110, 225.

fades in the plural pronoun as if the "narrative legions" conjured in this "we-locution"[372] were brought into being in this very gesture of collective listening – as a sort of opening to the other. As such, it stands as a figuration of the "tradition of the oppressed"[373] that keeps on insisting throughout the pages of *Tram 83*. What in Lucien's stage-tale or Requiem's cyclical view of history sounds like an eternal return of the same, here manifests as a return of history's repressed.

The refrain-like prose cultivated in the novel, thus, picks up on the rich history of anti-colonial jazz, which undermines the sense of historylessness that otherwise pertains to the consumption of jazz in the titular nightclub. As notes Mujila, Hugh Masekela's 1974 *Stimela* ("Coal Train") is a virtual reference throughout the text. *Tram 83* proposes to reproduce Masekela's musicalization of the train's dislocations – displacing miners and minerals across the continent – in an "abrupt" and "slithery" language.[374] The train turns into a "metonym of [a] massive infrastructural reorganization"[375] that imposes on the continent the rhythm of commodity extraction. But against the lingering forces of imperialism, Masekela's piece at once "evokes the forces of contestation-from-below"[376] that manifested when *Stimela* was first recorded in 1973, namely the mass strikes that erupted in Durban against the labour regime of Apartheid South-Africa. The "we" of the railroad civilization ("Nous sommes de la civilisation du chemin de fer"[377]) is thus again and again positioned in chains of equivalence with the past: "la même galère, les mêmes trains."[378] In this, Mujila follows Glissant's call to think the invisible bonds between those condemned to (social) death by the violence of (neo-)colonial rule:

372 Dwivedi, "The Transitivity of 'We' and Narrative Legions," 12.
373 Benjamin, "On The Concept of History," 392.
374 Samatar, "Fiston Mwanza Mujila & Roland Glasser," Online.
375 Deckard: "African Resource Culture and the Neoliberal World-Ecology," 247.
376 Deckard: "African Resource Culture," 250.
377 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 39.
378 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 56.

> In your poetic vision, a boat has no belly a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. […]; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.[379]

In Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), the slave galley is described as an abyss at the heart of Western capitalism. It is portrayed as a "nonworld" in which the universalist principles of Enlightenment are negated. In this image, the lower deck is the hidden "belly" to the grand narratives of exploration and progress presumptuously "steered by open skies" yet powered by the consumption of human raw material. At once, however, the boat is evoked as the brutish site of another – potential – universalism: the boat "generates the clamor of your protests."[380] The digestive metaphorization of the galley is altered into the vitalist imagery of the "womb." But as such it is always ambivalent. The shared experience of forced diaspora may beget, in a sort of renascence, "all the coming unanimity." Yet, this commonality is an "unknown" one: it is lived in alienated parallel such that the poetic act will consist in illuminating the links with those suffering comrades "whom you have yet to know." Solidarity is not given by birth but must be built. It is in a similar vein that Mujila's *Tram 83* creates echoes between the "territoires" of the global capitalist order "ayant déjà franchi le cap des souffrances intérieures."[381] The extraction enclave is invoked as the underside of the world-market:

379 Édouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. Betsy Wing (Transl.). Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press. 6. Glissant critically juxtaposes the Deleuzian notion of "holey space" with Foucault's conception of the ship as heterotopia by bringing into relief the very reliance of power structures on such nonworlds as he calls them. In this vein, he urges his readers to visualize the triangular slave traffic between North America, Africa, and Europe as a "Middle Passage" between an interconnected web of abysses: the slave ship, the ocean depths, and the alien land of the "New World." In this light, the ship as heterotopia does not appear anymore as a space of subversion, but rather as the obscene – yet constitutive – underside of Western civilization.

380 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

381 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 56.

written out of neoliberalism's self-descriptions and yet constitutive of this regime of accumulation. Against this backdrop, the above-quoted scene of mutual recognition via the voice of the diva stages a fleeting moment of "unanimity" in which the aloneness of suffering is briefly transcended. The act of collective listening – precisely insofar it figures a receptive experience – models a proper relational poetics whereby, to quote Glissant again, "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."[382] It is in this sense that *Tram 83* proposes to create in the medium of literature a space of solidarity between the dispersed labour masses of yesterday and today.

Through all these meta-market and meta-literary reflections, the novel looks to craft a new literary language. In this, the mockery of Lucien's pretensions at aesthetic autonomy plays a critical role. It is in this confrontation that *Tram 83* stages the substitution of the creative genius – proposing to "insuffler une certaine vision du monde par la littérature"[383] – for the figure of informal (migrant) labour "as the subject of urbanization."[384] The bar's grotesque chorus "kidnaps" the self-image of the literary maverick and "force[s]" him "to examine [his] own vulgarity."[385] As Émilienne puts it: "In fine, qu'est-ce que c'est la conscience d'un écrivain qui ne veut pas ouvrir les yeux."[386] In this vein, Lucien comes around to recognize that the city itself "vibrait de littérature."[387] It would, hence, be wrong to assume that the novel makes "a claim for

382 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

383 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 110.

384 Soule, *The City Novel After the City*, 174. Lucien styles himself after the bohemian figure of the modernist flaneur as he tries to piece together the serial realities of the extraction enclave into a collective experience. Yet, his tabular registers that sometimes fill entire pages fail again and again at categorizing the footloose character of labour in the extraction enclave. If Walter Benjamin still considered the flaneur a sort of "undercover agent" spying on his own class, then in *Tram 83* it is expressive of a specific class standpoint that is oblivious of the labour going into the material support of its bohemian existence. It is interesting, in this regard, that Lucien is never conclusively marked as black in the novel, which, of course, invites further investigations into the specific configuration of the intellectual "gaze" that the figure of the author casts upon the social conglomerate of the extraction enclave.

385 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 109.

386 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 241.

387 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 125.

the irrelevance or exhaustion of literature."[388] Instead, as also Alexander Fyfe suggests, the novel develops the vision of a literature that refuses to be defined away from social life into a dubious position of aesthetic autonomy. Instead, it is reconceived in terms of a collective and material practice. Fyfe's intriguing point of reference, in this regard, is James C. Scott's *Everyday Forms of Resistance* (1989) which tries to envision forms of political action – such as desertion, sabotage, pilfering, absenteeism, or poaching – that are less momentous than "riots, rebellion, [and] revolutionary movements" but nonetheless "may have aggregate consequences all out of proportion to their banality when considered singly." [389] Similarly, now, the image of the city as vibrating with literature can be read to re-think the social effectivity of literature by re-situating it among such everyday strategies of resistance. This becomes particularly apparent when the closing words of Lucien's stage-tale, offering a fictional description of the mutilated body of the dissident General, "revenaient sur toutes les lèvres"[390] as the dictator, actually, falls from grace because he wants to raze the nightclub. The performance of the piece already took place many pages prior to these occurrences without causing any annoyance to the military man. This is not a negligible detail but serves to complicate the causal link between the literary act and social protest. For it is only as part of a mass movement from below that this quote re-appears in the novel. The author-persona itself, on the other hand, is irrelevant to this protest wave.[391]

The bar-trope is essential to this re-consideration of literature as a collective social practice because, eventually, it is the titular *Tram 83* where otherwise disjunct milieus collide. As a collective audio space, it is the acting ground for the conflict between fore- and background traced in our analysis. It points toward a plural narrative subject, even if it only fleetingly takes the stage, that challenges the enclosure of lit-

388 Cf. Alexander Fyfe, "Valences of the Literary in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*," 2.
389 James C. Scott. "Everyday Forms of Resistance." *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 4. 33–34.
390 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 255.
391 Cf. Alexander Fyfe, "Valences of the Literary in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*," 11.

erature in the "unendingly particular" (Hegel).[392] The defence of the bar at the end of the novel can, then, be re-read as a defence of the universalist impulse enabled by this implausible common space, giving new meaning to the recurring notion that this place "n'exist[e] que sur papier."[393] In fact, it "*does* exist,"[394] but only and precisely insofar it is produced through a riotous act of literary affirmation that canalizes the signs of antagonism circulated throughout the novel. The collective act of listening quoted above, hence, indexes the bar as a "social structure of last resort"[395] for those without reserves: those who do not share a positive content but something negative, a shared condition of dispossession. The struggles spurred over the collective property of the bar, countering the subjection of space to the volatilities of economic interests, mark a localized "spatial event" that "unlike traditional revolutions" functions as a "vanishing mediator[]" that "clear[s] the terrain for new and unexpected developments."[396]

My argument, then, is that *Tram 83* precisely develops its critical language and, thus, a "new basis" on which a political aesthetic could be "founded" by working its way little by little from the "acknowledgement of a people who are missing" into a call to action for art/literature to engage in "contributing to the invention of a people."[397] In fact, it is as if the moment it were proclaimed with seeming narrative authoritativeness that "[t]here have never been people here" that the novel's minor characters start voicing and "invent[ing] themselves."[398] In its polyphonic musicality, the novel calls attention to a fundamental gap in the literary text where an alternative novelistic agency might emerge in that those who, first, seem surplus to the textual economy of the text insist on their presence in the narrative. Notwithstanding the condi-

392 Of course, the novel always acknowledges the difficulty of this representational effort by outlining, as we have seen, the manifold mechanisms of atomization whereby the "creuseurs" are separated.
393 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 66.
394 Bady, "Once is a Mistake, Twice is Jazz" Online.
395 Joel Nickels. *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 69.
396 Jameson, "Aesthetics of Singularity," 131.
397 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 216.
398 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 216.

tions of extreme survival that it represents, then, the novel stages the search for a common language beyond the idioms of resentment and dystopianism prevalent in recent languages of critique and documented for instance in Röggla's portrayal of the disablement of collective solidarity in today's regimes of crisis-management.

9 Constructing Solidarities: Literatures from the Holes in the Whole

In the style of the 21st century proletarian writing investigated by Sonali Perera, *Tram 83* "interrogates the ruling *definitions* of literature itself" in order to step into the "figural logic" of a novel kind of internationalism that looks to establish new solidarities.[399] Against this background, the negotiation of the challenge of postcolonial urbanity that can be observed in the novel might be considered to take up the task of "writ[ing] the world from an African metropolis"[400] without construing it as a belated emulation of Euro-American modernity: Congolese urban life "is from where the world is analysed"[401] as Mujila puts it himself. In this context, the "Afrique des Possibles" is a medium whereby the novel seeks out the history of the Global South more generally speaking.[402] The engagement with the realities of halted decolonialization,

399 Sonali Perera. *Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization*. New York: Columbia University Press. 6–9.

400 Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall. "Writing the world from an African metropolis." *Public Culture* 16:3. 3.

401 Kona, "Using language without restraint to show the energy of the 'Wretched of the Earth'" Online.

402 Nganang, *Manifeste D'Une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine*, 265. There might be reservations against this synecdochic impetus. It is true, for example, that the setting of *Tram 83* is itself staged through internal spatial differentiations that reproduce in themselves centre/periphery binaries as that between Arrière-Pays and Ville-Pays. What is more, the extraction enclave is marked time and again by signs of disconnection such as the unfinished railway station. Nonetheless, the suggestion to view Ville-Pays through the prism of synecdoche strikes a sensitive point. If Nganang suggests grasping "l'infini zigzagant" of contemporary capitalist reality out of the experience of Africa's urban multiplicities, then it cannot be entirely dismissed that allegorical mechanisms such as the bar-trope or the generical denominations structuring the representation of space in the novel make equal claims to put the world in a (chaotic) nutshell. Moreover, the novel's soundscape is marked

adjustment, and the mining business is expressive of a larger interrogation of capital's extractive operations in the postcolonial setting.[403] It is, therefore, crucial that the we-locution of the "civilisation du chemin de fer" is not marked as articulating a local identity. The only sign of commonality that is given is a shared condition of dispossession expressed in the claim to the titular bar as a common good to be defended ("le tram était la seule chose qui leur appartenait vraiment"[404]), delimiting the protesting masses from the comprador elites still allowed access to the excavation sites. Even if it is right to consider *Tram 83* as a piece of more or less Congolese literature, not least due to the parabolic gestures made to the country's experience of (post)coloniality, a transnational perspective almost urges itself upon us.[405]

In this, Mujila's writing shares in a broader tendency of Congolese literature. As we have seen, there is a concerted literary effort to resituate the country in world-history. Take Bofane's *Congo Inc.* which positions the DRC at the heart of capitalist cybernetics. As such, though, it also proves an interesting contrast foil to *Tram 83*. For *Congo Inc.*, too, briefly takes on the challenge posed to literary writing by the "new wretched of the earth" that emerge at the other end of global supply-chains. Indeed, the street kids, the so-called "shégués," amongst whom the narrator lives for some time, are at one point invoked as a

by intricate synapses between earth regions. The invocation of "jazz" alone already marks a fundamental dislocation that situates the enclave in global processes of circulation instead of nailing down the represented urban scene to an imagined autochthonic culture. Thus, the scene of action is staged, as has been elaborated, as a node for the transnational circulation of musical styles, such that this sonic environment almost functions like a cognitive mapping of the cultural history of the *soi-disant* Global South.

403 Jelly-Schapiro, "Extractive Modernity at Large," 5ff. Jelly-Schapiro points to this, when she relates Mujila's engagement with the realities of extractionism to other works such as Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010). Though, she might just as well have named a novel like Sofi Oksanen's *Dog Park* (2016), which forwards a literary account of the global fertility market paralleled with the operation of illegal coal mines in post-soviet Ukraine that proves highly reminiscent of the so-called "sexe-coltane" nexus encountered in *Tram 83*. However, none of these texts displays the same refusal to be localized all-too easily in a national or even continental framework.

404 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 257.

405 Cf. Mujila, *Tram 83*, 20, 13. This might also help to grasp the inflationary use of superlatives to describe the bar, whose reputation is not only said to reach way beyond the borders of the extraction enclave ("Sa renommée s'étendait au-delà des frontières de la Ville-Pays") but which is situated as the most blasphemous space "du globe."

global revolutionary force when his friend Zhang Xia – in a paraphrase of Mao's speech in support of the Mulélé rebellion (1963–64)[406] – calls upon the "shégués" of the world to unite against the forces of imperialism.[407] Observing the mobilizing effect that this rhetoric has on the "shégués," Isookanga states: "nous allons mondialiser la révolution."[408] Yet, the content of this revolution is always ambivalent. Eventually, the protagonist turns his back to the global poor. In his desire to become a "mondialiste," he instead seeks "to track his way into the global economy before climate change stagnates even the possibility of a developmental modernity."[409] Against this background, the rhetoric of solidarity briefly intoned by Isookanga's partner in crime is morphed into a cynical language of power that rallies the masses "[pour] nous rendre maîtres du Grand Marché."[410] Narrative perspective gives in to an allegory of control. The so-called "Congo Inc." turns into a signifier of an almost cyberpunk-like imaginary that sees no end to the cycle of violence: "et plus de sang, plus de caranges, toujours."[411]

In comparison, Aanza's *Généalogie d'une Banalité* strikes a different tone by introducing us in the very first chapter to a "nous"[412] not that dissimilar from the one encountered in *Tram 83*. In asking at the very beginning "De quoi Élisabethville est le nom,"[413] the novel envisages Lubumbashi by way of its colonial name as a template through which to view contemporary capitalism. The plural subject that, thus, emerges, is related to the world at large as the novel styles itself in terms of a global shantytown literature by turning "Élisabethville" into a name for "la banlieue des grandes villes du monde entier."[414] Playing with the metaphoric of holes that comes with the motif of "creuser," the book

406 Cf. Yoon, "Figuring Africa and China," 189; Bofane, *Congo Inc.*, 105. "Peuple shégué, unissons-nous pour abattre les agresseurs américains et leur laquais! Que les shégués n'écoutent que leur courage, qu'ils osent livrer combat, qu'ils bravent les difficultés et le monde entier leur appartiendra. Les monstres seront tout anéantis!"
407 Bofane, *Congo Inc.*, 106.
408 Bofana, *Congo Inc.*, 108.
409 Yoon, "Figuring Africa and China," 188.
410 Bofane, *Congo Inc.*, 106.
411 Bofane, *Congo Inc.,* 271.
412 Aanza, *Généalogie d'une Banalité*, 13.
413 Aanza, *Généalogie d'une Banalité*, 13.
414 Aanza, *Généalogie d'une Banalité,* 13.

jumps "réellement de trou en trou"[415] to establish a space of commonality between those whose deaths have been banalized. It is, thus, fitting that the novel's multi-vocal form counteracts the isolation of narrative perspective into atomized, private viewpoints: the characters that raise the voice do not tell their own stories but the collective history of the place they inhabit. In this sense, Aanza approaches the poetics of informality that I have tried to identify in my reading of *Tram 83*.

Mujila's writing program, hence, marks a striking exponent of a series of literary attempts that suggest inflecting a certain "globalisation of the postcolonial predicament"[416] via the transnational incursions of the Congo. It plays into a tendency which views the DRC against all odds as a special "literary locus that is by nature both center and periphery" and as such has something "representative of other such apolar constituencies across the globe."[417] In this capacity, however, *Tram 83* may be placed in an even more far-reaching trend that can be observed in other literary cultures of the Global South, that is, the inversion of the "language of black holes and […] a fall out of history" underpinning much neoliberal policy discourse into a literary reconsideration of the capitalist whole through its holes. As noted in the prior chapter, the novel resonates with works such as Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, César Aira's *La Villa*, or Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*. Grouped by Michael K. Walonen under the rubric of a global "slum novel," these texts exemplify a transcontinental literary corpus that has "much to say about the socio-spatial dynamics of the slums in which so much of the earth's population has come to seek shelter."[418] Considering their vastly different socio-cultural contexts of production, it is of course not surprising that there is a wide thematic variance between these literary expressions. Nonetheless, Walonen identifies "certain common patterns […], which illustrate the nature of their

415 Aanza, *Généalogie d'une Banalité,* 267.
416 Samaddar, *Karl Marx and the Postcolonial Age,* 109.
417 Riva, "Congolese Literature as Part of Planetary Literature," 220, 232. In this, Riva also points to the history of "intense cultural exchanges" between the early post-independence DRC and the Caribbean.
418 Cf. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction*, 83.

shared entanglement within transnational neoliberal systems of governmentality and economic distribution," including:

> […] testaments to spatial adaptiveness as a survival strategy, attempts to translate in scale from local afflictions to global trends as a means of warding off a sense of helplessness and inertia, disgust with the failed or illusory development efforts of the past, and/or rage that economic growth for others has been purchased at the expense of the further immiseration of the subaltern, and awareness of informal economics as another survival measure, though a meager and at times dehumanizing one at that.[419]

Indeed, this "body of texts offers efforts […] to draw connections between the impoverished and marginalized lots of the disparate slum peoples of the globe."[420] Envisioning a proletariat "sans usines, sans ateliers, et sans travail, et sans patrons,"[421] Chamoiseau's *Texaco* goes a step further. As it forms a novelistic construct that closely resembles the historiographic explorations undertaken in Mujila's *Tram 83*, the text connects the struggles of Martinique's urban poor to past resistance movements. The neo-colonial riot police that assaults the shantytown is said to surround "la pente comme si nous étions des fellaghas d'Alger ou des chinois méchants des forêts du Vietnam."[422] The novel, thereby, wagers on a form of solidarity not built on identity but a common dispossession – a shared negativity vis-à-vis the capitalist mode of production indicated by the multiple "sans" – that may form the basis for a new kind of "belonging to one another and to other […] marginalized peoples on the peripheries of the global order."[423]

The author's later writing has remained faithful to this task of a relational poetics by shaping solidarities between the dispersed proletariat of global capitalism. In *Frères Migrants* (2017) – Chamoiseau's intervention into the post-2015 discourse of "Migrant crisis" – the Martinican

419 Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction*, 102.
420 Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction*, 102.
421 Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 345 (emphasis added).
422 Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 336.
423 Lincoln, "Conquering City," 19.

writer re-insists that "tout les combats sont liés."[424] The lives of those "[…] détruits à chaque instant recommencé toujours, en Europe, mais aussi en Asie, en Afrique, en terre des Caraïbes, et des autres Amériques […]" are linked by innumerable invisible threads.[425] In this sense, he refuses the victim blaming of a hostile European border-management that re-defines asylum seekers into security risks. To this effect, the border regime is described as a necro-economic apparatus whose operational ideologemes acts like death-sentences: "*insécurité identité immigration … des mots tombés monstres!*"[426] Against this backdrop, the displaced masses fleeing the wars and economic violence of global capitalism are figured as the universal product of "l'Histoire profonde de toutes nos histoires" such that the accumulation of misery is pinpointed as intrinsic to the accumulation of wealth: "Notre plénitude est faite de la plénitude de personnes inconnues qui pourtant sont en nous. Tout l'inconnu du monde soutient notre connu, l'anime, le détermine aussi."[427] In this, however, he notes that "le fait relationnel […] est autant un lieu de mort, de saccage et de domination […] qu'un essaim de surgissements (résistances, résiliences […])."[428] If Chamoiseau, then, argues that "[l]e solidaire s'impose comme principe"[429] in the face of these mutual interdependencies, he issues that literature and poetry must participate in the construction of solidarity.

In that capacity, his writing brings into view a zoned capitalist space in which "internal and external colonizations are no longer distributed only geographically" but instead the "North has its *Souths* (immigrants, descendants of colonized peoples who inhabit colonizing countries, […] etc.) just as the South has its *Norths* on the inside (zones of high-tech production and consumer zones for those who enrich themselves: *comprador elite*)."[430] Against this backdrop, the already-quoted Rana Dasgupta but also Ben Okri might be considered authors that pre-

424 Patrick Chamoiseau. *Frères Migrants*. Paris: Seuil. 122.
425 Chamoiseau, *Frères Migrants*, 17.
426 Chamoiseau, *Frères Migrants*, 16.
427 Chamoiseau, *Frères Migrants*, 134, 122.
428 Chamoiseau, *Frères Migrants*, 70.
429 Chamoiseau, *Frères Migrants*, 122.
430 Lazzarato/Alliez, *Wars and Capital*, 330.

cisely try to trace these fractures and, thus, create mutual intelligibilities. Dasgupta's *Notes on Suicide* (2017), for instance, describe the confines of Paris' so-called *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* as "open-plan prison[s]" or "population dumps," whose "only purpose" consists in "supply[ing] labour" to the metropole, imposing on inhabitants a sense of generalized dispossession, while police forces keep them in check like colonial occupying armies.[431] Similarly, Okri's commemoration of the fire at London's Grenfell Tower (2017) takes on an endocolonial perspective. The burned-out ruins of the apartment complex do not only materialize the hidden structural violence at work in contemporary property relations. But "[l]ike a war-zone come to depths of a fashionable borough," the "black skeleton of that living tower" also comes to embody an instance of asymmetric warfare.[432] In Okri's account, this catastrophic event tears apart the neoliberal consensus by revealing "the undercurrents of our age" inasmuch it symbolizes a zone of death that the fire victims had entered already ere they died: "their deaths happened long / Before. It happened in the minds of people who never saw / Them. It happened in the profit margins."[433] The city is re-imagined in terms of a civil war waged against an internal postcolonial enemy: "Those that survived" the burning are rendered as "sleep[ing] like refugees on the floor."[434] In this, Okri does not only echo Dasgupta's figuration of Paris' *banlieues* as "cemeteries"[435] for migrant workers. It likewise represents internal colonization as the policing of economic superfluidity by way of a racialization of poverty: "Poverty is its own / Colour, its own race."[436]

From a similar vantage point, one of Mujila's very own short-stories – the text *ICH WAR NICHT SCHWARZ (Monolog eines gewöhnlichen Nachtarbeiters)* – addresses the intersections between precarity and racism. In this, Mujila figures a "flexible *global colour line* separating

431 Rana Dasgupta. "Notes on Suicide." *Granta* 140. https://granta.com/notes-on-a-suicide/ [last accessed 20.06.2022].
432 Ben Okri. "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017." *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/39022f72-5742-11e7-80b6-9bfa4c1f83d2 [last accessed: 20.06.2022].
433 Okri, "Grenfell Tower," Online.
434 Okri, "Grenfell Tower," Online.
435 Dasgupta, "Notes on Suicide," Online.
436 Okri, "Grenfell Tower," Online.

the formal and informal economy, and waged from wageless life."[437] Pointing out the slippage in German language between "Schwarzarbeit" and blackness, the text navigates the intricacies between illegalization and racialization that structure the European border regime and its production of a hyper-precarious workforce.[438] Mujila himself further elaborates this issue by returning to Fanon's critique of the imperialist unconscious of Western metaphysics to testify to the racial ontologies involved in the fortification of Western economies against the fleeing multitudes of the South. In his *Monologue d'un Damné* (2016) he, hence, gives subjective expression to the experience of being rendered surplus to the economy and how this is crucially lived through the modality of racialization:

> Mon corps, ce corps privatisé /[…]/ Mon corps, ce corps hécatombe / Mon corps, ce corps poubelle /[…]/ Mon corps, ce corps colonisé / Mon corps, ce corps sous-développé / Mon corps, ce corps chosifié /[…]/ Mon corps, ce corps-corps veut se libérer de son corps de damné![439]

The racist re-coding of dispossession is inscribed into the body itself. Again and again, in this lyrical discourse, the border regimes of global capitalism enclose black bodies in chains of equivalence between political scapegoating, economic superfluidity, and social death: "J'en ai marre d'être le bouc émissaire, le maudit, le damné, l'idiot de la République, le chômeur, l'immigré, le pauvre, le dindon de la farce, l'apatride, le demandeur d'asile, le nègre."[440] It is in this regard that the literary output of the Congolese author is occupied with the configuration of neoliberal labour regimes. In the end, his general literary work proves fundamentally concerned with the making of the capitalist economy through the production of an external and at once an internal postcolonial enemy.

437 Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality," Online.
438 Fiston Mwanza Mujila. "ICH WAR NICHT SCHWARZ (Monolog eines gewöhnlichen Nachtarbeiters)." Edit 75. http://www.nazisundgoldmund.net/blog/ich-war-nicht-schwarz [last accessed 20.06.2022].
439 Fiston Mwanza Mujila. "Monologue d'un Damné." *Sur Fanon*. Bernard Magnier (Ed.). Montréal: Mémoire d'Encrier. 157.
440 Mujila, "Monologue d'une Damné," 159.

In point of fact, measured by Mujila's own statements, *Tram 83* itself is already supposed to narrate a story that could take place anywhere else: the text aims to tell something about the world at large by way of Congolese society and history.[441] As if to underline this unorthodox synecdochic effort, his first piece of theatre staged in German language *Zu der Zeit der Königinmutter* (2018) is yet another bar-narrative, that this time around takes place in a locale called "Fucking" that could be just about anywhere in the world according to the stage directions: "An diesem Ort, der irgendwo auf der Welt ist."[442] What is striking, here, though, is not only the repeated representation of a stage of action reigned by alcoholic and sexual excesses underscored by a jazz soundtrack, but the recurrence of a set of motives particularly associated with frontier economics such as the figure of the cowboy which functions as an embodiment of a new extractive order (fittingly he is only referred to as the "new one" by the other characters). The play is all about mining and the deliria of the gold rush, throwing us back to the numerous instances in which *Tram 83* situates the enclave in the history of capital's search for new frontiers of accumulation. Take the association between the so-called "civilisation du chemin de fer" with the American "Far West."[443] As we have seen, the novel engages in an excessive construction of such metonymical chains that lodge different worlds (the signifier "monde" recurs numerously in the novel) into each other in temporal loops that trace the genealogies of primitive accumulation as a recurrent feature of capitalist globalization: "Le Nouveau Monde, le Nouveau-Mexique, l'époque contemporaine…"[444] In this formulation, that, first, invokes the colonial conquest of the Americas, to lead over into a signifier of imperialist repartition marked by the U.S.'s fight for supremacy on the continent, multiple pasts are placed in an associative

441 Maria Motter. "Interview mit Mujila: 'Wir leben in einer Zeit der Utopie.'" *FM4*. https://fm4v3.orf.at/stories/1772178/index.html [last accessed 06.05.2022]. "Die Geschichte von Tram kann überall passieren, im Kongo oder irgendwo in Europa. Denn es geht um eine kleine Stadt, die ein Land geworden ist, in das viele Leute von überall kommen. […]."
442 Fiston Mwanza Mujila. 2018. "Zu der Zeit der Königinmutter." *Theater. Aktuelle Stücke 29*. Uwe B. Carstensen et al. (Eds.). Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlage. 174.
443 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 37–38.
444 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 34.

chain with the crisis-ridden "contemporary" re-adjustment of imperialism delineated in the novel.

As much as it is accurate, then, to point out the distinctive historicity of the social milieu depicted in *Tram 83*, it refuses to be conceptualized outside a globalized framework. It is, hence, the relationships that the novel draws between itself and the world at large that I want to stress at the end of this chapter.[445] That is, the kind of solidarities that it establishes within the medium of literature to work at a "more inclusive narrative of globalization" which achieves a representation of the relationship such extraction enclaves entertain among each other and to global production circuits.[446] Mujila himself also notes that "*Tram 83* could be a South African, Congolese or Angolan novel."[447] On another occasion, he goes even further in his parallelization of the operation sites of extractive capital, saying that the worlds of miners, be it in France, Belgium, or Angola, show striking consonances.[448] Thereby, *Tram 83* is inscribed in a broader effort in the recent decade to re-discover the "*in-common*"[449] against the particularizing tendencies of global capitalism. It explores the synapses between earth regions in order to think these contexts "through each other."[450]

A central concept in this discursive field is Glissant's notion of the "tout-monde" which proposes to recover the sense of a differentiated, earth-encompassing social totality precisely by thinking humanity from

445 It is true that the language of the novel at times feels incredibly dense due to its circular rhythmicality, dissonances, verbal accumulations, and historical intricacies. Indeed, it takes time to unfold the critical impetuses of the text out of the opaque aesthetics engendered in the jazz-like prose of *Tram 83*. But it is precisely in perturbing reading habits, compelling readers to scroll back and forth between the pages to keep track of the not readily apprehensible historical and geographical incursions made across the text, that the novel puts into effect a multitudinous relation to global capitalism.

446 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectics*, 582, 578.

447 Kona, "Using language without restraint to show the energy of the 'Wretched of the Earth'" Online.

448 Wilß, "Weltwortreisender," Online.

449 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 183; Abdourahmane Seck. "Penser l'en-commun: un agenda décolonial pour l' Afrique Francophone." *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde*. Felwine Sarr and Achille Mbembe (Eds.) Dakar/Paris: Philippe Rey/Jimsaan. 309.

450 Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr. *Ateliers de la Pensée de Dakar III*. https://www.thuram.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Ateliers-de-la-pens%C3%A9e-2019-pr%C3%A9sentation.pdf [last accessed 04.04.2026].

the wretched lives opacified in the "*faux-semblant* of the universal"[451] created by bourgeois society: that is, from the "holey space" of imperialist capitalism with its false effects of wholeness.[452] As Mbembe phrases it, the idea is to think the "durability of our world […] from the underside of our history" so as to make way for those excluded "from humanity itself" in a conception of the world as one.[453] Re-activating the idea of the colonial boomerang, the Cameroonian philosopher has, in this vein, suggested that perhaps we are witnessing a "*becoming black of the world.*"[454] He argues that the diagnosis of the gated "world" of contemporary capitalism and the concomitant production of "abandoned subjects" – monetized but without money – must account for the historical experience of black people, since the logic of dehumanization underlying the zonation of current capitalism precisely "made its first appearance under the sign of the Black Man, as *human-merchandise*, *human-metal*, and *human-money*."[455] Against the backdrop of rising inequality and violent population management, then, he ascribes the history of anti-blackness a pivotal role in the representation of present processes of dehumanization, since capitalist development has "always depended on racial subsidies," that is, the production of racialized populations "to exploit the planet's resources."[456] For Mbembe, however, this perspective does not abound in a dystopian future of universal oppression. It

451 Édouard Glissant. *Poetic Intention*. Nathanaël (Transl.). New York: Nightboat Books. 147, 53. Glissant distinguishes his notion of totality from concepts of uniformity wherein all differences are levelled in some kind of abstract universalism: "the Totality is not the Same." See also Moses März. *Édouard Glissant's Politics of Relation. Mapping an Intellectual Movement of Marronage*. PhD Dissertation. University of Potsdam. 71. "For Glissant, the Tout-Monde is a historic novelty in the sense that, with the onset of the decolonial struggles, where the people and nations who were previously on the 'hidden side of the world' appeared on the world stage and expressed their visions of the world, the full extent of the world's cultural and historic diversity has become visible and can no longer hidden [sic!] by a colonial discourse of a singular world History […]. For the first time in human history, Glissant argued, it is no longer possible to remain ignorant of any part of the world, and that even without knowing all the world's languages, a writer *'écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde'* […]."

452 Cf. Deleuze/Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 413ff.; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

453 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 181–182.

454 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 179–180.

455 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 180.

456 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 179; See also Mbembe, "Afrofuturisme," 125.

urges a reflection on how black people have survived and how their resistance strategies might help dismantle global systems of domination.

In *Tram 83* this salvage of critical knowledge is tackled by engaging the history of anti-colonial internationalism. Thereby, the novel participates in a larger narrative that seeks to renew the credo of the "wretched of the earth." The critical language developed by Mujila emits a universalist impulse that comes precisely from the sense of negativity unleashed in the text. Materialized crucially in the irruption of the novelistic background into the novelistic foreground, it suggests representing the whole through "the part of those without part."[457] There are also explicit references to Glissant's relational poetics in Mujila's further work, for instances when he invokes a writing of the "All-Welt"[458] that challenges the enclosure of literature in identitarian containers and forges new solidarities on a transcontinental scale. A performance at the HKW in Berlin is especially telling here. Taking the stage with his trademark reading style[459] (filled with laughter and accompanied by a jazz band), Mujila engages in a recital of Césaire, Baldwin, Fanon, and Glissant amongst others that proposes to read from "Lumumba's Congo to Alabama, from the mines of Johannesburg to Lagos, from Fort-de-France to London."[460] Beyond the faux-semblant of sameness often induced by the method of synecdochical representation, this might be considered an attempt precisely at a relational poetics that creates associations across spatial and temporal boundaries, between the living and the dead. This *mise-en-scène* of his work follows up on the way

457 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 35.

458 Fiston Mwanza Mujila. "Die All-Welt einer Lyrik." *Kontinentaldrift*. Idem. (Ed.). Dortmund: Wunderhorn. 8.

459 Mujila's oral performances of his work sometimes bring forward new facets that otherwise would remain overlooked in a silent reading of the text. Take a passage from the end of chapter 28, where the Diva repeats eighty consecutive times the adjective "lugubre," meaning something along the lines of "gloomy," "grim" or "mournful." One probably would take this passage for a quasi-avant-gardist excess in language imitating a broken record – a formal experiment without further affective implications – if one stuck to the muted black letters on the white page. In Mujial's stage-readings, however, this scene turns into a nervous breakdown, verbalized by the singer in a dyspneic word repetition. This is something that, to my mind, would remain concealed in the written form.

460 Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Denis Abrahams, Ben Kraef, Marco Mingarelli, and Fyodor Stepanov. "Wretched of the Earth." *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*. https://media.ccc.de/v/kolo-6-the_wretched_of_the_earth [last accessed 01.06.2022].

the novel itself establishes catenations in the medium of literature (e.g., relating the fate of those displaced by the "Middle Passage" to those displaced by the "Scramble for Africa"). There is, hence, an intriguing alignment between Mujila's writing program and the strategies whereby the novelist orchestrates the reception of his literary output. *Tram 83* is continuously re-framed and re-improvised in new settings such that the iterative structure at work inside the finished text of the novel is re-applied to re-tell the story again and again. In this, one can see a constant re-invention of the novel in the quest to open it up to the world respectively other lifeworlds.

Benjamin's crucial distinction between the "attitude of a work *to* the relations of production of its time" and "its position *in* them"[461] resonates here. For the self-recognition of literature as collective production staged in *Tram 83* finds itself delimited in a cooperative dynamic in which Mujila himself affirmatively takes on the ambivalent position of a "cultural broker."[462] Take the anthology *Kontinentaldrift* (2021) which congregates poetry by black authors that engage the realities of the European border regime while gleaning for experiential commonalities over and beyond national or even continental separations. Accounts of structural racism in Sweden (Mariama Jobe) find themselves juxtaposed to testimonies of the Somalian civil war (Ubah Christina Ali Farah). A eulogy (Roger Robinson) to the victims of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London stands next to an obituary to the pauperized Haitian relatives of one of the authors (Jean d'Amérique). At once, the volume proposes to document the "unheard lyric" of other similar collective enterprises from the last decade. Invoking the trans-hemispherical impetus – the "geographical kaleidoscope" – of the 1948 *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Négre et Malgache de Langue Française*, edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the tome seeks out the interconnections between what today would be called the Global South and Global North, reconnecting what has been disconnected by drawing new cartographies for literary writ-

461 Walter Benjamin. "The Author as Producer." *Selected Writings. Vol. 2:2 (1931–1934)*. Rodney Livingstone (Transl.). Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 770.
462 Brouillette, "On the African Literary Hustle," Online.

ing.[463] There is, then, an interesting universalist impulse at work in the deconstruction of the (binary) spatial constructions that organize the imagination of global capitalism. The literature coming out of this specific North-South nexus suggests investigating the itineraries between spaces that otherwise remain de-solidarized: be it for example d'Amérique's lyrical obituary "à mes tantes qui passent leur vie à chercher du travail"[464] or Robinson's *The Missing*, which akin to Okri mourns the victims of Grenfell Tower as it invokes the building in terms of a "gothic" construction acting like "a conveyor belt" for the working poor that had gone "missing"[465] in economic circuits long before the fire happened. Putting into effect a literary vision of a "tout-monde," the volume engages in an act of world-literary cooperation that purports to organize an encounter between experiences of (extreme) vulnerability to discover what these might hold in common.[466]

The curatorial practice of Mujila as a publisher but likewise his activities as a member of the Lubumbashian collective *Libr'écrire* (exploring the itineraries between the Caribbean and Françafrique), hence, sediment into his literary writing and vice versa. His practice as a literary agent elongates the solidarities fostered in his texts into a broader cultural sphere. In this, one can find at work Glissant's view of a kind of literature that "leads from periphery to periphery" and seeks to re-make "every into a center."[467] Under this aspect, Mujila's writing can be found to articulate a desideratum for new concepts, narratives, and aesthetics that might capture something of the universalist impulse once encoded in the formula of the "wretched of the earth." His own variegated textual output, ranging from novelistic writing to poetry, short-stories and the mining opera *Injustice* (composed together with Milo Rau and Hèctor Parra), opens a particular constellation through which to view the entanglement of neoliberal accumulation strategies with a certain post-

463 Cf. Mujila, "Die All-Welt einer Lyrik," 13–17.
464 Jean d'Amérique. "ce qu'on regarde au fond de ce grand…" *Kontinentaldrift*. Fiston Mwanza Mujila (Ed.). Dortmund: Wunderhorn. 110.
465 Roger Robinson. "The Missing." *Kontinentaldrift*. Fiston Mwanza Mujila (Ed.). Dortmund: Wunderhorn. 242.
466 Mujila, "Die All-Welt einer Lyrik," 8.
467 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 29. Glissant even envisages the "aboli[tion of] the very notion of center and periphery."

colonial predicament. For one thing, this concerns the decoupling of the DRC from the global experience of structural adjustment which *Tram 83* undermines in a narrative form that identifies the effectivity of world-market forces at the local level. But it also concerns the solidarities that the novel forges with today's and yesterday's wretched of the earth. *Tram 83*'s refrain-like prose, moving up and down in time to trace a missing collective subject, has something preparatory in that respect. Perhaps it does not prefigure a positive content for what a radical "cut" with existing conditions will look like. But the universalist impulses that it puts into effect delineate a space where a politics in solidary with the part-without-part might intervene. Mujila's writing, then, has much to teach about the depiction of structural adjustment across the nodes of transnational value chains. Transferring representational strategies across the South/North axis, his literary project could serve as a model for a critical poetics of capitalist shock therapy that traces the imperial boomerang from debt-driven "structural adjustment" in the Global South, through post–Cold War military doctrines of "Shock and Awe," to the "chainsaw" reform respectively decimation of the administrative state in the United States and Europe.

VI Conclusion: Literature and the Crisis of Critique

This study has been occupied with the representability of capital in the early 21st century as it is negotiated in the literature but also popular culture and theory of the time. It is probably for this reason that literary accounts of revolt – textual expressions in which the depiction of anti-systemic rebellion takes centre stage – have only been explored peripherally across the last chapters. Surely, the antagonistic logic that inheres the capitalist production of wealth has figured prominently in my investigations, yet first and foremost concerning the management respectively co-optation of conflict. The motif of resistance plays a crucial role in the capitalist imaginaries dissected in this enquiry but only insofar it serves to fix an ideology of alternativelessness. Thus, my reading of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* took off with an extended analysis of the *mise-en-scène* of anti-capitalist resistance in the novella, in which I noted that the signifiers of contestation compiled across the text serve the primary narrative purpose to play up the powers of the market. In the vein of contemporaneous social theories, critique is re-defined as a system-relevant feature in the "creative destruction" whereby capital expands. Here, the reference to "anti-capitalism becomes a […] procedure of naturalizing given conditions."[1] Epitomized by the V-shaped curve diagrams animating efficient-market hypotheses, the financial epistemology dissected in *Cosmopolis* represents rebellion as a deed that misrecognizes itself in that it misses its pre-corporation by the market. The novella gives a sense of a system that promises to dissolve crisis and critique into the ups and downs of business cycles. However, one might point here toward an unsaid in DeLillo's text, namely that the narrative of the false act set forth in the scene in question is enabled by a cutting-edge security system – an armoured vehicle – which keeps the billionaire-protagonist at a safe distance from protesters. The discourse on the totalizing powers of the market uttered by his "chief of

1 Frank Ruda. *For Badiou. Idealism without Idealism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 54.

theory" is facilitated by a system of violence that itself remains largely unnamed in the novella. Gupta proposes to render this absence readable by way of a comparison to Robert Newman's *The Fountain at the Center of the World* (2003), which provides a rather different depiction of the alter-globalization movement:

> If in [*Cosmopolis*] violence was somehow, obviously implausibly, concentrated on the protesters and activists, so that the anti-globalization activists seem to have a near monopoly on real violence, in *The Fountain* that monopoly is clearly the establishment's. It is in the hands of the U.S. police and military […]. *The Fountain* describes in visceral detail all the modes of crowd control and dispersal […] unleashed by the police and paramilitary forces in Seattle against a non-violent mass.[2]

The narrative of recuperation unfolded across *Cosmopolis* relies on an occlusion. Insofar so-called "cyber-capital" is made to appear as an almost transcendent entity, abstracted into zeros and ones, it is disconnected from the dirty work done to maintain the existing order. Or, to put it differently: the theorem of irrepresentability – which during this study has been defined as a key ingredient in neoliberal legitimation discourses – hides the heavy-handed policing, counter-insurgency strategies, and other violent means of class warfare that complement the silent compulsions of economic life. The view of a post-antagonistic society at the heart of the "end of history" lore blocks out that when the mute discipline of the market order proves unable to manufacture consent something else intervenes to moderate or suppress unrest.[3]

Against this backdrop, "structural adjustment" has proven a key analytic concept. First, of course, inasmuch it gets to the heart of the neoliberal regime of accumulation by conceptually tying together the "cyber-

2 Gupta, *Globalization and Literature*, 22.

3 "Genoa, 2001" recurs throughout this study as a pivotal event-site that stands in for a certain exhaustion of resistance before the 21st century really got started. Be it in literary accounts such as McCarthy's *Satin Island* or Wu Ming's self-reflections, the demise of the alter-globalization movement marks an important historical fact in the narratives of the false act dominating the era. Yet, in recognizing the historical horizon as essentially closed, these political considerations precisely risk filling in the gaps in capitalist power as I have argued throughout this study.

netic offensive"[4] against labour militancy and the "dethronement of politics"[5] characterizing neoliberal statecraft. Secondly, to the extent the notion helps identify a recurring aesthetic pattern marked by the neutralization and assimilation of dissent. Over and beyond literature, in fact, the first chapter has explored the emergence of "structural adjustment" as a recognizable optic in popular culture, from the brand-management of Apple Inc. to the *The Matrix* franchise, in which a power without negativity is confabulated. In this sense, we have identified a neoliberal bubble culture that closes the gaps in the supposed "end of history." The blueprint for these anti-utopian allegories of control, though, has been traced back to the cyberpunk genre, exemplified by William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, wherein a hyper-capitalist cyberspace, pictured as a "consensual hallucination,"[6] is narrativized in terms of an ineffable higher-order intelligence that co-opts even hostile forces into its incomprehensible, expansive drive. It is this construction of cyber-capital as the "sum total of the works, the whole show"[7] that is re-invoked in *Cosmopolis* so as to give representation to the "techniques of charting"[8] deployed to contain the instabilities of financial speculation within a vision of general equilibrium. But the image of cyber-spatial immersion ("livewire voodoo"[9]) unfolded in Gibson's vision of an embodied internet also provides a template for DeLillo's depersonalized prose which, for its part, tries to grasp the interfaced agency of subjects caught in the loops of an ever-smarter power that permeates everyday life and capitalizes on the exercise of freedom itself.

It is, however, *die alarmbereiten* by Kathrin Röggla in which this sense of "dividual" subjecthood is most intriguingly negotiated in and through literary form. The image of possessed subjects complicit with the forces of their own undoing that is tracked in this study is carried to the extreme, here, in that it is intimately tied to a cultural sentiment of futurelessness. Indeed, the narrative structure put into effect in the

4 Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat*, 197.
5 Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 149.
6 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 56.
7 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 259.
8 DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, 85.
9 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 5.

short-story volume is characterized by an uncanny incursion of 3rd person agentive perspective into 1st person narration that makes the subject itself appear as a medium of "blocked social conflict."[10] Yet, if DeLillo's book about holes is concerned with the immunization of the economy against market failure, Röggla's short-stories more specifically process the perpetuation of the present deadlock through an increasing polarization of the political landscape. In the style of a literary ethnographer, Röggla documents the grievances, punitive desires, and divisions of a society at trouble to articulate a shared horizon for capital and a population tormented by compounding crises. As it anticipates the literature of precarity that emerges in response to the unrest of the 2010s, *die alarmbereiten* registers the tensions in the paradigm of crisis-management. But it at once notes the regressive drifts in these social polarities which not only obscure more deep-seated contradictions but precisely reproduce the capital-relation in and through their resentful crisis response. In fact, the set pieces constructed in *die alarmbereiten* are pervaded by an insidious binary between in- and outside that often can only be maintained by externalizing the risks of crisis. This is at its most political when the text invokes the anguished stabilization measures of a self-stylized but in truth revanchist "gebernation"[11] that is ready to walk over dead bodies – the "hinterbliebenen" of global crises – to simulate a dubious return to normality. Bringing a certain crisis of political representation to bear on the crisis of literary representation, with respect to the sheer scale of the contemporary threat-environment, Röggla identifies at the core of neoliberalism's defence mechanisms a pseudo-rebellious subject type that aggressively holds itself hostage to a winner-takes-all system.

Turning to power's techniques of representation, Röggla tracks the denunciatory acts whereby neoliberal crisis-management promises to keep the contingencies of 21st century capitalism within narratable bounds. Corresponding to the last resort credits that bail out the core players of the global economy, Röggla tracks something like last resort narratives. The apparatus of disaster mitigation is presented as a

10 Staab, *Digitaler Kapitalismus*, 285.
11 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 178.

"löcherstopfsystem"[12] in which the plugging of liquidity gaps coincides with the plugging of plot holes in the "()hole complex" of the economy. That way, her prose ultimately proves concerned with the social antagonisms mediated by the junk language of faltering containment measures. In this, the post-Cold War triumphalism of earlier neoliberalism has morphed into the cruel (narrative) optimism of a nationalist austerity regime that considers disruption less a self-chosen strategy than a quasi-natural environment that business must adapt to. In that respect, die *alarmbereiten* represents an emergency neoliberalism that does not necessarily hide the cruelties of the market but professes their alternativelessness. The worst-case emerges as a legitimational trope by way of which the capitalist order justifies itself as the lesser evil. Cultivating a prose that taps into the grammar of risk discourses as a source of poetry, Röggla chronicles a system that constantly runs at the limit but for the time being manages to recuperate social discontentment in an authoritarian form of neoliberal catastrophism.[13] In this, the volume points toward the dissemination of "structural adjustment" into further segments of mass culture, most significantly the genre of disaster cinema/literature. Bringing forward the ideological precepts of much of recent popular catastrophe scenarios, Röggla notes that these execute a neoliberal wish-fulfilment by staging disaster as an apotheosis of Margaret Thatcher's quip that "there is no such thing as society." The representation of cataclysm proves a site where the presuppositions of austerity politics are amplified instead of confronting the scale-effects of multiple interlinked emergencies.[14] By following to the letter

12 Röggla., "draußen tobt die dunkelziffer," 271.

13 There is surely something anticipatory, here, regarding the alarmist representation of Germany as the "sick man of Europe" (reminiscent of the discourses that preceded the Hartz IV reforms) and the simultaneous jargon of national solidarity intoned in the talk of a new "Deutschlandpakt" that dominated the country's public debate in 2023.

14 Cf. Slavoj Žižek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real. Five Essays on September 11*. London/New York: Verso. 15–16; To the extent, then, that Röggla's 2010 *die alarmbereiten* seems to have anticipated some of the cultural response patterns to the coronavirus pandemic (the mode of narration in many of the short-stories appears, indeed, under lockdown), this is because "the space for it had already been prepared in ideological fantasizing." The view of a society at the precipice of disaster has been gestating for some time in neoliberal culture. Up to a certain point, the cultural reaction to the health crisis has, hence, been prefigured in prevalent catastrophe imaginaries. It is as if popular culture had been waiting for this

the neoliberal dream image of a society founded on self-interest and division, then, the embracement of the micro-economic miniaturizes crisis-management into rational-choice scenarios that plot the survival of the individual while any collective-solidary dimension is de-realized and the macro-social is rendered utterly illegible.

The close readings performed in the first and second chapters of this study have, thus, explored a gradual breakdown of the historical nexus between crisis and critique. Conversely, if one follows *die alarmbereiten*, a quite antithetical linkup seems to have taken hold, namely the couplet permacrisis/adaptation. In Fiston Mwanza Mujila's 2015 *Tram 83*, now, the prospect of enduring crisis is enmeshed into an account of the nexus between postcolonial labour and the reformed imperialist structure erected by neoliberalism in reaction to the anti-colonial uprisings of the post-war era. Much in vein of Koli Jean Bofane, the text investigates the Congolese economy as a "laboratoire du future"[15] insofar the scenarios found in the pushback against decolonialization in the DRC are figured as a paradigmatic case of structural adjustment in the Global South. Neoliberalism, thus, is portrayed as a response – to put it in the words of Césaire – to the "two major problems to which [capitalism's] existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem."[16] In that capacity, in fact, Mujila negotiates the interlacement of class and racialization in the context of capitalism's global border regime. Accounting for the repeated scramble for the Congo's riches, his debut novel gives representation to that part of today's cyber-proletariat – the "new wretched of the earth"[17] – that does not really fit the musings on a more or less classless "Information Society" that have undergirded

moment, holding ready established narrative formulas, so as to stage the emergency as the return of the evergreens of disaster cinema. (cf. Georg Seeßlen and Markus Metz. *Apokalypse & Karneval. Neoliberalismus: Next Level*. Berlin: Bertz + Fischer. 20–23) As such, the culture industry contributes to the sense that crisis has become stationary. Stripped of its eruptive quality, crisis is taken for granted: a new normal. In fact, the spectacle of crisis precisely yields adaptive effects in that the constant exposure to the vista of cataclysm has desensitizing consequences. It normalizes the dominant feeling that the world ends ere capitalism ends.

15 Bofane, *Congo Inc*, 289.

16 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 31.

17 Monaville, "An Interview with Fiston Mwanza Mujila," Online.

the "end of history" thesis. The novel undermines the curious discursive short-circuit, facilitated by offshoring, in which the talk of "dematerialization" and a "post-industrial economy" has been just another way of saying, as Fukuyama did, that there are no more "fundamental contradiction[s]."[18] In *Tram 83*, this is most acutely addressed in an effort to ridicule the ideological operations, be it "failed state" discourse or the so-called "resource curse," whereby the DRC is written out of world history. Under this aspect, though, the novel can be read to problematize in how far the optic of the hole in the whole might itself be conductive to a de-historicizing gesture. Against the figuration of the Congo as an ahistorical "heart of darkness," Mujila's prose therefore brings into view a risk society on steroids which is supercharged with history. By proposing to think structural adjustment "à partir du lieu morbide,"[19] the text at once sets out the entanglement between world-market forces and the informal mining economy which it depicts. In a "dialectic of 'real' and structural violence,"[20] *Tram 83* crafts a poetics in which capitalist abstractions are violently concretized. Thereby, the novel puts on display the temporal politics of structural adjustment with its in-built "betriebsalzheimer,"[21] as Röggla would have it, that suppresses the atrocious impact of imperialism in a wishful historical amnesia. Versus the reification of the short-term that banalizes the everyday violence of Congolese capitalism into a historyless image of deprivation, *Tram 83* writes the genealogy of an economy of premature death. It is not mystified into a state of exception but placed in the *longue durée* of imperialism.[22]

18 Fukuyama, "The End of History?" 9.

19 Nganang, *Manifeste D'Une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine*, 263.

20 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* 240.

21 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 59.

22 In that capacity, Mujila's prose echoes a literary position which has been summarized by the publishers of the African Short Story Day on the occasion of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the 2020 edition of the prize had long been dedicated to the topic of "disruption" when the fallout of the health crisis hit the ground. The fiction up to selection, collected from all over "Africa," was dedicated to the "relentless march of global environmental destruction," with one or two stories even glancing in the direction of zoonotic diseases, almost as if the texts at hand had been preparing for this moment. In reflecting on the strange ruse of literary history that the anthology was caught up in, the editors therefore note with a nod to Hemingway that "apocalypse occurs" in "[t]wo ways. Gradually, then suddenly." The impact of the plague and concomitant economic upheavals on the majority of the continent is not interpreted as an unparalleled epochal break but a point of intensification in

Against this backdrop, however, it has been up to debate whether the sense of neo-colonial perpetuity depicted in *Tram 83* does itself tone into the litany of alternativelessness dissected throughout this study. As a matter of fact, my analysis has suggested that the novel stages a post-revolutionary condition in which past ideologies of contestation have been stripped of their ability to articulate a dissensus vis-à-vis the ruling order. What is more, the text is for the most part permeated by a brutal language of competition: again and again, floating voices intrude into the narrative act to sell themselves piecemeal. Yet, my argument was that *Tram 83* differs from the unity of idiom that has been observed in DeLillo or Röggla, where it is as if the discourse of the various literary characters merged into a unanimous vernacular of banking or risk. Sure, compared to my prior readings, *Tram 83* definitely takes similar pains to establish the influence of absent causes on the scene of action. Characters like Requiem, purporting to speak for the market itself (alias marché"[23]), but also the sex workers that constantly interrupt the main plotline, are depicted as dividual subjects through and through in that their behaviour cannot be dissociated from global market forces. One could, hence, be tempted to conclude that there is no sign of contra*diction* in the literal sense of the word. Notwithstanding, my reading of *Tram 83* has reasoned that this literary exhibition of heteronomy at once becomes the site of an antagonistic narrativization. If, for instance, the incursion of 3rd person perspective into the 1st person singular in *die alarmbereiten* renders the narrator impassive, *Tram 83* stages a conflict between narrative fore- and background through which a plural subject insists on its presence in the story, that is, the invisible (linguistic) labour it performs to set the scene of the novel. In my analysis of *Pattern Recognition*, indeed, I noted that the more commodities seem to speak (in the form of brand-management), the more

an ongoing historical process. Without talking down the significance of the event, that is, the publishers refuse to decouple the suddenness of the disaster from the socio-metabolic forces that, for one thing, facilitate such hazardous (natural) events and, secondly, contribute to the inequal worldwide distribution of vulnerability. (Helen Moffett. "Introduction." *Disruption. New Short Fiction from Africa*. Karin Szczurek et al. (Eds.). Minneapolis/Cape Town: Catalyst Press. 11–12)

23 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 43.

production-chains recede into silence: Fittingly, in Gibson's near-future fiction the exploited remain a "wound [that] speak[s] itself wordlessly in the dark."[24] Mujila's prose, in comparison, subverts resource-curse ideologemes that conjure the procreative powers of commodities ("Au commencement était la pierre"[25]) by contrasting them with a literary accentuation of the antagonistic logic of extractive labour. It is notable that the universalist impulse of the novel is precisely staged via a scene of collective listening not an oratorial self-assertion: "quelle voix, quelle voix, quelle voix, elle nous pénétrait, nous écorchait, nous piétinait, nous déchirait, partir, naître, rêver, on pensait à ceux que la terre avait engloutis […]."[26] In Glissant's sense, *Tram 83* tries to think a commonness which is an "unknown" one: it does not consist in a shared identity but a shared negativity respectively dispossession vis-à-vis the capitalist production of wealth such that the solidary poetic act will consist in illuminating the links with those suffering comrades "whom you have yet to know."[27] Instead of imaginatively skipping over the sense of alternativelessness proper to the present capitalist moment, then, *Tram 83* writes out a powerful enunciative position in which the morbid and the luscious overperformance of an informal economy complement each other to point toward a potential "people to come."[28]

1 Epilogue: Toward a New "'Fighting Phase' in Literary History"?

All that said, it is fair to argue that my readings have brought forward the persistence in 21st century literature of a certain "negative knowledge of the actual world."[29] However, it remains unclear to what extent such literary sensoria are invested "not merely in mapping present realities but

24 Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 316.
25 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 13.
26 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 225.
27 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
28 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 216.
29 Theodor W. Adorno "Reconciliation under Duress." *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*. Ronald Taylor (Ed.). New York/London: Verso. 160.

in the revelation of possible futures and emergent social orders."[30] Critical literature might be able to create a sense of "the incommensurability of daily life […] and the immense invisible totalities of the capitalist world system."[31] But can it go beyond the "recognition-effect"[32] of this mode of representation? The question is in how far critical aesthetics interrupt power or risk reinforcing it. As Adam Turl puts it: "Images of trauma can become disciplinary images that, paradoxically, paralyze self-activity."[33] Such representation can lock viewers into a position of recognition that is also a position of subjection: the subject recognizes the overwhelming force of the powers-that-be. This is precisely the dynamic that someone like Russell Vought, an official of the 2nd Trump Administration, makes explicit: "we want to put them in trauma."[34] The production of powerlessness is strategic. As coercive capacity is limited, it relies on power projection to extend its reach. Representations, that induce a sense of inferiority, perform this amplifying function: they allow power to operate without constant physical enforcement.[35] As such, they close the gaps in power while contributing to an atmosphere of helplessness. Against the belief that capitalism is too big to be challenged, however, we would do good to remember Beverly Silver's insistence that conflict has followed capital wherever it took root in its flight across the planet from proletarian intransigence. On the closing pages, therefore, I want to attempt a partisan outlook on the perspectives of contention and revolt that recent literature has to offer. I venture a shift in perspective so as to bring into focus dissident literary positions that inquire less about the representability of capitalism in the 21st century than the representability of collective anti-capitalist struggle as it hopes to augur a new "'fighting phase' in literary history."[36]

30 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 77.
31 Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, 97.
32 Toscano/Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 239.
33 Adam Turl. *Gothic Capitalism. Art Evicted from Heaven & Earth*. Finland: Revol Press. 116–117.
34 Quoted after: Corey Robin et al. 2025. "Muskism and McCarthyism." *n+1*. https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/muskism-and-mccarthyism/ [last accessed 06.04.2026].
35 Cf. Robin, "Muskism and McCarthyism," Online.
36 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 77; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 222.

Of course, the primary prospect of change traced in this study concerns the rather hopeless deadlock of "structural adjustment" in a bubble-and-bust dynamic. The transition from *Neuromancer* to *Cosmopolis* re-traced in the first chapter is telling in that respect. If in the context of early neoliberalism literary form has been said to struggle with the increasing irrepresentability of market forces – by now a veritable trope of literary criticism – DeLillo's finance epic has shown that in the 21st century it rather has to account for the lapses in these abstractions.[37] The representation of representation performed in the novella showcases how crisis is encountered as an invisible limit by capitalist power itself. My wager, then, has been that *Cosmopolis* helps envisaging the neoliberal turn not as some "exhilarating new cultural condition" but "an organized semblance of world-historic dynamism."[38] In order to undermine the fantasy image of capitalist acceleration produced in cyberpunk culture, Joshua Clover has proposed a look on the very own fate of *Neuromancer*. As an instant classic of sci-fi literature, many critics forecasted the quick adaptation to screen of the cult novel. However, for a long time, the text was deemed unfilmable for technical reasons. When the story was eventually entrusted to the movie companies of Hollywood in the mid-2000s a certain irony of history had its way. Cinema's technological capacities had at last been developed enough to picturize Gibson's vision of cyberspace. But the very arc of accumulation set in motion by the financialization of capitalist relations, whose onset the novel had borne witness to, experienced a crash: the global economic crisis of 2007 and the subsequent recession. Since then, all projects to adapt *Neuromancer* to cinema have been cancelled. In this regard, Clover's take on this turn of events gets to the heart of the matter:

37 Cf. Benjamin Noys. "Toxic Money and Collapsing Values. The Postmodern Novel and the Aesthetics of the Financial Crisis." *academia*. https://www.academia.edu/9691269/Toxic_Money_and_Collapsing_Values_The_Postmodern_Novel_and_the_Aesthetics_of_Financial_Crisis [last accessed 11.05.2023].

38 Balakrishnan, "On the Stationary State," 15; See also Mason, "Disgorge the Cash," Online. As Mason puts it, this certainly "doesn't mean it wasn't real" but rather goes to show "the scale of the financial apparatus required to keep productive enterprises focused on profit maximization."

> It may be that Hollywood's inability to bring *Neuromancer* to the screen is itself the truth of the situation, more true than any version of the film could be. [...] [I]t's endlessly telling that the film should founder in this exact moment: when the very developments it required – that is, the dematerializing and virtualizing of the physical movie set, of the scene of real labor – have blown up the economy and worse […]. This is dialectical history in its most refined form.[39]

According to Clover, the ruse of history which caught up with *Neuromancer*'s film version might itself just be – in the very absence of the cinematic artwork – a more adequate representation of capitalism in the first two decades of the 21st century than a screen adaptation of its cyberpunk aesthetics could ever have been. The blockbuster-that-was-not serves as a fitting image of recession. As such, it contrasts well with the "retromania"[40] of the tech-industry which plunders the imagery of cyberpunk, the spectre of an all-powerful AI, to fuel its speculative logic and recruit the billions of dollars needed to sustain its scaling trend. These are, of course, very real fictions that bridge the gap between a hypothetical future and the current lack of a profitable business model to assure its claims on the spoils of contemporary labour.[41] Considering the general slowdown of economic growth in the last decades, however, Noys points out that suchlike visions of speeded-up market forces have little to offer for a *critical* figuration of the future. They fall back into "a retooled nostalgia that castigates the present"[42] in the image of outworn forms – simulacra of economic boom – that gloss over contem-

39 Clover, "Remarks on Method," 9.

40 Simon Reynolds. *Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*. New York: Faber Faber, Inc.

41 See Deutsche Bank analyst George Saravelos, who argues that current growth is "not coming from AI itself but from building the factories to generate AI capacity," that is, speculative investment. (Victor Tangermann. "Deutsche Bank Issues Grim Warning for AI Industry." *Future*. https://futurism.com/artificial-intelligence/deutsche-bank-grim-warning-ai-industry [last accessed 30.10.2025])

42 Benjamin Noys. "Days of Phuture Past: Accelerationism in The Present Moment." *Accelerationism – A Symposium on Tendencies in Capitalism, Berlin* [Talk]. https://www.academia.edu/5383550/Days_of_Phuture_Past_Accelerationism_in_the_Present_Moment [last accessed 30.09.2023].

porary experiences of expendability or stagnation, and, hence, mystify the present.[43]

Under this aspect, Clover's proper poetry shows itself concerned with the configurative bugs of crisis-management, tracing the wreckage of rapidly ageing forms that are holed out by alternating crises: "punctuated by crash."[44] It tracks the "language of value" across the moving contradictions of capital as it attempts to "make […] whole" again "the owners of debt," "the shareholders," the "debauched and defaulted," or "our brothers and sisters in the equity / and the mezzanine tranches."[45] In Sean Bonney's *Notes on Militant Poetics* (2012) a comparable idea comes to the fore. Referring to the situationist conception of poetry as the "anti-matter" of spectacle society, Bonney contrasts this "claim" to another theorem forwarded by the "Situs," namely that advertising is the "real poetry of capital" such that its interruption might indicate deeper problems.[46] In fact, he suggests that the "empty billboards" that seamed "East London" during the recession years in Britain post-2007 "speak more eloquently about the collapse of capital into sterile and arid zones of its own making than any poetry."[47] In light of these blank spaces left behind in the spectacular self-representations of capital, advertising – and the utopia of consumption it expresses – appears as

43 Cf. Semley, "Cyberpunk is Dead," Online. Today, cyberpunk is caught in a "self-mythologizing nostalgia" as Gibson himself noted regarding the videogame Cyberpunk 2077 (2019). It re-works "the canon of cyberpunk itself, smashing together tropes, clichés, and old-hat ideas," rather than engaging with the relation between genre and historical reality. Akin to the humans in *The Matrix*, cyberpunk retromania itself is stuck in a loop that eternalizes the boom culture of the dot-com bubble. But, as Balakrishnan notes, even stern analysts such as Fredric Jameson were spellbound by the prospect of cybernetics. (cf. Balakrishnan, "On the Stationary State," 15) In his writing of the 1980s and early 1990s, he attributed the sublime effects of the world market to the crippling of political agency in light of a "new and virtually unimaginable quantum leap in technological alienation." (Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings of the Postmodern (1983–1998)*. London/New York: Verso. 16) Yet, over the years he refrained from this vision of unfettered productive forces. Against the backdrop of perpetual crisis-management, in fact, he "silently shifted the locus of the problem […] to mapping an opaque, pseudodynamic world of financial markets." (Jameson, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 408)

44 Clover, "Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis," 9.

45 Clover, "Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis," 8–9.

46 Sean Bonney. 2016. "Notes on Militant Poetics." *All this Burning Earth*. Web Publication: Ill Will Editions. 38.

47 Bonney, "Notes on Militant Poetics," 38.

"the anti-matter of itself."[48] The critical potential of poetry, thus, would not stem from a creative act anymore (e.g., the production of situations) but from documenting the sterile zones where exchange-value fails to be realized. Capital, not labour, appears as its own gravedigger, falling victim to its own success. The point of a critical aesthetic would, then, be to achieve an effect of the real via the *mise-en-scène* of crisis-management and its discontents. This emphasis on failure containment is, of course, crucial to Röggla's writing program, which traces the "schrottprämienerklärung[en]"[49] whereby crisis-management organizes the precarious bailout of the capitalist system. In this, the Austrian writer dissects an austerity regime that substitutes economic incentives for penalties and threats, should it prove ineffective at purchasing social peace by garnering the consent, the "marktwirtschaftliche[] totalüberzeugung,"[50] of its subjects. As in "der übersetzer," that is, Röggla critically brings forward the class war waged by neoliberalism, for which – over and beyond the rhetoric of pseudo-solidarity intoned in mantras such as the "weltuntergangsboot"[51] – the real catastrophe consists in declining growth rates. Thereby, however, *die alarmbereiten* evinces that the focus on capital's failures of (narrative) containment again codifies a certain powerlessness: the proverbial emperor may be naked, but this schadenfreude offers no way forward. It risks perpetuating the enormity effect of a global economy that is not only deemed too big to fail but as such also too big to be changed, insofar the action of individual agents and even individual states is considered irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. It appears, then, that power is reproduced through this crisis of representation, not least inasmuch the neoliberal crisis response "harness[es] ignorance"[52] to disqualify the prospect of a shift in the deep blueprints of a truly global capitalist society. As already noted, the distribution of the sensible codifies a distribution of the possible.

48 Bonney, "Notes on Militant Poetics," 38.
49 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 55–59.
50 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 63.
51 Röggla, *die alarmbereiten*, 60.
52 Davies/McGoey, "Rationalities of Ignorance," 80.

What emerges as a vista of the near-future, then, is the image of a late neoliberalism. It is late because it fails to escape the economic slowdown, even if it mobilizes – much in vein of the 1980s – the countertendencies to the stagnation of the economy: privatization, labour repression, asset price inflation, subsidies to big capital, militarization, and on. Current calls for "painful"[53] re-adjustment hark back to the neoliberal "Zeitenwende" of the late 1970s that reverberated across the entire globe in decades of debt crisis, austerity, and state disintegration. Notwithstanding, growth in OECD countries and the global economy overall continues to trend downward. Investment rates decline in tandem, leading to decelerating labour productivity in both advanced and emerging economies. Against this, debt has long ceased to function as a last resort in a moment of crisis. Central banks act as key market makers, state indebtment is a global standard procedure that assures liquidity. Despite all, "zombie firms" account for larger and larger parts of the economy, while debt eats into social wealth. What is at stake, though, is not only the exhaustion of a growth model. It is the gradual undoing of the mechanisms that have managed distributional conflict in capitalist democracies since, at the latest, the post-WW2 era.[54] In the face of stagnation, the promise that rising output would reconcile accumulation with social reproduction loses credibility. Financial bubble dynamics suspended this impasse for some time. But the crisis of 2007–8 marked the point at which this compensatory regime was lastingly de-stabilized, faster in some areas, slower in others, yielding a crisis of prior forms of (democratic) representation. As austerity factors in mass discontent as a tolerable cost to adjust to global competitivity standards, the defence of social welfare moves ever further away from established institutional channels and increasingly takes the shape of episodic revolts.

53 Cf. Anom. "Tim Gurner on Productivity and BTR." *Australian Financial Review*. https://www.afr.com/property/residential/we-need-pain-in-the-economy-tim-gurner-on-productivity-and-btr-20230912-p5e3z2 [last accesssed 01.10.2025]. As Gurner put it on the occasion of the 2023 Australian Property Summit, the sentiment among leading capitalists is that "[w]e need to see pain in the economy" to remind employees who the boss is.
54 John Burn-Murdoch. "Is liberal democracy in terminal decline?" *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/b4d2c7a3-587d-440f-a7a9-7e5e85b93a88?syn-25a6b1a6=1 [last accessed 06.04.2026].

A parallel erosion of mediation has unfolded in international relations. Amid cascading sovereign debt crises, prior narratives of globalization unravel. During the 2010s, the promise of comparative advantage – according to which international trade would deliver shared prosperity – lost its hold. Under the pressure of slowing capitalist development, international competition increasingly came to be experienced as "zero-sum."[55] As Canadian prime minister Mark Carney conceded at Davos in 2026, "strategic autonomy" has emerged as the new concern of national, economic "risk-management." This marked an explicit recognition that globalization no longer functions as a neutral medium of coordination and, indeed, never did: "You cannot live within the lie of mutual benefit through integration, when integration becomes the source of your subordination."[56] In this setting, it is the language of re-nationalization through which the neoliberal maxim "there is no alternative" is perpetuated.[57] The future of capitalism depends in many ways on lowering the living standards for the vast majority. In the process, it sheds even the limited pretence of a human face supplied by trickle-down beliefs, while austerity, carceral politics, and militarized borders take centre stage. The fight over international competitivity materializes crucially in state subsidies to private capital, police force, and military power, re-directing funds away from social and other public spending. The top-down re-distribution of the costs of economic and geopolitical transformation is the other side of "de-risking."[58] As growth ceases to function as an integrative force, coercive adaption tendentially replaces consent. Patriotic mobilization, far from representing a rejection of neoliberal rationality, performs a crucial stabilizing role in this. By translating systemic contradictions into narratives of external threat and internal

55 Cf. Merchant, *Endgame*, 133–135.

56 Mark Carney. *Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada. World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, Davos*, 20 January 2026. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/ [[last accessed 30.01.2026].

57 Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, Cord-Christian Casper, Emmanuel Tristan Kugland, and Marlon Lieber. "On the Production, Distribution, and Articulation of the Possible and the Impossible." *Coils of the Serpent* 8. 4.

58 Cf. Frederick Coulomb. "Subventionen nur mit Konditionen." *Jacobin*. https://jacobin.de/artikel/subven-tionen-derisking-industriepolitik-eu-mario-draghi [last accessed 16.10.2024].

betrayal, it provides a political language through which intensified discipline and the continual bailout of big business can be enacted. Trade wars and imperialist conflict may suggest a departure from the Washington Consensus that governed recent decades of global competition. But as a mode of internal governance, neoliberalism is gearing up and undergoing an authoritarian transformation. Narratives of national decline fuse with ideologies of disruption to generate violent projects of re-adjustment that intensify neoliberalism's logic of restoration via shock-therapy. The reactionary cycle since the Great Recession proves "not so much a backlash against neoliberalism but the realization of possibilities latent within it."[59]

What distinguishes this conjuncture is the techno-political infrastructures through which a strange "paleolibertarian"[60] amalgam of anarcho-capitalism and racialism is enforced. Current far-right projects hinge on claims to sovereignty grounded in technological superiority, with AI-generated content functioning as an ideological machine that feeds into long-standing culture wars. For decades, these have operated as channels of polarization. Now, they increasingly become vectors of fascist intensification. Via micro-targeting techniques that fuse advertising with the pre-emption of critical behaviour, digital technologies enable the production of illegitimate populations, a dynamic set in motion by the security logic of the War on Terror. The control mechanisms provided by the military-digital complex, thus, effectively facilitate the power grab of the far-right. Within this environment, ultra-nationalist forces pursue a dual strategy. Some seek to normalize an increasingly illiberal status quo while leaving parliamentary forms intact – a process dubbed "Melonization," after Italian PM Giorgia Meloni, that names the mainstreaming of the far-right. Others, like Trumpism, seem to work to escalate conflict toward a civil-warlike militarization that displaces class struggle. Either way, the threat of fascism – capitalism's political form of last resort – assumes a distinctively 21st century shape. It presents itself as a mode of crisis-management that normalizes, even exploits, disorder and collapse as political authority is re-constructed via unceasing

59 Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance," 4.
60 Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance," 17ff.

disruption and systemic disorientation. AI is folded into this strategy as wager and tool. It is projected as a technological fix for the secular slowdown of the economy, while simultaneously functioning as a versatile apparatus of class domination. The prospect of a speculative frenzy is hedged into this: should the bubble burst, the technology will not disappear but be branded as solution and deployed as a means of authoritarian coordination.[61] In short, AI is projected as a general-purpose technology, supposed to fill in the holes in the capitalist whole. In this, it becomes a key infrastructural support for an "anti-state state" (Gilmore) that systematically administers precarity and abandonment for populations rendered economically redundant or produced as expendable through racist hierarchies.

There is, then, a close entanglement of state authority with finance and tech-capital that is shadowed by a "fragmenting politics of space and place"[62] animated by myths of cultural/racial superiority and national renaissance. This is flanked by irredentist and palingenetic tendencies. For if this setting proves a fertile ground for renewed dreams of national deliverance, it scales up, at the international level, into a civilizational geopolitics that aims to re-align the international order along explicit spheres of influence, which may well extend across the globe. In far-right imaginaries, "geopolitics is part of a comprehensive worldview underpinned by a deeply pessimistic interpretation of politics as

61 It is at this point that the function of AI narratives as a technology of power comes fully into view. Ideologically prefigured in cyberpunk fiction – which renders it as a frictionless force: a whole without holes – the ascent of "AI" is framed as inevitable, inducing a sense of resignation that bridges over the evident limits of the technology. Jürgen Geuter, in fact, argues that while investment in so-called "generative AI" resembles past tech bubbles, it differs in a crucial way: it lacks the economic properties that allowed earlier bubbles to leave behind broadly useful, low-cost infrastructure. He claims that "generative AI" is structurally unprofitable due to high, non-declining marginal costs for training and inference. So, scale makes losses worse, not better. Unlike the dot-com era, where cheap, data-agnostic networks endured, generative AI models rapidly degrade without constant, expensive re-training. If firms like Anthropic collapse, what remains would likely be data centers and GPUs (e.g., NVIDIA hardware), not sustainable consumer AI services. Geuter, therefore, concludes that post-crash AI infrastructure will primarily serve state and surveillance uses, benefiting companies like Palantir, rather than democratic or broadly productive ends. (cf. Jürgen Geuter/tante. "these are not the same." *Smashing Frames*. https://tante.cc/2025/04/15/these-are-not-the-same/ [last accessed 01.07.2025])

62 Merchant, *Endgame*, 135.

a zero-sum struggle in which every community is a potential rival, and survival depends on controlling territory."[63] The U.S. occupies a pivotal position in this situation. Its structural power enables it to act as chief crisis-manager. Yet, this role is exercised under conditions of relative decline, such that – far from rescuing this order – it increasingly opts for economic and military interventions that accelerate its undoing.[64] Foregoing the expansive soft power that underwrote U.S. hegemony since 1945, it tends to assail established alliance systems and the multilateral institutions which underwrote its global influence. Continued growth is purchased via blackmail, employing economic and military dependence as coercive leverage. From this perspective, protectionism, economic nationalism, and imperial conquest are not assertions of political primacy. They signal the grip of economic compulsions, mediated by global competition, over governmental decision-making. As Jamie Merchant observes, the effectiveness of the "general rate of profit for capitalism […] shows up indirectly but most dramatically in the stratagems actors devise to resist its decline."[65] Yet, the emerging configuration also suggests that the ruling class has, in crucial respects, pre-empted its own opposition. The language of nativism – infused with an "anti-globalist" impulse – appears as the dominant idiom in which protest against global capitalism can be articulated. It is structurally incoherent, as the crisis is transnational in origin und nationalism precisely perpetuates the principles of world market competition. Nonetheless, this project draws energy from a pervasive sense of powerlessness generated by an exhausted system, holding out the promise that some measure of sovereignty can be reclaimed. The crisis of "American globalization," rooted in the disjunction between capital valorization and social reproduction, hence brings the nation-state back to the fore, both as an internal nativist affirmation and as an axis of interstate conflict.[66] In this context, rather than a clear-cut return to

63 Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams. "International relations and the revolutionary geopolitics of the European New Right." *European Journal of International Relations*. 31:2. 315

64 Cf. Merchant, *Endgame*, 133–135.

65 Merchant, "Suicide State," Online.

66 Cf. Dndf, "Européennes 2024," Online.

bloc confrontation, a logic of "polyalignment" (DiCarlo) takes hold that cuts across presumed alliances such as the G7 or BRICS. Capital continues to operate and accumulate transnationally.[67] Meanwhile, the vast wage-dependent population is disciplined by recruiting it into geopolitical and racist enmities.[68] Fragmentation, thus, does not negate global capitalism. It functions as one of its crisis modalities.

Against this backdrop, critique struggles to re-assert that "another world is possible" as the famous alter-globalization slogan had it. Austerity, it seems, does not only subject public expenses to a strategic deficit. It also limits the scope of critical imagination. Decoupled from notions of progress, it appears exhausted in the documentation of collapse: "we now poeticize dilapidation."[69] Reading from literature to the broader historical context, one may hence establish a continuous regress in post-capitalist utopianism. Mujila's debut, now, has not much reassurance to offer in that respect. It effects a ruthless *mise-en-scène* of structural adjustment. Nonetheless, my reading advanced the thesis that the necro-aesthetic elaborated in *Tram 83* does not only resist the historical *tabula rasa* carried out by capitalist shock-therapy but, in fact, emits a universalist impulse that comes precisely from the sense of negativity unleashed in the text. In that regard, the last chapter's closing sketched something like the contours of a "global *bandungsroman*"[70] as I

67 Roughly 70 percent of global trade now passes through global value-chains. The fixation on a new bloc confrontation reflects anxiety over economic dependence on Chinese nodes in advanced stages of production. But supply-chain diversification merely relocates this dependence, empowering emergent capitals in other regions and countries. There is, then, a certain "fragmentation of a specific global trade regime that took US-China trade as its nucleus." Yet, talk of "delinking" obscures how power over production has been re-distributed rather than withdrawn, with control dispersed across a hierarchy of firms and states. Global capitalism is not being overturned so much as reorganized, as new subsidiary powers assume sub-imperial functions within the existing order. This re-linkage is highly contradictory. Political rivalries/alliances and economic partnerships/competition overlap. The new "bloc confrontation" is riven by fractured coalitions. (Neel, "Subimperial Scramble," Online)

68 Strangely, this reactionary formation continues a certain neoliberal concept of freedom. It stages a "war on empathy" (Musk) that promises liberation from guilt, shame and any semblance of universalism.

69 Patrick Keiller, Quoted after Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor. "Reckoning with Ruins." *Progress in Human Geography* 37. 478.

70 Joshua Clover. *Riot. Strike. Riot. The New Era of Uprisings*. London/New York: Verso. 164.

tried to map out a literature that is in solidarity with the "part-without-part" in the capitalist system. It is this intuition that I want to expand upon – excursively – on the ultimate pages of this long enquiry.

One could, for instance, link the extraction novel to Bhanu Kapil's "[n]otes for a novel never written: a novel of the race riot: (Ban.)," which precisely means to narrate "a negation that wasn't erased."[71] In *Ban en Banlieue* (2015) we come across an attempt at figuring the present via the zones of banishment perforating capitalism, foremost via the peculiar illegibility – within the racializing procedures of official discourses – of the "riot" as an expression of political dissent under conditions of social death. Continuously recombining various fragments, be it autobiographical or paratextual remarks, social reportage, references to the real-life Ban, accounts of sexual violence, or different banlieue uprisings throughout history, the text unfolds the intricate semantic layers of "ban" as in banlieue, social abandonment, or a girl killed during a riot in the "outskirts"[72] of London in 1979. *Ban*, thus, composes a failed novel insofar the attempt at contriving a literary figuration of riot pushes historical fiction to the breaking point. As such, the text constantly reflects upon the representational dilemmas that pose themselves to the literary perspectivization, let alone formalization of the "language of the unheard" as Martin Luther King conceptualized the riot phenomenon. Urging that the structural violence of racial capitalism cannot be shown directly, Kapil's riotous prose hopes to undo violence's immediacy so as "To write the larger scene. In this scene without depth […]."[73] Writing from the hole in the whole, if you will, *Ban en Banlieue* thereby tries to figure out "what a post-colonial literature might be. To write into the parts of institutions, societies and events that are never recorded or seen."[74] Uninterested in some kind of utopian writing, Kapil's critical impetus consists in undoing over and again the oblivion of racial injustice in and through the incessant return to the riot as "a charnel ground" of history: "To ban, to sentence. To abandon is thus to write prose."[75]

71 Bhanu Kapil. *Ban en Banlieue*. New York: Nightboat Books. 20, 90.
72 Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*, 33.
73 Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*, 71.
74 Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*, 89–90.
75 Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*, 22, 41.

Ban en Banlieue is not alone in that respect. The already-mentioned Sean Bonney argues that "A Riot is a Haunt"[76] which resists the invisibilization by capitalist crisis-management. If Bonney considers the empty billboards that lined UK landscapes in the aftermath of the 2007 crash a symbol of a certain profitability crisis, then he reads the riot as the manifestation of a crisis in the crisis. The "riot," thus, emerges as a figure of counter-periodization that re-introduces a certain sense of the ungovernable into an epochal self-periodization that is otherwise characterized by awe and terror at the totalizing power of markets. Against this background, someone like Clover even reckons that one can observe glimpses of an "insurrectionary turn"[77] in recent writing. And, indeed, there is an assumption in some parts of recent literature and culture that "the poetry of the future is being written from within these dynamics, where ever-accelerating productivity can no longer provide a shared horizon for both capital and its antagonists,"[78] and where civil unrest has become a more and more common global phenomenon.[79]

Yet, the methods of representation differ quite a bit. One comes across very different temporal constructions in the accounts of revolt that have popped up in recent times. Take the riot epic *Athena* (2022) by Romain Gavras, which is marked through and through by an effect of immediacy. The first ten minutes of the movie consist of one long-take that closely tracks the early instances of an uprising in a fictional Parisian *banlieue*. As such, it is characterized by a certain militant "hyperlocalism."[80] If there are remarks that the unrest has spread to other cities,

76 Sean Bonney. *Our Death*. Oakland: Commune Editions. 1.

77 Joshua Clover. "The Insurrectionary Turn." *Fiction & Poetry (The American Reader)*. http://theamericanreader.com/the-insurrectionary-turn-part-one/ [last accesse 15.04.2023].

78 Joshua Clover and Chris Nealon. "The Other Minimal Demand." *Communism and Poetry: Writing Against Capital*. Ruth Jennison and Julian Murphet (Eds.). Cham: Palgrave MacMillan. 25.

79 According to the Global Peace Index, anti-government protests, riots, and general strikes have increased by 244% over the last decade. The frequency of mass protest has increased by an annual average of 11.5 percent between 2009 and 2019 across all regions of the world, with the largest concentration of activity in the Middle East and North Africa and the fastest rate of growth in sub-Saharan Africa. See Anom. *Global Peace Index 2021*. Institute for Economics and Peace. 3. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GPI-2021-web-1.pdf [last accessed 03.10.2023].

80 Kieran Aarons. "The Silos of History. Remarks on Romain Gavras' Athena." *Hardcrackers*. https://hardcrackers.com/the-silos-of-history/ [last accessed 02.10.2023].

this happens without coordination. *Athena* shows itself concerned with the lived experience of rebellion, not so much the larger historical context. In that capacity, Gavras' screenplay holds no solutions. But even if the social totality recedes from view, revolt appears as the logical consequence of the accumulated discontent of decades.[81] The film, thus, has something realistic precisely insofar the aesthetics of immediacy at work in *Athena* succeed in depicting the rioting masses as the "subjective expressions of the objective disorder of our times."[82] On the other hand, a novel like Omar Robert Hamilton's *The City always Wins* (2017) is written as a protocol of defeat that starts at the end, proceeding from the lethal backlash of "Tomorrow" (Part I) not the hopes of "Yesterday." Dedicated to the 2011 uprising against Husni Mubarak in Egypt, the non-linear text narrates the reversal of an initial victory – the fall of the regime – into counter-revolution epitomized by Morsi's declaration on June 30, 2013, that "there will be no second revolution." By way of this temporal construction, the novel wants to avoid the nostalgic revelling in the euphoria of the past: "It's impossible to do the Eighteen Days [that predated the downfall of Mubarak] without being clichéd. It's ruined already by its overtelling."[83] Yet, the narrative does not entirely give in to defeat. Reminiscent, in fact, of *Tram 83*, the novel from the get-go invokes jazz as a metaphor of collective revolutionary memory:

> Yes, Cairo is jazz. Not lounge jazz, not the commodified lobby jazz that works to blanch history, but the heat of New Orleans and the gristle of Chicago: the jazz that is beauty in its destruction of the past, the jazz of an unknown future, the jazz that promises freedom from the bad old times.[84]

If *The City always Wins* then traces the limitations of the anti-regime movement, it at once reckons that the task of the novelist is to hold on to the social energies that were liberated and the new modes of

81 Maxence Klein. "Athena, or Logical Revolt." *Ill Will*. https://illwill.com/athena [last accessed 02.10.2023].
82 Endnotes. "Onward Barbarians." *Endnotes*. https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/endnotes-onward-barbarians [last accessed 02.10.2023].
83 Omar Robert Hamilton. *The City always Wins*. New York Faber & Faber. 149.
84 Hamilton, *The City always Wins*, 10.

belonging that were tested out in the moment of insurrection. A comparable temporal construction can be detected in Sean Bonney's *Letters against the Firmament* (2015), which, for their part, are dedicated to the 2011 England riots as well as the anti-austerity protests that shook the UK during that time. Akin to Hamilton, his writing ventriloquizes rebels that are left without a rebellion. His epistolary poetry practices a sort of post-insurrectionary mourning by placing revolt and lyrical expression in an intricate interplay of anteriority and posteriority: "In moments of defeat, revolution tumbles back into poetics, just as in moments of insurrection […] the energies concealed in poetics explode outwards into revolution."[85] Putting into lyrical form the "sound of the collective I being pushed back into its individuality,"[86] Bonney tries to uncover the forces of negation hidden in the great resignation of the age. If in a novel like *The Flee* resignation mostly ends up in apathy, he reconsiders grief as a militant practice that resists the historical forgetfulness induced by the "clean slates" of structural adjustment. Against any kind of "recognition-effect" that recognizes the essential closure of the historical horizon, the riot here is remembered as a scene of counter-recognition in which the untenability of the ruling order came to a boiling point: "when out of nowhere around 300 teenagers ran past us, […], all yelling 'WHOSE STREETS OUR STREETS'. Well it cracked us up. You'd be a pig not to answer."[87] Much in vein of Rosa Luxemburg's prosopopoeia of revolution "I was, I am, I shall be!"[88] days before her assassination, then, literary writing here is reconstructed as a political act that is characterized by its fidelity to the social insubordination of the wretched of the earth.

In light of this cursory overview, it seems to me that counter-hegemonic literature today envisages the periodicity of revolution. Approximating the older meaning of "revolvere" (lat.) as the "movement of

85 Bonney, "Notes on Militant Poetics," 29–30.
86 Sean Bonney. "Letter on Poetics." *Letters Against the Firmament*. London: Enitharmon Press. 142.
87 Bonney, "Letter on Poetics," 143.
88 Rosa Luxemburg. "Order Prevails in Berlin." *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (Eds.). Peggy Fallen Wright (Transl.). New York City: Monthly Review Press. 378.

celestial bodies," Bonney's Letters *Against the Firmament* engage in a cosmic figuration of the eternal return of revolution: "Like a comet, it disappears. And then it returns."[89] Or, at least, there is an attempt to introduce the temporal out-of-jointness of the supposed end of history in capitalist permacrisis. And it also appears that different genres lend themselves more or less readily to various temporal constructions and, thus, visions of social transformation. Against this backdrop, now, Jasper Bernes's *We are Nothing and So can You*[90] (2015) is an intriguing case insofar it taps into different genres, switching between prose elements and verse poetry, to explore the historicity of the recent moment. Whereas those segments that are written in metrical speech reflect upon the shape of protest movements in the 2010s, the more narrative text parts engage in a sort of extrapolation which conjectures about the possible trajectory of emancipatory struggles in the near- to mid-future. Shuffling different tenses into each other, the contemporary is fundamentally defamiliarized. The lyrical compendium envisages history as a process in which the present might appear deadlocked but nonetheless is but an interim period.

In this, Bernes' meditations are not that dissimilar from the speculative construction tested out in Kim Stanley Robinson's climate change epic *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), which likewise places the current situation in a transitional phase yet opts for a more technocratic framework. Trying to imagine a best-case scenario for climate politics in the 21st century, the novel uses a multi-perspective style to reflect on the multitude of tactics devised to contain compounding environmental crises. For the longest time, though, the text is caught up in a loop without a clear plot, a sort of disruptive realism, that outlines the inability of the powers-that-be to find an answer to global warming. Delving deep into the structural constraints posed to political change

89 Sean Bonney and Paal Bjelke Andersen. "You'd be a Pig not to Answer: A Conversation." *Audiatur-Online*. http://www.audiatur.no/festival/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2-Sean-Bonney.pdf [last accessed 15.04.2021].

90 The title "rings a change upon a difficult-to-translate line of Eugène Pottier's original French lyrics for "The Internationale," *Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout!* Many English-language renditions leave the line out, but Charles Hope Kerr's version translates it as "We have been nought, we shall be all." (Jasper Bernes. *We are Nothing and So can You*. Oakland: Commune Editions. 83)

by a cybernetic rules-based order, juxtaposing minute excursions on tax codes and central banking to the internal monologue of an algorithm, business-as-usual is depicted not as the realist but the phantasmatic option. The speculative transition that Robinson wagers on, by contrast, is only set in motion when insubordination becomes a mass phenomenon. His "literary conceit" is that "mass death will make reservations about militant struggle melt away."[91] Ultimately, however, Robinson assigns global grassroots movements, radical activism, and mutual help initiatives foremost a catalytic role. Structural change emerges from a combination of reforms, diplomacy, technological innovation, and geo-engineering which together instantiate something like a general will. This narrative choice raises the question whether the novel eventually opts for a kind of technocratic wish-fulfilment that bypasses the reader as a reflexive subject by doing most of the work for us. Robinson's temporal construction risks "invent[ing] a fake sense of time as a form of imaginary compensation"[92] which skips over the profound delegitimization of even reformist struggles in the current conjuncture. *We are Nothing and So can You*, by contrast, figures the present more insistently as a transitional and unresolved moment. It refuses the promise of narrative closure as a solution to present-day contradictions. Where Bernes' prose poetry envisions the becoming of an oppositional agency, it at once reflects upon the limits placed on revolutionary imagination by the capitalist workaday:

> *We move through the sewer system*
> *gingerly, sketching on the underside*
> *of the surface of the world*
> *a map of the city to come, with brackets*
> *holding in place the things we can't*
> *begin to begin being*
> *perhaps because we were*

91 Andreas Malm. "When does the Fightback begin?" *Verso Blog*. https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/5061-when-does-the-fightback-begin?_pos=1&psq=fightback&_ss=e&v=1.0 [last accessed 02.10.2023].
92 Klein, "Logical Revolt," Online.

unwilling to count ourselves
among the things of the world
or perhaps because we did.[93]

The lyrical "we" that emerges is marked by a struggle against the limits of the current moment: "*the things we can't begin to begin being*." The literary act hopes to "hold open spaces for thinking and being otherwise"[94] at a time when the market and its radical niches seem to preordain our wildest dreams, while the social field is so atomized that only the delusional concreteness of the gendered body and the false totality of race/nation appear to hold an identificatory pull.

At present, critical writing would be "ahistorical" if it ignored the counter-revolutionary condition, yet to efface antagonism altogether would be to naturalize the status quo.[95] For that reason, this study has continuously maintained that conflict follows capital wherever it goes, even if this often only sediments in literature's political unconscious.[96] Bernes's urge to preserve the lived poetics of riot, in turn, tries to make that irreconcilability manifest by extrapolating an insurrectionary "we"-to-come out of the recent cycle of social struggles.[97] In doing so, he returns us to the idea of a literature from below developed in my reading of *Tram 83*: the projection of a collective space "vibra[nt] de littéra-

93 Bernes, *We are Nothing and So can You*, 23.

94 Zac Gunter. "Flames, too, are a Form of Literary." *Los Angelese Review of Books*. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/flames-too-are-a-form-of-literacy-jasper-bernes/ [last accessed 02.10.2023].

95 John Roberts. "Realism, Alter-Realism, and the Question of Legibility." *Kunst und Politik. Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft*. 16. Norbert Schneider and Alexandra Axtmann (Eds.). 97n7.

96 One might, here, also think of Louis Althusser's remark that "*in* a *necessarily conflictual reality* such as a society *one cannot see everything from everywhere;* the essence of this conflictual reality can only be discovered on the condition that one occupies *certain positions and not others in the conflict itself.*" (Louis Althusser. "On Marx and Freud." *Rethinking Marxism* 4:1. Warren Montag (Transl.). 21) And as Zupančič adds: "some positions dissimulate this conflict, and some reveal it" such that "a 'neutral' position" (e.g., the false unity invoked in the notion that "We're all in the same boat") almost necessarily, deliberately or not, consciously or not, comes out in favour "of the ruling class." (Alenka Zupančič. *What is Sex?* Cambridge/London: MIT Press. 4)

97 Bernes, *We are Nothing and So can You*, 83. Bernes claims that the title of his poem has been taken "from a patch of graffiti that appeared on the wall next to a looted jewelry store after a minor riot in Santa Cruz."

ture."[98] The contentious aesthetics sketched here treats social struggle as an enabling condition. It does not claim a revolutionary momentum for itself but vows to figure the in-common of the multitudinous moments of refusal that unsettled the last two and a half decades.[99] It abides to "the images of a life lived otherwise"[100] briefly glimpsed at in our ongoing era of revolt. As such, it acts as part of the "everyday forms of resistance" that contribute to the making of collective agency and construction of solidarity.[101] Against incapacitating "end of history" narratives that resign to the fascist bailout of global capitalism, there is also hope for an enabling poetics that connects to emancipationist, egalitarian projects by remembering or prefiguring forms of collective agency, thinking through their limitations and unrealized potentials.

98 Mujila, *Tram 83*, 125.

99 See also Endnotes, "Onward Barbarians," Online. Endnotes argue that the global turmoil since the crash of 2007 has produced "revolutionaries without revolution, as millions descend onto the streets and are transformed by their collective outpouring of rage and disgust, but without (yet) any coherent notion of transcending capitalism."

100 Gunter, "Flames, too, are a Form of Literary," Online.

101 In his retrospective on the workers' movement, Mike Davis argues that "the power of capital" must be confronted "in every aspect of social life, organizing resistance on the terrains of the economic, the political, the urban, the social-reproductive, and the associational. It is the fusion or synthesis of these struggles, rather than their simple addition, that invests the proletariat with historical agency." In this, he considers proletarian countercultures immensely important in "projecting the solidarities of the workplace and neighborhood into all aspects of recreation, education, and culture." (Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, 119, 95)

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The topic of resistance is a recurring motif in neoliberal culture. Yet, it largely functions to stage a lack of systemic alternatives. Drawing on works by Don DeLillo, William Gibson, Kathrin Röggla, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, and other late 20th and early 21st century texts, this study examines how literature has registered the era of the presumed "end of history."

Key to the analysis is the concept of "structural adjustment." Borrowed from economic terminology, the term becomes a lens for identifying a particular narrative logic in which crisis and critique are repeatedly absorbed into a broader story of capitalism's inevitability. By reading literature alongside neoliberal self-descriptions, the book traces the diffusion of "structural adjustment" beyond economics into a broader cultural pattern.

At the same time, literature is figured as an arena where the limits and possibilities of critique continue to be negotiated. Thus, recent writing is rendered legible as a sensorium for the historical trajectory of neoliberalism that helps contextualize the authoritarian transformations of the 2020s as an actualization of tendencies latent in the program of adjustment.

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